

**“I have the right to my desires”: Que(e)rying Heterosexuality  
and Feminism in Practice**

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The candidate confirms that the work submitted is his/her own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

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## Abstract

This thesis considers the relationship between feminism and heterosexuality in practice. It aims to explore how feminist values and beliefs help to shape or inform (hetero)sexual practices, identities and relationships. In turn, it highlights how lived experiences of (hetero)sexuality influence feminist politics. Seventeen feminist-identified women explored this complex relationship through solicited diaries and semi-structured (follow-up) interviews.

Theoretically informed by a feminist phenomenological poststructuralist framework, this research argues for the importance of lived experience as a way of making meaning. Equally, it recognizes the narratives presented as part of a much broader social world – a world with already established meanings. Participants are understood as both producers and carriers of meaning, where the social world is constructed through their actions (and stories), but who are, in turn, being constructed by them. Plummer notes that sexual stories work in many ways - they reinforce the dominant culture, and at the same time, put it into question. These women's experiences have proven to produce both.

The findings of the research suggest that feminist values not only influence experiences of heterosexuality *within* the context of a sexual encounter, but also *between* instances of sex (through everyday interactions that occur outside a sexual encounter) and *beyond* the context of sex. This three-part approach supports the idea that meaning-making is fluid, unstable, and subject to change as participants move through different contexts of sex; as such, the findings present an understanding of plural feminisms and multiple heterosexualities, where feminist values and identities are just as various in meaning as the (hetero)sexual experiences from which they emerge. Grounded in often complicated and contradictory narratives, this research explores a relationship between feminism and heterosexuality that acknowledges its complexities and possibilities, tensions and potentialities, and in doing so, presents a nuanced understanding of feminist heterosexualities.





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## 1. Introduction

**What I like about bringing feminism and sexuality together is that each term challenges the complacencies in the other. People who want to get rid of sexuality for the sake of their feminist politics and people who want to get rid of feminism so they can feel good about sex are choosing artificial comfort over the uneven path of conflict.**

**(Gallop 2002, xii)**

### 1.1 Situating the research

In October 2011, 30-something Danielle Henderson was an MA student in Gender Studies at the University of Wisconsin. Out of 'sheer academic frustration', she began looking for a way to work through dense feminist theory in an effort to create a more accessible outlet - she thought feminist flashcards would be a funny idea. Having recently seen *Drive* (directed by Nicholas Winding Refn, 2011) at the cinema, Henderson could not get Ryan Gosling off her mind. She obtained a number of photos of him online, 'splashed them with thoughts based on my actual homework, and posted them on a blog in an effort to cheer up my friends. I greatly underestimated the power of Ryan Gosling's face' (Henderson 2012, 1). Within 24 hours, Jezebel.com was circulating Henderson's blog. Since then, the 'Hey Girl' meme<sup>1</sup> has been featured in a number of mainstream and feminist media including *Huffington Post*, *Rolling Stone*, *Ms Magazine*, *Time*, *Village Voice*, *Bust*, *GQ*, and *The Guardian*. In August 2012, a blog that she claims to be originally intended for a handful of people became published as a book – *Feminist Ryan Gosling: Feminist Theory (As Imagined) from your Favourite Sensitive Movie Dude*.

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<sup>1</sup> An Internet meme can be defined as 'a piece of culture, typically a joke, which gains influence by spreading through online transmission, where the meaning can often change from user to user' (Borzsei 2013, 1); and, as *The Urban Dictionary* suggests, memes are often used 'to give a bit of pseudo academic gravitas to stupid viral shit' (Borzsei 2003).

The 'Hey Girl' meme presents an image of Ryan Gosling paired with the simple greeting 'Hey Girl'.<sup>2</sup> Each meme draws on an element of feminist theory and pairs it with a competing narrative, often related to ideas of femininity, heterosexuality, heteronormativity, and other dominant social norms - the irony, of course, being that the feminist idea put forth is a known critique of the narrative that runs alongside it. For instance, below are a few examples that speak to the themes of this thesis:

- Hey girl. The cultural impetus to make women feel ashamed of taking pleasure in sex is rooted in a power differential that gives preference to male satisfaction – but I'm not that insecure.
- Hey girl. Does compulsory heterosexuality require me to be more or less like Lord Grantham?<sup>3</sup>
- Hey girl. I know how Judith Butler feels about subverting the dominant paradigm and rejecting the naturalization of heteronormativity, but I got you this flower.
- Hey girl. We can be supportive of gender variance even while we get our bounce on.

Although intended as a study tool, the 'Hey girl' meme brings additional relevance to feminist discussions when considering the idea that Henderson's imaginary feminist Gosling, a heterosexual white male<sup>4</sup>, *gets* feminism, but wants to do x, y and z anyway *because* he is so critically aware. I argue that the 'Hey girl' meme also attempts to speak to a reader who might identify with some of these same competing narratives, working them out in the same way 'Gosling' does in each meme. Whether or not this was part of Henderson's intention remains unknown; regardless, the 'Hey girl' meme captures many of the stories, experiences and feminist politics that run throughout this thesis. In the way that Henderson is playing *with* feminism by addressing some of the contradictions between heterosexual desire and feminist politics, so too are the participants of this research.

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<sup>2</sup> The 'hey girl' is a pejorative of the original meme which also features Ryan Gosling but does not include the element of feminism. For instance, one of these memes pairs his photo with a stanza from a Katy Perry song: 'Hey Girl, everyday living with you is like living the teenage dream, in our skin tight jeans'.

<sup>3</sup> Lord Grantham is the fictional patriarch on ITV's *Downton Abbey*.

<sup>4</sup> When asked about the motivation in using a white male as her avatar, Henderson argues that 'as a black woman who has lived every moment of my black life as a black person in a country that never lets me forget that I'm black [...] this is not lost on me. It's actually quite intentional. That. Is. ALSO. Part. Of. The. Joke.' (feministryangosling.tumblr.com).



Thus, I offer the 'Hey Girl' meme as a way to situate my research not only because Henderson's Tumblr began just as I started my own journey as an academic, but because it more broadly addresses the complexities *and* potential in pairing feminism with (different aspects of) heterosexuality. Many of my participants are university-educated, some with a focus in gender studies, while others have a career in organizations that centre on gender issues. The dense theory that Henderson plays with, are, in many cases, concepts that are familiar to some of my participants. As such, the 'Hey girl' meme speaks to the possibility that feminism and heterosexuality can (at times) provide competing narratives but that these narratives can be negotiated in positive ways. For instance, yes, feminist-identified heterosexual women might recognize Butler's call to reject the naturalization of heteronormativity, but that does not necessarily mean they do not want to be romanced by their partners, as indicated by the meme above.

Henderson's intent was to play *with* feminism, and it is my contention that this lends itself to the multiple ways feminism can be interpreted, experienced and played with *alongside* just as many different understandings and experiences of gender and in particular, (hetero)sexuality. It also addresses the often complex relationship *between* feminism and heterosexuality. For instance, within the title of this thesis I purposefully prefix 'heterosexuality' with the idea that participants are often in the active process of que(e)rying it; by this I refer to the fact that not only do some of my participants not exclusively define themselves as heterosexual per se, but rather, that heterosexuality is one part of a wider and often complex sexuality. So although this thesis may be primarily interested in unpacking the relationship between feminism and heterosexuality, it does so on the basis that participants have also experienced same-gender sexual experiences, desires and relationships as these are undoubtedly explored throughout and play an integral role in the findings. It is my aim that in que(e)rying heterosexuality, I am able to acknowledge and validate their non-heterosexual experiences as well as their heterosexual ones, and in doing so, ensure I do not actively or purposefully participate in a culture of bi-erasure.

Moreover, as the title of this thesis suggests, 23 year old Megan believes she has the right to her desires. Indicating that she has *right* to something offers an understanding of feminism that centres on the entitlement to sexual expression, freedom and pleasure. However, saying that she has the right to her *desires* also suggests that there is a competing narrative that perceives these desires as conflicting with feminist values. This is, of course, not a new debate. It follows the contours of many feminist discussions over the

last 40 years, of which there are three specific contributions that have informed the motivation and thus cultural location of this thesis.

### 1.1.1 Feminist 'sex wars' (1980s)

Margaret Jackson argues that 'no human sexual behaviour or practice can be divorced from the socio-political context in which it takes place and the system of social relations in which it is embedded' (1987, 77). Therefore, I begin by briefly considering the role of the 1980s feminist sex wars<sup>5</sup> and the impact of the 1982 Barnard Conference, from which Vance's *Pleasure & Danger* (1984) emerged. In the early 1980s, much of these discussions emerged from feminist campaigns against pornography. From here, two primary perspectives developed. As Caplan writes:

On the one hand, there are the radical feminists, who hold that sexuality in a male-dominated society inevitably involves danger for women. They identify with a lesbian-feminist community, and condemn pornography, as well as practices such as sado-masochism (1987, 9).

On the other hand, 'libertarian' feminists, both lesbian and heterosexual, supported any consensual activity bringing pleasure (Caplan 1987, 10) and led many from within the feminist movement to begin arguing for 'greater sexual permissiveness' (ibid). In her introduction to the collected papers from the Barnard conference on sexuality held in 1982, Vance suggests that an overemphasis on danger makes talking about pleasure sound taboo (1984, 7). Thus, the point of the Barnard conference was to expand the analysis of pleasure and to create a movement that speaks as powerfully about pleasure as it does against sexual danger.

We cannot be cowardly, pretending that feminism is not sexually radical. Being a sex radical at this time, as at most, is less a matter of what you do, and more a matter of what you are willing to think, entertain or question...It is simply not enough to move away from danger and oppression – we have to move toward something – pleasure, joy (1984, 23-24).

However, while setting an agenda for the inclusion of pleasure in discussions of female sexuality, heterosexuality often remained trapped within the 'sex as danger' position as it was seen to be 'immured in gender inequality, and imprisoned by social

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<sup>5</sup> The three contributions to which I refer here are unpacked in greater detail and explored in more specific measure throughout the course of this thesis. Here I use them as a way to introduce the debates they have sparked.

norms that constrain any attempts to do it differently' (Beasley et al. 2012, 5). Where pleasure was recognized and validated it was in queer, not heterosexual, contexts. As such, heterosexual feminists became heavily critiqued for their involvement with men. Since 'our bodies speak their language' (Dworkin 1987, 135) there was arguably no other escape from such an oppressive institution except to remove oneself from it.

### **1.1.2 Focusing in on heterosexual feminists (1990s)**

Although lesbians themselves, in 1993 Kitzinger and Wilkinson continued the dialogue brought forth by the sex wars and placed their focus on feminist-identified heterosexual women. With the aim of offering a unique perspective about the relationship between feminism and heterosexuality, Kitzinger and Wilkinson were interested in unpacking how 'heterosexual activity affect(s) the whole of a woman's life, her sense of herself, her relationships with other women, and her political engagements' (1993, 1). In contrast to Dworkin's contention that heterosexual women (and heterosexual feminists in particular) are only ever collaborators in their own oppression, a number of contributors to Kitzinger and Wilkinson's anthology fought to make claims for the potential and possibilities within heterosexuality. For instance, Ramazanoglu argued that heterosexuality 'does not have to be oppressive. Sex with men can be thoroughly pleasurable for women and feminism can promote rather than deny or limit this pleasure' (1993, 59).

However, the more common narratives in this anthology were filled with the contradictions often experienced between political ideology and personal lived experience. So while Kitzinger and Wilkinson note that notions of comfort, luxury, happiness and equality were littered through the pages of Special Issues dedicated to lesbianism in the 1980s and 90s, the heterosexual feminists included in this particular collection more commonly wrote 'of painful conflicts and compromises with the men in their lives' (Kitzinger and Wilkinson 1993, 12). In fact, in the introduction to their anthology both editors remark that 'we would have liked to have included more on the benefits and rewards of heterosexuality for feminists – but little of this was submitted' (1993, 12). Instead, most submissions grapple with the idea that yes, feminism and heterosexuality can indeed work together to create an informed sexual and political identity, but no one seems really sure just *how* this can be done. What is certain, however, is that 'heterosexual feminists in this collection are doing more than simply romanticizing lesbianism and

wallowing in their misery: they are beginning to theorize some of the contradictions inherent in feminist heterosexuality' (Kitzinger and Wilkinson 1993, 15).

### 1.1.3 Same debate, new cultural context? (2000s)

Moving forward another decade, into a climate that has been characterized by the emergence of 'raunch culture' (Levy 2005), Johnson's collection of essays entitled *Jane Sexes it Up: True Confessions of Feminist Desire* offers an understanding of feminism and heterosexuality that appears to have navigated through some of the compromising contradictions of what it means to be a feminist who engages in sex with men; in turn, the benefits, possibilities, and pleasures of a feminist heterosexual identity unfold. While Johnson maintains that many heterosexual women define their politics in part by the 'second wave feminist legacy of sexual freedom – disrupting norms surrounding the body, unsettling rigid gender roles, and observing few, if any, boundaries on our speech as erotic creatures' (2002, 5), she nonetheless expected backlash from a number of feminists condemning the desires confessed throughout the essays *because* of the plethora of seemingly misaligned sexual and political identities. The collection of essays includes topics like stripping, BDSM, fantasy, porn, and sexually desiring girlhoods - all through a lens that seeks to take on 'a lot of the contradictions in feminism[...] and faces these contradictions rather than prematurely resolving them with mere wishfulness' (Gallop 2002, xiii). As presented in the epigraph of this chapter, 'people who want to get rid of sexuality for the sake of their feminist politics and people who want to get rid of feminism so they can feel good about sex are choosing artificial comfort over the uneven path of conflict' (Gallop 2002, xii). As such, *Jane Sexes it Up* remains up-front, optimistic and honest in its portrayal of feminism and heterosexuality in practice. It balances the complexities and contradictions by negotiating them with equal measures of pleasure and possibility, and as a result, is most reflective of the stories found throughout this thesis.

Although these complexities are addressed in Kitzinger and Wilkinson's anthology, as well as the feminist sex wars of the 1980s, I argue that the timing of Johnson's collection (where buzzwords like 'sexualization' started to be used more frequently as a way to describe the current, albeit not new way in which Western culture has come to think about sex) may have allowed for a more straightforward and frank discussion. However, although over 20 years earlier, this sentiment was a part of Vance's original intention for *Pleasure & Danger* (1984), and so to return to one of the key starting point of discussions surrounding feminism and heterosexuality in this section, I draw on Vance, who contends that:

The rich brew of our experience contains elements of pleasure and oppression, happiness and humiliation. Rather than regard this ambiguity as confusion or false consciousness, we should use it as a sourcebook to examine how women experience sexual desire, fantasy, and action (1984, 6).

## 1.2 Research focus

Alongside the influence of feminist discussions outlined above, this thesis also emerged from the limitations of a smaller study I conducted for my Masters, entitled 'Negotiations and Non-negotiations of Male-defined Power: The Sexual Practices of 20-something, University Educated Heterosexual Feminists'. Here the findings centred on having an awareness of the role dominant norms of heterosexuality can play in sexual practices. For instance, through acts of assertion, negotiations of male power were present when the context focused on initiating sexual conduct and setting boundaries; non-negotiations were present through a lack of assertion surrounding discussions of female pleasure. Negotiations were also made when participants were aware of the choice to be submissive within certain sexual acts; these negotiations were limited as they were often predicated on male pleasure. Moreover, non-negotiations were present through an awareness and understanding of the strength afforded to male power, whereby challenging it became regarded as an overwhelmingly, near impossible task. The cause of these non-negotiations proved to be a result of the female socialization process as well as a deeply embedded internalization of feminine passivity. As such, female pleasure was only ever alluded to, rarely discussed, and thus even more rarely negotiated or included in participants' narratives (and sexual practices).

From here, I became interested in unpacking what it is about heterosexuality that makes talking about female pleasure so difficult. It is undeniable that the sexualization of Western culture means we can no longer say that many aspects of sex are considered taboo. However, the women's experiences in this smaller study did not match the 'raunch culture' in which they were located. Unlike, for instance, Johnson's collection of essays (which was somewhat naively what I had been expecting in my own MA findings), the desires and pleasures I did unpack appeared to be matched by a silence *against* the constant clamour of sex. In order to account for and include the potential and possibility, as well as the complex, contradictory narratives in being a feminist who has sex with men, *this* thesis has been designed in such a way that seeks to build on Kitzinger and Wilkinson's claim that women are beginning to theorize the contradictions of a feminist

heterosexuality; but also that perhaps, as they suggest, this requires 'more rigorous and sophisticated analyses of heterosexuality' (1993, 25) in order to make space for less condemnatory accounts. As Johnson suggests, this might well require forging 'a feminist sexual identity informed (not imprisoned) by women whose writing came before us' (Johnson 2002, 4) as well as the subsequent feminist debates that have occurred, both within and outside academia, over the last 40 years.

Answering this call, this thesis represents an in-depth exploration of feminism and heterosexuality in practice. It is a qualitative study that is conceptually driven by feminist theory and analytically informed by lived experience. As such, the primary objectives are to:

- Provide accounts of (hetero)sexual practices, identities and relationships in the lived experiences of feminist-identified women
- Contribute to a growing body of methodological work which uses diaries to gain insight into intimate experiences of everyday life
- Combine feminist poststructuralism and feminist phenomenology as a theoretical framework in order to contribute to interdisciplinary scholarship on the body

These objectives will be reached by addressing one overarching, two-part research question:

- How do feminist values inform, shape and influence sexual practices, identities and relationships?
- How do these practices, identities and relationships in turn, inform a feminist consciousness?

By framing the research questions in this way, I aim to highlight a set of feminist values, identities and beliefs that are just as multiple in meaning - fluid, unfixed and ever-changing - as the (hetero)sexualities from which they emerge and are shaped by. Although I have outlined notable collections centring on feminism and heterosexuality in practice that do exist, this thesis is located in a different set of socio-cultural specificities and is therefore informed by a different moment in time. It reflects 21<sup>st</sup> century accounts of Western, patriarchal culture that is often characterized by a hypersexual, liberal rhetoric - one that may not have been as formidable and ever-present in both Johnson's collection of essays and Kitzinger and Wilkinson's anthology.

### **1.3 Theoretical location**

The theoretical framework of this thesis begins by focusing on the concept of subjectivity; in particular, how the subject is formed through the body's actions of intentionality and how those original, unique actions are simultaneously mediated and governed through the already established meanings of the actions themselves. It is my contention that experiential-based theories like feminist phenomenology, while necessary for the purpose of this research, are not enough to wholly explain the bodily experiences that occur within a Western, patriarchal social context. In order to more fully understand certain patriarchal assumptions and implications (which inevitably exist in the framework of this thesis), it is important to attach qualitative accounts, ways of understandings, and thus lived experiences, to something larger - something that addresses more deeply rooted conditions of human experience, for instance the social existence (and thus location) of language.

#### **1.3.1 Considering phenomenology**

It may seem obvious to suggest that experiences of the lived body are acknowledged through an understanding of gender difference; however, traditional phenomenology makes no such distinction. According to early phenomenologists, experience is experience – that is to say it is decidedly non-gendered (Fisher 2000, 20). The feminist critique of this is quite simple – bodily experiences are in no way essential or generic. Bodies are gendered and the way a woman experiences corporeality is definitively different to all other genders. The essentialism with which early phenomenologists base these claims actually serves to perpetuate philosophies that uphold the naturalization of gender relations, and as a result, excludes the female body and its experiences from the production of knowledge. It would therefore seem obvious to state that this is why phenomenology requires the use of feminism. Theoretically, the details of the female body's particularities and its experiences are largely ignored; yet, as Young argues 'there is a distinct mode of being in the world that is female' (2005, 16). As such, it is through this mode of being and therefore the inclusion of such experiences within the phenomenological tradition, that feminism can offer new ways of understanding the world, through feminine embodiment and female bodily subjects.

Broadly speaking, phenomenology is characterized as the description of lived human existence, located somewhere between the world and consciousness, whereby

subjects themselves become 'the bedrock of evidence upon which explanation is built' (Scott 1992, 25). Simply put, the body and its gestures 'express possible ways of encountering and living the world' (Vasterling 2010, 211). The body is thus understood as an intentional body, that is to say an acting (or expressing) body. Every bodily act, every lived experience, is done with intent and originality and therefore must exist as a legitimate source of knowledge, one which has to be taken as what it presents itself to be (Alcoff 2000, 48). The body, in short, has a high degree of signifying power (Vasterling 2010, 211). While this is undeniable, as it is my contention that the body can and does make sense of the world and that lived experiences are intentional and inherently authentic, the partial disjuncture for a poststructuralist thinker can be best summarized by Vasterling's inquiry: 'how does [phenomenology] explain the fact that we are able to understand each other's bodily and linguistic gestures?' (Vasterling 2010, 212). In other words, have the words we speak not already been spoken? (ibid). So although lived body experiences are understood as intentional, active and therefore capable of creating meaning, the point Vasterling makes here is that this is impossible to do 'from scratch' as there is an already established world, beyond our bodily gestures, that seeks to explain our experiences for us (2010, 212). As such, I argue that feminist poststructuralism offers a more deeply rooted critique of where meanings come from and how they inform the subject (Weedon 1987). Combining these theoretical frameworks may seem like an arduous task, where one cannot be explained without interference or objection from the other. However, by fusing the strengths of feminist poststructuralism with those of a feminist phenomenological framework (outlined below), these two seemingly incongruous schools of thought aid in understandings of female lived body experience, and in particular, where these experiences come from and how they exist within our world.

### **1.3.2 A feminist phenomenological poststructuralist approach**

The following statement from Scott best describes the strengths and useful relationship between phenomenology and poststructuralism; as a result, I argue that it presents an understanding of how lived experience might be best addressed in the context of this thesis: 'Experience is a subject's history. Language is the site of history's enactment' (Scott 1992, 34). What this first suggests is that experience is an authentic reality of the subject; it gives the subject a history, and therefore a means through which the subject actually comes into being - constituted in a broader social world. Without experience, there would be no history of the subject; therefore, experience *must* be regarded as a



legitimate source of knowledge production and a valuable way in which the subject is formed. However, the latter section of Scott's statement reveals that those same experiences cannot exist without connecting the symbolic language of the experience to the actual lived experience, thus suggesting that experiences always already have pre-existing meanings. Moreover, these meanings actually precede the lived experience.

For instance, when the subject chooses to do something with their body, they solidify the importance of their ability, as bodily-subjects, to create original, authentic experiences. As such, experience is not entirely a 'linguistic event' (Scott 1992, 34). However, that act would not be an act if it did not have a meaning already attached to it, and so the meaning of each intentional act is assigned prior to the experience, which in turn, also helps constitute the subject's actions in a broader social world. To locate this framework within the language and experiences found in this thesis, I consider one of my participants; Ella's orgasm is *her* orgasm. No one else in the history of human existence will ever experience what she knows as orgasm - it is a completely original experience. However, the meaning attached to what an orgasm is, how it is valued and whose is valued, is established prior to Ella's experience of the orgasm itself. Therefore, the orgasm comes to exist in a relationship between practice and discourse, where something can be done as an original act, but that the very experience of the act only exists because the subject already understands what the act means, stands for, or is - *but not how it felt* - prior to experiencing it.

As separate theoretical frameworks, feminist phenomenology and feminist poststructuralism<sup>6</sup> are not enough to wholly account for the set of experiences this thesis centres on. As suggested above, by supplementing the limitations of phenomenology with the strengths of poststructuralism (and vice versa), I offer a theoretical framework that still validates lived experience but simultaneously recognizes that these experiences are part of a much broader social world. That said, poststructuralism can often deny the subject control over their bodily actions and experiences, so much so that everything is capable of being reduced, even the body, to a constructed entity (Vasterling 2010, 210). It is my contention that this can produce a framework of understanding where the subject is only ever 'a carrier of citations' (Vasterling 2010, 213), thus leaving little room for the possibility of the body's intentionality. Alternatively, phenomenologists tend to argue that the world must first be opened up by the body that acts in order for the meanings of the act to

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<sup>6</sup> From this point forward, when I use the term phenomenology or poststructuralism, I am always referring to *feminist* phenomenology or *feminist* poststructuralism unless otherwise stated.

permeate; in doing so, 'what we see and understand is not just a result of sedimented meanings, of spoken speech, but [it is] *also* a result of the body's intentionality' (Vasterling 2010, 213, my italics).

Therefore, by fusing the strengths and limitations of each framework, I present the subject as an 'expressive body subject' (Vasterling 2010, 213), full of intentionality, with access to a world that is in need of interpretation; it is once we become these speaking subjects that language has the ability to condition and construct the subject through a world that has always already been interpreted. So while experience is capable of being valued as legitimate and authentic, it is simultaneously mediated by conventions and practices (Vasterling 2010, 220). The subject is both an acting body and a 'semantic template' (Bell 2000, 182), both a producer and carrier of meaning. Therefore, the theoretical location of this thesis is grounded in a feminist phenomenological poststructuralist approach, where I challenge the latter by offering the body as a credible source of knowledge and creator of meaning. In doing so, I also challenge the limitations of the former by locating these experiences in the broader conditions of a Western, patriarchal context.

## **1.4 Thesis outline**

### *Chapter 2: Locating Feminist Heterosexualities*

I begin by considering the literature I find most relevant in order to provide the necessary foundation for understanding not only the subject of this research, but the cultural context in which she lives, and the competing, (at times) contradictory discourses that position her within a patriarchal, Western culture. This chapter aims to connect a series of dots between a number of different feminist and sociological approaches, critiques and concepts. In order to account for my research subject(s), I first consider theorizations of heterosexuality. To account for the cultural location in which the research subject exists, I explore constructions of (female) desire and pleasure; from here, I locate these understandings in a cultural context that is arguably characterized by an increasing sense of neoliberalism and postfeminism. Here I consider how understandings of 'choice' operate within this narrative, and in particular, how they are often informed through a third wave feminist rhetoric of pluralism and self-determination. From here, I aim to further unpack the female subject's position in this cultural context by exploring

approaches to understanding the female body and its particularities (as it is situated within this Western, patriarchal culture), and the subsequent framework of power that works to shape and inform it. Last, I conceptualize understandings of agency, particularly in ways that focus on themes of embodiment, so as to account for the ways in which the female subject is able to negotiate and inhabit the norms that seek to inform her sexuality. These concepts are presented in such a sequence in order to most appropriately set up the analysis that follows.

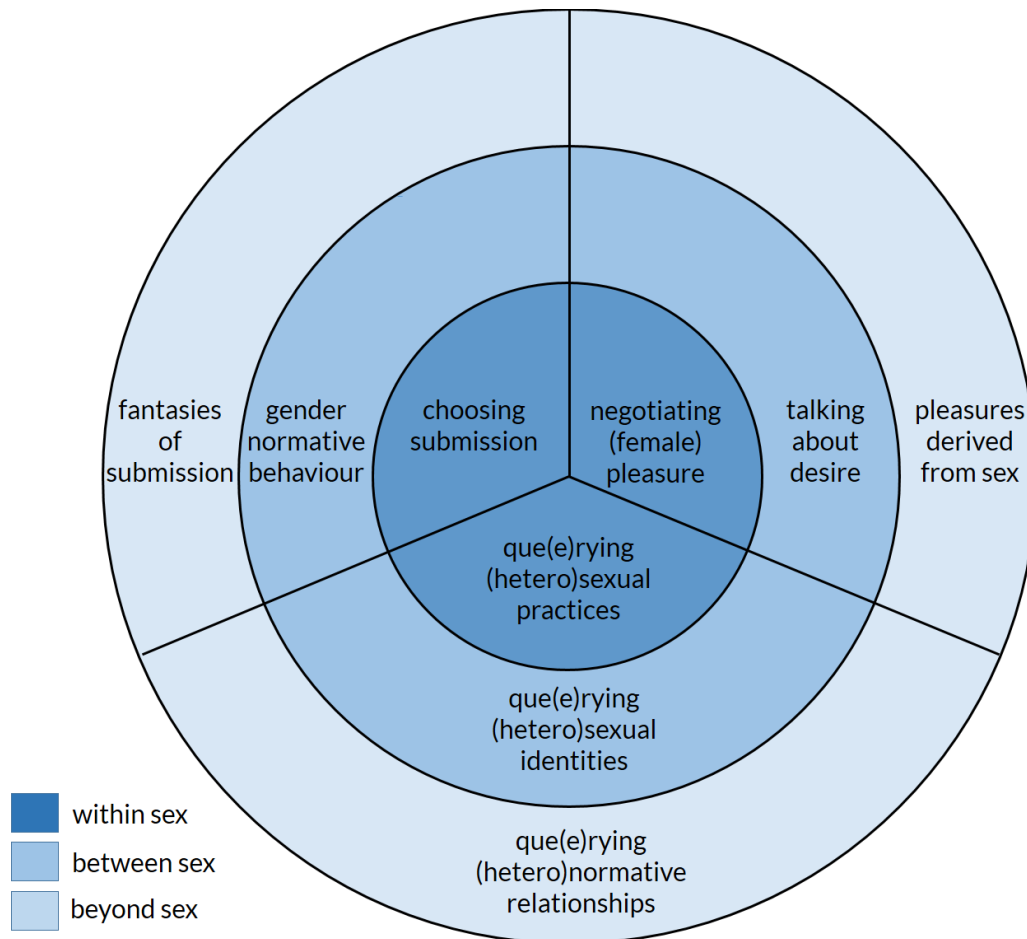
### *Chapter 3: Researching Feminist Heterosexualities*

Informed by a feminist methodology that seeks to place lived experience at the centre of its concern, this chapter unpacks the specificities of my research design in great detail. In particular, it considers why I have chosen the diary-interview approach, and how I have contributed to a growing body of methodological work that seeks to use solicited diaries as a means to gain insight into the intimate lives of feminist-identified women. This chapter also includes feedback from participants about their experience of keeping the diary; these comments are used throughout in order to legitimate the research design, and offer insight where applicable. In doing so, this chapter establishes the most important aspect of the epistemological, ontological, and analytical approach of the research – by placing the participants' narratives and the lived experiences of feminism and heterosexuality in practice at the forefront of consideration.

### *Chapters 4 - 6: Analysis*

In outlining chapters 4, 5 and 6, it is important to provide a more detailed account of its structure in order to establish the range of themes that are presented within it. That said, it is also important that I offer an explanation as to why they have been structured in such a way. This research began with the assumption that lived experiences and ways of understanding the relationship between feminism and heterosexuality would largely centre on what occurs *within* the context of sex. In the early stages of conceptualizing my research design, I aimed to unpack the following question: 'what do you do with your feminist politics/consciousness/beliefs and ways of understanding heterosexuality when placed *in* acts of sex?' I did not envision the emerging themes to stem *far* past the context of sexual acts and practices. So while I originally intended to present findings that sought to consider how participants' feminist identities inform their sexual *practices*, I soon realized that what occurs within the context of sex is just one third of the complex relationship between ways of understanding feminism and (hetero)sexuality; feminism

also works to inform, shape, and impact what occurs *between* and *beyond* sexual encounters. The following diagram seeks to offer a visualization of these contexts and the key themes that occur within and across them. They are explained in detail below.



**Figure 1.1 Structure of analysis**

The aim here is to visually present how the findings of this research have been framed as a three-part narrative. Each circular ring represents one context (within, between, and beyond sex), and one analytical chapter. Moreover, as indicated by equally sized pie segments, each context includes three themes. These themes are broadly shaped by understandings of *submission* (left), *desire and pleasure* (right) and what I have termed as *que(e)rying* (bottom). Take the *que(e)rying* theme as an example: it should become clear that in moving outward, ring by ring, 'within sex' presents experiences that both query and queer (hetero)sexual *practices*; 'between sex' presents these ways of understanding as the querying and queering of (hetero)sexual *identities*; and lastly, in the broader context – 'beyond sex' – they represent how participants query and queer (hetero)normative *relationships*. A similar progression applies when moving outward

through themes of submission, and desire/pleasure, whereby the meaning of each theme shifts as it is considered across different contexts.

This approach offers multiple ways of understanding the same three themes as they appear *within* sexual encounters, *between* instances of sex, and *beyond* the context of sex. As outlined above, the motivation for this approach supports the idea that meaning-making is fluid, unstable, and therefore subject to change as participants' narratives move through different contexts. Consistent throughout is the connection between how participants experience their feminist politics, identities and values, and the way these work to inform their sexual practices, identities and relationships. This plays an important role as I am particularly interested in articulating how feminist beliefs and values influence the meaning made out of a particular theme, within a particular context.

I begin the analytical chapters by considering what occurs within sex. I start here as a way of addressing the original intention of this project, but also to showcase how these ways of understanding impact and inform more than just sexual practice; in other words, the diagram can be read like a ripple effect as participants move out and across different contexts. This context, within sex, will focus on ways of understanding the relationship between feminism and heterosexuality by exploring narratives constructed and situated within a sexual encounter, experience, act or practice. This chapter considers experiences of *choosing submission*<sup>7</sup> as a sexual practice or activity; here I offer ways of understanding the choice to be submissive as constructed by, or informed alongside, feminist identities. Moreover, this section considers participants' feelings of justification that are, likewise, often constructed alongside feminist beliefs. From here I move counter-clockwise on the diagram and draw on the idea of *que(e)rying (hetero)sexual practices*. This section highlights the inclusion of non-normative motivations, behaviours and ways of understanding heterosexuality that many participants include as part of their sexual scripts – in short, the queering of heterosexual acts and practices. These instances are often situated as a response to questioning (or querying) the kind of practices normally included in an individual's sexual script. Finally, this chapter considers how the broader theme of desire and pleasure is situated within the context of sex by drawing on narratives of *negotiating (female) pleasure*. In doing so, I consider cultural understandings of female pleasure in an effort to situate how participants make sense of pleasure within the context of their own practices, and in particular, alongside feminist-informed understandings.

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<sup>7</sup>Each theme has been italicised so that as the reader continues through this section, they can easily pick out themes as they appear on the diagram.

Moving outward on the diagram, chapter 5 considers how similar themes are experienced and understood *between* instances of sex. It is important to note that because this context occurs 'after' sex (in the structure of this thesis) it is not simply to be understood as what occurs after a sexual encounter. Instead, the context of between sex seeks to include everyday gender interactions, (hetero)sexual identities, and experiences that are situated outside the script of a sexual encounter but are (perhaps) used to inform one. In this chapter, I consider *que(e)rying heterosexual identities* by focusing on the motivation to participate in heterosexuality as a sexual identity, as well as the way participants often seek to queer certain aspects of this identity. The latter is used to explore feminist-informed ways of understanding a (potential) partner's masculinity, and in particular, the important role understandings of masculinity play when engaging in sexual or romantic relationships. From here, I explore instances of *talking about desire*. These findings are located in a context between sex because they represent how desire is conceptualized outside sexual encounters, how participants engage with their desire, and, at times, with wider understandings of female sexuality. Lastly, this chapter considers submission by exploring experiences of *gender normative behaviour*. This theme is presented as a reflection of (or as ways of understanding) dominant cultural scripts of femininity. The aim here is to position gender normative behaviour as something that may inform a participant's sexual script, but that occurs outside the context of a sexual encounter.

The final, outer ring of the diagram represents a context that goes *beyond* sex, and it is first imperative to recognize its distinction from instances that occur between sex. So while between sex often refers to an interaction, identity, or way of speaking that is actually situated outside a sexual encounter (but may work to enforce or negotiate what occurs within one), beyond sex is about ways of understanding that are an *extension* of a sexual encounter. For instance, I have chosen to locate fantasy in a context that extends beyond sex as a way to mark its distinction from lived realities (even though many participants spoke of fantasy in relation to their real-life encounters). Moreover, I have situated fantasy under the theme of submission because the most common fantasy among participants revolves around themes of force and power exchange, where they are positioned in the submissive role. As a result, I explore whether feminist values impact the narrative of submissive fantasies, regardless of how these might be justified or experienced when considering submission within or between acts of sex.

To build on ways of talking about desire and negotiations of pleasure, the equivalent theme found here centres on the *pleasures derived from sex*. This serves as a way of going beyond understandings of pleasure as something that occurs only within the sexual act, and instead, focuses on narratives that equally include emotional intimacies and the pleasures gained from the broader context of (not only sex, but) love, trust and relationships. To that end, I consider experiences of *que(e)rying (hetero)normative relationships* so as to explore the aforementioned notions of sex and love as they relate to and appear in a variety of feminist-informed relationship arrangements. I position relationships within the broader context of sex as it is my contention that relationships can be formed as an extension of sex, and in many instances, that relationship might inform what occurs within sex. Here I consider feminist motivations for (non)monogamy, as well as experiences of 'casual sex'.

Although themes of *desire and pleasure, submission, and que(e)rying* represent central ways of understanding the complex relationship between feminism and heterosexuality, these are, of course, not the only themes constructed within and across participants' experiences. The themes and contexts that I have chosen to present here ultimately reflect the overall aim of this research and the subsequent research question that has guided me throughout – how do feminist values and identities influence (hetero)sexual practices, identities, and relationships? It is my contention that constructing the analysis as a three-part narrative, both context specific and parallel in theme, works to offer a nuanced and complex understandings of feminist heterosexualities.

#### *Chapter 7: Conclusions*

Chapter 7 summarizes both the methodological and theoretical contributions this thesis has made to existing literature. It also highlights where I have made original contributions to scholarship within the area of sexuality and feminist research. Here I refer back to a number of current feminist discussions and debates that the findings of this research have drawn on and in doing so, urge a continued move toward understanding feminism as plural, which in turn, opens up the possibility for understanding multiple heterosexualities. As a result, this approach offers a more nuanced, complex understanding of feminism and heterosexuality in practice.





## 2. Locating feminist heterosexualities

**The equation of heterosexuality with an unchanging and inequitable conformity reduces heterosexual subjects to the status of cultural dopes, and corrals heterosexuality into ahistorical stasis.**

**(Beasley et al. 2012, 22)**

### 2.1 Introduction

As Beasley et al. introduce above, it is important to recognize the critical implications of heterosexuality without conflating these ideas with the possibilities of heterosexual practice, identity, and experience. While this notion requires disengaging with the idea that heterosexuality is unchanging and that its subjects are ever-conforming, it also entails acknowledging the power relations and constraints that are actively involved in heterosexuality *before* considering its pleasures and possibilities (Beasley et al. 2012, 4). To this end, the aim of this chapter is to consider the literature I deem to be most relevant in providing the foundational groundwork for the subject of this research, the cultural context in which she lives, and the competing, often contradictory discourses that constitute her within contemporary Western society. I do so by first unpacking feminist critiques of heterosexuality occurring within the last 40 years – the aim here is to effectively set up the relationship between feminism and heterosexuality in practice. I then move on to consider cultural concepts and understandings of desire and pleasure as a way to introduce the subjects of primary concern here – feminist-identified women who engage in sex with men. In an effort to position desire and pleasure as both materially lived and symbolically positioned within a broader socio-cultural framework, the ‘culture of sexualization’ is used as a way to further situate female lived body experiences<sup>8</sup>. I argue that the emergence of sexualization actively plays a role in the way we, as a Western, patriarchal culture, come to think about sex. Here I suggest that while female pleasure is said to appear as a central concern in discussions surrounding heterosexual sex (Braun

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<sup>8</sup> The culture of sexualization will be a phrase used throughout to describe how sex is ‘becoming more and more visible, and more explicit’ (Attwood 2006, 6).

2005), these constructions of desire (and therefore female sexuality) situate the female subject in a complex relationship between what is presented as female sexual empowerment and what may be experienced and lived as a repackaging of traditional gender norms, persisting and upholding the gendered and sexual scripts ascribed to the female subject. Here I will draw on third wave understandings of 'choice feminism' in an effort to suggest that 'each feminist must make a conscious decision about how to determine her own path through [the] contradictory discourses' (Snyder-Hall 2010, 257).

From here, I unpack the wider implications of these contradictory narratives by considering how discourses of power work to inform and shape the female subject – that what she ought to do in acts of sex (and in acts of gender) is defined by a pre-existing idea of what it means to be female, feminine and heterosexual. These scripts are attributed to the strength of disciplinary power and self-surveillance; it is my contention that this framework of power helps to uphold and preserve (patriarchal) understandings of scripts, both gendered and sexual, and therefore play an important role within constructions of femininity and the female sexual self - particularly within the discourse of heterosexuality, even by women who embrace and identify with feminism. To expand upon the female subject's construction within discourses of power, it will be imperative to unpack how and why the female body has come to be understood as a site for such modern operations of power. Here I consider approaches to understanding the female body within feminist theory, grounding the body in both its ability to make meaning and exist as socially, linguistically constituted. I do so as a way to introduce more generative understandings of agency - ones that focus on embodiment rather than constraint.

By relating these ideas to understandings of female embodiment, that is to say by exploring what the female subject is capable of making and doing, I seek to challenge the boundaries of such deeply embedded sexual scripts - encoded and ascribed on to the female embodied subject - and introduce how ideas of subversion and agency play a role in the understandings of female lived experience. Here I urge a move away from the idea that agency is only equated with resisting or conforming to norms and offer an understanding of agency that includes what it means to inhabit or aspire to dominant norms. The aim is to present a model of agency that recognizes the female subject's ability to ontologically construct herself while simultaneously recognizing that her lived body is 'conditioned by social facts, informed by gender structures and the behaviour and expectations of others in ways that she has not chosen' (Young 2005, 18). As such, I aim 'to distinguish between the undoubted possibilities of heterosexual pleasure, and the extremely powerful social forces

which constrain these possibilities from being more widely realized' (Ramazanoglu 1994, 321).

## 2.2 Theorizing heterosexuality

Beasley et al. have recently argued that heterosexuality is rarely problematized and as a result, largely invisible within critical literature – when it is of interest within scholarship on sexuality, heterosexuality is 'typically characterized as monolithic and oppressive, yet boring and normative' (2012, 3). Its construction, and perhaps more importantly perception, is that of a 'coherent, natural, fixed and stable category' (Richardson 1996, 2). More commonly ignored or hidden, theoretical frameworks of sexuality universalize heterosexuality into the 'troublesome contention that non-straight or queer sexualities are the only interesting sexual subject positions' (Beasley et al. 2012, 12). While this invisibility perhaps speaks to the privileged position of heterosexuality, it also means that it is rarely the focus of analysis. As Gaines asks, 'why would anyone not part of an erotic minority, anyone protected as part of the privileged erotic majority, need to proclaim, let alone claim an erotic identity?' (1995, 394).

Conceptualizing heterosexuality as unproblematic and universal is, in itself, problematic as it dismisses the possibility of a heterosexuality that is *not* monolithic and fixed. As Richardson notes, 'there actually exists a diversity of meaning and social arrangements within the category "heterosexuality", rather than a unitary heterosexual subject and a unified distinct heterosexual community' (1996, 2). Therefore, presenting heterosexuality as boring and normative disregards the possibility for its heterogeneous forms and the 'pleasurable, exciting and non-normative possibilities of heterosexuality' (Beasley et al. 2012, 8). I am arguing for further and more nuanced explorations of heterosexualities that acknowledge these possibilities and build upon Beasley et al.'s argument that heterosexuality is 'more than a bland foil for the exploration of inherently more interesting sexualities, and demands investigation in its own right' (2012, 12). Hollway argues that the absence of nuanced understandings, ones that 'make sense of the pleasures, desire and satisfactions, for women of heterosexual relationships is both damaging to feminist theory and feminist politics' (1993, 412). It is this sentiment which confirms the necessity in theorizing heterosexual practice, identity and relationships - both the pleasures, desires and satisfactions, as well as the tensions, contradictions and

challenges, particularly within the lived experiences of feminist-identified women who engage in sex with men.

The contours of this debate, that is to say the tensions existing within and about discussions surrounding heterosexual feminists<sup>9</sup>, are not new. Stemming back to 1970s radical feminist critiques, heterosexual women (particularly heterosexual *feminists*), were perceived as collaborators in their own oppression; the justification for such claims lay in the broader framework informing radical feminist thought - that sexuality is the site for the fundamental maintenance of women's oppression (Hines 2008, 22). Radical feminists such as Firestone (1971), Dworkin (1987) and Jeffreys (1990), have argued that the microcosmic institution of heterosexuality is the basis for women's systematic oppression – as Jeffreys argues 'from heterosexuality flows all other oppressions' (1990, 297). Therefore, women's liberation could only ever be achieved if systematic male dominance was overthrown or otherwise rejected (Hines 2008, 22). For Jeffreys, the solution for heterosexual women was clear – denounce and 'opt out' of the defining element of heterosexuality, penetration, as this is where all other systems of domination and subordination emerge (Smart 1996, 166). Jeffreys' assertion (and more importantly, assumption) that all feminists would choose this 'freedom' over heterosexual desire, underlies the 'all-or-nothingness' (Smart 1996, 165) that helped inform and represent some of the wider radical feminist critiques of heterosexuality from the 1970s onward. A similar critique can be found in the 'sex wars' debate of the 1980s. Here heterosexual sex is positioned as dangerous and problematic as a result of its oppressive and normative features (Beasley et al. 2012, 21).

In order to provide the underlying theoretical background for this thesis, it is necessary to advance beyond the debates surrounding heterosexuality brought forth by radical feminism and the 'sex wars'. While these debates centre on the *perceived* entrapment of heterosexual women and in particular, the complicitness of heterosexual feminists, I argue alongside Jackson that analyzing heterosexuality needs to be about more than this all-or-nothing approach. Indeed, it involves recognizing the critical implications of

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<sup>9</sup> Like Jackson (1996), I acknowledge that the term 'heterosexual feminist' can be problematic in that it appears to exclusively define one's feminism by one's heterosexuality. However, I also believe that it best represents the women who participated in this research. Many expressed that their feminism informs their sexual practices - in other words, they identify as feminist *because* they are heterosexual. Likewise, just as many stated that their feminist values play an active role in the construction of their heterosexual practices. Moreover, the term 'heterosexual feminist' also implies that one is exclusively heterosexual. It is important to note that many participants in this research did not exclusively define themselves as such; while this will be explored in the empirical findings, for the purpose of this chapter when the term 'heterosexual' is used, the reader should remember that I am referring to heterosexual 'practice' rather than 'identity'.

heterosexuality, but ‘without conflating heterosexuality as an institution with heterosexual practice, experience and identity’ (Jackson 1996, 21). So while it remains imperative to recognize heterosexuality as a hierarchical relation between men and women, thereby securing heterosexuality as an institutionalised form of women’s oppression (Jackson 1996, 31), it is equally as important to challenge the assumption that heterosexual women are ‘doomed to submit to men’s desires whether as unwilling victims or misguided dupes’ (Jackson 1996, 34). It is my contention that this approach, outlined here by Jackson and Beasley et al., seeks to problematize the seemingly monolithic experience of heterosexuality, where it is only ever positioned as ‘the sex that just is, that needs no explanation, that everyone knows about, has access to and can do without learning’ (Bhattacharyya 2002, 18). This understanding actively ‘denies differences among women who relate to men sexually’ (Jackson 1996, 34) and moreover, does not demonstrate ‘diversely interesting aspects of heterosexuality’ (Beasley et al. 2012, 12).

In 1993, when Kitzinger and Wilkinson engaged with the debate surrounding feminist-identified women’s heterosexual practices and experiences, some of the unresolved feminist discussions of the 1980s re-appeared. It seemed that heterosexual women, feminists in particular, had to apologize for their heterosexual identity and as a result, their complicit role in upholding patriarchal values. Alternatively, many contributors to Kitzinger and Wilkinson’s anthology acknowledged the ‘fault’ of practicing heterosexuality and the implication this brings with regards to women’s overall social positioning within a Western, patriarchal context. While much time is spent on the ‘pains and problems of heterosexuality’ (Smart 1996, 170) – the prominent argument throughout their anthology being that the only voice of heterosexual feminists has been the voice of ‘suffering’ (a problematic term in itself) - I am arguing for ‘a fresh attempt to create discursive heterosexualities’ (Smart 1996, 168) and therefore aim to provide an alternative perspective by increasing focus on the pleasures and possibilities of feminist heterosexualities.

It becomes clear that time and time again, that ‘the battle lines [have been] drawn between those arguing that heterosexual sex is inescapably oppressive for women and those who claim that the power relation it entails is vulnerable to subversion’ (Jackson 1996, 33). As mentioned above, the most prominent radical critique of heterosexuality stems from an institutional perspective – and although these critiques are often criticized for providing essentialist, ahistorical ideas of gender and sexuality, the aim here is to not ‘pick a side’ or denounce all that radical feminism has offered to discussions of female

sexuality. Rather, the aim is to illustrate that through an informed exploration of desire and pleasure, as well as female embodiment and its positionality within discourses of power and agency, heterosexuality is in fact plural, unstable, and in a constant process of becoming. Therefore, I aim to explore both the complexities and possibilities of feminism and heterosexuality in practice by creating a space that recognizes the importance (and politics) of pleasure and in particular, how these understandings emerge from and within the relationship between feminism and heterosexuality. As Segal argues, 'sexual pleasure is far too significant in our lives and culture for women not to be seeking to express our agency through it' (1994, 313). Therefore, by maintaining a critical perspective on heterosexuality, exploring its complexities (and going beyond the claim that heterosexuality is merely eroticised power, as radical feminists often suggest), I argue for an engagement with heterosexual practices, identities and relationships that is 'less condemnatory' (Jackson 1996, 35); as a result, I will make space for the ways in which heterosexual feminists have worked to 'define our own pleasure, questioned phallogocentric models of sexuality, tried to deprioritise penetration or reconceptualise it' (Jackson 1996, 34) – and perhaps most importantly, enjoy it.

### **2.3 Desire and pleasure**

As outlined above, a radical feminist critique of heterosexuality suggests that heterosexual women (feminists in particular), are complicit in the perpetuation of patriarchal rules and values since heterosexuality is the institution from which all other forms of women's oppression emerge. However, I argue for a less condemnatory critique of heterosexuality, one that remains critical yet offers a more nuanced and informed understanding of feminist heterosexualities by acknowledging both the possibilities of incorporating discussions of desire and pleasure into what it means to identify as a feminist who has sex with men. To build upon the theorization of heterosexuality and feminist heterosexualities in particular, this section considers how desire and pleasure are understood in the context of this research, and how these understandings seek to challenge existing cultural representations of female desire and pleasure.

To begin, I find it important to consider the relationship between desire and pleasure. In doing so, I explore whether they are mutually exclusive or parts of the same thing – for instance, does desire have to exist in order to gain sexual pleasure? Does desire have to be present at all to engage in sexual behaviour? What about desire and pleasure

beyond the context of sexual acts and practices? Or desire and pleasure that can be derived from sex?<sup>10</sup> By rejecting Freud's notion that desire pre-exists consciousness and therefore occurs as a purely biologically driven need (Jackson and Scott 2007, 96), I argue that desire is socially constructed and always socially located (Jackson and Scott 2007; Richardson 1996). Jackson and Scott confirm that desire 'cannot be envisioned as floating free of the social: it will always be social and therefore meaningful' (2007, 103). They believe that our experiences of desire and pleasure come from 'cultural meanings and social knowledge, shaped and re-shaped throughout our lives' (Jackson and Scott 2007, 110), so much so that our bodies (even when we are 'doing sex' alone) are bodies in interaction. In other words, when we are alone, we still must go through a reflexive process where the abovementioned cultural meanings and social knowledge 'guide both our minds (our fantasies) and our hands' (Jackson and Scott 2007, 110). Desire is therefore a fundamental part of our relational world, an indication and display of the connection individuals have with their own bodies and other people (Tolman 2005, 20). As such, desire is also conscious; it is informed by cultural beliefs and narratives that allow society's individuals to make meaning out of experience, giving individuals 'the sense that these meanings constitute objective facts or reality' (Tolman 2005, 14).

Pleasure, like desire, is also socially located. In other words, 'pleasure does not develop. It creates and recreates in ways that cannot be known in advance or directed to a future' (Talbert 2009, 93). In addition, acts that are considered pleasurable are indeed 'socially constructed to contain pleasure' (Brown 1994, 324). Adding to this yet another layer, Brown suggests a transactional element due to its social mediation - where pleasure is understood in terms of its relational concepts and constituted through interaction (1994, 323). Although pleasure has perhaps more obvious transactional elements within partnered experiences, Brown suggests (much like Jackson and Scott) that there should still be a focus on the transactional qualities of solitary sexual pleasures like masturbation and fantasy as these are still experienced through fantasizing about people and activities that are socially located (1994, 323).

So, if sex is understood as a transactional 'domain of pleasure' (Braun 2005, 414), whereby the meaning of sexual desire is culturally produced and reproduced, it is important to consider the kind of relationship desire and pleasure might have with and to each other. For instance, if orgasm is widely understood as 'the destination of a sexual

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<sup>10</sup> While these questions will be answered more fully and directly in the findings of this research, here they are used to establish a starting point for theoretically considering ideas of desire and pleasure.

journey, as the end-point or finish line of a race' (Potts 2000, 60), thereby locating orgasm as central to experiences of sexual pleasure, this negates other ways in which sex can be pleasurable, often relegating these experiences to second place (Braun 2005, 415). Furthermore, it has been argued that dominant heteronormative assumptions surrounding desire is that desire itself is understood as the deferral of satisfaction and must therefore be eliminated in order for pleasure (more specifically, orgasm) to exist (Jackson and Scott 2007; Potts 2000). This prolonged deferral of pleasure means one is always desiring - that is to say one is always in the active. In this understanding, where binary meanings structure our thinking, pleasure must replace desire. The assumption here is that once pleasure is achieved, the desire for its achievement is gone (Potts 2000). I would argue that this is a naive assumption – for instance, what about instances of non-orgasmic sex? Can desire in these instances transform conventional heterosexual sex through its perpetual deferral of pleasure? Does sexual pleasure simply not exist in non-orgasmic sexual experiences?

Although it would seem apparent that widespread cultural conceptions of sexual pleasure are synonymous with orgasm, and that 'women's sexual pleasure - or ability to orgasm - appears as a central concern for women and indeed, for society' (Braun 2005, 418), these understandings of pleasure are limited. Here it is important to note sexual pleasure is not necessarily the same as pleasure that can be derived from sex. In fact, I would call for an expansion of the definition of sexual pleasure so as to include the pleasures that can be derived from sex in order to further develop an overall understanding of what sexual pleasure is and what exactly it encompasses beyond the physical. Similarly, desire is not restricted to sexual desire. For instance, it is important to consider the desire for emotional intimacy - the desire for love, trust, heteronormativity - all of which have the potential to stem beyond the context of sexual acts and practices, and thus include a wider array and broader understanding of desire and pleasure. I find it interesting to consider the possibility of a spectrum of desire, one that acknowledges the varying capacities of pleasure, whereby, in sexual terms, one does not have to work to eliminate the other, but rather, where desires and pleasures can exist in tandem, interacting at various points, supporting *and* challenging each other. This shift in focus not only works to question the orgasm imperative but also actively subverts and challenges conventional notions of heterosexual sex by making room for a less restricted view of how one can experience both desire and pleasure.



To further situate understandings of desire and pleasure within a broader socio-cultural framework, I turn briefly to outline one of the ways desire will be explored in the findings of this research - as a means to challenge how female sexual desire is understood and experienced within the context of heterosexuality in a Western, patriarchal culture that is arguably characterized by a preoccupation of sexual values, practice and identities (Attwood 2006). As Albury notes, Western cultural prescriptions have historically stated that a 'normal' heterosexual woman is only ever 'desirable, but not desiring [...] desire is something that is done to her, rather than something she herself does' (2002, xxii); and although active and embodied accounts of female desire do exist, it is interesting to consider the following:

Do women have to frame their desire within a conventional masculine discourse in order for their desire to be embodied? If women frame their sexuality within conventional feminine version, their desire is passive and within the context of a relationship. If framed within masculinized versions, their desire is determined by the physical and relational, social and cultural factors are not accounted for (Muisse 2011, 417).

While this is an important starting point, I would suggest that understanding, experiencing and embodying desire must acknowledge the body's responses, motivations, modalities, particularities and positionalities - regardless of whether or not these are culturally appropriated as masculine or feminine versions of desire, as Muise outlines above. It is my contention that this opens up the possibilities for an active and embodied engagement with female desire and pleasure. As Albury suggests, this works to expand the gendered position (for women) of being able to say yes or no to sex, and instead, include the 'what and how' (Albury 2002, xxiv). By adopting this approach, the focus centres on challenging the notion of the desired female object and making space for her to become a desiring female subject, without the vilification of an active and embodied female desire. Like Albury argues, 'to acknowledge female sexual desire is to acknowledge women's ability to act as well as to be' (2002, xxiv).

Therefore, I have argued that desire is conscious, always socially located and always capable of being shaped and re-shaped. By considering the relationship desire and pleasure have with and to each other, I suggested that the dominant narrative positions desire as a deferral of satisfaction and that pleasure, once achieved, renders desire inert. I urged for a move away from this model of understanding the relationship between desire and pleasure and suggested that by expanding the definitions of desire and pleasure so as to first include the desire for intimacies outside of sexual acts, and second, the pleasures

that can be derived from sex. In doing so, the possibilities start to open up regarding the ways in which desire and pleasure can interact with and to one another. I now continue to consider the possibilities and limitations of female desire and pleasure when placed in the context of a sexualized Western culture. In order to do so, I first outline what I mean by sexualization (and how I intend to use it for the particular aims of this research), what discourses help to perpetuate it, the implications it has on the female subject, and the role feminism plays as a result.

## **2.4 Feminism, heterosexuality and current cultural contexts**

Attwood argues that sexuality has permeated every level of social experience, so much so that it ‘assumes such a central, yet nebulous role in articulating our bodies and our pleasures and in making our claims to individuality, to a self for itself, to our status in the world, to our embodiment for others and for sex itself’ (2006, 14). These qualities, she suggests, mark out a ‘specific sensibility of sex which is linked to the broader conditions of our social world’ (ibid) – a social world which, according to Gill and Scharff, is distinctively neoliberal and postfeminist (2011, 1). While the former (neoliberalism) places importance on the individual as an autonomous, self-managing, self-regulating subject, the latter (postfeminism) is argued to be both a doing and undoing of feminism, where women are offered very particular kinds of ‘freedom, empowerment and choice “in exchange for” or “as a kind of substitute for” feminist politics and transformation’ (McRobbie 2009, cited in Gill and Scharff 2011, 4). It is thus imperative to consider the socio-cultural implications that exist alongside such fluid and fragmented ideas of sex and sexuality, and in particular, where words like ‘choice’ and ‘empowerment’ are central to such discussions. In other words, what are the implications of such individualized meanings of sex (as well as the narratives of freedom, autonomy and choice) when placed within a cultural context that has been characterized by the ‘pornographication of the mainstream’ (McNair 2002 in Munford 2009, 184)?

Most often perpetuated by media representations, buzzwords like ‘sexualization’, ‘raunch’, and ‘pornographication’ are broadly used to describe the various ways that sex has become more visible and arguably more explicit within contemporary Western culture. This culture has been broadly characterized by (but certainly not limited to) new forms of sexual experience; a cultural preoccupation with sexual values and practices; a public shift in sexual attitudes and behaviours (although a contentious point when considering the dichotomy where an encouraged openness about sex is not reflected in religious and

politically conservative agendas); and as Attwood says, 'our fondness for scandals, controversies and panics around sex' (2009, 2). The argument here is that new forms of 'public intimacy' have developed due to the shifting boundaries between what is deemed public and what is deemed private (McNair 2002, cited in Atwood 2009, xv).<sup>11</sup> Attwood argues that as a Western culture, we have created a new language for talking about sex (2009, xv) – one that is central to the way sexual knowledge is developed, created and, in turn, one that contributes to the way in which we see ourselves as sexual beings in a social world, within a particular moment in time and location in space.

Moreover, I argue that this language for speaking about sex is undoubtedly accompanied by (or perhaps even a result of) a shift in sexual norms, and as such, a shift in focus with regards to how we understand experiences of sex(uality); here I refer to the idea that there appears to be less concern surrounding sexual identities, 'types' and orientations, and more of a focus on sexual practices and behaviours (Armstrong et al. 2012; Backstrom et al. 2012; Lehmiller et al. 2011; Lewis et al 2012). This would make sense considering the expanded popular access to sexual information and the increased availability of new sexual experiences and forms of relationships introduced above. Moreover, Braun argues that mirroring a socio-cultural shift toward the 'eroticization of female sexuality' (2005, 408), female pleasure has become a particularly central concern in academic and popular narratives surrounding heterosexual sex within this socio-cultural context. This shift is, of course, rallied around the idea that we are currently living in a 'raunch culture' (Levy 2005); here it becomes particularly interesting to consider how this culture places most of the focus on women – both the symbolic representations of women, as well as women's own engagement with sex in this cultural context, the latter of which some argue has come to (falsely) signify a liberated sexuality for women (Attwood 2010; Burkett and Hamilton 2012; Evans et al. 2010; Gill 2003).

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<sup>11</sup> It is important to note that I am not claiming this is the first moment in time where an interest in a discourse of sex has emerged. Foucault documents the history of this well by exploring the notion of a repressive hypothesis; here he argues that from the 17<sup>th</sup> century to the 1970s, discussions of sex were formed around 'authorized vocabularies' which determined who could talk about what, when they could talk about it, and with whom. What I am arguing here is that because there has been a blurring of lines between what is deemed public and what is deemed private, these shifting boundaries and particularities are socio-culturally different than Foucault's early theorizations. In other words, because sex has a distinctly different role in the current cultural moment, there are specific cultural anxieties that have emerged as a result.

In *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity* (2011), Gill and Scharff address women's engagement in this context by considering the role feminism plays. They argue that terms like 'choice' and 'empowerment' have come to the foreground in such discussions, but when the term 'feminism' is used it is almost always prefixed by 'post' or 'power' in such a way that the very political nature of feminism is threatened with displacement (Gill and Scharff 2011, 2). In this instance, they argue that postfeminism becomes recognized as a sensibility<sup>12</sup>, where, as outlined above, women are offered a very particular kind of freedom (through discourses of empowerment and choice) in exchange, or as a substitute for, a more substantive feminist politics (McRobbie 2009, cited in Gill and Scharff 2011, 4). It is important to note here that the 'autonomous, calculating, self-regulating subject of neoliberalism bears a strong resemblance to the active, freely choosing, self-reinventing subject of postfeminism' (Gill and Scharff 2011, 7). In other words, if the previous understanding of female sexuality - women as sexual *objects* - has allegedly shifted to understanding women as 'knowing, active and desiring sexual *subjects*' (Gill 2003, 103, my italics), then the overarching assumption is that women's sexual liberation has been achieved, largely because these new constructions of femininity are organized around a sensibility of 'sexual confidence and autonomy' (Gill 2003, 103).

However, Gill argues that framing female eroticization, female sexuality and the alleged postfeminist era in this way, actually seeks to use the seemingly celebratory culture of sex as a way of repackaging old gender norms under the guise of sexual empowerment and agency. This argument suggests that, in actuality, women are called on to self-manage more than ever before - to 'work on and transform the self, to regulate every aspect of their conduct, and to present all their actions as freely chosen' (Gill and Scharff 2011, 7). Here it is argued that there has been a dynamic shift from an '*external male judging gaze to a self-policing narcissistic gaze*' (Gill 2003, 104, italics in original), where women take on power-as-self-mastery and rather ironically, 'feel empowered or liberated by the very bodily norms and practices which constrain or enslave them' (Davis 1997, 11).

While I do agree that the celebratory culture of sex *can* place feminism's political role and purpose in question because of the argument that it appears redundant under the

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<sup>12</sup> Postfeminism as a sensibility is one of four ways Gill and Scharff define the concept which, for them, has such a lack of specificity yet signifies such a wide range of meanings. Alongside postfeminism as a sensibility (positioned here as an object of critical analysis rather than a theoretical orientation), postfeminism is also considered: as an analytical perspective found at the intersection of poststructuralism, postcolonialism, postmodernism, etc.; as representative of a historical shift (particularly after the Second Wave of feminism), and therefore indicating the 'pastness' of feminism; and lastly, as a backlash against feminism, often premised on fears surrounding the collapse of masculine hegemony (2011, 3).

guise of an ‘active, freely choosing, self-reinventing [female] subject’ (Gill and Scharff 2011, 7), I also find validity in arguments surrounding ‘choice’, particularly when considering one of the key principles in understandings of third wave feminism – where women are called to embark on projects of individualized self-definition, prioritizing self-expression and thus developing a relationship to feminism in ways that are relevant to the contradictions that characterize their lives and experiences (Budgeon 2011, 279). Here I move away from considering the limits placed on the female subject by broader social structures and instead, consider the possibility that within these structures and the current cultural context, feminist-identified women (and my participants in particular), act with the ‘knowledge of what one is doing and why one is doing it’ (Baumgardner and Richards 2000, 83)<sup>13</sup>.

It is important to consider however, that choices made by my own participants are done so through their social position as White, middle-class women, situated in a 21<sup>st</sup> century, Western culture. Choice therefore remains a contentious point when more closely considering *who* gets to choose, *who* feels entitled to make these choices, and *what* choices are, in fact, available. So while Budgeon argues that ‘maintaining a coherent empowerment narrative consisting of autonomy, individuality and personal choice requires a denial of the effects that external influences have’ (2011, 285), I argue that this is not necessarily the case, at least within the context of this research, as my participants do not recognize or experience their choices through a celebratory, empowerment postfeminist narrative; rather, they identify the neoliberal nod to self-definition and autonomy but at the same time, make very explicit links between their sexual choices (and desires) and the external forces that play a role in their very construction – which is precisely why many of them express such contradictory, complex relationships between their experiences of heterosexuality and feminist politics.

Highly contested phrases like ‘choice feminism’ are often caricatured as ‘uncritically endorsing whatever a woman chooses to do as feminist’ (Snyder-Hall 2010, 255), and perhaps this is a worthwhile critique of the fluid meanings often associated with third wave feminist values, where the focus has become more on the individual’s lived experiences and emotions rather than legislation and policy (Budgeon 2011, 184). However, I argue that choices do not necessarily express a thoughtless endorsement of empowerment, but rather, within the context of this research, are the result of a deep respect for feminisms’ pluralism and the right to self-determination (Snyder-Hall 2010,

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<sup>13</sup> The role of agency and embodiment will be unpacked in detail toward the end of this chapter, in section 2.7.

255). This is not to say the term 'choice' is unproblematic; as I have outlined above there is much to say about who gets to choose and what choices are available. Moreover, there is pressure to make the 'right' choice, a nod to the external structures that shape and inform the very choices available and thus the choices being made. What Snyder-Hall suggests, and what is imperative within the context of this research, is that the term choice (and the critiques surrounding it) can trivialize what are often hard decisions to make (2010, 256), something that will become starkly obvious in chapter 4-6. Therefore, it is imperative to recognize and validate that sexual choices may be driven by deep-seated desires or the need to express a gender or sexual identity - and this is precisely where my participants' negotiations are located. The choices that will be outlined in chapters 4-6 represent some of the most fundamental principles of feminism – pluralism, self-determination and non-judgmentalness (Snyder-Hall 2010) - and therefore present an understanding of feminism that recognizes there is 'no one lifestyle or manifestation of feminist empowerment, and instead, offer self-possession, self-determination and an endless array of non-dichotomous possibilities' (Walker 1995, xxxiv). Being mindful and critical that 'a sense of entitlement is not enough to transform a culture where that entitlement is not yet fully recognized' (Budgeon 2011, 290), I find it important to stress that ideas of choice be regarded throughout this thesis as a way of understanding feminist politics that are inherently based on 'the importance of self-definition and the need for women to define their personal relationships to feminism in ways that make sense to them as individuals' (Budgeon 2011, 283).

The concepts outlined above undoubtedly come from more deeply rooted theoretical claims. For instance, Young argues that there is a specific mode of being in the world that is female, where certain structures and norms inform or delimit female lived experience. How does the female subject negotiate between the social structures that dictate her actions and the choices she wants to make? Why is she situated in this relationship between structure and agency – between what she ought to do and the choices she makes that might disrupt such scripts? These ideas will be further explored in the following section by considering Gagnon's (2004) notion of scripting and Butler's (1993) theory of performativity. Here I will move away from the current cultural context and argue more generally that gender (and sexual) scripts help to uphold and perpetuate the idea that femininity ought to be experienced and lived in a certain way; in other words what a woman should do in acts of gender (as well as acts of sex, which arguably stem from acts of gender) is dictated by a framework of norms that seek to govern the female

embodied subject under a guise that is so deeply embedded the scripts themselves become invisible and therefore perceived as natural.

## 2.5 Femininity as scripted performance

According to Gagnon, sexual conduct is culturally learned and dependant on the way in which sexuality is maintained and organized by social structures and cultures (2004, 134). In short, people learn how to be sexual in accordance with the accepted social roles of their specific culture and social group (ibid). These learned 'scripts', as Gagnon terms them, have been inscribed onto the gendered bodies of society's individuals come to describe certain qualities, motives for behaviour as well as set sequences of appropriate activities, of what one should and should not do according to one's (learned) gender (2004, 61).

Furthermore, Gagnon argues that 'individual actors possess and exploit culturally received explanations for their own and others' behaviours' (2004, 62). Here he refers to learned gender conduct, however Gagnon recognizes that both sexual and gender scripts are largely thought to be determined by similar prescriptions, informed by cultural understandings of masculinity and femininity. In other words, the socialization which is ultimately brought to bear on one's sexual script is actually first learned in contexts related to one's gender (Gagnon 2004, 68). It is important here to consider Butler's theory of performativity alongside her broader framework of the heterosexual matrix. In doing so, I aim to offer further support to Gagnon's understanding of how the female subject may come to experience her sex, gender, and sexuality through cultural inscriptions.

Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) introduced a critical account of the categories sex, gender, and sexuality in an effort to investigate the 'grid of intelligibility through which bodies, genders, and desires are naturalized' (208). Here Butler developed an account of a heteronormative and patriarchal culture which assumes masculine and feminine genders are built upon male and female bodies, respectively. In other words, sex causes gender. Through notions of performativity, where 'gender is always a doing' (1990, 34), or rather, where bodies are culturally constructed through repeated acts in time, the stylized body comes to appear as natural. As a result, the gender performance matches the sexed body; furthermore, it is also seen to express sexuality. For instance, Butler contends that gender performances are imposed on men and women by normative heterosexuality. Herein lies Butler's heterosexual matrix:

A hegemonic discursive/epistemic model of gender intelligibility that assumes that for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender (masculine expresses male, feminine expresses female) that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality (1990, 208).

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler argues that there is a very specific understanding as to how gender operates – in other words, what a person feels, acts, and how they express their sexuality is the articulation and consummation of a gender. I would like to consider the usefulness of Butler's theory of gender performativity and the construction of the heterosexual matrix in correlation with Gagnon's notion of script theory; however, I will focus less on the idea of compulsory heterosexuality within the heterosexual matrix as I am more interested (for the purpose of this section) in the process through which femininity is built upon the female body, and how culturally constructed gender performance relates to how the female subject might experience her sexual script.

As outlined above, Gagnon argues that in addition to how one learns their gender, people learn how to be sexual in accordance with the accepted social roles of their specific culture and social group (2004, 134). As a result, it should start to become clear why I supplement Gagnon's scripting theory with Butler's early theories of sex, gender and (to a lesser extent) sexuality. For instance, performing femininity through repeated stylized acts helps to naturalize a seemingly coherent gender and sex category: the feminine, female body. As Gagnon argues, these acquired ways of conduct become increasingly powerful in their capacity as they become internalized and carried out, often devoid of the actor's recognition that she is even accepting them (Gagnon 2004, 61). And while I agree with Jackson and Scott that the term 'script' connotes something that is fixed (2007, 109), I do think that sexual scripts and gender performativity, when considered together, offer a unique understanding when applied to sexual embodiment and in particular, the female body's lived experiences within the discourse of heterosexuality. It is my contention that approaching femininity and the female subject in this way offers a more nuanced understanding of how she might experience the complexities and possibilities of heterosexuality.

For instance, Gagnon argues that the norms of heterosexual sex are created by the notion that women's bodies are invested with erotic meaning derived from men (2004, 79). In other words, the female body follows interactional social codes deeply embedded within patriarchal language (Gagnon 2004, xxiv). For instance:



The sequence of what ought to be done in a sexual act depends on the pre-existence of a script that defines what is to be done with this or that person, in this or that circumstance, at this or that time, and what feelings and motives are appropriate to the event (2004, 136).

To illustrate his point, Gagnon describes heterosexual sex between adolescents, social actors who are just beginning to understand the workings of their sexuality and sexual scripts (2004, 78). He argues that the young male has a more developed script and a set of concrete behaviours while the female's is less so - she has learnt that cultural prescriptions of gender link men to initiation and dominance and women to passiveness and docility; although receptivity and passivity are equally part of a script, Gagnon's point is that the female subject is arguably more likely to learn and therefore perform a reactive version of male sexuality much in the way she has learnt to enact and perform the opposing traits of his gender (Gagnon 2004, 78). While scripts are shown here to operate at the interpersonal level - where one individual guides their conduct by the conduct of the other, thus attempting to meet the expectations of the other individual (Gagnon 2004, 140) - this level of scripting becomes the basis upon which continued patterns of structured social behaviour occur within both gender and sexual conduct. At the cultural level, it is cultural instructions (embedded in the practice of everyday life, social organizations and institutions) which uphold the idea that scripts are not simply the possession of any one individual as they are always situated as part of a socio-cultural scenario or structure. As a result, the language of sexual behaviour and conduct (within heterosexuality) is formed - norms and attitudes become integrated into sexual narratives and help to dictate what should be done in the act(s) of sex, who should do what, and how one should go about doing it (Gagnon 2004, 136).

Here it is imperative to note that while scripts are characterized by a pre-defined idea of what one 'ought' to do, the scripts themselves 'should not be understood as closed texts that lock us into predictable plots and roles' (Jackson and Scott 2007, 109). Rather, they are to be played with, manipulated, improvised and renegotiated - 'not simply played out...we take cues from partners and make sense of what is happening to them, to us, and between us' (Jackson and Scott 2007, 109). For Butler, this brings 'gender trouble', whereby individuals 'trouble' the categories of gender through subversive performance. In other words, if identity is 'performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results' (Butler 1990, 34), then troubling such performances allows for less restrictive and binary understandings of masculinity and femininity and instead, offers the

opportunity for subversion, mobilization, confusion – in short, a proliferation of genders, and therefore, identities.

From the considerations above, I have argued that the female embodied experience of heterosexual sex, in a Western, patriarchal context is ultimately informed by learned categories of sex, gender and sexuality, largely demonstrated through performances of femininity and the cultural scripts set forth by a discourse that promotes a deeply embedded set of social codes inscribed upon the female body. In other words, both Gagnon and Butler question the idea that gender and sexual behaviours are natural and instead, suggest that they are performances learned through the internalization of dominant (gender) norms. Therefore, I have argued that pairing Butler's theory of performativity with Gagnon's notion of sexual scripting provides the most useful framework in approaching the female subject's lived experiences within the context of heterosexuality. Together they acknowledge that what ought to be done in acts of sex and gender is defined by culturally constructed ideas of what it means to be female, feminine and heterosexual.

If performances and practices of femininity are part of a process of embodiment which works to establish just how the female, feminine subject *should* be constructed and, as a result, achieved, I would like to consider how certain frameworks of power, namely discipline and self-surveillance, help to uphold and preserve patriarchal, Western understandings of gender and sexual scripts. The aim here will be to suggest that although performances of femininity arise from the female body and therefore offer a certain strength toward embodiment and active engagement with the self, femininity is also framed as a trap in that it can be difficult in determining what is done 'in obedience to the *requirements of femininity*' (Bartky 1990, 66, my italics). I will then ground the idea of disciplinary power in Foucault's wider theorizations on power. The goal here will be to elaborate on how the female body is positioned within the discourse of heterosexuality in a Western, patriarchal culture.

## **2.6 Disciplinary power and the female body**

It has been noted that feminist scholarship on the body 'invariably links women's embodied experiences with practices of power' (Davis 1997, 10); and while it can be argued that all bodies (of all genders) are directly involved in a political field as such, the

female body exists in a particular discursive relationship whereby the idea of the docile, practiced body emerges as a means of self-surveillance, or rather, a sort of obedience to patriarchy (particularly when discussed in terms of femininity and heterosexuality within a Western context). It is important to note that perspectives of power depend on how the body is conceptualized as well as the socio-cultural framework of female embodiment that is being considered (Davis 1997, 10), so here I will first consider theorizations of the female body that coincide with the perspectives on power that will be investigated below. The aim here will be to ground frameworks of disciplinary power and self-surveillance in a more deeply rooted, historical understanding of the female body's positioning within Western, patriarchal culture.

Firstly, I argue for an understanding of the body that is indistinct from the mind; in other words, they are fundamentally interrelated, dependent on and informed by one another, creating what I would argue can best be described as the embodied subject, whereby the mind and body are conceptualized and represented as working together in one corporeal being. In other words, the mind is always embodied (Grosz 1994, 86). Moreover, I would encourage the opposing statement to be of equal relevance – that the body is also always situated in consciousness. Informed by Merleau-Ponty, Grosz argues that because 'we perceive and receive information of and from the world through our bodies' (1994, 86), the body becomes both a carrier of the self (and the self's expressions) as well as a materiality upon which constructions of subjectivity are appropriated. In short, the subject is only ever capable of accessing knowledge by living their body – 'the-body-as-it-is-lived-by-me' (Grosz 1994, 86). Furthermore, the embodied subject is always socio-culturally and historically situated; thus, understandings of embodiment depend on how the individual gives meaning to their own interactions, 'through their bodies and with the world around them' (Davis 1997, 14). While I am interested in the connection between interiority and exteriority - the body and the way it experiences the world through consciousness - I find it necessary to further emphasize the importance of socio-historical specificities. It is also imperative to consider how the social construction of gender can help to fill in the ontological gaps of phenomenology by situating the female body in a broader discourse of power. In order to do so, it is first important that I outline where these understandings of the female body's positionality in a Western, patriarchal context, come from.

For instance, Descartes' notion of the mind/body dualism suggests that the body is corporeal and as a result, is only ever an object situated in immanence; the mind however,

is the subject of knowledge. The subject in question can only ever become the latter if the body, its materiality, and the suspicion that comes along with its 'unruly passions and appetites' (Shildrick and Price 1999, 2) are disrupted and discarded for the pursuit of truth, rationalism and knowledge. However, Descartes also argued that the female subject could never escape association with the body because of its reproductive purpose and capacity - she could only ever exist as body-object and fail to achieve status as the subject of knowledge, easily achieved by the body that is not bound by reproduction: the male, or rather, the *disembodied*. Approaching understandings of the body in this binary and hierarchical manner, whereby the body-object becomes *other* to the subject of knowledge (Fraser and Greco 2005, 7), is one way of explaining sexual difference as it seeks to naturalize differences of gender and sexuality; as a result, this understanding perpetuates the inequalities that are experienced and based on those exact differences. Rejecting such an ideology, whereby human biology became the causal explanation for human and social behaviour (Fraser and Greco 2005, 7), Beauvoir introduced and argued for an epistemological foundation suggesting that the differences between men and women were not biological but rather social; in other words 'one is not born, but rather becomes, woman' (1949, 283).

A constructionist approach such as this began to disengage the notion of the mind/body split by supporting the argument that biological sex cannot '*in itself* limit the position of women...it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature' (Fraser and Greco 2005, 8, italics in original). Therefore, Beauvoir argues that women's social inequality is not rooted in their biology and their body's capacities, but rather, produced through understandings that have been perpetuated by social and cultural meanings; meanings that, for centuries, have been inscribed on the (unpredictable and suspicious) female body by the rational male subject - the subject of knowledge. When situated in a broader framework, this comes to be understood as the female body's given positionality within the overall discourse of a male-privileging culture, both historically, and as will be introduced below, today. The argument made here is that when recognized through a social constructionist lens, bodily difference *is* essential for understanding experiences of embodiment. It is the individuals interactions 'with their bodies and through their bodies and the world around them' (Davis 1997, 9) which are key concerns in understanding female lived body experience, especially within a culture which has its roots in such a binary mode of knowledge production. Shildrick and Price argue similarly in that it is the individual's everyday interactions with their bodies which help to 'emphasize the importance and inescapability of embodiment as a differential and fluid construct, the site

of potential, rather than as a fixed given' (1999, 3). Furthermore, cultural variations of lived body experiences help to illustrate just how flawed the disavowal of a 'natural' body is (Davis 1997, 4). Through such recognition, lived bodies, conditions of embodiment, the emphasis on lived experience - these phenomenological understandings of the body - offer a useful starting point for making sense of 'the lived experiences of having a female body' (Davis 1997, 9).

That said, despite understanding the individual as a site of potential, it is equally as important to recognize that social construction and socio-cultural specificities play a role in the experiences of the female body, and this is precisely where an understanding of power relations is brought forth; in other words, femininity, sexual desires and pleasures, sexuality as a whole, are all constructed categories that will always be socially located and always recognized and interpreted as culturally specific. For instance, Young summarizes this construction and the positionality of the female subject as existing with a network of power relations as:

A set of structures and conditions that delimit the typical *situation* of being a woman in a particular society, as well as the typical way in which this situation is lived by the women themselves (2005, 31).

Here Young recognizes that the body is central to discussions of power and that because the female body is often defined and characterized *by* her body (by the dominant culture), she exists within an 'aesthetic scaling of bodies' (Davis 1997, 10) where the foundation for processes of domination take place. This domination is said to take place through and on the body that belongs to any subordinate member of a group - a body not part of the dominant culture (Davis 1997, 10). Thus, in a Western, patriarchal context, the female body has been historically positioned as object or Other and as a result, becomes subjected to processes of domination and control (Davis 1997, 7). In this context, Grosz describes the female body as a 'black box [...] it is acted upon, inscribed, peered into; information is extracted from it, and disciplinary regimes are imposed on it' (1994, 146). In other words, power is invested on to the female body in order to mark it, train it, and in order to use it to emit signs, ultimately creating a docile body (Foucault 1975, 100).<sup>14</sup>

These modern techniques of (disciplinary and self-policing) power are exercised invisibly, and effectively create a political anatomy whereby subjected and practiced

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<sup>14</sup> Here it is important to ideas surrounding the docile body have been adapted by feminist theorists to incorporate femininity and the female body, as Foucault's writing addressed the docile body in a non-gendered manner.

(docile) female bodies are produced (Bartky 1990, 77); in other words, the internalization of discipline becomes incorporated into the structure of the female self and the practiced body comes to be inscribed by an inferior status. The female body enters what Bartky calls 'a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it' (1990, 80); as a result, women come to live their bodies as seen by another. In a Western, patriarchal culture, the female body is thus affected by a male-defined power that has permeated through the 'finer channels' (Bartky 1990, 79), permitting it to reside at the centre of a discourse which controls and defines female sexuality while upholding and privileging (that of) the male. It is because of these binaries and their seemingly naturalness that a certain irrefutable strength is afforded to the disciplinary power which seeks to regulate the female body. These binaries have fragmented the female body's space and its movements so that women live their bodies under the persistent gaze of 'an anonymous patriarchal Other' (Bartky 1990, 63). Here disciplinary power works to not only produce bodies and bodily practices but also bears the 'imprint of a given interest and logic – including patriarchy' (Green 2010, 320) - despite insistence that the 'disciplinarian' is both everyone and no one in particular (Bartky 1990, 74) .

So while Bartky notes that the disciplinary power which inscribes the female body is both everywhere and nowhere, that the disciplinarian is everyone and yet no one in particular, the absence of an 'actual' enforcer of power means the practiced female body comes to be understood as natural or voluntary (1990, 75). Emerging here is the role that feminist poststructuralism plays in understandings of power and the female body within the discourse of patriarchy - it proposes an idea of how power is exercised, how to think about it, and how notions of conformity and compliance work in the production of female sexual subjectivity. This is not to say the female subject is not actively engaged in constructing her femininity or sexuality, but as Holland et al. note, these active constructions occur in social situations in which the female subject is both 'produced and constrained by discourses of power and by the way power relations between men and women are socially organized' (1998, 24). While it may now appear that the importance placed on phenomenology (or the body's actions of intentionality) has begun to be refuted by the strength afforded to disciplinary power and the way it is situated as a central focus to the female body and its particularities, it will be outlined below that power also actively engages the subject through its own construction of the meaning attached to the lived subject.

The notion of the female body-subject, while never specifically addressed in Foucault's understanding of power relations, is useful in discussions within feminist theory because it helps to generate understandings regarding the situatedness of gendered embodiment within discourses of patriarchal power; and in particular, how the female subject experiences her body within a culture that has created a micro-physics of power appropriated through technique, discipline and surveillance (Bartky 1990, 74). It might seem that the female body is only ever destined to be a practiced body-object, the male subject's Other; however this is a rather restricted assumption. The female body's ability to exist within this network of power relations actually helps to produce her as a subject, and this is the key to Foucault's notion of power. In short, power has a directly productive role, wherever it comes into play (Foucault 1976, 94). Subjects themselves thus play an active role in their relation to power because they are in constant negotiation with the ever-present networks that permeate throughout their social world. In short, while 'power grips us at the point where our desires and our very sense of the possibilities for self-definition are constituted' (Bartky 1990, 10), it is precisely because we are constituted by power that we are able to challenge its forces.

We are never trapped by it, Foucault argues (1976, 96), because while power itself may produce effective modes of domination and remain a perpetual feature of all social relations, it is neither stable nor fixed, so modifying its hold is always inherently possible. In other words, power is dependent on resistance, a resistance that can never exist in a position outside of its relation to power (Foucault 1976, 96). And while it seeks to tighten the grip on our actions, bodies, minds, desires and pleasures, power's existence also allows the female body-subject to resist and engage with such inscribed discursive practices. Power is therefore productive and positive – it does more than work negatively through denial, repression and restriction; instead, it produces 'forms of pleasure, systems of knowledge, goods and discourses' (Abu-Lughod 1990, 42). Power henceforth produces knowledge through the subject's very own desires and pleasures. However, in turn, this can provide more 'refined, improved and efficient techniques for the surveillance and control of bodies, in a spiral of power-knowledge-pleasure' (Grosz 1994, 146). It is this power-knowledge-pleasure relation which is to be considered here:

Not on the basis of the subject of knowledge who is or is not free in relations to power systems, but, on the contrary, the subject who knows, the objects to be known and the modalities of knowledge (that) must be regarded as so many effects of these fundamental implications of power-knowledge and their historical transformations (Foucault 1977, 104).

Situating this notion of power-knowledge-pleasure within the context of femininity and heterosexual relations, it starts to become clear how and why the female body and its relationship with power is important to consider for this thesis. For instance, as introduced in the previous section, while women are actively engaged in constructing their own femininity – their own gender – these are learned scripts inscribed onto the bodies of society's individuals, and also seek to inform sexual scripts. So, while practices of femininity are part of a process of embodiment, they also dictate just how the female, feminine body subject should be constructed. The strength of the seemingly natural and invisible disciplinary power outlined here helps to uphold patriarchal understandings of femininity and as a result, impacts the female subject's sexual script. In this sense, scripts may be manipulable, negotiated and re-written, but perhaps not without their limits (Gagnon 2004, 62).

It starts to become clear that there exists a possibility for tension and contradiction between the female subject's lived experiences and the messages or discourses that inform them. For instance, to what extent does the female subject have control over her lived experiences? How much of her embodied experience is her own and how much is determined and encouraged by cultural messages? As Goffman notes, 'we are clearly seen as the agents of our acts, there being very little chance of disavowing having committed them' (2005, 83) and it is the credit afforded to the embodied subject found here that is imperative in considering the phenomenological framework that informs this research. Here I refer back to the idea of 'choice' and the right to self-determination when considering practices of femininity and sexuality. For instance, if a feminist-identified woman chooses to eroticize male dominance, this should not be unconditionally met with the insistence that she is *only* inherently shaped by the larger socio-cultural context in which she is located. That indeed, by looking at the final 'choice' any feminist makes, we cannot assume to know anything about 'how she may have struggled to balance competing narratives' (Snyder-Hall 2010, 256) – for instance, the disciplinary regimes outlined above and the feminist consciousness she possesses. However, as Gill contends, disciplinary and self-policing regimes of power mean that 'sexual objectification can be presented not as something done to women by some men, but as the freely chosen wish of active, confident, assertive female subjects' (2003, 104).

Here I have outlined an approach to understanding the female body and why its positioning - historically rooted in the body, located as secondary and inferior - helps to uphold conventional and normative gender scripts. To elaborate on the female subject's



role within discourses of power, I have suggested that a feminist-informed Foucauldian perspective on power is useful in investigating the female subject's positioning within the context of heterosexuality. I will now turn to use these perspectives on power and female embodiment in an effort to transform such deeply embedded sexual scripts. The aim here will be to first present a framework of agency that is commonly associated with poststructuralist thought; and second, urge a move away from this model of agency and offer a more generative understanding based on theories of embodiment.

## 2.7 Agency and embodiment

In negotiating and challenging both the potentialities and limitations of female lived experience, the body starts to emerge 'as a site for mundane acts of resistance' (Davis 1997, 12). As outlined in the previous section, the female subject *does* have the opportunity to resist the messages which seek to control her sexuality, no matter how deeply embedded disciplinary power (or dominant gender norms) lie. In fact, they play a direct role in enabling understandings of individual agency.

The concept of agency carries with it many different meanings, largely those which, in feminist projects, tend to be defined as the self-directed, self-realizing ability to act at one's own will. In *Politics of Piety* (2005), Mahmood explores the concept of agency within Islamic women's religious practices with this definition in mind. Although her research is situated outside the context and themes of my own, I believe the way she conceptualizes agency can be expanded to include a much broader (and indeed, Western) cultural context. For instance, Mahmood suggests that agency is 'the capacity to realize one's own interests against the weight of custom, tradition, transcendental will, or other obstacles (individual or collective)' (2005, 8). She takes a humanist approach toward autonomy, claiming that all humans have an innate desire for freedom, and that actions must be the consequence of one's own will in order for that individual to embody agency. In this formulation, it is not the substance of a desire, 'but its origin that matters in judgements about autonomy' (Mahmood 2005, 12). Furthermore, it is the ability to choose one's desires, 'no matter how illiberal they may be' (Mahmood 2005, 12), which helps to create an agentic subject (illiberal desires in Mahmood's research refers to those that arguably 'against' Islamic custom). Mahmood urges a move away from this dualistic framework of agency, one in which 'norms are conceptualized on the model of doing and undoing, consolidation and subversion – and instead think about the variety of ways in which norms are lived and

inhabited, aspired to, reached for, and consummated' (2005, 23). Before exploring this notion further, it is first important to consider how agency is understood through a poststructuralist lens in order to demonstrate its limitations.

Feminist poststructuralist notions of agency have been critiqued because of the understanding that subjectification occurs through a largely negative paradigm, whereby the 'individual emerges from constraint' (McNay 2000, 4), thereby suggesting a sort of 'freedom from' (Grosz 2010, 141). In other words, agency or autonomy is thought to be achieved upon the elimination of such constraint. From a poststructuralist lens, the possibility for agency exists within structures and discourses of power; this makes sense since power, as discussed above, is an ever-present feature of social (and sexual) relations, and while securing the subject's subordination is 'also the means by which she becomes a self-conscious identity and agent' (McNay 2000, 17). In other words, once the subject has had 'restraints and inhibitions, the negative limitations, to freedom removed, a natural or given autonomy is somehow preserved' (Grosz 2010, 141). The 'freedom from' model of agency is argued to be restrictive, based on the notion that the negative paradigm of subject formation actually plays a role in confining the subject (despite the fact that it simultaneously plays a role in the subject's construction), thus presenting agency as a 'structural abstraction rather than an account of the logic of practice' (McNay 2000, 45). As a result, this is said to offer an analysis of change (or notion of agency) that is understood through a dichotomous logic of 'domination and resistance' (McNay 2000, 155).

As outlined in the previous section, for Butler these acts of resistance or subversion can be characterized by (but are not exclusive to) 'gender trouble'. This is the idea where the male or female body demonstrates symbolic possibilities of disrupting normative conceptions of what would be deemed appropriate or 'normal' for gendered bodies. However, such transgressive body politics, that is to say subverting dominant norms through the creation of a symbolic space, remains focused on operations of power that still work within a set of dualisms. In other words, the subject either conforms or subverts, consolidates or resignifies – 'there is no possibility of undoing social norms that is independent of the doing of norms' (Mahmood 2005, 20), thereby confirming the dichotomous attributes of the 'freedom from' model. Like Grosz suggests, the 'freedom from' constraints does offer a certain level of agency due to the elimination of the constraint which has been inscribed upon the subject; however, along with Grosz, McNay argues that the individual who emerges from this constraint provides only a weakened version of agency because of the passivity underlying the subject's formation within this

negative paradigm – ‘it tends to think of action mainly through the residual categories of resistance to or dislocation from dominant norms’ (McNay 2000, 4) whereby *not* conforming, but rather subverting and resisting, are terms used to describe ‘any situation where individual practice does not conform to dominant norms’ (ibid). Like Mahmood, McNay suggests that a more precise and varied account is required because this would help to explain ‘differing motivations and ways in which individuals and groups struggle over, appropriate and transform cultural meanings and resources’ (2000, 4). A more generative understanding of subject formation, as will be outlined below, seeks to provide a ‘dynamic theory of agency through which to examine how social actors may adapt and respond in an active fashion to the uncertainties unleashed in an increasingly differentiated social order’ (McNay 2000, 161).

It is clear that Mahmood goes many steps beyond the negative paradigm as she believes the subject has the capacity for a relationship with dominant norms that stems beyond simply doing/undoing them, or reinstating/subverting them. She argues that inhabiting norms is not necessarily ‘bad’ or a way of disengaging from discourses of agency because, ‘agentival capacity is entailed not only in those acts that resist norms but also in multiple ways in which one *inhabits* norms’ (Mahmood 2005, italics in original 15). If we look at instances whereby women inhabit dominant norms as ‘the site of women’s attempts to actively give shape to their lives’ (Davis 1997, 12), then those very notions of inhabiting, adhering, or aspiring to dominant norms should be read as actively *locating* oneself in a particular place, in a particular time.

Therefore, Mahmood argues that agency should be thought of not simply as a synonym for resistance to dominant social norms but ‘as a modality of action...this conversation raises some interesting questions about the kind of relationship established between the subject and the norm’ (2005, 157). In other words, she does not necessarily call for a direct theory of agency, but rather, a theory of *analyzing* agency in terms of its different modalities and the ‘concepts in which its particular affect, meaning and form resides’ (2005, 188). She argues that this framework forces us to recognize that different modalities (of agency) require different bodily capacities, forcing us to question whether resistance (to gender norms) requires the body to behave in particularly *new* ways. For instance, it ‘might well require the retraining of sensibilities, affect, desire and sentiments – those registers of corporeality that often escape the logic of representation and symbolic articulation’ (Mahmood 2005, 188). Here it becomes clear that Mahmood moves away from the symbolic articulation of subjectivity and agency, and instead, looks more towards

how the corporeal being and themes of embodiment help to supplement the negative paradigm of subject formation and thus offer a more generative theory of analyzing agency. While the negative paradigm offers a 'powerful explanation of the profound inscription of gender norms in the process of subject formation' (McNay 2000, 164), the more generative understanding offers a theory which examines how subjects might adapt, inhabit, and respond to these norms through notions of embodiment, rather than through notions of constraint.

Grosz refers to this as a 'freedom to' model of agency, consisting of the 'condition of, or capacity for, action' (2010, 140). Whereas the negative paradigm and the 'freedom from' model offer a more deterministic approach, a focus on themes of embodiment offers an understanding of agency which stresses the importance of the temporal, lived aspects of the body, which arguably creates 'a more fluid relation between body and subjectivity than is available in dualist concepts' (McNay 2000, 13). Agency thus becomes recognized as a capacity of the body – the bodily capacity for movement and the possibilities of bodily actions (Grosz 2010, 152). In this instance, agency does not then seem to be so much about the subject 'being free or not free; rather, it is the *acts* that, in expressing a consonance (or not) with their agent, are free (or automatized), have (or lack) the qualitative character of free acts' (Grosz 2010, 144). In the same way that Mahmood understands autonomy to be the result of actions done out of one's own will, Grosz confirms this by suggesting that the act is considered free to the extent that the self has been the author or creator of that act, and therefore expresses the self.

If we understand acts as the means of creating an agentic subject, then it starts to become clear that the focus is less on the constraints that produce the subject as agentic, and more so on the ability to make acts one's own – whatever those acts may be. The freedom to act, Grosz argues, is connected to an embodied being – acts that both transform and inform the subject. She states:

Acts are free insofar as they express and resemble the subject, not insofar as the subject is always the same, an essence, an identity, but insofar as the subject is transformed by and engaged through its acts, becomes through its acts (2010, 146).

The question of agency therefore becomes more about the content in the choices we make rather than simply in the choices that we make. For instance, if agency is located in acts rather than subjects, 'the capacity to act and the effectivity of action is to a large extent structured by the ability to harness and utilize matter for one's own purposes' (Grosz 2010, 148). This still holds intact the earlier notion that the subject is the author of

their own acts, and that acts are chosen at the individual's will, void of any influence from custom, tradition and norms. However, it also expands to include the idea that when the body acts, or the subject makes a choice, the content of that choice becomes part of their subjectivity, part of their constant process of becoming. As Grosz states, 'in the process those acts become capable of transforming that being' (2010, 147) therefore allowing the freedom of action to be concretely connected to the embodied being and the world in which that being acts (with other beings and objects).

In this section, I have offered a framework for understanding the possibilities of agency in terms of temporality and embodied practice. I have argued that the subject's acts should be understood as a lived set of embodied practices and potentialities, 'rather than as an externally imposed set of constraining norms' (McNay 2000, 34). It is my contention that this conception opens up the possibilities of agency and places importance on what the subject is capable of making and doing, rather than focusing on agency as something to be attained (only) once independent from the constraint of dominant social norms. I would argue that understanding the female subject's capacity for agency may be best addressed by this framework, that is to say by exploring what she is capable of as a *lived* body rather than simply addressing the constraints she should free herself from as a *gendered* body, particularly when considered within the context of heterosexual norms. That said, my aim is not to disregard or down-play the role that social structures play in constituting lived experience. I recognize Giddens' (1984) argument in that structures refer to the norms, rules and resources of society, but that social actors play an active role in drawing on these structures in order to inhabit, manipulate or transform their social actions. The relationship between structure and agency that I have drawn on at various points throughout this chapter effectively mirrors the relationship between poststructuralism and phenomenology, where neither are sufficient on their own, but rather, where primacy is given to both. It is my intention that understanding agency through notions of embodiment does not eliminate the role of structure, but rather, works to supplement it so that social actors are recognized as active participants in determining their lived experiences, rather than simply bearers of structure (Giddens 1984).

The remaining section of this chapter will aim to draw a theoretical conclusion between the ways in which this model of agency works within the framework of disciplinary power. It will then review how discourses of disciplinary power are learned and performed through scripts of gender and sexuality, in an effort to explore the lived body experiences of female desire and pleasure in a highly sexualised, Western, patriarchal

context. I will offer a final explanation as to why female lived experience might best be interpreted from an embodiment or 'lived body' perspective, and conclude by returning to the wider theorizations of heterosexuality and feminist-identified women.

## 2.8 Conclusion

My intention for this chapter has been to construct the necessary conceptual approach, and subsequent review of the most relevant literature, in order to establish a productive and informed way in which the findings of this research will be framed and investigated. The overall aim has been to theoretically illustrate the need to recognize the possibilities of heterosexuality while also acknowledging the dominant social forces that seek to constrain such possibilities. In order to achieve this, I have offered considerations that take into account a feminist phenomenological and feminist poststructuralist perspective in order to capture what I deem to be the fundamental components in the critical exploration of feminist heterosexualities. By this I refer to the idea that the female subject has the ability to ontologically construct herself, her desires and pleasures, while simultaneously being constructed by the social conditions, norms and values that position her within a (21<sup>st</sup> century, Western, patriarchal) context. In doing so, I have attempted to be critical of heterosexuality (by focusing on the strength of patriarchal, gender norms) without conflating these ideas with the potentialities of lived heterosexual experience.

In order to consider how the female subject is both capable of creating meaning through lived experience while simultaneously being constituted by pre-defined meanings attached to these experiences, I assembled a series of ideas that needed to be connected to one another in order to organize and set out how the female subject's lived experiences will be presented in the subsequent analysis chapters. To that end, I introduced the subject of this research by offering an overview of feminist debates on heterosexuality over the last 40 years. I then turned to a discussion of desire and pleasure as a way of introducing the broader themes of my overall research; the focus here was on how desire and pleasure are understood, represented, and experienced when considered alongside female (hetero)sexuality. I suggested that expanding the definition of both sexual desire and sexual pleasure might offer more possibilities for the female subject (for instance, the desire for intimacies and the pleasures that can be derived from sex), particularly when considering how female desire and pleasure is both materially experienced and symbolically positioned within a broader socio-cultural framework.

I chose to locate understandings of female desire and pleasure in a cultural context in order to address feminism and (hetero)sexuality more explicitly. My aim here was to illustrate how the female subject is situated in a Western, patriarchal culture that is distinctly neoliberal and characterized by a seemingly celebratory culture of sex that is said to place feminism's very political role into question. Here I referred to the idea that female sexuality, choice and autonomy are often at the centre of such discussions, where neoliberal ideas of individualization and autonomy have the capacity to be perpetuated under the guise of sexual empowerment and thus seek to uphold certain gendered and sexual scripts, informed by patriarchal/cultural inscriptions. However, I considered the participants of this research more closely by offering an explanation that seeks to validate understandings of 'choice' under a third wave feminist rhetoric. While being mindful of critiques that suggest any choice a woman makes can be claimed as feminist so long as it is accompanied by a 'political consciousness' (Ferguson 2010, 247), I offered a way of understanding 'choice' that was grounded in the neoliberal right to autonomy and an understanding of pluralism – where no common identity, experience, or definition of feminism exists and where the 'politics of difference starts from the specificity of individual experiences' (Budgeon 2011, 282). As such, I argued that 'choice' is central to my participants' understandings of feminism, and thus an important point of consideration when unpacking the relevant literature that informs the upcoming analysis. In particular, I contested the argument that autonomy, individuality and personal choice requires denying the effects of external influences, and instead, highlighted that choices are often complex and difficult *because* of the role external forces play, particularly when considering the relationship between feminism and heterosexuality, the cultural context in which those choices occur, and the dominant meanings they might infer.

However, in order to account for the claim that a re-packaging of gender norms appears under this guise of empowerment, and moreover, that any choice can be claimed as a feminist act, I needed to consider how deeply embedded social codes are inscribed onto the female body through two frameworks, sexual scripting and performativity. Here I argued that within a Western context, female experiences of heterosexual sex are informed by performances of gender and learned sexual scripts, and that both are internalized by dominant gender norms. I suggested that performativity and sexual script theory offer a framework for approaching how the female subject learns what she should do in acts of sex and in acts of gender. This, I argued, is due to the cultural construction of both gender and sexuality and the way in which the dominant discourses that inform them also help to present ideas of what it means to be feminine and heterosexual in a

patriarchal context. As Snyder-Hall argues, even feminist-identified women ‘can often find their attempts to achieve liberty and equality stymied by their own feminine attraction to things that bolster patriarchy, as well as by the dominant gender norms imposed on them’ (2010, 256).

In order to further ground this assertion, I presented a framework of power that was both informed by and connected to the way in which the female body-subject is constructed by virtue of what is ‘appropriate’ in terms of a feminine gender and female heterosexuality. Therefore, disciplinary power and self-surveillance were used here to suggest that although performances of gender emerge from the female body, it is self-discipline and self-policing, informed by an anonymous patriarchal Other, or rather, a self-policing gaze that helps to uphold and preserve dominant norms and values. The aim here was to present a feminist interpretation of Foucault’s theory of power in order to elaborate on why and how the female body has come to exist within a network of power that has historically positioned her as secondary; in other words, a site for modern operations of power like self-discipline.

From here it became necessary to apply these perspectives on power to introduce understandings of agency in order to explore how the female subject can adapt and negotiate its meanings. The goal here was to offer a more generative understanding of agency based on theories of embodiment – one that recognized the interaction between theories of the body (and power), and the particularities of embodied experience. Here I provided a means through which the boundaries of such deeply embedded sexual scripts could be addressed. I urged for a move away from understanding agency through notions of subversion or dislocation from dominant norms; instead, I suggested a model of agency that includes inhabiting and aspiring to dominant norms. This model helps support the idea that female embodiment (and agency) can be explored through notions of a lived body rather than a gendered one. Because the capacity for agency within this framework is understood in terms of what the female subject is capable of making and doing, rather than subverting or freeing herself from, Young’s work on female embodiment further emphasized the importance of understanding agency through acts of the lived body, rather than the gendered subject. I argued that Young’s conception of female lived experience is perhaps the most productive way in which to understand the female body and its particularities within the context of this thesis. Young simultaneously recognizes that the female subject has ‘the ontological freedom to construct herself’ (2005, 16), while also acknowledging that this lived body is conditioned by social facts, informed by gendered



structures and 'the behaviour and expectations of others in ways that she has not chosen' (2005, 18). In other words, that 'persons live out their positioning in social structures along with the opportunities and constraints they produce' (Young 2005, 25).

Thus I returned to my theoretical starting point – the female subject has the ability to live out her positioning within social structures. As Young suggests, this provides the opportunity to use gender as a tool for analysis when engaging with social structures and understandings of power – for instance, gender structures that exist within the discourse of heterosexuality. By implicitly using these theoretical concerns in the analysis chapters that follow, I aim to engage in a critically informed discussion of feminist heterosexualities by considering the possibilities and potentialities of heterosexual practice and experience, while at the same time, recognizing the powerful social forces that limit these same capacities; as a result, I aim to provide accounts of feminism and heterosexuality in practice that stem far beyond the seemingly monolithic, universal, fixed and stable category it is often thought to be.



### 3. Researching Feminist Heterosexualities

**'[Feminist methodology] requires that the mythology of "hygienic research" with its accompanying mystification of the researcher and the researched as objective instruments of data production be replaced by the recognition that personal involvement is more than dangerous bias – it is the condition under which people come to know each other and to admit others in their lives'.**

**(Oakley 1981, 58)**

#### 3.1 Epistemological Approach

This research has been developed through a social constructionist lens, whereby the social world acts as the starting point through which social actors create their own realities and their own experiences; in doing so, they make sense of the social world. In choosing this approach, I have accounted for the subject as always culturally and historically specific, and therefore always in a constant process of becoming – never static and never fixed. As a result, I have not interpreted participants' diaries and interviews as a way of revealing an inner truth or 'real' meaning of the self (Plummer 1995, 34). Instead, I have followed Plummer in that telling one's story is about saying something 'in a particular way through a particular time and place' (ibid). In practice, the semi-longitudinal nature of this research, detailed below, has exemplified how personal narratives can and do alter, and therefore how the meaning of one's experiences (and subjectivity) is dependent on the socio-historical context of time and place (Plummer 1995, 34). For instance, 27 year old Amy was in a polyamorous relationship during the course of her diary; four months later, at the time of her interview, she was in a monogamous relationship with an entirely new partner as a result of moving cities for a new job opportunity. Impacted by the change of her own shift in time and place, Amy revealed in her interview that "it's difficult for me to talk about it [polyamory] as positively as I used to because of what happened [monogamy]". Experiences are thus positioned within a situational context that recognizes the ongoing process of locating oneself in a particular story, which in turn, gives shape to

the story's settings and thus provides a lens through which the situated self is created (Plummer 1995, 35).

I have also been influenced by Plummer's assertion that personal narratives bring greater understanding to wider cultural issues more so than 'abstract argument' (1995, 175). Plummer argues that the impact of individual story-telling can become 'a clue to wider symbolic workings', where stories flow from the individual, into culture and then back again (1995, 176). Stories thus have the ability to produce understandings and constructions of cultural dynamics and societal values - stories are, in this sense, 'resources' (Plummer 1995, 176). Similarly, Scott argues for an epistemological approach where experience is understood as 'the origin of knowledge, the vision of the individual subject' (1992, 25) and therefore the foundation upon which explanation is built. Experience is therefore recognized as the basis through which social beings are constructed and situated (Scott 1992, 27), although firmly located within a broader socio-political framework. My ontological assumption fuses Plummer and Scott, and is perhaps best described by the latter - 'experience is at once always already an interpretation and is in need of interpretation' (1992, 37). I am therefore arguing for the importance of experience and stories as a way of making meanings; in other words, the social world is constructed through the actions (and stories) of social actors, who are, in turn, being constructed by them (Scott 1992, 37).

### **3.2 Research Design**

The overall objective of this research is to explore the relationship between feminism and heterosexuality by considering how an individual's feminist values, beliefs, and consciousness influence their heterosexual practices, identities and relationships. In turn, I aim to consider how those same practices, identities and relationships may influence the individual's feminist consciousness and sense of politics. Solicited diaries and semi-structured interviews were used as a means through which to explore this relationship, and in turn, the social world of the participants. With Plummer's notion of story-telling in mind, I created a research design that would legitimate the intimate experiences I aimed to learn more about.

My strategy behind the diary-interview method was twofold; one, it allowed participants to share their sexual experiences through use of the diary, which in turn, allowed them to take control over what kind of information was disseminated. Second, the

diary would then be used as a prompt in determining the structure, themes, and flow of each interview. In Harvey's work with sexual encounter diaries, she argues that qualitative researchers who choose to use private diaries are often interested in theoretical frameworks grounded in fragmented, multiple identities and experience (2011, 666); as a result, in order to legitimate some of life's most intimate experiences and acknowledge the fragmented, multiple understandings of the self as socio-culturally situated, I chose to employ a method that would match this level of intimacy.

### **3.2.1 Choosing diaries**

Diary-keeping is a well-known means of expression; it was my understanding that participants would be familiar with its 'popular psychoanalytic-referenced framework developed in expert-induced confessionals of sex through television talk shows, the "makeover" genre and women's magazines' (Harvey 2011, 676). Since the diary is regarded as a form of 'intimate confessional [...] the space to say what cannot be said out loud' (Harvey 2011, 675), it is arguably representative of a 'safe space'. Recent research centred on female expressions of desire has suggested that online blogs are a place where women are more frequently developing and engaging in active vocabularies of sexual pleasure and desire (Muise 2011; Wood 2008; Harris 2005). I argue that anonymous blogs offer the same 'forum for expression' (Muise 2011, 412) as the diary, where women can articulate and explore their sexuality and sexual voice in a safe, virtual space. It was therefore my intention that the use of diaries would allow participants to tell their own stories, in their own uninterrupted ways - much in the same way that Muise found these active forms of expression in her work on women's anonymous sex blogs. However, the anonymous, virtual blogosphere means authors do not necessarily know who or how many people are reading their entries; furthermore, they may never have to encounter their audience in 'real life'. The diaries in this research were written with participants' knowledge that I would read and interpret them and that we would engage in a discussion about its contents; as a result, the diaries themselves had to be understood as only partially accurate representations due to the process of self-editing (Harvey 2011, 667). As Holliday has similarly noted in her work on video diaries and the performativity of identity, the researcher can never know 'what really happened' (2004, 510).

When asked if the contents of their diary would be affected by the knowledge that I would be reading and interpreting them, participants were quite divided. For those who

said ‘no’ their entries were not affected, the following were listed as reasons for not censoring their diaries: the importance of honesty, the ease with which they discuss sex in their personal lives (with friends and partners), the importance of research that is “beneficial to women” (Lana, 56), and the anonymity they had been guaranteed. For those who said ‘yes’, that knowing I would read their diaries *did* affect what they wrote, the reasons were not negative or revolved around censorship as one might expect. Rather, they were based around having to provide more context than would have been necessary in an unsolicited diary – in other words, being mindful of an audience in order to keep entries focused; as 29 year old Nicole stated, she felt like there was an element of having to “explain my situation to someone”. So while the diary may have cultural significance as a method of writing for the self, to be seen only by the self, and thus representing honesty, openness and the opportunity for reflecting thinking, it was still understood that I would never be able to fully ‘tap in’ (Harvey 2011, 667) to the participants’ most private experiences, despite claims of not being affected by the notion of a solicited diary. By no means did this suggest the diary as a potentially discreditable method of collecting data, as it was my contention that the diaries would provide the most fruitful way in which intimate thoughts and feelings could be expressed as a result of the cultural meaning attached to diaries.

### **3.2.2 Impact of diary phase**

The diaries proved to have a great impact on the dynamic of trust that was established between myself and each participant, both prior to and during the interview. Having gauged this dynamic of trust as a result of both the quality and volume of disclosure that was presented in the diaries (many participants confirmed this dynamic when asked about their experience of keeping the diary), I approached the interview phase having been influenced by the ethics of feminist methodology, and in particular Oakley’s contribution regarding women who interview women (1981).

First, I aimed to convey an attitude that encouraged participants to view me in a non-hierarchical position (Oakley 1981, 41). Rather than being viewed as a collector of data, the interviews took on a conversational mode where I became one half of a conversation surrounding life’s intimate experiences. It was my contention that establishing this type of relationship would promote and encourage a high quality of information, therefore making clear to the participants that their experiences were valid and important. Like Oakley

(1981), I answered questions when asked and if something the respondent said rang true in my own experiences, I let them know that I too, could understand what they meant; like Oakley, I found it important to be clear that I was using my own experiences to form the opinion I made (1981, 47). The motivation behind this active participation also stems from Oakley - in order to get the most from interview participants, I must be willing to disclose my own experiences when appropriate. As Oakley's states, feminist researchers cannot 'gain intimacy without reciprocity' (1981, 49), and so it became my duty to ensure this occurred. However, as a researcher, it is important to note that I am not suggesting there were elements of self-disclosure on my part. Rather, what I refer to with the use of Oakley's point above is that I positioned myself as more than a data collector, one who might only ever ask questions from an objective standpoint, and instead, the approach I took allowed me to be an active part of the conversation *without* revealing my own personal opinions or lived experiences of the themes discussed.

Although I was clearly the interviewer, there existed the notion that I too, was attempting to negotiate the same themes in my own heterosexual experiences and relationships; this informed the second way in which Oakley influenced the design of this research. She argues that a feminist who interviews women (and other feminists) is 'by definition both "inside" the culture and participating in that which she is observing' (1981, 57). While I understand and acknowledge that this does not fully eliminate power relationships between myself and the participants, I do believe that this positively impacted the trust that was established. For instance, 29 year old Danielle described having a "peer perception" of me; she said this enabled a sense of comfort and trust in sharing her stories. Likewise, 25 year old Vanessa admitted during her interview that there is no way she would have shared this kind of information with a non-feminist – even worse, a man! Furthermore, 36 year old Wendy appreciated the fact that I shared information about myself in the weekly reminder emails I had sent during the diary phase (more on this below); it let her know that I was invested in the research in more ways than she had expected.

### **3.3 Reflexivity**

In order to account for situating myself as an insider, it is imperative to demonstrate the importance and role of active reflexivity in the design of this research (Mason 1996, 5). In using the term insider, I refer to the notion that I too, am a woman, a

feminist, and practice heterosexual sex. This is how I reflexively situate myself in this work - I am not claiming that there is a universal experience of what it means to be a 'heterosexual feminist' - one that my participants and I all share, as my own experiences of the relationship between my feminist politics and heterosexual practices, identities and relationships are situated within a specific time and place. While there were many times I found myself identifying with the themes of one participant's experience, there were also times when participants made assumptions about me, particularly my own feminist values (the assumption being that we shared those values – in some cases we did not). It was therefore imperative for the overall strategy and design of this research to consider the importance of reflexivity, and to examine the points where my own experiences may have impacted on the analysis of participants' experiences. Like Mason suggests, active reflexivity is the ability to think critically about what informs and guides the researcher's own theoretical concerns as well as those of the research (1996, 5). She argues that the researcher must recognize their own assumptions and as a result, work to challenge them, while also accounting for the actions and decisions that have shaped the research aims, questions and strategies (1996, 5).

Reflexivity also became an important tool through which to situate and analyse the participants' diaries and interviews. For instance, when reflecting on the experience of keeping a diary, many suggested that one surprising element was the theme of self-awareness – either not realizing how self-aware they actually were until seeing it in writing or alternatively, how un-self-aware (and confusing) feelings toward sexuality and relationships can sometimes be. Writing the diary meant some participants had to engage more critically with their sexuality and feminist values. For these participants, it was noted that the act of writing, of seeing certain thoughts in front of them, made the issues they had previously been conflicted about or struggling to negotiate much more stark and obvious. 29 year old Danielle said that "sometimes the written word reflected my life in ways that I did not like, or that looked different from what they felt like". This notion of reflexivity was therefore present in many participants own reflections, where some even recognized the opportunity to challenge some of the assumptions they held about themselves and their own heterosexual practices, identities and relationships.



### 3.4 Recruitment

Participants were recruited through three methods – networking opportunities, snowballing techniques, and social media. I met two participants at a seminar day geared towards feminist research in November 2011, where both had shown interest in being involved and asked me to get in touch when it came time for fieldwork. Using an opportunistic approach to sampling, I followed up on this lead and ultimately recruited a further two participants from this network of women (although one withdrew during the diary phase). Snowballing techniques also accounted for two participants, acquired from personal contacts promoting my research in their own friendship circles and networks.

I gained the majority of remaining participants online - through Facebook groups and discussion forums on MeetUp (a networking site for local groups), and Fetlife (an online BDSM community); here I placed requests on women-centred groups and feminist forums, respectively. The motivation behind the latter was grounded in my own theoretical concerns and assumptions. I had suspected discussions surrounding feminism and BDSM practices would play a role in the results of this research regardless of whether or not participants were self-defined as 'kink practitioners'; in this sense, I implemented purposive sampling and actively sought to include participants who would explicitly identify themselves as such. On Meetup, I posted my call for participants in two groups aimed at women over 40 in order to broaden the age range. These were not defined as feminist-based groups but rather general networks geared toward middle-aged and older women.

Facebook served as the most productive source for recruiting. Placing requests on various feminist networks (usually defined by city or location) produced nearly half of all participants. In one instance, a professional writer and sex therapist, tweeted the call for participants and posted the flyer on her personal Twitter and Facebook page respectively. In using Facebook as a method of recruitment, I thought it would be best to use my own profile page when posting in groups. My strategy behind this was twofold; for one, I was identifiable and as a result, hoped to be perceived as trustworthy; and second, I was already an existing member of many of these groups. If the potential participants wanted to know more about me, they could click on my profile page and gain access to basic information including where I study, where I am from, and what I look like. Because of the intimate nature of the research, I felt that giving potential participants access to a

restricted view of my personal Facebook page might have ensured them an early level of comfort in knowing that I was who I said I was.

In any instance, the participants were met with a flyer on whichever Facebook group, Meetup, or Fetlife board they came across. Although I had created four flyers, I only used two in the end (all examples can be found in Appendix A)<sup>15</sup>. Each flyer provided a brief statement about the nature of the research, the criteria for inclusion, my contact information, and encouragement to contact me for more details about the project. Since the primary concern of this research explores the sexual practices of feminist-identified women who engage in sex with men, the criteria for inclusion required three main principles; first, that they identify as a woman. The aim in using 'woman-identified' during the recruitment stage was so I did not dissuade transgender women from participating; that said, I have no evidence to suggest that any participants were transgender. Second, participants had to choose to identify as feminist. There were no set beliefs or values that were obligatory – if they chose to identify as such, they met this part of the criteria. As will be demonstrated throughout, these values and beliefs varied greatly.

Lastly, because I was interested in unpacking heterosexual practices and experiences, the flyer simply asked: do you engage in sex with men? Rather than suggest that one must be exclusively heterosexual (as I did not think this had to be the case), I was careful in choosing how to phrase this element of inclusion criteria – 'engage in sex with men' seemed like the best possible option. At the recruitment stage, a common question from potential participants revolved around *just how* heterosexual they had to be. I assured those who inquired that it did not matter if they identified as bisexual, queer, or (at some stage of their life) a lesbian - so long as their diary and our interview was, for the most part, focused on heterosexual experiences. That said, all participants who did not identify as exclusively heterosexual, did write and discuss their non-heterosexual experiences and relationships. However, it is my contention that these experiences and narratives further enriched our discussions of heterosexual practices, identities and relationships and moreover, they greatly impacted the focus of analysis.

Upon registering initial interest, the 'information sheet' (Appendix B) was provided. The aim of the information sheet was to outline the objectives of the research, the role

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<sup>15</sup> After gauging responses from colleagues, friends, academic supervisors and the examiners of my first year upgrade, it was decided that only two of the flyers would speak to the broadest range of women. It was argued that the flyer entitled 'Subject' was too narrow in its focus and may only attract young women or those who might engage in a wider range of sexual activities. In most cases, the 'Kiss' flyer was used.

participants would play as well as the potential risks and benefits of becoming involved. Participants were informed that requesting this information did not mean they had accepted to take part in the research - it was only after signing a detailed consent form that their participation was considered official (this will be outlined in more detail below). Ensuring participants their right to withdraw at any stage of the research was made clear during this initial contact and at many other times. It is worth noting here that throughout the course of research, six participants withdrew; two occurred at the beginning of the diary phase due to time commitments and unforeseen circumstances. At this stage, I recruited two replacement participants. When the diary phase ended, I failed to hear back and receive diaries from a further four participants. After three attempts at contact, I considered them removed from the research.

### **3.5 Research Sample**

17 feminist-identified women who engage in sex with men made up the final sample of participants. A short biography of each participant can be found before the appendices, located at the end of this thesis - the reader is invited to familiarize themselves with this information at any time. Should the reader forget a participant's biographical background or where they situate their understandings of feminism, this will serve as a reminder. It includes basic demographic information as well as a short statement about the participants' feminist values and in some cases, how they came to identify as such. Most of this information was gained by asking participants to fill in a 'participant demographic sheet' (Appendix C). It was made clear that filling in this form was voluntary and would only be used to build an overall picture of the research sample. It will be useful to outline some of those demographics here in order to set up and take account for the research participants. While not all the demographic information is represented in the chart below, the variables that are most relevant for this research have been included.

Name	Age	Occupation	Socio-economic background	Relationship status
Blair	28	Unemployed writer	Middle class	Single
Megan	23	Front desk staff of history museum	Upper working class (rural)	Long term relationship
GoLM*	29	Secretary	Middle class (working class grandparents)	Engaged
Wendy	36	Lecturer	Middle class	Married
Carrie*	31	Researcher	Middle class (working class parents)	Single†
Cleo*	21	Student union women's officer	Middle class	Single
Lana	56	Lecturer	Middle class	Married
Sandy	31	Sales representative	(did not answer)	Single†
Ruby*	51	Lecturer	Middle class	Single
Danielle	29	Postgraduate student	Over-educated middle class	Long term relationship
Amy	27	Stage manager	Middle class	Polyamorous relationship†
Vanessa	25	English tutor	(did not answer)	Single
Nicole	29	Community organization co-ordinator	Middle class	In a relationship
Ella*	36	Community development leader	Middle class	Long term relationship
Sue	31	Youth work manager	Working class parents, middle class upbringing	Single†
Dawn	59	Housekeeper	Working class	Long term relationship
Ashley	22	Student/Journalist	Upper working class	Single

\*Participant chose own pseudonym

†Relationship status changed during course of research

**Table 3.1 Participants' demographic information**

Participants ranged in age from 21 to 59, with an average age of 33. While most identified as middle class, the form they filled in was open-ended so that they could use their own words in describing their biographical details – for a participant’s socio-economic background, the open ended-nature of the questionnaire helped to ensure that I did not limit participants by offering a list of options or income brackets. As noted in the table above, many of those who identified as middle class stressed the importance of working-class upbringings and roots, implying a certain level of recognition in their own privilege as a middle-class woman. Lastly, due to the aim of this research, participants were asked to provide their relationship status. Three participants began new relationships between the time of diary and interview. While only two participants were married, seven were in relationships (one polyamorous), and of those, three lived with their partners. The remaining five were single.

Participants’ educational backgrounds were omitted from the chart above (they are supplied in the biographical portraits mentioned above); I have chosen to substitute ‘occupation’ as a similar variable here. Most participants’ occupations accurately represent their level of education and it was my contention that noting their occupations would also provide a fuller image of the participant as an individual; furthermore, it showcases the breadth of participants’ socio-cultural specificities. In short, all but two had a university degree, ranging from undergraduate to doctoral level; three participants completed their respective degrees (two undergraduate, one doctoral) during the course of this research.

All participants were Caucasian. The specific term each participant used in describing their ethnic background depended on geographical location, both of which are represented in the table below.

<b>Name</b>	<b>Ethnic Background</b>	<b>Location</b>
Blair	Slavic	Australia
Megan	Caucasian	USA
GoLM	White British	UK
Wendy	White British	UK
Carrie	White British	UK
Cleo	White British	UK
Lana	White British	UK
Sandy	White (South African)	UK
Ruby	White British	UK
Danielle	White (Quebecoise)	Canada
Amy	White	Canada
Vanessa	Greek	Greece
Nicole	White	Canada
Ella	Anglo-saxon	Canada
Sue	White British	UK
Dawn	White British	UK
Ashley	White European	UK

**Table 3.2 Participants' location and ethnic background**

The limitations of this research ultimately lie in the restricted diversity of the research sample, which will be discussed in greater detail below. While it was never my aim to represent all feminist-identified women who engage in sex with men, I, as a

researcher, take full responsibility for the non-representative nature this sample has provided with regards to intersections of race and class (which are again, outlined in more detail at the end of this chapter). I am, however, interested in capturing in-depth looks into women's lives and experiences, and I aim to use these participants' positionality as White, middle class, university educated women as a means of exploring how they make sense of the world through a set of lived experiences that *is* rooted in these intersections.

However, since knowledge is always situated (Jackson and Scott 2007, 96), it remains beneficial and of interest for the aims of this research to recognize both the potential differences and parallels between a seemingly homogenous group of women. In other words, despite many biographical similarities, their experiences will certainly not be the same, particularly when considering two specific intersections of identity - their age, and the narratives surrounding when and how they began to identify with feminism. These intersections will impact how an individual experiences and negotiates their own pleasure and desire within the context of their sexual practices; for this reason, I believe the research sample to be valuable in its contributions and understandings of how feminist values and beliefs shape and inform (hetero)sexual practices, identities, and relationships.

### **3.6 Data Collection**

As introduced above, the findings have been produced through a two-stage qualitative approach that took place over a period of 8 months. Participants were first asked to keep personal diaries for a period of 3-4 months. They were offered the choice to write traditional handwritten diaries, or to keep an on-going document on their pc or laptop. Only four participants chose to keep handwritten diaries, which I transcribed into Microsoft Word once received in the post. Before participants began their diaries, I supplied them with 'Instructions for Diary Completion' (Appendix D) which offered tips and considerations worthy of bearing in mind. This instruction sheet was modelled after previous diary research in the field of qualitative methods, health and illness, and to a lesser extent, sexuality (Coxon 1999; Harvey 2011; Horvath 2007; Jacelon 2005; Janesick 1999; Kenten 2010; Valimaki 2007).

Alongside the instruction sheet, participants were given a list of topics that they could write about (Appendix E). Some of these topics were loosely based on Jaclyn Friedman's 2011 workbook entitled *What you Really Really Want: The Smart Girl's Shame-Free Guide to Sex and Safety*. As an accessible guide that offers creative exercises, quizzes,

and other slightly teen magazine-centric activities, I appreciated the intent in Friedman's approach – to offer a space in which to engage with sexual preferences, choices, practices and attitudes. As such, I made it clear to my participants that they did not have to use these prompts, but rather, to view them as a way of getting motivated, to offer an idea of the kinds of things they *could* write about (although not limited to), and to use when they could not think of anything to write about. Nicole (29), who did not use any of the prompts, said that “it might have been interesting to have a few mandatory topics to write on” as it would have forced her to “venture out of my comfort zone”. Lana (56) explained that “they gave me an idea of what was expected and then, I just did my own thing, as I knew I had permission to do that”. Similarly, 29 year old Danielle read the topics and decided she would only use them “when I ran out of steam [...] I never ran out of topics!”

Some participants *only* used prompts as they felt the diary would have been a struggle to write otherwise, while others, like 23 year old Megan suggested that “some of topics made me laugh at times as some of them made me get the feeling that I was supposed to be repressed or something”. Similarly, 21 year old Cleo suggested that the topics were all positive in nature, and that the themes she felt I was focusing on all had largely positive connotations - “like pleasure and fantasy”. Because a lot of Cleo's feelings surrounding sex and men are *not* positive, she found the topics somewhat of a hindrance. In contrast, Blair (28) felt that the topics represented a spectrum of sexual experiences whereby she was encouraged to “write of the unique diversities within me”.

Participants were encouraged to write as often as possible. The shortest diary I received was 3 pages single-spaced, while the longest exceeded 70 pages (also single spaced, using a 12pt font). It has been argued that asking participants to log their sexual behaviour comes with a high degree of investment, both time and effort (Horvath et al. 2007, 538). It would have been naive to assume participants' level of commitment would match my own and so I worked to avoid this by providing weekly email reminders. Horvath et al.'s study on the daily web entries of men who have sex with men reported a non-completion rate of 82% when reminder emails were not sent out (2007, 538). For my research, adopting a similar approach made practical sense in order to ensure non-completion did not occur, or was at the very least, preventable. In these emails, I tried to include a piece of topical news so that it was not viewed as a way of nagging participants to stay on task, but rather, to offer something that I thought might be of interest to any number of them since it was assumed they might be interested in sexuality outside the scope of their own practices. In many cases, I heard back from participants who either



thanked me for the friendly reminder or commented on the piece of news I had attached. This proved to be one of the most effective and important things that I could have done as a researcher, because in doing so, I continually built up my rapport with participants and this proved to be invaluable when the interview phase began.

Interviews were conducted approximately 4 months after receiving the diaries. This afforded me time to analyze the diaries in order to tailor each interview to the specific themes of each respective diary. Sixteen interviews were conducted - after failing to meet via Skype on three separate occasions, Blair (28) informed me that she did not want to take part in an interview due to health reasons. Also, upon transcription, 31 year old Carrie's interview file was found to be corrupted and only the first and last seven minutes of her interview remained intact. These were used in my analysis where relevant<sup>16</sup>. The interviews were, on average, an hour and twenty minutes long. Five women were interviewed in person (dependent on geographical location); four via Skype; five through an instant messaging service including G-chat (operated through Gmail), Facebook chat, and Skype chat; and in two cases, interviews took place over the phone. Due to technical difficulties where two participants would have preferred Skype, our internet connections were incompatible and so instant messaging took place. It was my intention in these cases that since the participant had set aside time for the interview, I did not want to inconvenience them and re-schedule – this decision, of course, was left up to them. In one instance, the participant chose instant messaging as she felt she would have been too embarrassed to discuss her diary "face-to-face". Subject to agreement, all interviews were recorded.

The primary aim of the interviews was to further unpack the emerging themes of each diary. I compiled a set of questions for each interview which were all slightly different in focus as they were prompted from each respective diary. There were, however, a number of questions that I asked every participant, largely based on themes that emerged across the diaries as a whole. As mentioned above, I aimed to follow the strategy of Oakley (1981) in that the interviews maintained a conversational flow rather than a question-answer structure; therefore in most instances, there were some questions I left out and others that I asked spontaneously, depending on the direction of the conversation. Like

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<sup>16</sup>I knew Carrie had conducted qualitative PhD research, so I decided to ask if she would be understanding and consider another interview. She said she preferred to meet again in person (to accommodate, I suggested she could answer questions in written format), however she only suggested a five-day stretch of time that she could be available over a period of two months. During this week, I had an international conference to attend. Therefore, only the portions of Carrie's interview that remained intact will be used in the analysis.

Oakley, I was asking participants to tell me intimate details of their lives, some of which they had never told another person, and so I felt it necessary and productive to respond with my own experiences when asked. The conversational flow of the interviews meant participants could tell their stories, and moreover, bringing up certain topics at their own will.

I emailed each participant a copy of their diary a few days prior to our scheduled interview. While this email served as a reminder for the interview itself, I thought it would be useful if they were given the option to re-read their diaries beforehand, even though it was made clear that this was not mandatory. In being able to read back their diaries, it is my contention that participants could play an active role in the meaning making process and to ensure that their narratives would be represented in the way they intended. As Holliday writes, 'the power to present one's subjectivity may override the risk of having that speech appropriated by others' (2004, 1606) – it was my objective that inviting participants to re-read their diaries would encourage this process of self-representation.

At the end of each interview, I asked participants if they would like to ask anything or expand on any topics that we had not covered (from the diary) or spent sufficient time on in the interview. In most cases, they did not have anything to add. A number of participants simply commented on the fact that I had sent them their diary. For instance, Vanessa (25) said:

I wrote the diary without thinking that someone would read it and the moment I saw it typed and realized I would talk to a person who has I was sooo not looking forward to the interview.

31 year old Sue, on the other hand, thought it was a great refresher to the things that were important at the time the diary was kept and moreover, how those issues had changed or progressed since. In addition, this is where participants showed their interest in the actual research, the other participants, as well as if and when they could expect to see any findings. In other words, if participants felt worried about their role in the meaning making process, this was not made explicit (perhaps further alluding to the trust established throughout). What did become clear was that participants were extremely interested in the findings of the research, so I agreed to supply them with some initial results when I had completed the overall analysis.

### 3.7 Analysis

In the four instances where participants kept handwritten diaries, these were transcribed into Microsoft Word. All diaries went through a process of coding which did not involve the use of software. I felt that using coding software like NVIVO would alienate me from the narratives, individually and as a whole. I felt that I would become closer to the emerging themes and the details within each diary if I conducted all coding on a hard copy of the document itself. As such, I began by reading each diary several times and in doing so, decided to adopt certain characteristics of Smith and Osborn's (2004) Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), used here as a tool and framework for coding.

IPA offers a commitment to understanding the participants' world as it considers that not only is the participant trying making sense of their own world, but the researcher is trying making sense of the participants' attempts to do so. For instance, as a qualitative researcher, there is a responsibility to hear what participants are saying in order to situate a participant's orientation toward the world and thus recognize how 'this phenomenon has been understood by this person' (Smith and Osborn 2004, 53). Although Smith and Osborn focus on semi-structured interviews, I found their suggestions to be quite adaptable to the diary method, mainly because they argue that the actual method of data collection is secondary to the way in which participants' narratives and accounts are explored and annotated. Confirming my interest in IPA as a form of coding was the understanding that as the analysis phase proceeds, 'you may find yourself adapting the method to your own particular way of working and the particular topic you are investigating' (Smith and Osborn 2004, 55). I found this open and exploratory approach to coding a productive way forward as I could essentially take into account Smith and Osborn's offerings, tweak them where I saw necessary, and therefore gain the most valuable insight into each participant's diary. Having this kind of loose structure and framework to guide in my analysis proved beneficial.

First, I read each diary without making any notes as I wanted to garner some form of connection, understanding or 'natural' impression about the participant – about where they were coming from and how they made sense of, talked about, and understood their own experiences. For the second reading, I used the left-hand margin, annotating what was 'interesting or significant about what the respondent said' (Smith and Osborn 2004, 67). The right-hand side margin was used for the third reading - here I began making note of theoretical considerations. This is where I strayed from Smith and Osborn as I then took each one of these individual emerging themes (from the right-hand margin) and wrote

them onto individual strips of paper, ultimately creating a visual mind map. Here I would group certain themes or ideas together, move them to another cluster when recognizing a more appropriate fit, and so on. The result of this process meant I had formed clusters of themes and in turn, I gave each cluster a more concrete, conceptual title. The next stage was to produce a linear format of these clusters, resulting in a table of themes – one that looked visually similar to a table of contents. At this stage, Smith and Osborn suggested including a few key words or phrases (as well as page and line numbers from the original source of data) so as to indicate where the theme can be found in the original text (2004, 72). Again, I strayed from pinpointing specific key words and listing important page numbers because this felt too rigid an approach. I was confident enough in how well I knew and understood the data that noting page numbers would have provided no extra benefit to the overall analysis process.

After a diary was coded, I created a post-diary report. This was ultimately for my own benefit as it detailed each participant's biographical information, a short list of their 'key concerns' and 'experiential claims' (also inspired by Smith and Osborn<sup>17</sup>), as well as a brief overview of each of the following areas - desire, pleasure, the body, and feminism. Here I outlined ways in which these themes were (or were not) discussed in the diary. I also listed 'other interesting themes' and only considered these as important and deserving of more attention once I began to see how they fit across the diaries as a whole. Each diary was then used as a tool for developing interview questions. While there was a set of questions that I asked all participants, I also customized each interview based on the narratives and themes within each participants' diary. Because I had already coded one set of qualitative data, the interviews were much easier to interpret, largely because I had an already established idea of (some of) the themes that were likely to become central in the interview analysis. Each interview was then transcribed into Microsoft Word. Again, I chose not to use coding software, but rather, wanted to make my own detailed notes, formulating new themes (as in, themes that did not appear in the diaries) where appropriate. Handwritten notes were made in a notebook which was then used to refer back to diaries throughout further analysis and write-up stages.

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<sup>17</sup> As Smith and Osborn suggest, 'what is this person trying to achieve here? Is something leaking out that was not intended?' (2004, 53), and perhaps most importantly, do I, the researcher 'have a sense of something going on here that maybe the participants themselves are less aware of?' (2004, 53).

### 3.8 Ethical Considerations

In accordance with the Research Ethics Committee at University of Leeds, participants were required to sign a detailed consent form before their participation was considered official (Appendix F). In fact, I had anticipated that there would be certain ethical considerations specific to this research (outlined below) therefore participants were required to give their consent regarding a number of issues, agreed upon between the Research Ethics Committee and myself.

Moreover, I felt it was imperative to develop ethical considerations specific to the diaries and the sexual content of the research. As such, participants were informed that there would require a certain amount of care when engaging in the diary phase as it was my contention there might be an element of risk associated with keeping a diary of sexual thoughts, feelings and practices. Participants were strongly advised to keep handwritten diaries somewhere safe and reliable; if they were keeping an electronic version, they were advised to save files under a misleading name or folder, or alternatively, in password protected files. It was made clear that these measures should only be taken if the participant chose to do so and that by no means were they obligated to 'hide' their diary. In reflecting on what it was like to keep the diary, four participants had told their partners about their role in this research – some even shared entries with them. For the participants who told their partners but who did not let them read entries, all noted that while they may not have gone out of their way to hide the diaries, they trusted that their partners would not go looking for them. This was usually followed with some variation of the following: "nothing I wrote about would have been horrible for him to read" (Amy, 27), or, "to me it still felt private and so I did not share it with him" (Wendy, 36). Overall, participants felt very little risk associated in keeping the diary; however, I believe these precautionary measures were necessary.

I also strongly felt that discussing and reflecting on intimate sexual experiences, thoughts and feelings would undoubtedly produce a range of emotions, positive and negative, and both extremes were present in this research. As such, it was entirely up to the participant to decide how much information they chose to reveal (in both their diaries and interview). This was made clear on multiple occasions; for instance, on the initial information sheet, consent form, instructions for diary completion, and verbally, at the start of each interview. It was never my intention to push participants to engage with sensitive topics or questions they were not comfortable with; they were encouraged to let

me know if our discussion began to take this turn. For instance, a number of participants had discussed (briefly and at length) experiences of violence – including verbal, physical and sexual assault. I used the length and explicitness of their diary discussion as an indicator in deciding how likely they might be in expanding on these experiences during the interview. For instance, 56 year old Lana only ever alluded to this notion of violence (in her diary), by stating that in her first marriage, sex was used as a control mechanism and that her disinterest in violence and masochism stems from this relationship. She wrote all of this, at multiple points throughout her diary, without discussing any actual experiences. In her interview, when I asked how she came to reconcile that wrist bondage was enjoyable but anything ‘further’ acted as a limit, her immediate response was: “the way I feel about sex goes back to my ex-husband and that relationship. I think it’s about – it’s to do with trust”. She then proceeded to outline the importance of having a partner who is not physically overpowering (without actually tying this back to her aforementioned marriage, despite the implication that it was relevant). Later, Lana suggested she might be able to overcome some issues regarding her first marriage with the help of counselling. What these exact issues were, and the events that led to her feeling this way, are unknown. In this instance, I felt the way in which Lana talked *around* the topics in her diary, was not conducive to actually discussing them in the interview, and so I did not pry for any further information. In Ruby’s diary<sup>18</sup>, however, she described an experience of being beaten and raped. This entry was described in four short sentences; however the language did not *allude* to an experience, but rather, explicitly detailed one. When prefacing my interview question regarding this experience (here I assured her that we did not have to discuss if she did not want to), she proceeded to openly tell me about her experience of rape, sharing details she had never shared with anyone - including the man she was married to at the time of the experience. These examples are indicative of my overall approach in dealing with certain sensitive issues that arose throughout the course of this research.

### 3.9 Limitations

The limitations of this research, as introduced above, lie in the sample. I recognized this as a potential weakness during the recruitment process, particularly with

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<sup>18</sup> Ruby asked that I refrain from using direct quotations from her diary or interview as she preferred to be paraphrased. Her motivation was a precautionary measure - she is a lecturer and often writes for both personal and academic reasons, and as a result, she did not want me to be reprimanded for not referencing her appropriately, in the event she has published something of a similar vein elsewhere.

regards to race and ethnicity, and to a lesser extent, class. As a researcher, I take full responsibility for these failings and the non-representative nature of this sample; however, I argue that this research sample *does* offer certain strengths in demonstrating how a seemingly homogenous group are capable of producing such a varied and diverse set of lived experiences. I understand that in recognizing a lack of diversity with regards to race and ethnicity, I could have altered my recruitment strategy and advertised my call for participants, for instance, on a Black feminist group on Facebook; however, I discouraged myself from making it about ‘the numbers’, so to speak, as I believed this would result in the practice of tokenism where, for instance, the non-White participants would then come to inaccurately represent ‘all’ Black women<sup>19</sup>. I felt that this was a limitation I could take account for by making the decision to move beyond looking for the numbers and instead, focusing on the quality of the participants that had agreed to participate and were eager to get involved.

Another potential limitation of this research revolves around two potential biases in the findings: first, I focus here on the fact that many participants were familiar with a variety of theoretical concepts found within feminism – concepts that had actively informed their own feminist identity and beliefs. In this sense, it is arguable that their own reflexivity and critical thinking processes had contributed to how they described, discussed, and analyzed their own experiences of desire and pleasure *before* they wrote them down in the diary, or shared them in our interview. As such, the findings may not represent spontaneous narratives but rather, well thought-out ones, as they include issues that participants have been navigating and negotiating for many years. For example, throughout many diaries there existed the notion of not being able to see without a so-called ‘feminist lens’. 22 year old Ashley said: “once you start wearing particular intellectual glasses, like feminism, you start reading theories into everything”. Similarly, 27 year old Amy remarked that she finds it difficult to “think about things like this (sexuality) outside of that (feminist) framework”. As a result, the findings presented throughout may offer high levels of critical thinking and reflexivity, indicative of the educational backgrounds of participants, as well as their interest and engagement (both academic and non-academic) with feminism and feminist theory.

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<sup>19</sup> Because age was more of a variable of interest in understanding the experiences of feminism and heterosexuality, I did adjust my recruitment strategy so as to ensure I included groups of women over a certain age. I realize this same approach could have been used to broaden the categories of race/ethnicity and class; however, I failed to do so, and I take responsibility for the shortcomings this has caused.

The second potential bias in the findings that will be presented in this thesis centre on the notion that human sexuality research has long been considered an area of study that produces volunteer bias (Strassberg 1995, 370). As mentioned above, all participants were aware that they were signing up for a study explicitly advertised with the aim of understanding experiences of pleasure and desire; and moreover, that the process of developing these findings would involve keeping a diary and participating in a follow-up interview. Previous studies have found that those who participate in studies focused on sexuality or sexual practice tend to be more sex-positive, more unconventional and overall, practice a 'wider variety of sexual behaviours' (Zurbriggen and Yost 2004, 298). They also tend to experience less sexual guilt, have more sexual knowledge and sexual experience, when compared to non-volunteers (Strassberg 1995, 372). For these limitations, I understand that this research is to be understood as socio-culturally specific to the women who have chosen to participate.

Lastly, I aim to take account for a small but important concern that has developed in the writing and editing of this thesis. As a theoretical framework, I have outlined the usefulness in feminist phenomenology as a way to ground lived experiences as an important source of gaining knowledge, particularly through the intentions, decisions and actions of my research participants' sexual experiences, identities and relationships. Likewise, the design of this research has been phenomenologically-informed; for instance, in choosing diaries I provided a platform that best established the opportunity for participants to construct their stories in their own uninterrupted ways - with a focus on lived experiences, thoughts, feelings and emotions. Moreover, phenomenology was used as an analytical tool and framework for coding when I adopted certain techniques from Smith and Osborn's interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). Motivated by my responsibility as a qualitative researcher to hear what participants were saying, how they made sense of and understood their own experiences, IPA offered an approach that involved firstly and most importantly, letting the themes of the diaries emerge on their own – only then did I begin to interpret what had been said. In addition, participants were given the opportunity to re-read their diaries in an effort for them to become a part of the meaning making process during our interviews – a nod to the experiences they wrote about, ultimately stemming from their body's actions, intentions and desires. It is therefore my contention that phenomenology plays an active and explicit role in many elements of the overall research - its aims, design, and theoretical considerations.



However, throughout the analysis that follows, a paradox has emerged: how do I account for phenomenology in my analysis when the very themes I draw on are based on text (diaries) and speech (interviews)? For instance, had this research been centred on participant observation, the uses of phenomenology would be much more explicit in chapters 5-7. Had I been interested (throughout the interviews) in the relationship between body language and how this is impacted when talking about sex, I could have used a more phenomenologically-driven analysis. Likewise, had the aims of this research involved unpacking the way we write about sex versus the way we speak about sex, a similar analysis might have unfurled. Because this research centres on the use of text and speech, it would be problematic to interpret participants' lived experiences through this lens as I inherently rely on text. While I take account for any limitations this may produce for the reader and the overall research, I do believe that phenomenology has played an important role in many aspects of this research and therefore, is able to play a more implicit role in the analysis. Much like the theoretical framework of this thesis, I begin with the individual, whose experiences are the foundation upon which my explanations and analysis are built. In other words, phenomenology's usefulness is present in the findings that follow in that the actual experiences and expressions that come from each participant - their bodies and desires, choices and actions - form the very basis of my (albeit textual) interpretation.

That said, I have epistemologically argued for the importance of experience and therefore the recognition that personal narratives help bring greater understanding to wider cultural issues (Plummer 1995, 176). At the same time, I have taken account for the limitations of this research, provided by the seemingly homogenous sample. Although critiques are made regarding just how far sexuality studies can generalize about the subject or identity in question - particularly since these narratives are about a particular moment in time, set in a particular place - it is not my intention to generalize or oversimplify the lived experiences of feminism and heterosexuality in practice. Rather, my intention is to provide an in-depth exploration of a group of women who may appear to be homogenous 'on paper', but whose experiences are as varied and wide-ranging as the feminist beliefs they use to inform and shape their heterosexual practices, identities and relationships. So although the narratives produced throughout this research are grounded in a particular moment in time, and are about a particular group of women - a group whose own lives and circumstances changed throughout the course of research - the themes that have emerged are characteristic of how a wider (Western) culture understands, expresses, and portrays female experiences of desire and pleasure, and

female (hetero)sexuality as a whole. As Plummer notes, sexual stories work in many ways – they reinforce the dominant culture, and at the same time, put it into question (1995, 176). These women’s experiences have proven to produce both.

## 4. Within Sex

**[I want] to experience things sexually that both fulfil what I want and to challenge me to want new things.**

**(Amy, 27)**

### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter considers the relationship between feminism and (hetero)sexuality by exploring key themes that occur within the context of sex. To begin, I focus on a set of experiences where participants choose to engage in sexually submissive practices. By exploring the spectrum of these practices, I will consider the multiple ways in which feminist values and identities interact, inform and otherwise play a role in the choice and experience of being sexually submissive. This section also considers instances where participants feel they have to justify these choices – in doing so, I offer an understanding of the (often tenuous) relationship between feminism and choosing submission in the context of heterosexual sex. Here I also highlight experiences of reconciliation, where the relationship between feminism and choosing submission revolves around trying to find a position ‘which feel[s] comfortable, or rather, less uncomfortable’ (Gill and Walker 1993, 69).

From here, I link the prevalence of choosing submission (experienced by over half of my participants) to a set of exploratory practices characterized as ‘playing with dominance’. I will use these narratives, wherein participants often associate their role as a dominant partner with feelings of ‘unnaturalness’, as a way to further unpack understandings and experiences that que(e)ry heterosexual practices. By this I refer to the fact that in a number of cases, playing with the dominant role led participants to engage in a much broader set of questions regarding their sexual practices, particularly in terms of what is and is not included as a part of their sexual encounters and scripts. The aim here is to present understandings and experiences within sexual encounters that trouble, challenge and negotiate heteronormative, heterosexual scripts within the context of sexual acts – in short, where participants queer heterosexual sex. In doing so, this section

considers the role feminism plays in informing the motivation to engage with and intentionally include non-normative practices.

The final section of this chapter contributes to understandings and experiences of (female) pleasure as they are situated within sexual encounters. It focuses on the way participants understand conceptualizations of pleasure, as well as their experiences and negotiations of it, by first considering how participants come to learn about the importance or non-importance of their own pleasure within the wider context of heterosexuality. As such, it also considers the extent to which pleasure is associated with the experience of orgasm (while being mindful that experiences of pleasure do extend beyond this); moreover, I consider the social representations of orgasm that are formed alongside many participants' narratives. Finally, I unpack ways of understanding pleasure that revolve around the desire to explore *new* sexual pleasures. Here I consider the motivations and subsequent results of such explorations, all in an effort to build upon the multiple ways in which feminists who engage in sex with men experience pleasure as it occurs within the context of sex.

## 4.2 Choosing Submission

This section highlights experiences of choosing to be submissive. It explores the kind of activities participants engage in, and in particular, the varying role that feminist values and identities play in informing the choice to be submissive.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, this section considers the justification and non-justification experienced alongside the desire to engage in submissive practices within the context of a (hetero)sexual encounter. By exploring these narratives I introduce ways of understanding agency and embodiment – a framework that will be continually developed throughout all three analysis chapters.

By choosing to explore submission, I draw on wider notions of BDSM as a way to highlight the various activities and 'type of dynamic or identity that is subject to modification' (Barker et al. 2007, 4). BDSM is an acronym that (for the purpose of this research) stands for bondage, discipline, domination, submission, sadism, and masochism; moving forward, I will use BDSM and kink interchangeably as the latter is more representative of participants in this research and is indeed a term more frequently

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<sup>20</sup> It is important here that I very briefly recognize Megan's (23) distaste for the term 'submission'. She believes it to be a term associated with a sense of passivity that is not present in her own practices of 'bottoming'. However, the term submissive/submission will be used throughout as the experiences I describe should be understood as an active choice, unless otherwise stated.

employed by them. Kink can be loosely described as ‘consensual sexualized encounters involving an orchestrated power exchange characterized by domination and subordination typically involving the infliction of pain’ (Taylor and Ussher, 2001 cited in Deckha 2011, 130). Furthermore, Barker et al. argue that:

Some degree of power or pain exchange is common in many people’s sexual practices. For example, biting or light spanking, roleplaying school-girls or doctors, or holding a partner down by the wrists during sex because both parties find this desirable and exciting. BDSM codifies such practices more explicitly and uses terminology such as ‘power’ or ‘pain’ exchange in negotiation between partners (2007, 4).

I find this explanation indicative of the variety of practices found among my participants as most do not explicitly identify with, or engage in, BDSM communities but nonetheless practice these dynamics in the context of their sexual encounters. For instance, Amy describes her ideal sexual encounter as involving usually (but not exclusively) “roughness, power exchange, etc...me being restrained, slapped, spanked, flogged and ordered around”. Along with Amy, over half of the participants in this research actively choose to engage in practices where some element of power is exhibited upon them and where they take on the role of the submissive partner, or ‘bottom’, within the context of sex.<sup>21</sup> While some participants like Megan suggest that “masochism is a deep and wonderful part of my sexuality”, for the majority of others it is more about an act or sensation, one that might not appear within each sexual encounter, but that is recognized as a consistent desire and thus regarded as pleasurable when included.

I also find it important to note that my participants were by no means recruited on the basis that they engage in aspects of BDSM, particularly choosing submission. As such, it is interesting to consider the sheer popularity of these practices, not only among my participants, but women in general. This is something that has been well-documented by Friday (1975) and more recently, with the onslaught of popular and academic literature in and around the *Fifty Shades of Grey* phenomenon – thus highlighting how BDSM has historically and within the current cultural context, become part of cultural discourses around submission and feminism. Moreover, not only did I not purposefully seek out submissive feminists, but their narratives highlight just how integral and fundamental choosing submission is in relation to their own personal identities, as women and feminists.

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<sup>21</sup> Participants who consider themselves interested in power play, bondage, and other kink practices include Amy, Blair, Carrie, Danielle, Dawn, GoLM, Megan, Nicole, Ruby, Sandy, and Sue. To my knowledge, Amy, GoLM, and Megan are the only participants who consider themselves ‘active’ members of (online) kink communities.

That said, there is a wide range of practices, behaviours and subsequent ways of experiencing kink within the context of sex. Below, I focus on a number of examples which indicate these various (although not exhaustive) positionalities and the way in which they interact with feminist understandings. For instance, Ella says that she considers herself “pretty vanilla”, and although she has played with light bondage and role-playing in the past, she thinks if she did have an interest in more forceful practices, then she may have “more to work out as a feminist”. This is precisely where choosing to be submissive becomes most interesting – in the way participants who *do* engage in kink practices discuss, implement, and refer to their feminist consciousness when considering the inclusion of such practices.

#### **4.2.1 BDSM: then and now**

In *Jane Sexes it Up: True Confessions of Feminist Desire*, Johnson suggests that ‘a theory of feminist desire must acknowledge the impact of the time period’ (2002, 44); as such, I turn to offer a brief historical context of debates surrounding feminism and BDSM. While I have outlined these debates in the context of the feminist ‘sex wars’ in chapter 1 (section 1.1.1) and chapter 2 (section 2.2), the aim here is to consider BDSM as one part of this much wider debate which was largely centred around the politics of sexual practice and behaviour. Rubin describes the contours of this debate by saying that: ‘if feminist politics entail or require particular sexual positions or forms of erotic behaviour, then it follows that other kinds of sexual activity are specifically anti-feminist’ (1981, 215). The anti-feminist activity that Rubin refers to here is BDSM. Culturally positioned as dark and polarized, extreme and ritualized, hated and feared, the attitudes of the time attempted to do nothing short of demonize, and in many cases, criminalize ‘whole categories of erotic behaviour’ (Rubin 1981, 202). For instance, without passing any new laws, (early 1980s) Canadian police took advantage of the phrasing from an established law that indicated arrests could be made ‘where indecent acts take place’ (Rubin 1981, 202) – this accounted for shutting down many leather bars and bath houses, leaving those who practiced BDSM on the fringe of society. Interestingly, the cultural understanding was that only gay men participated in BDSM, and that these practices accounted for many homicides of the time, thus equating kink practitioners with violence and death. The shock value of BDSM, mercilessly exploited by both the media and police, was so prevalent at the time that many, like Rubin, hid parts of their sexuality - so much so that ‘some of us [feminists were] being caught in the odd situation where we must, politically, disown ourselves’ (Davis 1981, 8).

Within the wider context and debates of the 1980s 'sex wars' it becomes clear that meshing feminist politics with the practice of BDSM provided the potential for a particularly tenuous relationship. However, because I have argued that Western culture is *currently* (although not necessarily newly) characterized by a preoccupation of sexual values, practices and identities, where 'the explicit has become so familiar and sexual transgression so mainstream' (Attwood 2006, 4), it is equally as important to consider current discussions surrounding BDSM in order to offer the necessary socio-cultural context for my participants. The (somewhat) timeliness of this research make it interesting to consider how participants' ways of understanding submission are presented within a particular moment in time where BDSM has been 'brought to the fore with the recent throng of arguments surrounding the reception of the *Fifty Shades* trilogy' (Tsaros 2013, 868). However, because the reception of the fictional trilogy lies outside the scope of my research aims, I will instead refer to the *Fifty Shades of Grey* 'effect', and in doing so, consider how this has helped reposition BDSM from an extreme, marginalized and stigmatized sexual practice 'to one which is fashionable and socially acceptable' (Martin 2013, 980).

Even before the release of *Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy (June 2011), it had been argued that the preoccupation of sexual values, practices and identities also included pervasive cultural references and popular representations of BDSM (Barker et al. 2007; Deckha 2011; Wilkinson 2009). In fact, Barker et al. suggest that it might not be BDSM practices per se, 'but rather the imagery associated with BDSM (e.g. accessories like handcuffs and riding crops) and the way it is signified on the body...which have become more visible and therefore more acceptable in a mainstream context' (2007, 5). That said, it is also undeniable that there has been a significant increase in the visibility and acceptability of BDSM as a direct effect of *Fifty Shades of Grey*. And although the books are often regarded as a 'diluted' or 'lightweight' version of BDSM (Martin 2013, 981), they nonetheless position discussions surrounding BDSM in a significantly different light to the 1980s. In fact, I would argue that the debate that is more common here revolves around who the 'real' or 'authentic' BDSMers are. For instance, is it the commodified, fashionable and socially acceptable *Fifty Shades* version? Or, is this version too lightweight and too diluted, indicated by my participant Megan, who states: "I am a kinkster and not the stupid *Fifty Shades of Grey* shit!". Here there is a clear distinction from someone active in the BDSM community that the *Fifty Shades* version of BDSM is not 'real' or 'authentic'. As mentioned above, this discussion lies somewhat outside the scope of my research concerns – what I aim to take from the debate surrounding who the 'real' BDSMers are is

the fact that kink practices are ‘something [that] many people actively seek out and enjoy. [It] still holds value for some women and it is too dismissive to regard this value as an expression of false consciousness’ (Deckha 2011, 141). As outlined above, this is where it becomes most interesting when considering feminists who choose to engage in submissive sexual practices - how do their respective feminist consciousness’ inform, shape or justify the desire to ‘consent to this kind of “non-consent”’ (Fowles 2008, 118)?

#### 4.2.2 A kinky feminism?

23 year old Megan, who is in a long-term monogamous partnership with Andrew, describes her kinkiness *as* feminist due to an understanding that their core themes are actually quite similar. For instance, although she admits to identifying as a feminist first (kink is something she has only ‘discovered’ in the last two years), she says:

I was quite happy to find that the kink community very much stands besides those standards [of choice, communication and consent]. I think partly because what kinksters do would be cruel or wrong otherwise, so they need a strong moral code. I think that feminism did promote me to be a strong communicator from the start though, when I didn't necessarily know all those C's came with kink. I was very aware of what I wanted and wouldn't do from the first moment.

As a self-defined “kinkster”, Megan believes that in the context of her trusting relationship “when you are bound, blindfolded, gagged and being beaten...you still know you are safe, that the person topping may hurt you but not harm you”. And although she acknowledges that she does not *need* kink in her life, she believes that it has made her sex life that much more fulfilling, especially since she has discovered these shared values - in other words, where understandings of kink work with Megan’s understanding of feminism. As she suggests, this allows submission to exist as “an empowered choice for women”. Here she describes an encounter that highlights the importance of the 3 C’s, and in doing so, offers a way of understanding submission as an empowered choice.

Andrew checked in to make sure everything was okay (*communication*) and I waved him on, telling him to continue (*consent*). It’s at these times when I don’t particularly envy him as a top, as hey, I’m his partner and suddenly I’m sobbing as he’s beating me (*choice*). That has GOT to fuck with your brain a bit.

So although Megan recognizes that the exchange of power has a physical and emotional impact on both her and her partner, it is the importance and continual



negotiation of the 3 C's which allow her to effectively engage with these desires in the context of sex. And although she admits to having a "strange relationship with feminism and my sexual practices", Megan ultimately believes that "if I CHOOSE to be submissive, I want that choice on an equal level that a man can CHOOSE to be submissive, and not have any negative connotations for that choice." The underlying point for Megan is that she has the right to her desires, whatever those desires may be; and moreover, that her understanding of feminism supports this right to choose.

In 'Spanking & the Single Girl', Daley follows a somewhat similar reasoning, whereby 'feminism equipped me to cultivate equality in relationships with men, [so now] I can flirt with the "no-no" of submission' (2002, 135). As such, choosing to be submissive within the context of sex can be regarded as an 'active surrender, an act of choice and self knowledge' (Daley 2002, 133). Furthermore, Daley believes that women have the ability to 'transform practices developed in patriarchal cultures into turn-ons' (Daley 2002, 128) - for Megan, this sentiment is undoubtedly reflected in her own sexual encounters. As a result, the choice to be submissive revolves around an embodiment of sexual acts (informed and supported by her feminist consciousness) that are then given new meaning. Here I refer to the 'freedom to' conceptualization of agency outlined in chapter 2 (section 2.7), whereby women have the ability to transform the patriarchal, gendered restraints attached to understandings of female sexuality – of what women should and should not do in acts of sex - and in turn, choose to actively embody and inhabit these norms and spaces within the context of sex.

Like Megan, 29 year-old GoLM, (a roller derby player and ex-burlesque dancer who married her partner the week following our interview), links the values of the kink community to her understanding of feminism, the latter of which is centred on "being an empowered individual and being able to make my own choices without being influenced or persuaded by society and culture". GoLM sees these values reflected in the kink community where, in her experience (and to her knowledge):

People are treated as equal. I don't think I've ever encountered any kind of gender issues of sexism or anything like that. As long as what is happening is consensual between two people, the outside world is irrelevant.

For GoLM, this helps to solidify her interest in kink as it is aligned with many values she regards as important within her own feminist identity. Like Megan, these themes are also largely aligned with consent and choice. Introduced to kink by her ex-partner (with whom she still attends an annual fetish ball), GoLM notes that her early exploration into

different fetishes and sexual practices meant sex “became quite colourful at that point”. Because this particular partner identified as a “massive sub...he tried to lead me down the domination path”. However, GoLM felt uneasy about these early explorations and associates them with a feeling of unnaturalness (a concept that will be further unpacked in the following section of this chapter). Now, she says (of the fetish ball):

I love nothing more than to wander in the direction of the dungeon and hear the wailing and pleading of a Sub laid over a barrel being spanked, tickled, or ‘electrocuted’ by their Dominant to an inch of their soul! I love to be the voyeur, but I have also discovered that I like to be the participant, as long as I’m the submissive.

Evident here is GoLM’s interest in submissive practices, where she gains pleasure in being both the participant and spectator. She subsequently offers a way of understanding these desires by locating them in relation to her feminist values, which as outlined above, are equally reflected in her understanding of kink. GoLM says that negotiating these two seemingly dissimilar communities can be like a “50/50 balance – well, like a game of chess almost.” Here GoLM acknowledges the tensions between BDSM and (certain circles of) feminism, yet she simultaneously recognizes that choosing submission within the context of sexual practice is ultimately linked to ‘the capacity to realize one’s own interests against the weight of custom, tradition, transcendental will, or other obstacles (individual or collective)’ (Mahmood 2005, 8). By this I refer to the obstacles or tradition in feminist understandings of submission that *differ* from GoLM’s as this is where she most often feels the tension between her sexual practices and feminist politics. For instance, in our interview she said:

GoLM: If I’m talking to somebody who – their feminism, their view of feminism may be slightly different to mine - when I’m talking about the slightly oppressive side of feminism I almost find myself justifying things and I’m like, I need to stop doing that because this is my feminism.

Nichole: And it can be different from someone else’s...

GoLM: Yeah! I’ve had this conversation with several other people, what their kind of feminism is, and I know I’m not a widely read feminist at all and [one woman] kind of like, gave me the low down on the waves of feminism, and I was kind of like “oh my god, I don’t know where I fit into this? The ‘now’? The ‘now’ development of, ‘I’m into female empowerment and we argue it out, on like, Facebook groups’.

As GoLM states, she has recently come to the realization that multiple feminisms can exist simultaneously. By recognizing feminism as pluralistic, GoLM’s non-judgmental,

self-determining understanding of feminism allows her to navigate her own feminist path, different to feminists who may not agree with some of her sexual choices. In doing so, GoLM recognizes that by inhabiting norms, that is to say by choosing to be sexually submissive or what she calls the “slightly oppressive side of feminism”, this is not necessarily ‘bad’ or a way of disengaging from discourses of agency because, as she states, this is *her* feminism. As a result, this follows alongside Mahmood who argues that ‘agentival capacity is entailed not only in those acts that resist norms but also in multiple ways in which one *inhabits* norms’ (2005, italics in original 15). In GoLM’s understanding it is not the substance of her desires but about where that desire comes from, and moreover, it is about having the right to decide for herself if these desires work within *her* understanding of feminism.

### 4.2.3 Justifying kink

Amy, who describes herself as “somewhere on the submissive spectrum”, does not feel her submissive practices warrant *any* justification, as a woman *or* a feminist. In fact, she (somewhat jokingly) suggests that she has “been able to take advantage of society’s inherent inequality in terms of the roles men and women play in sex”. For instance, Amy believes that:

It’s not by chance that within the BDSM community [that] there’s such a predominance of female submissives...like that’s not just chance. So I can’t deny – I can’t pretend that I have some sort of sexuality that’s completely unshaped by society but that doesn’t cause me any stress or anxiety.

Here Amy highlights how she is “mentally superimposing” cultural scripts of femininity into her own sexual practices<sup>22</sup>. Yet she also uses this way of understanding as an opportunity to address the lack of anxiety she feels as a feminist in her choice to be submissive; for her, feminism actually acts as an “added push for me to feel okay going for what I want”. Amy does not feel the need to justify her choice to be submissive within the context of sex and this is the extent of her discussion on the topic - something that not many participants felt, at least not in the definitive sense that Amy demonstrates above. This is in large part because of the contradictory narratives often associated with the choice to be submissive, particularly when those choices are what (single and 31 year old) Carrie describes as “diametrically opposed to my feminist politics”.

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<sup>22</sup> By acknowledging that her sexuality and sexual script has been shaped by certain societal constructs, Amy highlights an understanding and awareness of the gender and sexual scripts I have outlined in chapter 2, section 2.5 Femininity as scripted performance.

Self-identified radical feminist Carrie uses words like “terrible” and “can’t believe I’m saying this” when describing sexual encounters in her diary. Moreover, Carrie says she often “feel(s) very awkward about core parts of my sexuality in that I enjoy very much being submissive and told what to do”. In one instance, she describes a sexual partner who “slapped me round the face” but instantly follows this by indicating that the slap was “not hard” - perhaps an indication to the kind of justification she feels is necessary when these practices are considered alongside her feminist identity.<sup>23</sup> Reflecting on the same sexual partner, she says:

He would pull my hair, scratch me, spank me and tell me that I was his bitch...one time, he came in my mouth and told me I had to swallow it because I was his bitch. He even checked my mouth to make sure I had swallowed. I really enjoyed it. Terrible, isn’t it?

The ‘terribleness’ surrounding Carrie’s sexual encounter is brought on by the fact that these practices are in direct opposition to the values she holds as a feminist. As a result, she says they “often worry me greatly”. This sentiment is reflected in Ritchie and Barker’s focus group with women who practice BDSM. One participant in particular reiterated what Carrie articulated in our interview, in that it is often ‘really hard, really hard to work out how I can do that [BDSM] and want that and still try somehow to define as feminist’ (2007, 18). So while Carrie provides one way of understanding the negotiations and reconciliation between feminism and BDSM, Danielle describes this tenuous relationship as a “long process of acceptance”, or what Fowles has described as a ‘long, intentional path to finally feel(ing) empowered’ (2008, 117). Where Fowles argues that ‘it has taken me many years of unlearning mainstream power dynamics to understand and accept my own desire for fictional, fetishized ones’ (2008, 119), Danielle similarly suggests that:

It was a long dialogue that sometimes felt like a clash between my feminist values, and aspiring to a feminist self, and what ‘objectively’ turns me on...no matter what the representations of something and the symbolic meanings of it in society, what happened between us, in the intimate sphere of sexuality...was all right as long as we both enjoyed it.

Moreover, Danielle believes that her desire to engage in submissive practices meant that “feminism messed with me a little bit...I had problems doing anything sexual that could be seen as slightly unequal in terms of power”. What Danielle demonstrates

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<sup>23</sup> And of course, she was writing a solicited diary for a feminist researcher. I often wonder whether she justified the slap as a way to address me, the reader. Because she is unaware of my feelings on the topic, she may have felt the need to justify her partner’s actions here.

here is the acknowledgement that the choice to be submissive *could* or *has been* problematic in aligning with some of her feminist ideals. However, these desires and choices are made through a process of unsilencing certain preconceived gender norms, and therefore acting on the basis of what the self and the body find pleasurable in acts of sex. As Grosz argues, this capacity to act 'is to a large extent structured by the ability to harness and utilize matter for one's own purposes and interests' (2010, 148). In other words, Danielle's choices do not require justification *anymore* - when the body acts, or Danielle makes a (feminist) informed choice to engage in submissive practices, an understanding of embodiment and agency emerges where the capacity for agency becomes recognized as a capacity of the body, and as a result, becomes more about the content in the choices Danielle makes, rather than simply in the choice itself.

#### **4.2.4 Summary**

This section has considered ways of understanding the choice to engage in submissive practices within the context of sex. I have outlined a set of narratives that offer multiple and complex ways in which the relationship between feminism and submissive sexual practices are lived and experienced. This relationship, as shown throughout, is complicated. At times, participants highlight the need to reconcile, negotiate, and in particular, justify the desire to engage in a set of practices – practices which are, in theory, fundamentally opposed to what they may believe to be at the centre of their feminist identities. In doing so, I have drawn on a variety of submissive practices, dynamics, and identities that participants actively engage in, all in an effort to show the varying ways in which feminist understandings of kink operate within the context of sexual encounters. For some, identifying similar core themes (between kink and feminism) was associated with less of a need to reconcile the choice to engage in BDSM when considered alongside feminist identities. It is worth recounting here that Megan, Amy, and GoLM are active members of larger BDSM communities. I mention this because of the possibility that such forums may allow them to more openly engage and discuss elements of kink that they believe to be mirrored in some of their feminist values; as a result, this may contribute to the way in which these participants have actively negotiated and managed sexual submission with their respective feminist identities. Moreover, these participants are more likely to have access to information on the values of the kink community that other participants may not even be aware of, or feel safe discussing within feminist circles or friendship groups. Here I drew on Carrie, who feels less inclined to share some of what she

finds pleasurable with other people (particularly with other feminists). In another instance, I demonstrated how Amy uses these culturally imposed scripts of gender inequality to her advantage. For others, I demonstrated how the relationship between feminism and the desire to engage in submissive practices involves a process of reconciliation, one that 29 year old Nicole summarizes by stating: “I *could* be ashamed of where my desires come from, or ashamed to simply be having them...[but] it isn’t productive and that’s not a thought process I encourage anymore”. In doing so, I have introduced an understanding of agency and embodiment that seeks to place importance on what the subject is capable of doing, rather than focusing on agency as something to be attained once independent from the constraint of dominant social norms.

### **4.3 Que(e)rying (hetero)sexual practices**

While the previous section focused on ways of understanding the experience and justification in choosing submission, this section considers ways of understanding that both *query* and *queer* heterosexual practices. It begins by building on the prevalence of submissive practices and in turn, considers experiences of ‘playing with dominance’. As introduced above, GoLM referred to an ex-partner who intentionally led her “down a dominant path” – she quite strongly felt unnatural ‘playing’ this role. This is a common theme among participants; here I consider various experiences of engaging in this dynamic and will do so as a way of introducing a more general and wide-ranging set of sexual queries. By this I refer to the way in which participants actively question and seek to challenge their sexual scripts and the activities that are included within a sexual encounter. From here, I move on to explore a number of ways in which participants address, negotiate and challenge heteronormative sexual scripts. The aim here will be to present a series of narratives that include non-normative sexual practices; I will draw on these narratives in an effort to rethink heterosexuality from a heteroerotic perspective by considering what O’Rourke calls ‘straights’ queer desires’ (2005, 113). In doing so, I aim to offer nuanced and complicated understandings of (hetero)sexual practices as they occur within the context of sex.

#### **4.3.1 Playing with dominance**

Often presented alongside narratives of choosing submission, a number of participants drew on sexual encounters that involved playing the ‘top’ role. For Megan and Sue, playing with sexual roles and taking on the ‘top’ position is often characterized by

*initial* feelings of unease and ‘unnaturalness’. Interestingly for Sue, this unease only occurs in sexual encounters with men as she describes herself as more naturally taking on a dominant role in sex with women. For Megan, the initial unease is due to the mental preparation that comes with being a ‘top’. At times the implication of these narratives (and the ones that will be explored in greater detail below) often led to, or informed, a broader set of queries as to why certain acts are a part of certain sexual encounters and in turn, why some are not. As a result, participants often highlighted the desire to challenge themselves - their sexual desires, practices, and overall understanding of (hetero)sexuality.

As outlined in the previous section, Amy predominantly identifies as sexually submissive. She also went from practicing polyamory to being in a monogamous relationship in the time between the diary and interview phases. In her diary she describes two experiences of “domming” an ex-partner – one where she and another woman took turns penetrating him with a strap-on dildo, and one where Amy was inspired by a fantasy she wrote in her diary which involved anal play, ropes, and flogging her partner. Although she turned this fiction into “some version” of reality (admittedly with “less talking and more laughing”), she describes the experience as:

A bit difficult, as I felt pretty disassociated from myself having to take on a role that I didn’t find natural. In the days beforehand, I had started to feel pretty sexy about the whole thing, but while there were moments of excitement there wasn’t a strong feeling of desire on my part.

Interestingly, Amy’s current (monogamous) partner says that he has seen “moments of aggression or dominance in our sex life that [I think] he’s like ‘I think you are more dominant than you think you are’”. So while Amy believes that playing the dominant role is more difficult for her to negotiate in terms of recognizing her own desires (as well as the potential pleasure these kinds of encounters can provide), she *is* inspired by her current partner to explore these roles further. As Amy says, “he doesn’t want us to be invested in one particular role”. So while she admits that this is challenging, mainly because “it’s a role I find less inherently sexy than the opposite”, Amy does indeed believe that in the broader spectrum of sexuality, it is “way better for me to be able to integrate that [kind of practice as part of my sexuality], instead of not”. Similarly, Megan admits that there are times where she has to make a concerted effort when she ‘tops’. For instance, “sometimes dressing ‘Dom’ helps [me to get in the right mindset]. I like to have time to get into the headspace, of thinking about what I want to do”. Megan believes there is a lot of mental preparation involved in being the dominant partner - something that Amy also alludes to in the fact that she spent a lot of time *thinking* about the experience in the days

beforehand, psyching herself up, so to speak. However, both highlight the *potential* of these practices and in doing so, offer a way of understanding whereby ‘playing with dominance’ is understood as worth the ‘work’ and preparation. In short, both believe these explorations (although perhaps not viewed as ‘natural’), are regarded as potentially beneficial to their overall sexuality and (hetero)sexual practices.

29 year old Nicole, who also engages in predominantly submissive sexual practices, purchased a dildo and harness for her partner’s birthday – “and so, you know, pegging [anally penetrating male partner] is now a part of our practices from time to time. I want to get better at it”. Somewhat surprised by this in our interview (because of the way Nicole so strongly seemed to identify with submissive practices in her diary), I asked how she felt playing the dominant role. She explained that while it is not her “natural inclination”, it *is* fun to explore. Furthermore, she highlights a way of understanding these experiences that (for her) goes beyond the actual sexual act. For instance, “I can be sucking his cock and still be topping him, it depends on the vibe. It’s not only in the acts. But it’s just fun to explore!”. Here Nicole demonstrates a broader engagement with dynamics of power and how they operate within the context of sex. In doing so, she presents a way of understanding where the meanings attached to a certain sexual act are open to interpretation. As Albury contends, ‘there is no automatic intrinsic meaning in any particular sex act [...] although there is a dominant cultural view, each of us interacts with that culture slightly differently, bringing to sex our own acculturated meanings’ (2000, 40). In short, meanings are permeable. As acts are performed, Nicole understands that they can be ‘read’ in a myriad of ways. So although Nicole suggests that she might predominantly identify with submissive practices, she has more recently realized that “I don’t want to be [like] a gold star submissive”. As a result of exploring practices like pegging, she is now more “actively on the lookout for things that will challenge my notion of what’s acceptable in submission or BDSM in general and just kind of be open [to exploring]”. Here she also noted the lack of diversity in the BDSM imagery she posts on her own Tumblr account; in doing so, she makes a commitment to seek out alternative imagery that offers different ways of understanding beauty and sexuality. The overall aim, therefore, is to challenge what Nicole thinks is acceptable and to actively look outside her comfort zone as a way to more deeply consider what she assumes will turn her on.

It starts to become clear by Amy, Megan and Nicole’s experiences of ‘playing with dominance’ that this has led them to question a much larger set of sexual practices and desires, and that in doing so, they aim to expand the notion of what is acceptable, or what is included within the context of their sexual encounters. For single and 22 year old Ashley,



this is articulated in her desire to “negotiate sex in a clearer way”; it is these negotiations which help introduce the second part of this section – queering heterosexual practices.

### 4.3.2 Queering heterosexual practices

The term queer, ‘initially meant to probe cultural constructs of sexual identity’ (Read 2013, 469), offers another way of thinking the sexual. It is a term that can broadly be used in describing sexual and gender identities that transgress ‘normality’, trouble conventional understandings of heterosexuality, or that exist as a necessary component of gender-fucking (Kitzinger and Wilkinson 1994, 453). Although this list is not exhaustive, queer identities are understood to be nebulous – in short, ‘difficult to define and/or contain’ (Callis 2014, 69). Within the context of this chapter, queer should be understood as a verb rather than a noun – queer is something that we can *do*. That said, this section is largely informed by O’Rourke’s view on moving toward an ‘antinormative heteroerotic’, and considers how the queering of heterosexual sex brings forth the potential for ‘non-phallobesed and non-hierarchical hetero-relationships’ (2005, 113). I present the following narratives as a way in which to situate how (within the context of heterosexual sex) the body can be understood as ‘griddable [...] with multiple sites of (hetero)erotic potential, where sexual pleasure covers multiple areas of/on/in the body’ (O’Rourke 2005, 113).

For instance, Ashley describes her sexual history as “very bisexual and I’ve never tried to separate out the same-sex experiences and relationships”; in doing so, she supports the idea that her sexual identity is too fluid, and her sexual behaviour too variable, to be so neatly categorized (Crawford 1993, 45). The way this fluidity is recognized in her sexual behaviour and practices is perhaps most clearly established by Ashley’s opinion of vaginal sex. For Ashley, the vagina is:

Just not a site of pleasure for me...I feel quite trapped when I’m being penetrated there – not just in missionary but in any position. You’re kind of locked in, which is quite scary. Once it’s happening it’s difficult to get out of easily.

Ashley repeatedly mentions this fear associated with vaginal penetration throughout the course of her diary; in fact, she says she had these feelings before her experience of rape. In an attempt to create a space where heterosexual sex *can* be a potential site of pleasure, Ashley troubles ‘the terms of hetero-logic, [whereby] the vagina is the heterosexual orifice associated with heteroerotic practice’ (O’Rourke 2005, 113, *my italics*). In short, Ashley understands anal sex as a site of pleasure as she believes that this

is simply a less vulnerable (physical) position to be in, particularly considered alongside her feelings that “some guys look a bit aggressive just before they cum, which I don’t like. During a blow job or anal, you don’t have to look at them, but with missionary you do”.

In Kippax and Smith’s study on anal intercourse and power between men, the majority of participants associated receptivity in terms of ‘feminine’ submission; and while, of course, the position of receptivity in anal sex between men is also associated with the individual’s *desire* to be submissive (2001, 417), for Ashley, locating herself as a receptive partner in anal sex is actually experienced as a way to negotiate her presumed submissiveness (by virtue of her gender) within a heterosexual context. So where Rodney (in Kippax and Smith’s study) describes the receptive position in anal sex between men as one where ‘you are a bit more vulnerable than in any other [sexual] position’ (2001, 426), this could not be further from how Ashley feels in her own understanding of the meaning associated with anal sex. Ana uses anal sex to negotiate a more active, productive and pleasurable space, one she can more easily navigate and reconcile with what she finds *not* pleasurable within the context of heterosex. For instance, even when I explicitly asked if anal sex was a way she can negotiate some of the things she finds confusing about her heterosexual desires (and past experiences with men) and in turn, gain something productive out of these complicated feelings, she answered with a resounding ‘YES! Exactly!!’. In doing so, Ashley constructs a way of rethinking heterosexual sex, where she can be positioned as receptive in the act of anal sex but where these experiences are based on negotiating and constructing a position so that the active penis is ‘grasped or enveloped by the *equally active* [mouth, vagina,] anus, [hand]’ (O’Rourke 2005, 113, my italics).

For 31 year old Sue, the inclusion of non-normative sexual practices has been a consistent feature throughout her sexual history as her first serious partner (at age 18) transitioned into a woman throughout the course of their four-year relationship. And while Sue’s current partner identifies as a trans man, she offers insight into just how different these sexual relationships were/are by highlighting how different meanings become attached to similar explorations of non-normative practices. For instance, her ex-partner believed that since women do not have penises, she would not use hers in a sexual way. Sue says:

Her relationship to her body, her gender and her sexuality limited what we could do without her feeling uncomfortable. Therefore it limited my experience and enjoyment of sex...Most of it was

about finding a way to make her comfortable and put her at ease so she could enjoy sex, and it was with mixed results.

Sue describes these explorations as enforced. Because her partner did not feel comfortable having sex “in the regular heterosexual way that we had been doing”, they chose to purchase various toys, vibrators, and strap-on dildos. Often experimenting in gender play, Sue’s partner would “dress up to feel more female...wearing a wig and having long hair in bed helped her a lot”. And while Sue counts herself lucky “in that whenever I have been experimental in bed it’s been with a partner who felt the same way”, these particular explorations and means of experimenting non-penetrative, non-heterosexual sex were for the benefit of her partner – “experimenting is fun but when you’re forced to experiment like that it can become a bit – you know?”. Sue says these explorations largely ignored her needs as they were meant to help make her transitioning partner feel more comfortable. What Sue wanted, as a teen, was sex that was enjoyable and uncomplicated – “I didn’t want it to end in tears or frustration (emotional and sexual).” With her current partner, Sue describes the same kind of non-normative explorations below; as will be noted, the meaning is made different as a result of the context in which this relationship is situated, and the fact that this partner is six years into his transition. For instance, she says:

I get all of the things I like about being in a relationship with a man but the sex is different. And I think the thing I’ve noticed about it is we have more scope to do different things I guess. All we have to do is put on a strap-on and we can have sex like any man and woman do, but if he’s not wearing that than I can do all the things to him that I could never do to a man and he can do all the things to me that either a guy or a woman could. So I suppose I like the wide variety of opportunities that we have in terms of our sex life.

Here Sue offers a way of understanding (hetero)sexual practices that embraces a sense of sexual and gender fluidity – ‘a space where identities can change, multiply and/or dissolve’ (Callis 2014, 64). By this I refer not just to the sexual/gender fluidity of Sue’s partner, but hers as well; and, in particular, how these are realized depending on the context of the sexual encounter, and on what ‘kind’ of sex they might be having at any given time. Sue uses her positionality (and her partner’s) as a way to destabilize categories of sexual practice, and therefore offer a way of understanding heterosexuality that works to recognize the ‘unstable, unpredictable, precarious, always in transition space’ (Callis 2014, 69). In doing so, Sue creates a space for her sexual practices that carry no fixed meaning.

In her diary, Sue also draws upon a short-term relationship with a cisgender male that highlights another way of understanding what it means to queer heterosexual sex. For instance, this particular partner was born with a small hole in his penis which meant that his urethra came out the side of the penis instead of the end. The psychological side effect (which Sue largely describes as the inability to “relax” with new sexual partners) became regarded as a “welcomed novelty”. Because he struggled to achieve orgasm, Sue contends that he was “not hung up” on the imperativeness of penetration or orgasm. As a result, it led to some of the best sex Sue has ever had.

He was never hung up on our sex being a race to the finish line or a race to penetrative sex...he reminded me how much I really enjoyed being penetrated anally while my partner plays with my clit to make me come. Similarly I had never experienced having someone lick my anus as they play with my clit – that was pretty amazing. So good in fact that he asked me to do the same for him.

The ‘queering’ that Sue demonstrates here is in the way she disrupts the sequence of events, the sexual acts, as well as the overall goal within the context of these encounters. As she says, the aim was never about penetration or orgasm – sex with this particular partner carried no specific end point, which immediately challenges conventional understandings of (hetero)sex (and some of the wider cultural conceptions of desire and pleasure as outlined in chapter 2, section 2.3). I argue that this also works to disrupt the notion of fixed and static sexual preferences, and as a result, provides an understanding whereby desires and meanings are fluid, diverse, always changing and always dependent on the context in which they are constructed. Therefore, in breaking down the constructedness of heterosexual practices, different ways of imagining heterosexuality start to emerge - as O’Rourke argues, this then allows us to articulate new codes of (hetero)sexual practice (2005, 112).

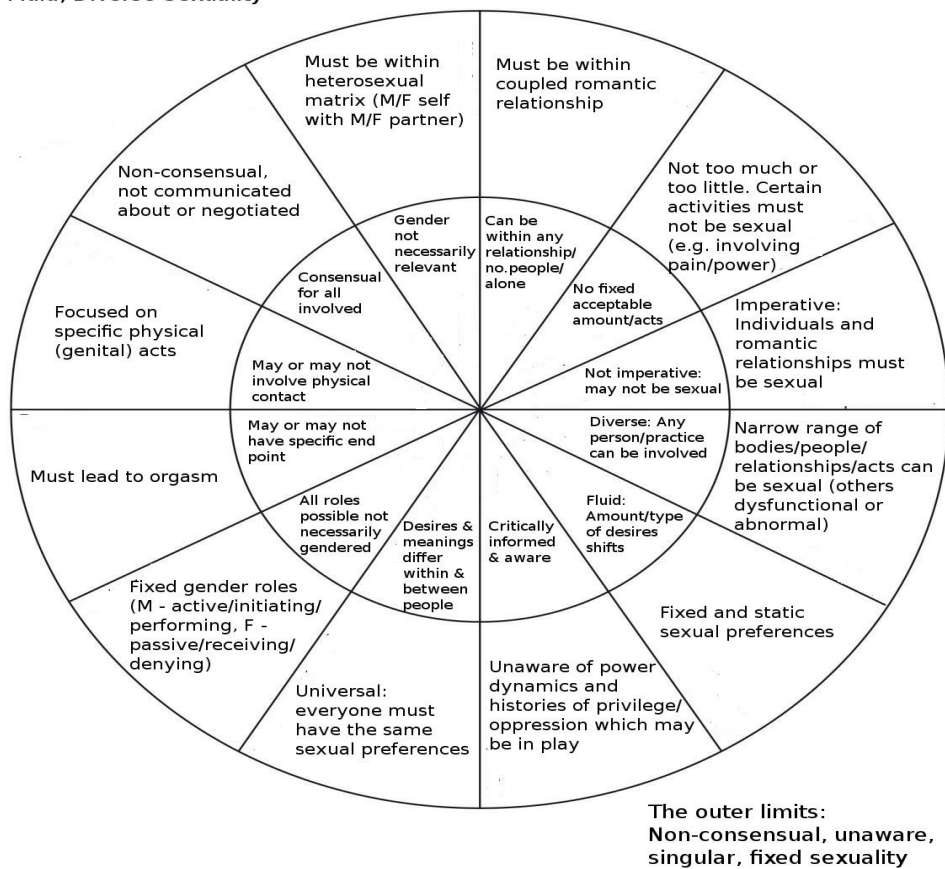
#### **4.3.3 Rubin v. Barker: whose ‘normal’ is ‘normal’?**

As shown in the figure below, Barker’s adaptation of Rubin’s charmed circle further highlights these new codes of practice and ways of rethinking (hetero)sexuality – as fluid, diverse and critically informed.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> My interpretation of Barker’s adapted charmed circle is based on a panel I attended at the Sexual Cultures Conference at Brunel University in April 2012. I have also accessed Barker’s adaptation through an online presentation-based website/blog that Barker posts to regularly. On this site, the presentation is entitled ‘Rewriting the Rules of Sex’. Access information (for both conference and website) can be found in the bibliography.

The charmed circle:  
Consensual, Critically Informed,  
Fluid, Diverse Sexuality



**Figure 4.1 Barker's adaptation of Rubin's 'charmed circle'**

Rubin's charmed circle is actually represented in Barker's outer limits; while Rubin's original version placed dominant, heteronormative understandings of sex (often privileged by society) at the centre of the charmed circle, Barker argues these are more accurately characterized as singular, fixed, and unaware understandings of sex. For instance, Rubin's charmed circle includes 'monogamous', 'heterosexual', 'procreative' and 'vanilla' as good or natural kinds of sex. Representing a hierarchy of sex, Rubin's charmed circle offers limited and heteronormative ways of understanding. In fact, Rubin's outer limits ('S/M', 'promiscuous', 'in sin', 'with manufactured objects') more accurately represent the relationships, acts, and identities that my own participants subscribe to as part of their (hetero)sexualities. As such, Barker suggests a re-writing of Rubin's rules so as

to recognize and include the value of *differently normative*, complex and varying types of practices, identities and relationship formations. In doing so, Barker's charmed circle seeks to include critically informed, fluid and diverse understandings of sexuality, and thus further represents the narratives I have outlined in this section. Furthermore, I argue that Barker's outer limits act as the point from which many of my participants' broader queries regarding heterosexual practice stem from. As such, through a process of questioning their heterosexual practices, Barker's charmed circle comes to fruition in many participants' accounts, thus offering more nuanced and complex understandings of heterosexuality – ones that are critically informed, diverse and fluid, and most importantly, embodied as such in the context of sex.

Little attention has so far been paid to the role feminism plays in both the querying and queering of participants' (hetero)sexual practices. That is simply because no *explicit* link was made between them in my participants' explanations, and as a result, my own interpretation. However, what can be gathered from the narratives above is that critically exploring the practices that are a part of sexual scripts (as well as the subsequent intent in queering these practices), *could* be a result of feminist-informed ways of understanding sex and sexuality. However, it should be made clear that these feelings were not expressed in any kind of explicit manner and therefore these ways of understanding are just as likely the effect of a number of other variables. For instance, Ashley *may* understand anal sex as pleasurable because of her experience of (vaginal) rape. Likewise, Sue *may* enjoy exploring sex much more with her current trans partner as he has fully transitioned and therefore not in the same position as her first partner, who began the process of transition during the course of their relationship. So while feminist-informed ways of understanding the que(e)rying of participants' (hetero)sexual practices are plausible, it is equally as important to acknowledge that these narratives are just as capable of being informed by their lived experiences.

#### **4.3.4 Summary**

This section has sought to include ways of understanding (hetero)sexual practices by exploring the how participants often question those practices, sexual scripts, and desires; and, how they actively seek to queer their practices as a result of critically engaging with broader understandings of sexuality. While this is certainly not an exhaustive explanation as to the multiple ways in which participants que(e)ry their (hetero)sexual practices, I have chosen to draw on narratives that complicate understandings of (hetero)sexuality, and that work to consider the varying and complex

ways that (hetero)sexual practices are situated and lived within the context of sex. First, I considered how playing with dominance is often associated with feelings of unnaturalness; importantly, this led to a more general querying as to why certain practices exist within sexual scripts and how participants might go about challenging their own notion of what is acceptable within those scripts and the encounters that are informed by them. This idea of challenging the self appeared in many participants' considerations as to the kinds of things they seek from their sexuality. Here I used Ashley as a way to connect the idea that querying (hetero)sexual practices can often lead to instances of queering them. From here I attempted to situate non-normative sexual practices in a way that recognizes them as a means of destabilizing sexual categories, and in doing so, showcase the potential for 'non-phallobessed and non-hierarchical relationships' (O'Rourke 2005, 113). Here the overall aim has been to highlight non-normative heterosexualities – 'the queer practices of straights and the lives and loves of those men and women who choose to situate themselves beyond [...] the heteronormative centre' (O'Rourke 2005, 112). The following section continues to focus on ways of understanding heterosexual practices by considering how participants negotiate (female) pleasure within the context of sexual acts.

#### 4.4 Negotiating (female) pleasure

This section explores ways of understanding pleasure as it is experienced within the context of sex. In doing so, I aim to locate these ways of understanding within two frameworks. First, I consider ways of understanding (female) orgasm. However, it is imperative to recognize that although many participants talk of pleasure as something that goes far beyond the orgasm<sup>25</sup>, I would also like to consider how their experiences and understandings of pleasure do, at times, reinforce the orgasm imperative. I do so by first introducing the way participants come to learn about female pleasure within a broader cultural context, and how this may be indicative of how understandings of orgasm emerge within the context of sexual encounters. Here I also consider how participants often stress the importance of their partners' orgasms, while their own are often framed by less of an expectation – one that does not imply the same kind of inevitability as the male orgasm.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Chapter 6, section 6.5 (pleasures derived from sex) presents these ways of understanding and will be explored in a context beyond sex.

<sup>26</sup> I realize that in choosing to focus on ways of understanding the experience of orgasm, I am taking part in reproducing the orgasm imperative. However, I also find it important to consider how participants themselves often reproduce the imperative within the context of their sexual encounters.

From here, I unpack a set of narratives that revolve around exploring (new) pleasures. Here I consider explorations of ‘new’ practices or ‘new’ ways of having sex, particularly ones that occurred during the course of this research. In doing so, I aim to offer an understanding of pleasure that is most commonly associated with the goal of becoming more informed about the role of (and potential for) pleasure within the context of sex. For instance, 25 year old Vanessa describes her own explorations (unpacked below) as “the best decision I’ve made towards my sexual liberation!”. Therefore, while the goal of this section is to highlight how pleasure is experienced within the context of sex, as well as the role feminist understandings play within these understandings, I begin by situating female pleasure within the current cultural narrative.

#### **4.4.1 Female pleasure as secondary**

As outlined in chapter 2, section 2.3 (desire and pleasure) it can be argued that the current dominant narrative produced within and about heterosexual sex argues for a liberal sexual rhetoric, whereby Western culture is continually bombarded with the idea that sex and pleasure are unquestionably ‘good’ (Braun 2005, 414). Within this narrative, female pleasure is undoubtedly included, and furthermore, said to ‘*appear as central in (hetero)sex*’ (Braun 2005, 414, my italics). For instance, in exploring representations of women’s orgasms in mainstream women’s magazines, Lavie-Ajayi and Joffe suggest that in spite of the ‘emphasis on women taking control in sex’ (2009, 100), it is questionable whether the goal is in women’s interests, or rather, to ‘implore women to subordinate their own interests...and to please men via enhancing beauty and sexual availability’ (Lavie-Ajayi and Joffe 2009, 100). In Taylor’s (2005) analysis of ‘lad mags’, a similar narrative was established, whereby articles geared toward ‘pleasing women’ were actually framed in terms of men’s sexual pleasure – the idea being that ‘*if you give women what they want, then your sex life will improve*’ (Taylor 2005, 161, italics in original).

There is something to be said here about the changing notions of masculinity and (hetero)sexual sex within a wider cultural context. For instance, with regards to ‘lad mags’, Attwood argues that ‘there are clear indications of new figures of masculinity, or emerging sexual lifestyles and sensibilities, and of increasing variety in the forms of presentation used to construct male heterosexuality’ (2005, 97). What Attwood suggests here can be evidenced by the fact that the most common topic found in Taylor’s research focused on ‘what women like’; these articles quite simply included strategies for pleasing women, ways to help women enjoy sex more, and at times, these articles were written by women themselves (presumably as a way to present these strategies as ‘tried and tested’ insider



tips) (Taylor 2005, 161). The implication of this alleged changing notion of masculinity is that 'real' men know how to please women in bed. However, I think it is equally as important to remember that Taylor's findings actually speak to constructions of masculinity that, as Attwood argues 'are [also] just a bricolage of the familiar and rather old-fashioned signifiers of masculinity' (2005, 97).

So although the cultural narrative *represents* female pleasure as central to discussions of heterosexual sex, the lived experiences found in a number of my participants' accounts arguably challenge such claims, particularly when considering how they have come to learn (and internalize) dominant narratives of female sexuality, and in particular, how these have influenced their experiences of female pleasure. For instance, mother of three Wendy believes that a recent increase in discussions surrounding female pleasure is the result of *Fifty Shades of Grey* - her argument being that it has given women "a lot of freedom to talk more [about pleasure], through this book". However, at the same time, she also recognizes that in a much broader context, "women's pleasure is still – yeah, I think it's still in some senses seen as less important than men's pleasure." While Wendy speaks more broadly about female pleasure here, she immediately brings her own experiences into discussion when admitting that she sometimes positions her pleasure as secondary - "even though I am a feminist". The implication here is that Wendy *should* actually know better, or rather, be able to negotiate these internalizations *because* of her feminist identity.

This is in contrast to Schick et al.'s (2008) exploration which considered the role feminist ideologies play in the promotion of women's sexual well-being, wherein a 'critical understanding of feminist ideology may help women resist the gender norms that impede sexual subjectivity, thus enabling women who hold feminist beliefs to feel more sexually self efficacious and sexually satisfied' (2008, 227). In other words, within the context of a sexual encounter, women who identify with feminism are more likely to know how to cultivate what they want and in turn, how to get it. Although Schick et al.'s research is narrowly focused on how feminist ideologies influence negotiated condom use, resisting gender roles is found to be related to an increased confidence in the ability to advocate for condoms and thus, produces a greater sense of sexual satisfaction. I would argue that within the context of my research, the same broad ideas apply – that a critical understanding of feminism may help resist norms that impede the confidence to advocate for sexual pleasure, and as a result, where dominant constructions of women's sexual roles can act as barriers to women's sexual well-being. However, this is not necessarily matched

in Wendy's lived experience. For instance, although she identifies an *awareness* of how dominant gender norms can potentially impede her sexual assertiveness and entitlement to pleasure, it does not mean she can simply infer a feminist rejection of this association and otherwise dismantle deeply embedded norms of femininity.

Like Wendy, Amy contends that "it's such a struggle for women to focus on their own pleasure and instead - have sex for other reasons (which I've done but am trying to avoid)". Reflecting on these types of sexual encounters, Amy suggests these 'reasons' are informed by deeply rooted norms of female passivity:

I wanted to be a good partner, I didn't want to start a fight...I didn't feel secure enough to even deal with a normal and moderate degree of disappointment (with him) in us not having sex - which is crazy! You know, like...?!?!

Here Amy cites reasons that have nothing to do with her own pursuit of pleasure and that place her partner's pleasure (sexually and in the broader context of their relationship) in a position of primary importance, which lends itself to the argument that 'because gender roles are ubiquitous, women learn to associate nonconsciously the sexual context with submission and passivity' (Kiefer et al. 2006, 83). However, the same level of awareness experienced by Wendy is also illustrated by Amy; this occurs when she says "which is crazy! You know, like...?!?". The interpretation here is that Amy's feminist consciousness, something that has always been her "inclination", should support her in creating a more active sexual subjectivity where the above scenario does not occur. In other words, she is not what Kiefer et al. describe as 'nonconsciously' accepting how gender roles influence her sexual experiences and subsequent understanding of pleasure. Instead, Amy actually expresses an awareness of the idea and assumption that women who identify as feminist are allegedly 'more inclined to have sex as a result of their own sexual interests and wishes rather than in response to intrinsic forces (e.g., their male partners)' (Schick et al. 2008, 229). However, like Wendy, Amy acknowledges that the awareness does not mean such deeply embedded norms automatically lose their strength when placed in the context of sex.<sup>27</sup> In an effort to resolve or 'avoid' this kind of sex (as Amy says she is actively trying to do), she describes a calculated scenario where visual isolation and a lack of communication with her partner enables her pleasure to become a focal point:

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<sup>27</sup> Here I am always reminded of Holly, a participant in my MA research. Changing these norms is a lot of effort, she argued, and "fixing sexism is a lot of weight to have on your shoulders while you're having sex".

In terms of actually getting to an orgasm, there needs to be a point where like, I cannot pay attention to [my partner], and part of that is feeling like my partner is enthusiastic about it and that I don't need to think about whether they are getting bored.

So while this illustrates Amy's negotiation in terms of what she can physically *do* to enable and focus on her own pleasure, she remains simultaneously worried about her partner's level of interest. She consciously negotiates the inclusion of her own pleasure, yet the very need to negotiate for its inclusion still reinforces the underlying rhetoric that 'normative heterosex is predicated upon men's sexual pleasure' (Stewart 1999, 276). This is demonstrated by the fact that Amy has to actively negotiate the inclusion of her pleasure within the context of the act in order to ensure that it is included. What starts to become clear by the explanations above is both Wendy's and Amy's reference to the idea that their partner's pleasure is more highly valued within the context of heterosexuality, means that 'learning how to negotiate sexual encounters that are pleasurable for the female partner entails confronting the interwoven layers/levels of heterosexuality that produce men as actors and women as their objects' (Holland et al. 1998, 82). Moreover, both Wendy and Amy's respective feminist identities do not necessarily eliminate these practices or ways of understanding from what actually occurs within the context of a sexual encounter.

#### **4.4.2 His and hers: the (non)importance of orgasm**

I turn now to locate these conceptualizations of pleasure as they relate to understanding (the importance of) orgasm within the context of heterosexual sex. In doing so, I highlight the social representation of both male and female orgasm and underpin their meanings by exploring the lived experiences of them. For instance, in examining the social representations of women's orgasms, Lavie-Ajayi and Joffe found that the male orgasm was depicted as 'mechanical - rubbing this, poking that' (2009, 101), a sentiment that was similarly reflected in the way male orgasms were talked about within the context of my research. For example, Sandy describes men as biologically programmed to release when they have sex and that women "just aren't built like that". Similarly, Sue says that when she has sex with men, "I could just lie there and [they're] going to come in the next few minutes. There's not that much participation on my part". Women's orgasms, however, are socially represented as something that involves more than 'rubbing this or poking that'; the implication shown here is twofold - that women seemingly share an awareness of the

cultural discourse which positions the female orgasm as elusive, mysterious and difficult to achieve (Frith 2012, 258); and second, that if the male partner does *not* orgasm, then, as Sandy (31) suggests, “there’s something wrong”.

When asked to describe how participants felt if their partner does not orgasm during a sexual encounter, the answers I received were littered with phrases like “let down” (Dawn), “bothered” (Amy), “like a bit of a failure” (Wendy) and, after catching her ex-husband masturbating, Ruby assumed full responsibility for not being available enough – it *must* have been her fault. While this works to reinforce the earlier notion that male pleasure is considered necessary, natural and as a result, of great importance, it also reinforces widespread conceptions that sexual pleasure is synonymous with orgasm (Braun 2005, 415)<sup>28</sup>. This is not to say that women do not value their own orgasms, or experience the same frustration and failure when they do not experience one – in fact, the same frustration is indeed felt; the difference is that the frustration is framed by less of an expectation to have an orgasm in the first place. For instance, Dawn articulates this by saying that although her orgasm is inevitable when she masturbates, it becomes more like the “icing on the cake” with her partner. Similarly, Sandy says, “I just think, well if it happens that’s nice and if it doesn’t then I’m still enjoying the sex I’m having, so it’s not a bad experience”. Like the women interviewed by Lavie-Ajayi and Joffe, there exists a complex relationship between the ‘ultimate goal’ of sex and subjective experiences of it - one that acknowledges the ‘mechanical’ nature of male orgasm and reinforces the elusiveness of the female’s. Moreover, as Wendy states, although it might be frustrating not to have an orgasm, she acknowledges herself as “pretty lucky” based on her ability to have one at all, referring here to the dominant assumption that female orgasm can be difficult to achieve. Nicole notes that she is “*becoming* more and more okay for orgasm not to be an absolute requirement”, adding that playing with sexual technique has taught her that “achieving orgasm isn’t the be all, end all”. Likewise, Megan says she is only ever frustrated “if I go in EXPECTING to cum, then yes, I’ll likely feel unfinished...I just accept the fact that orgasms fail sometimes”.

However, for single and 25 year old Vanessa, her orgasm is so prominently positioned as the pinnacle of sexual experience and moreover, essential to ‘normal’ sexual functioning, that she presents a relationship between pleasure and desire whereby the former must replace the latter – a theme also unpacked in Pott’s (2000) deconstruction of

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<sup>28</sup> It is also interesting to consider that the participants cited here range in age from 27 to 59, highlighting the generational similarities in understanding the orgasm imperative.

the heterosexual orgasm. Admittedly, Vanessa says that her sexual experiences with men are “very limited” and so a large part of her diary involves entries about exploring her own body and fantasies. A theme that emerges within these entries is that when Vanessa experiences what she calls “sexual energy”, she will not be relieved, satisfied, content, able to fall asleep, or otherwise get on with her day (all phrases and examples she uses) if that sexual energy is not replaced by an orgasm. She says:

It’s awful, it’s painful, it’s annoying – I can’t relax until I find some kind of a release and if I don’t right then and there, the feeling follows during the next days...I do feel as something is unfinished...I hate being left without release.

Vanessa even describes the fantasy of a ‘quickie’ (public sex with a man in a nightclub), as a largely unappealing scenario because she would not be able to have an orgasm in that kind of pressured environment, and therefore sees little point in the encounter. This kind of non-orgasmic sex indicates a sense of non-completion, or non-resolution to the encounter; in Potts’ deconstruction of heterosexual orgasms, she found that many participants do indeed frame orgasms in this way, where the achievement of an orgasm is associated with a ‘sense of enervation, of depletion, though this is not a wholly negative experience, but rather a “pleasant exhaustion”’ (Potts 2000, 68). For 56 year old Lana, who has been married for over 20 years, she describes the experience in a similar way: “you sink down to a really - like a warm pool, almost”. Most commonly, participants linked orgasm to feeling nurtured, relaxed, fulfilled, and emotionally close to their partners – the kind of pleasant exhaustion Potts describes above. However, as outlined above, Nicole describes herself as becoming increasingly okay with non-orgasmic sex, and what she says is echoed by Potts’ participant David. He says that in non-orgasmic sex, there is a ‘sort of a sexier feeling because I sort of still feel sexy, or still feel sort of turned on in a way[...]where the sexiness of sex remains present in the *absence* of orgasm’ (Potts 2000, 68). For Nicole, this is illustrated in playing with various techniques, where her partner actively denies her an orgasm, or takes her to the “edge”. Nicole says that “waiting for a resolution that will never come keeps me turned on”. For Ruby, this is articulated in the analogy of a simmering pot, wherein simmering (or to be kept simmering) is just as “fabulous” as the orgasm itself.

That said, there is no denying that, to varying degrees, participants in this research often view orgasm as the ‘destination of a sexual journey, as the end-point or finish line of a race, and as the desired outcome of a sexual transaction’ (Potts 2000, 60). This is not to say it is their *only* understanding of pleasure, but rather, that it is often difficult to talk

about the orgasm outside of dominant paradigms (Potts 2000, 61). In addition, I think it is equally as difficult to frame, unpack, and analyze experiences of orgasm without referring to these same paradigms. In fact, I had to actively ask participants if, in their understanding, pleasure extends beyond the orgasm just to be able to speak outside these paradigms (which, as stated, is explored in greater detail in chapter 6).

Within the context of sex, orgasm is something that operates in a complicated way, where women often negotiate for the inclusion of their own against the probability and perceived ‘naturalness’ of their partner’s; moreover, where negotiating pleasure within the context of sex is made more complex when considered alongside feminist understandings. This became most clear in the way participants’ understandings of pleasure and orgasm were often presented in contrast to the belief that feminist identities are equated with some kind of automatic ability to dismantle the norms of femininity – where feminists are said to “do it better”. That said, the following section builds on these understandings of pleasure by framing them around ‘new’ sexual experiences.

#### **4.4.3 Exploring new pleasures**

Exploring new pleasures within the context of sex is often done so with the aim of challenging what is previously thought to be pleasurable, or as a way of enhancing the *potential* for pleasure with new experiences. The experiences I unpack below offer ways of understanding pleasure that are located in a cultural context wherein sex is positioned as ‘stylish, a source of physical pleasure, a means of creating identity, a form of body work, self expression, a quest for individual fulfillment’ (Attwood 2006, 86). Moreover, I would argue that these explorations help to locate understandings of female sexuality in a framework that is characterized by a ‘more active, confident and autoerotic sexuality’ (Evans et al. 2011, 115) As such, these new ways of understanding pleasure and the sexual explorations they result in often present a move from ‘a heterosexual femininity constituted through passivity, whose sexuality was placed as inferior to her male partner’ (Evans et al. 2011, 115). While not explicitly stated, it is my contention that the overall sense from participants is that these explorations are often motivated by (and result in) what Ella describes as the feeling of being “grounded in my sexuality and feminist politic”.

I begin by offering an overview of some of these new experiences as recounted by participants; while they will not all be unpacked in greater detail below, they highlight the spectrum of explorations that occur within the context of sexual practices. In addition, the

following few instances may not link explicitly to the context of a sexual encounter, but for the purpose of introducing some of the explorations participants engaged in during the course of this research, I find them interesting to note. For example, during the course of this research, 59 year old Dawn (and her partner of five years) attended a naturist club disco night (as first timers, they went to a 'clothing optional' night but intend to go to a fully naked event in the future). As mentioned above, this experience may not explicitly link to the context of sex, but it is the sex that occurred after the disco which Dawn experienced as 'new'. She said that the atmosphere and freeness with which she experienced her body at the disco provided a different way of understanding foreplay. Interestingly, Sue also attended a naturist club with three friends (one of whom pretended to be her partner so they could attend the couple's night). Sue said sex occurred here behind closed doors, but for her, this experience was more about the ability to gain pleasure in exposing her naked body within a public context. Another similar link between participants' experiences is that Sue attended a women and trans men-only sex party with her partner; Nicole also attended a sex party, one that she describes as "queer and feminist friendly". What is important to note here is that both parties were marketed and described as inclusive and safe spaces for queers, feminists, and in Sue's case, trans men. For 21 year old Cleo, new and pleasurable experiences occurred within the context of having sex (for the first time) with a woman; for Amy, it lies in exploring BDSM with her new partner. And finally, for Vanessa, it is in purchasing her first sex toy, a process that carried much shame and deliberation, but that resulted in a rewarding and liberating experience.

Vanessa's exploration is interesting to consider, particularly when positioned alongside the shame and guilt she experiences throughout the process of purchasing a dildo. Having lived in Greece for most of her life (she spent a year studying in the UK), Vanessa admits that in Britain:

You can find dildos in Ann Summers in plain sight. In Greece the places are much more discreet and they kind of look shabby and dirty from the outside. If I was in England I'd buy one from a shop. Of course it also helps that much fewer people know me there than in Greece.

Implied here is the notion that in Greece, Vanessa is "just too ashamed to get into a sex shop and get one". When she does make this purchase, it is through an online retailer to whom she did not have to supply her full name or detailed address. When I asked why she felt so inhibited about buying one, she told me that she was:

Withholding sexual gratification from myself for bullshit...I was hesitant I guess, maybe a bit ashamed (see, patriarchy makes us feel ashamed for our sexuality), afraid mum would find it – of course that was an excuse. There's a great chance she's seen it already but of course, never talks about sex.

Evident here is Vanessa's understanding that even in this alleged postfeminist era, women are policed 'into silence about sex, socially constructed modesty, and self-regulating repression of behaviour and fantasy' (Johnson 2002, cited in Munford 2009, 193). As a single woman, Vanessa implies that she cannot explore her desires and fantasies with the use of sex toys – at least that is how she is made to feel, as illustrated by the shame patriarchy makes her feel about her own sexuality. Moreover, she presents an understanding of the cultural differences between Greece and Britain, as well as an understanding of how sex is negatively perceived by her mother, both equal in fostering elements of shame. As a result, Vanessa implies that Greece is perhaps more traditional, conservative and less sexualized than Britain - or at least less open about sex in general. This is particularly illustrated by Vanessa's contention that had she been in the UK, she could have (and would have) walked into Ann Summers and purchased the toy without pause.

Interestingly, Vanessa believes that "feminism is about freedom - the freedom to give women choice, [and] to choose the type of sexual relationship they like without guilt." These same themes are most certainly applicable to the way in which she approaches that same right to choose (and subsequent entitlement to pleasure) within the context of a sexual relationship with herself - and this is actually what motivates Vanessa to make the purchase in the end. By understanding that she withheld pleasure "for bullshit", the implication is that her understanding of feminism played a role in eliminating some of the shame she initially felt. In addition, Vanessa believes that "it would be great if I could have a vaginal orgasm by myself, which I think would make me sexually self-sufficient and then I wouldn't really need guys for sex. No STD fears either, which would be pretty great!". Here I draw on Koedt's infamous (1970) claim surrounding the myth of the vaginal orgasm, wherein men become entirely optional in the context of heterosexual sex and where women, as a result, can 'break out of male-defined notions of female pleasure' (Gerhard 2000, 450). I would argue that this tone is present in Vanessa's understanding of the possibility in exploring this new way of having sex – she understands the potential in being sexually self-sufficient and thus her exploration is one that centres on pleasure and play (and importantly, no danger, as illustrated by the mention of STDs).



Vanessa goes on to describe the confidence she has gained in using the toy by concluding that, “I think it’s one of the best decisions I’ve made toward my sexual liberation!”. As such, she has experimented in using the dildo in different ways and now wants to buy one with clitoral stimulation and a base so that she can attach it to things. Overall, her fantasies and orgasms have been enriched as a result of the way she implemented her own understanding of feminism in order to help reduce the shame she initially felt towards purchasing the sex toy. Illustrated here is the political significance of sexual pleasure, whereby gaining sexual knowledge through sexual practice starts to become experienced as normative for Vanessa (it is interesting to see this unfold throughout the course of her diary), and in doing so, she replaces the innocence of virtue and the silencing of sex with a more confident autoeroticism. So where Vanessa initially felt ashamed to sexually explore on her own, largely as a result of feeling like she has to police her sexuality within a patriarchal culture (or additionally, where her mother’s negative attitude toward sex effected the choices she was making), this is eventually replaced by gaining sexual knowledge (through the use and experimentation of the toy). In doing so, Vanessa experiments with the possibilities of pleasure as a result of feminist-informed understandings.

Like Vanessa, during the course of this research, radical feminist Cleo engaged in a kind of sexual encounter she had never experienced before – having sex with a woman. And while the desire for this experience was motivated by a number of factors, it is particularly interesting to consider alongside the same elements that played a role in Vanessa’s exploration of sex toys. In other words, Cleo’s experience becomes most interesting when considering the cultural context, and moreover, when understanding how themes of shame are eliminated by her feminist consciousness. The cultural context to which I refer (theoretically outlined in chapter 2, section 2.4) is made clear by Cleo’s confession that:

When I was younger I felt a lot of pressure to be seen as 'sexy' by men (even though I simultaneously despised a lot of men!)...I also feel pressure to have lots of sexual partners - and to be seen as 'sexually liberated'.

Strongly motivated by her feminist consciousness, Cleo offers a way of understanding her experience of sex with a woman as completely changing her outlook. First, she says “I no longer feel the pressure to be attractive for men”. This has also helped to shore up a lot of her body image issues which she realized were a result of cultural pressures to appeal to a heterosexual male gaze – “since having sex with a woman (where I

found I didn't worry about my body at all!)", Cleo's body image issues have dissipated. Likewise, she feels this experience has "opened up a whole new aspect of my sexuality that I hadn't been aware of before. And it's not oppressive which is great!". It becomes very clear just how intertwined Cleo's feminist identity and sexuality are; where the latter, she states, is informed by the former and indeed, where "I am cautious of being turned on by anything that is 'for men' or influenced by porn/patriarchy". This 'new' exploration of pleasure, and of Cleo's overall sexuality, has worked to resolve some of the issues she faces within a cultural context, most notably the pressure she feels to appeal to men and to simply 'be sexual'; moreover, it has illustrated a pathway in which the shame she feels toward her own body can be reconciled within the context of a sexual encounter with a woman.<sup>29</sup>

#### 4.4.4 Summary

This section has not only considered new ways of experiencing pleasure, but has chosen to focus on experiences that address the relationship between feminism and (hetero)sexuality. While a multitude of new sexual experiences occurred within the context of many different participants sexual encounters (briefly introduced above), I felt it was important that Vanessa's and Cleo's narratives were outlined here as both experienced elements of shame when positioned alongside some of their conflicted feelings, and as a result, took their understandings of feminism to create new pathways and understandings of pleasure. As such, these lived experiences offer a nuanced way of understanding the relationship between feminism and (hetero)sexuality. Moreover, they have contributed to the aim of this section which has sought to offer ways of understanding pleasure, and in particular, how dominant understandings of pleasure are learned or internalized by women. Here I worked the highlight that participants' experiences do not neatly fit into the equation that suggests identifying with feminism leads to better, uncomplicated sex – a view often presented in the literature (Bay-Cheng et al. 2007; Fitz and Zucker 2013; Lamb 2009; Schick et al. 2008). Instead, I have drawn on a set of experiences that suggest identifying with feminism does not simply mean deeply embedded norms of heterosexuality disappear from an individual's sexual script. From here, I established the social representations of orgasm as well as the lived experiences of

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<sup>29</sup> Interestingly, when I asked Cleo if she was going to further explore this interest in women (as her and the woman she had sex with only dated for a few weeks) she said: "Yes – I hope so. I think I might be gay I am really not sure! I guess it all comes down to who I meet".

them, and in doing so, located women's experiences of pleasure as often capable of reinforcing the orgasm imperative and other social representations where men's orgasms are positioned as inevitable.

## 4.5 Conclusions

This chapter has considered ways of understanding the relationship between feminism and (hetero)sexuality as it is experienced within the context of sex. I have framed this chapter so that the three themes - choosing submission, que(e)rying heterosexual practices, and negotiating (female) pleasure - act as starting points for which to explore and unpack the intricacies and nuances, as well as the contradictions and justifications that emerge throughout individual narratives. I began by discussing a set of experiences where participants actively choose to engage in submissive sexual practices. Here I highlighted the often complicated and tenuous relationship these practices can have when considered alongside feminist identities. Moreover, I offered ways of understanding which demonstrate a nuanced engagement with kink and feminism as a result of recognizing how these communities often operate with similar values in mind. Within this section, I also explored the need to justify the desire to engage in submission. Here I illustrated a series of examples that suggested multiple ways in which the desire to be submissive can interact with feminist identities. For Carrie, her sexuality and sexual interests are understood as diametrically opposed to what she values as a (radical) feminist, so much so that she often feels incredibly guilty about her sexuality and what she finds pleasurable within the context of sex. For others, like Danielle, the need to justify certain desires and practices involved a process of reconciliation, and as a result, finding a place where her desires can peacefully co-exist with what she values as a feminist. It is my contention that the narratives found here are applicable to a much broader cultural discussion, one that is centred on the idea of what makes someone a 'bad feminist', and why some feminists end up feeling this way. This was a sentiment expressed by a number of participants - in particular, when considering exactly *who* they feel they had to justify their desires to - *other* feminists.

From here, I considered how participants are often engaged and involved in understanding their own (hetero)sexual practices on quite a critical level, and as a result, often consider the possibility of sexual desires and practices that stem outside the dominant norms of heterosexuality. It is important to reflect on what this data might

suggest about current state of what is considered a 'norm' within heterosexual sex. For instance, if heterosexual sex is socio-historically characterized by male as active, female as passive, and moreover, where vaginal penetration ends in male orgasm, then it is certainly appropriate to suggest that most participants do not exclusively participate in the 'norms of heterosexuality'. As a result, it is interesting to consider the broader implications and limitations in upholding the myth of some elusive heterosexual norm that actually, has shown to not be a norm at all – as I suggested, these understandings and experiences are perhaps better understood as *differently normative*. To highlight this possibility, I began by focusing on a disassociation often felt when 'playing' the dominant role within the context of sex. As suggested, in a number of instances this often led to a broader set of question as to what is acceptable in the context of heterosexual sex, what turns one on, and perhaps most importantly, why. These queries, at times, led to a way of understanding sex where the inclusion of non-normative, non-heterosexual practices opened up the possibilities to engage with a nuanced understanding of (hetero)sexuality as a whole. At times, queering heterosexual sex was a result of negotiating past personal experiences; for some, it was simply a result of wanting to engage in a more fluid and diverse understanding of sexuality – in short, to challenge what is deemed acceptable or appropriate in a heterosexual context. Here I referred to Barker's adapted charmed circle as it is my contention that these ways of understanding sex (and what occurs within the context of it), are representative of my participant's understandings of their (hetero)sexual practices – critically informed, diverse, and fluid.

Lastly, I drew on a set of narratives that focus on understandings of (female) pleasure. I would like to reiterate here that while this section has focused on experiences and representations of orgasm (where, as a result, I am conscious and responsible for the role I play in reproducing the orgasm imperative), these are not the only ways in which participants understand pleasure. The pleasures often *derived* from sex (emotional intimacy, for instance) are among understandings that go beyond the orgasm, and these will be considered in the chapter 7. This section also considered how women come to learn about their own pleasure; these experiences were situated within a cultural context - one where female pleasure is said to appear as a central concern in heterosexual sex, but where lived experiences suggest that it can often be relegated to second place. In doing so, I considered how participants felt when their partners do not achieve orgasm, and I positioned these examples alongside the feeling participants have when *they* do not achieve one. I framed this section as such in an effort to further illustrate how female pleasure is positioned within the context of heterosexual norms (as secondary), which

works in juxtaposition to the cultural context which represents female pleasure as a primary focus in heterosexual sex.

From here I considered the possibilities of pleasure as they occur in new sexual experiences. The aim was to focus on the way in which feminism helps in eliminating some of the shame surrounding these new pleasures – a shame that is largely associated with patriarchal understandings of female sexuality. Within this section, I mentioned a number of women who participated in new experiences throughout the course of this research, and it is worth noting here that I understand the possibility of bias in sex research, one that becomes particularly most clear when considering this section. By this I refer to the idea that people who volunteer in sexuality studies are more likely than non-volunteers to have positive attitudes toward sexuality, more sexual experience and as a result, open to a wider array of activities (Strassberg and Lowe 1995; Zurbriggen and Yost 2004). Nonetheless, this chapter has demonstrated the complicated, multiple ways of understanding the relationship between heterosexuality and feminism as it appears within the context of sex. In doing so, I have aimed to highlight the way in which sexual practices, attitudes, and behaviours work to inform and shape feminist identities; and in turn, how those identities are at times, equally influenced by sexual practices, attitudes, and behaviours. As Wolf somewhat one-sidedly suggests, 'good pleasure makes good politics' (1993, 147). I argue that it is equally as important to recognize the opposite - that good politics may contribute to facilitating good pleasure, but most importantly, this relationship is far from being easily negotiated, managed or navigated.



## 5. Between Sex

**It wasn't like he was trying to cage me in - it was that I felt deeply uncomfortable playing the 'woman' in a relationship...lesbianism, usually, by comparison, was a bit of a walk in the park.**

**(Ashley, 22)**

### 5.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to explore the relationship between feminism and heterosexuality by considering experiences that are applicable to everyday gender interactions that occur outside of sex, or rather, *between* instances of sex. The narratives I present below draw on everyday social relationships and interactions with men, and are often used as a way to inform and shape sexual encounters. As Ashley demonstrates above, gender roles and expectations (and the subsequent cultural scripts surrounding what it means to be a heterosexual woman in a Western, patriarchal context) tend to inform the foundation upon which the findings of this chapter are built. As Gagnon contends, the cultural resources which are 'ultimately brought to bear on sexual conduct are learned in contexts which, at the time they are learned, are irrelevant to the ultimate outcomes or circumstances in which they are used' (2004, 68). This sentiment is precisely what grounds this chapter, and moreover, offers a framework for understanding the relationship between feminism and heterosexuality between instances of sex.

First, I consider ways of talking about desire; in particular, how participants construct their own desire as part of a wider narrative that both acknowledges and negotiates certain Western conventions regarding female sexuality. Here I draw on a set of narratives that highlight the varying roles of feminism, and in particular, how talking about desire is impacted and shaped by feminist values; the findings that emerge here offer a complicated relationship between dominant constructions of female desire and the role of feminism. Next, I move on to consider what it means to be submissive between instances of sex. Here I refer to ways of understanding dominant cultural scripts of femininity within

(what most participants explicitly recognize as) the male-privileging, male-defined discourse of heterosexuality. As such, in the context of this chapter, submission is synonymous with gender normative behaviour. Here I frame my findings into three parts – adhering to the ‘rules’ of gender normative behaviour; breaking the ‘rules’; and lastly, transforming them. This section highlights an understanding that goes beyond the idea that women must subvert or challenge dominant norms in order to gain agency. As I will suggest and have theoretically outlined in chapter 2, section 2.7 (agency and embodiment), agentic capacity also lies in the way participants choose to inhabit dominant norms and in turn, how these experiences transform them. From here, I consider how participants often qu(e)ry their heterosexual identities. First I draw on ways of critically reflecting and engaging with the desire to be heterosexual – here I consider the right to self-identify and a number of experiences that reflect a compulsory element to heterosexuality. I also consider how participants often que(e)ry the masculinity of their potential sexual or romantic (male) partners, as this is considered to be an important factor in how one goes about choosing who to have sex with, and the kind of relationship that emerges as a result. These ways of understanding are often (but not exclusively) informed by feminist understandings of masculinity in a Western, patriarchal, 21<sup>st</sup> century context. This chapter therefore aims to contribute to understandings of female lived experience by engaging with constructed narratives about what it means to identify as a feminist who engages in sex with men, as it is situated between, or outside the context of a sexual encounter.

## 5.2 Talking about desire

This section considers the way participants speak of their own (sexual) desire. I begin here as a way of acknowledging the similarities between the way participants negotiate their pleasure *within* the context of sex and the way desire is spoken about in instances *between* sex. As such, I aim to highlight how participants often construct their desire as part of a wider narrative that both acknowledges and negotiates certain Western conventions regarding female sexuality. These discussions are, of course, not new; however, so much of the existing empirical work surrounding discussions of female desire is almost exclusively concerned with young women (Allen 2003; Holland et al. 1998; Stewart 1999; Tolman 2002). These previous findings tend to focus on how young women’s understandings of sexuality are often the result of being ‘relentlessly exposed to a set of



rules, principles and roles that are mapped out for the production of ‘normal’ heterosexual [adolescent] relationships and sexual behaviour’ (Tolman 2002, 6). These rules, located at the site of everyday interactions and organized by cultural expectations (Budgeon 2014, 320), help in upholding a portrait of female desire where my own participant, Amy (27), says women end up “performing sexually in a way that just happens to fit exactly what society wants women to do”. In other words, when female sexuality is framed along protective, risk, or avoidance narratives, it obscures the possibility for considering active expressions of female desire *as normative* (Tolman 2002, 80). Thus, by considering the varying ways in which participants talk about their own desire, I aim to build on previous findings that are exclusively centred on young women and therefore offer a set of narratives that are inclusive of a much wider age range. Moreover, I seek to address how understandings of female desire are constructed alongside, positioned and informed by, feminist values and identities.

### **5.2.1 Silent feminism, silent desire**

University graduate Amy grew up in a feminist household – as a result, feminism has “always been my inclination”. She says feminism is a framework that she can rarely think outside of, which has also benefited many of the open and frank discussions she and her new partner have had about feminism and sexuality. However, I would argue that the way in which she actually *talks* about desire addresses a rather conventional heterosexual narrative of female desire. By this I refer to the notion whereby male sexual desire is coded as active and embodied, and where female desire is depicted as ‘not permissible, not imaginable – not there’ (Stewart 1999, 277). If it was ‘there’, it would be positioned as dangerous – dangerous to the patriarchal conditions that socialize male sexuality to dominance and female sexuality to compliance (Vance 1984). The result being precisely what Amy proposes above, that women end up performing in a way that just so happens to benefit patriarchal understandings of gender and sexuality.

For instance, after using the word ‘desire’ a number of times in her diary, Amy felt like it was “too big and serious a word for me to feel comfortable using”. When I asked her to elaborate in our interview, she said:

It’s hard for me to think about a desire that pre-exists what is offered to me, right? So like, I can think about my reaction to an action or a person or a situation but to think – to be asked the question, ‘what do you want?’...which is something my partner

does all the time, always leaves me flummoxed...like those questions always leave me sort of speechless. And I think that's like, you know, for like whatever reasons of self consciousness of feeling unworthy to make that big claim – even to myself, that's just not the way I think about it...desire seems so much more active and pleasure seems passive...because there is the implication of like actively going for something, [desire] is more difficult for me to talk about.

Here Amy highlights the way in which female desire is positioned as passive, and moreover, the impact this narrative has on her ability to assert herself. She also reinforces the assumption that desire is actively coded as male in that it is 'done' to the female - not something she herself does, or seeks out. In addition, Amy cannot articulate a desire that pre-exists what is offered to her – she goes so far as to say that she does not feel worthy making such claims. This is where the strength of the conventional narrative is most evident, where understandings of feminine passivity transcend her sexual script and seek to inform her gender script as well, outside the context of a sexual encounter.

Amy admits to critically engaging with her own sexuality (and ideally seeks that same level of engagement from a partner); yet, it is surprising to find that continually reiterated throughout her diary (particularly when describing instances that follow alongside dominant narratives of feminine passivity), that Amy wishes her feminist values were “enough to like, improve or enable me to behave sexually in a way that I want”. The reality, however, is that this does not always happen. Even though Amy wishes her feminist values could aid in negotiating a narrative that seeks to silence and perpetuate the notion of a passive female desire, her non-negotiations of this narrative are a nod to its irrefutable strength, whereby challenging it becomes regarded as a near impossible or overwhelming task, one that her feminist values cannot eliminate. Echoing the findings in Holland et al.'s (1998) research on young people, heterosexuality and power, Amy becomes drawn into her own disempowerment – this includes *not* legitimating her pleasure, *not* voicing her sexual knowledge, *not* valuing her sexual performance, and indeed, *not* placing these ways of articulating desire under her control. In this instance, Amy becomes 'drawn into the constitution of heterosexuality as male dominated in part through the efforts [she] put into the construction of a passive femininity, which effectively silences [her] own desires' (Holland et al. 1998, 120).

### 5.2.2 Finding an erotic voice

Like Amy, Nicole similarly refers to her feminist values when she talks about desire; *unlike* Amy, these values actively shape and inform the narrative Nicole constructs, rather than simply wishing they could (as Amy demonstrates above). For instance, Nicole says that in Quebec one of the most recent and heated feminist debates is centred around sex work(ers); after becoming sufficiently informed on the issue (Nicole attended a few relevant workshops and sought the advice and opinion of her friends), she decided to show her solidarity and support for sex work(ers). In doing so, Nicole believes that it “freed up my mind a whole lot more”, meaning she could engage with ideas of feminism and sex (positivity) in a way she had not felt able to before. For instance, at the time of our interview Nicole had just returned from a feminist porn conference in Toronto; soon after, she attended a feminist and queer friendly sex party with her partner. It is arguable that this sex-positive framework (as well as Nicole’s claim on this identity), influences the active and embodied way she talks about, and indeed, reflects on her desire outside the context of a sexual encounter.

Nicole formulates an erotic voice by speaking of her desire as something that is constant, and as a result, positioned as something that is active. This voice emerges alongside what Nicole describes as a “constant state of arousal” and is therefore represented when she describes the lasting effect of a sexual encounter: “if we’re fucking and he’s on me, there’s a move he does where he’s just like – rub his pelvis over my clit. I can come and...the days after I feel like my clit is still engorged, like the whole day after”. A similar acknowledgement in the power of sexual desire appears in a very small minority of Tolman’s teenage participants. Where these young women were more likely to silence their desires and follow alongside constructions of a passive femininity, few talked of their desire as something with such ‘unmistakeable power and intensity’ (Tolman 2002, 42). Moreover, Tolman says that few girls actually named the sexual parts of their bodies; in contrast, this is undeniably part of Nicole’s construction of an erotic voice, as highlighted above when discussing her clitoris.<sup>30</sup>

Moreover, the same kind of erotic voice also appears when Nicole refers to ‘inspection time’: “I love [it]. Especially when we’ve been out and about doing nothing sexual. He’ll put a finger inside me and feel how wet I am and he’ll know sex with him is all I have been thinking about”. Taking great pleasure and pride in the fact that she’s “always ready”, Nicole continually talks about her desire in a way that dismisses the narrative that

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<sup>30</sup> Throughout Nicole’s diary and interview, she used many different words to describe her vagina.

says female expressions of desire *should* not be coded as active, and instead, where her desire is intense, powerful and urgent (Tolman 2002). Tolman argues that an erotic voice emerges when a (young) woman feels embodied sexual desire, can describe these feelings, and in turn, includes them in her description of a sexual narrative (2002, 41). Adding to Tolman, it is my contention that Nicole's erotic voice also demonstrates the intent to act on her sexual desires, as well as the entitlement to play an active role in sexual encounters. In doing so, Nicole does not experience a dilemma in expressing her desire. This is even further illustrated when Nicole tells her partner:

‘I want you to dirty me up’...He can't believe how dirty I am. It's true that I'm disgusting (positive adjective, I've reclaimed the term). I'm a filthy slut, but I can't help it. It's always been this way since I was thirteen. I've always thought this much, this often about sex. People couldn't believe me at parties when I said I was a virgin. I would think and talk about sex constantly, see it everywhere, even though I'd never had sex with a partner.

However, the way Nicole talks about desire as something *so* active and embodied becomes overwhelming for her partner of five months; for him, Nicole said it became too much of a “sexual vibe...which was hard to receive because I was getting so much out of it”. Recounting his words, whereby “we always seem to end up in sexual situations”, it is arguable that this reaction could mean that Nicole's active embodiment of desire might be *too much* for him (when considered alongside cultural expectations of gender) – in other words, his understanding and expectation of female desire may be supported by conventional narratives of heterosexuality. In this instance, his reaction highlights the limiting narratives available in cultural discussions surrounding female desire, and as a result, the positionalities that are available for women's ways of speaking about it.

### **5.2.3 Woman with two brains?**

Ella offers a way of speaking about desire that has been previously and predominantly associated with ways of speaking about male sexuality. In short, she employs Potts' concept of the ‘man with two brains’ (in which the male penis is positioned as having a mind of its own). For instance, Ella positions her own hormones as something separate from the (conscious) self, while at the same time reinforcing the gendered narrative of the “biological clock”. In doing so, she works to highlight the importance of widening the lens through which we culturally understand, interpret, and in turn, speak about female and male desire as separate gendered individuals, with separate (gendered) sexual processes.

For instance, Ella (36) and her partner Patrick (29)<sup>31</sup>, have been in a monogamous relationship for two years; and while they have future plans for children, at the time of her diary, all Ella could think about is: “WHEN is he going to KNOCK ME UP?!”. While Ella’s diary was littered with day dreams and reminders of how much she wants to be a mother, it was her description of leaving the cinema (with her partner) where the narrative of a biological clock emerges and where her desires are positioned as a separate entity, with motivations and intentions beyond her control:

I couldn’t help but gravitate to this statuesque, built guy. This isn’t the type that I am normally attracted to, but lately, I am. I don’t know if it’s my age, or the fact that my body, or mind, is sending me strong signals to find the most virile men out there and ‘do it’ so I can possibly get knocked up, cause you know – the old biological clock is running out...?

What Ella begins to describe here is similar to Potts’ findings in that a man ‘may employ the concept of the irrational penis-self as an alibi or excuse for the enactment of coercive and riskier heterosexual behaviours’ (2001, 145). For Ella, I would argue that the same employment of an irrational ovary-self is constructed as an excuse for her active and embodied expression of desire. Moreover, her narrative is constructed as risky behaviour (like Potts suggests), because it challenges Ella and Patrick’s monogamous relationship. Ella even alludes to the fact that she “couldn’t help it” - that *something* was sending her “strong signals”. These signals help to further position the ovary-self as a separate entity, as something with a mind of its own, well beyond her control. Potts argues that when the individual relinquishes that control, or acts with the ‘other brain’, the conscious self is removed from responsibility (2001, 150); however, even though Ella does not ‘act’ on behalf of her ovary-self, she still situates her conscious self as removed from the responsibility of fantasizing about this stranger.

At the time of Ella’s interview (nearly five months after the diary entry above), she was entering her second trimester (an unplanned but welcome pregnancy). Here she describes the experience of re-reading this diary entry (before our interview) and reflecting on how she felt at the time:

I remember coming out of that movie and being all jacked up and seeing this really like, stocky, like full on ‘good stock’ guy across the platform, being like ‘yeah!’...and then being like ‘wait a second, that’s not me! That’s my ovaries speaking! Those are my ovaries on high alert!

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<sup>31</sup> Patrick’s name has been changed to maintain anonymity.

What Ella implies here is that her reaction in wanting to “bang him right there against the metro wall”, *had* to be a result of her hormones; in other words, that these active and embodied desires represent ‘a voice divorced from the rational interiority of the mind’ (Potts 2001, 149). Indeed, Ella rationalizes to herself that it is “not me!”, and in doing so, suggests that when an active and embodied (potentially risky) desire is present, it could not be her – or perhaps, that it *should* not be her, according to conventional narratives of female sexuality. Ella appropriates her ovaries as responsible for what would be potentially ‘risky’ behaviour, the exact risky behaviour Potts attributes to the irrational penis-self (2001, 145); and as a result, Ella removes herself from responsibility. While ovaries may lack a physical sense of exteriority (a status afforded to the penis), and where the sexed bodies of women are said to be rooted in reproduction (the body rather than the mind), I argue that the narrative of the penis-self *is* amenable to an ovary-self, where the latter *can* be afforded a ‘mind of its own’ and exist as something separate from the self. It works as such precisely because Ella constructs it in this way; in other words, by drawing on a narrative that Potts has theoretically constructed around male sexuality, but that is also applicable to female desire, and experiences of female sexuality. Ella’s narrative works to destabilize understandings of man/woman, active/passive, and mind/body because she exposes the ambiguities and inconsistencies of such dichotomies. Instead, she develops a way of speaking about desire that focuses on embodiment, regardless of what these bodies are prescribed by virtue of their existence within a gendered dichotomy.

#### 5.2.4 Summary

As shown throughout this section, ways of speaking about desire are complex and varied. In some instances, like Nicole, a sex-positive feminist framework has shown to directly enable and support the formation of an erotic voice, an active and embodied way of speaking about (and experiencing) desire. However, Amy provided a way of speaking about desire that follows alongside conventional understandings of female sexuality, where a construction of feminine passivity can impede on the ability to articulate desire. This was particularly interesting when considered alongside the feminist values Amy critically engages with - which admittedly, “can be really difficult when it comes to sexuality”. For Ella, feminist values have shown to play no explicit role in shaping her construction of desire. I would argue her feminist consciousness plays a much more implicit role in the way she dismantles understandings of female and male desire. While

Ella offered a way of speaking that acknowledges a gendered narrative - the biological clock – she sought to complicate broader understandings of male and female sexuality by talking about desire in a way most commonly afforded to men.

Like Amy, Nicole and Ella, many participants position themselves somewhat similarly to the narratives represented throughout this section. For instance, Ruby often constructs her desire as something separate from the self, at times blaming “the menopause” for what could be constructed as potentially risky behaviour. In the way that Nicole’s sex-positive feminist framework helped to support her own construction of an active and embodied voice, Megan views her own kink identity *as* feminist; in doing so, she can similarly talk about desire through an entitled and erotic voice. However, Cleo demonstrates the same kind of struggle Amy experienced in speaking about desire - in that “even as someone with a feminist consciousness I still [sometimes] pretend to enjoy sex that I really hate”.

What Amy and Cleo experience can be summarized by Gill and Walker in that, *as feminists*, there sometimes exists ‘the contradiction between recognizing patriarchal oppression in all its subtle and pernicious forms and yet wanting to have profound friendships and sexual relationships with men’ (1993, 68). The confusion and contradiction referred to here can be shown in the way Amy struggles to talk about desire because of the way constructions of femininity (like passivity) are organized by cultural expectations that end up being played out in everyday interactions that are situated in social structures that seek to uphold gendered power differentials. The following section continues to build on these ways of understanding the relationship between heterosexuality and feminism as it occurs between instances of sex by focusing more closely on experiences of gender normative behaviour. Here I consider the impact of gender and sexual scripts that are, as outlined above, reinforced, perpetuated and upheld by everyday interactions that occur within a Western, patriarchal culture. As such, I situate the following narratives alongside an understanding of male power as it is my contention that this ever-present feature of power relations is commonly understood to be the starting point from which participants’ gender normative behaviour emerges.

### **5.3 Gender normative behaviour**

As introduced above, I aim to explore how a framework of male power shapes and informs the way participants address, negotiate, and/or experience gender normative

behaviour between instances of sex. As such, I consider how these understandings of male power emerge alongside gender expectations and culturally imposed scripts - ones that inherently rely on a disembodied (passive) femininity. Moreover, I suggest alongside Benjamin (2003) that while the meanings of heterosexuality may be regulated, produced and maintained by privileging the interests of men, it does not mean that this power cannot be challenged, negotiated, inhabited and rewritten by different modes of thinking.

This understanding provides the basis through which participants engage or respond to the ever-present network of male power (as theoretically outlined in chapter 2, section 2.6 [disciplinary power and the female body]). As I will highlight, this occurs in three distinct ways – adhering to or following the ‘rules’ of gender normative behaviour; breaking or subverting them; and, inhabiting and transforming them. As Danielle says, we are “never entirely free” from the heteronormative scripts that seek to limit female sexual expression and uphold ideas of male power because “those scripts and attitudes are always in our minds”. As such, this conventional narrative of heterosexual femininity serves as a point of reference in which participants use feminism to construct their own narrative of what it means to adhere, break, or transform the ‘rules’ of gender normative behaviour.

### **5.3.1 Adhering to the ‘rules’**

Adhering to dominant gender norms is most evident in Cleo’s struggle to negotiate her feminist identity with conventional feminine behaviour. Cleo’s diary was filled with anecdotes about her inability to say ‘no’ in sexual encounters, as well as instances of not wanting to engage in sex unless her (past) partners made the assumption that they would; in these cases, she admits to inevitably foregoing her desire *not* to have sex in order to appease a potential partner. As a result, Cleo admits that she has felt “largely powerless in sexual relationships”. Interestingly, Cleo was employed as the Women’s Officer of a UK university at the time of her participation in this research (she has since graduated and left this post) and admits that, “I find it easier to challenge men and patriarchy in my ‘public’ role as a feminist than my ‘private’ role as a woman in a relationship with a man”. I asked where she thought this mistranslation stems from, and while admitting that what makes it so difficult is that she *is* so aware of it (largely because it makes her feel like a “bad feminist”), she admits that:

When I talk to my friends about being unable to say 'no' to men they are always so surprised - but many of them can also



empathise. I think there are a few things at play here. 1. A hang up from wanting to fit in and be liked by guys 2. A feeling that if I don't go along with what men want I will be lonely (which, I had in the past accepted is worse) - linked to this is that I like being close to someone in a relationship and when in a relationship the pushing of my own boundaries seems like a 'small price to pay' for this closeness 3. I think it ultimately comes down to internalised patriarchy. I have, like all women, been socialised to be amenable to men.

I would argue that Cleo's self-proclaimed inability to say 'no' operates here as a silencing mechanism based on the need to belong to and position herself as part of a given world (Benjamin 2003, 12); as she says, she often goes along with sexual activity in order to 'fit in' or avoid loneliness. The contradiction Cleo refers to is found in the disconnect between her own expectation to negotiate her desires and the way they are actually (not) negotiated in practice; as a result, she highlights the possibility and strength afforded to notions of male power within heterosexuality. Benjamin suggests that the kind of silencing mechanism employed by Cleo actually seeks to acknowledge the dangerous implications of a feminist narrative - meaning that when '(sexual) rejection and loneliness are experienced as intimidating', *unsilencing* by means of a feminist narrative 'may seem to exact too high a price' (2003, 11); this is precisely what drives Cleo's assent to male power (her fear of being alone).<sup>32</sup>

Like Cleo, Vanessa expresses a similar narrative in her inability to say 'no'; this occurs in instances where:

I didn't feel like doing [it] and did just to please someone else. That's *so* not feminist. But then again, I have to understand that having been raised in a patriarchal culture, and I have internalized patriarchal values. I need my time to let them go.

For Vanessa, there is a sense of recognition in which she has been affected by a male-defined power that has permeated through the 'finer channels' (Bartky 1990, 79), and as a result, resides at the centre of a discourse which controls and defines female sexuality while upholding and privileging that of the male. As Holland et al. found in their research, '[young] women's self esteem, self image, self knowledge and emotional needs are tied to a highly skilled but limited social construction of femininity' (1998, 127) – in short, one that continues to support men's power. As such, it is arguable that an

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<sup>32</sup> This is also interesting to consider in conjunction with chapter 4, section 4.4.3 (exploring new pleasures), where Cleo had sex with a woman, and where she now understands that there are less oppressive options.

ideological 'male in the head' works within Vanessa's understanding of the pressure to adhere to gender norms - highlighted in the excerpt above here by her need to please sexual partners. Moreover, it is Vanessa's silencing strategy, or her inability to say 'no', which suggests the often overwhelming, near impossible task of negotiating these deeply embedded norms, so much so that she both acknowledges and suggests that even her feminist consciousness cannot override such firmly engrained meanings of power. This is shown by her admission that these actions are "so not feminist".

Being expected to behave in a particular way within the context of heterosexuality can provide limiting (normative) frameworks for gender interaction (Maxwell 2007, 541). Here I refer to the context of heterosexuality as it is located outside an actual sexual encounter and instead, alongside everyday (gender) interactions. As such, the 'rules' or scripts put forth often work to impose a set of behaviours that aid in upholding a version of heterosexuality where masculinity is predicated on independence, activity and the possessions of sexual desire as power (Holland et al. 1998), and where femininity is characterized by 'passivity, docility and victimization' (Vance 1984, cited in Stewart 1999, 276). As I have suggested, accounts of gender normative behaviour become most interesting to consider when positioned alongside feminist beliefs as it becomes clear that participants often experience a disconnect between demonstrating an awareness of the role dominant norms play within their construction of a female gender, yet not being able to infer them through their feminist understandings of male power and heterosexuality. As a result, Vanessa and Cleo work to illustrate instances of following the 'rules'. They experience non-negotiations of male power despite their awareness of the role dominant norms play between instances of sex and in everyday gender interactions with men. This is ultimately linked to the strength afforded to male power and the subsequently overwhelming task of negotiating it. The cause of these non-negotiations prove to be a result of the deeply embedded internalization of feminine passivity, and that despite the embodiment of a feminist consciousness, these norms do not simply go away. As Vanessa argues, negotiating such patriarchal values takes time.

So while Vanessa and Cleo highlight instances of following or adhering to the 'rules', I turn now to consider ways of understanding gender normative behaviour that aim to break or subvert the 'rules'. As Stewart describes, this can be about 'negotiating modes of femininity which grant [women] access to what may have been previously prohibited and/or potentially unthinkable ways of being women' (1999, 278). However, I argue that in doing so, gender normative behaviour is still affirmed because participants reinforce a

series of hierarchal dualisms that, in their rejection of a passive femininity, recognize an active masculinity as the more desirable and powerful position within the context of heterosexuality.

### 5.3.2 Breaking the 'rules'

23 year old Megan, who describes herself as a “self-defined kinkster...I play with power, pain and bondage”, is certain that while power is never equal, “power is a choice”. She argues that “I may be bound, but I never let go of my power...I know what I want, even if I’m being controlled. I know my desires and I will assert them, and I will not be shamed for it. I couldn’t be with anyone who did that”. The power Megan refers to is a male-defined, male-privileging understanding of heterosexuality, alluded to by the fact that she could not be with a man who *did* exert this power, afforded to him by virtue of his gender. This is further highlighted by Megan’s insistence that she asserts her desires - perhaps a nod to the narrative which suggests that she, as a woman, should not assert those desires. In Stewart’s exploration of women’s transition to positions of power in relationships with men, she found that women who took on more traditionally masculine roles in sex - initiating, asserting and prioritizing desires, maintaining power and control – led to an understanding that by doing so, broader ‘conventional gendered imperatives are challenged and the gendering of masculine and feminine behaviour becomes less certain’ (1999, 277). While I agree that resisting modes of traditional femininity can, like Stewart suggests, create confusion and uncertainty in terms of the roles offered within heterosexuality, I also find that these actions can further affirm the desired position of masculinity. For instance, the way Megan negotiates feminine passivity falls into an understanding that she can either comply with, or resist it – in other words, whatever she chooses will always fall into the category of departing from this understanding of femininity or embracing it. As such, Megan frames her desires within masculine terms, affirming the strength and hierarchical positioning of masculinity because it is understood as the position she *must* take up in order to maintain her goal of “holding onto my power as much as possible...I realized I can’t follow with anything that takes away any of my power”.

Similarly, Ruby’s rejection of male-defined power runs alongside a re-evaluation of past (controlling) relationships, where she eventually realized she had more power than she once thought. In her most recent relationships (and her expectations for the future), Ruby is hopeful that by controlling men, she can protect herself and that by calling the

shots, she will not get hurt. These feelings are perhaps an extension of Ruby's experience of rape, where she was given the opportunity to report the incident but chose not to because she thought this man's powerful position within society meant that she would have no chance at winning a case against him<sup>33</sup>. Here Ruby confirms the presumed inevitability of a male-defined power when engaging in heterosexual relationships. She also acknowledges heterosexuality as male-privileging by her (necessary) inclination to reject and challenge male privilege by calling the shots and controlling men. Ruby admits that her desire to gain this control means she can maintain the 'upper hand'. Realizing how much of a 'lad' she feels in saying this, Ruby confirms that by breaking the 'rules' and rejecting feminine passivity, masculinity and its hierarchal positioning remains intact because she recognizes it as preferential within the context of heterosexuality and in her everyday interactions with men. It is my contention that while these are valid ways of understanding and interpreting gender normative behaviour, they also limits expressions of desire, gender and sexuality because experiences become framed as *either* masculine or feminine – they do not blur the boundaries beyond this. In other words, by breaking the 'rules', Ruby and Megan have had the restraints or negative limitations to their freedom removed. For instance, because Megan has been "into feminism" since realizing she could not get on board with anything that took away from her power, her resistance to gender normative behaviour is informed by a set of gender politics and an understanding of structures of power where resisting (or dislocating from) dominant gender norms is seen as the pathway to agency.

### 5.3.3 Transforming the 'rules'

In order to consider ways of understanding that work to transform gender normative behaviour, I draw on Trezbiatowska's (2013) research on negotiating femininity with Polish Catholic nuns. While this may seem far removed from the context of my own research, the findings (like my own) offer ways of understanding gender normative behaviour that do not necessarily emerge out of a resistance to, or subversion of a male-privileging heterosexuality. Like Trezbiatowska suggests:

Instead of reacting positively or negatively to the dominant model [of femininity], my participants fashioned a gender identity which is simply one of the many possible femininities on the gender continuum. Female agency in this context means the power to transform without subverting, or intending to subvert, the normative gender model (2014, 214).

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<sup>33</sup> Here Ruby is referring not only to his power as a male but his high status profession in law.

Echoing this claim, Holland et al. suggest that agency is not necessarily about challenging and negotiating the rules, but also about remaking them, as this offers an understanding of heterosexual interaction that acknowledges the possibilities of ‘remaking heterosexuality’ as a whole (1998, 190).

Nicole ascribes to certain desires that she thinks some discourses of feminism would say are contradictory to a feminist identity. In fact, she admits that there are “certain spaces where it’s not safe for me to talk about these things” – in other words, her desire to inhabit gender normative behaviour outside the context of a sexual encounter. By inhabiting gender normative behaviour I refer to Nicole’s desire to reinforce certain dominant understandings of heterosexuality and femininity, particularly in a way that privileges the interests of men. Interestingly, recent research has shown that gender normative behaviour that *is* consistent with personal desire does indeed predict more positive outcomes in terms of sexual well-being and satisfaction, more so than *pressured* gender normative behaviour (Sanchez et al. 2005).

For instance, Nicole engages in a set of power dynamics with her partner - the ‘Daddy dom/Baby girl’ narrative. And although the dynamic is also played out within the context of sex, it is established in their interactions between sexual encounters as well: “my daddy decided I should be his pet. He’s going to show me how to be a good girl...kiss my face and tell me I’m his. Oh I want so bad to belong to him, more than anything else in my life right now.” When I asked where the desire for this dynamic stemmed from, Nicole said it comes from her childhood:

On my mom’s side, I was the only grandchild for 6 years so I had everyone around me caring about me. I sing and I like to perform and everyone was like ‘yay!’ and giving me validation and I sort of became used to that...I felt like a beautiful girl, whatever that meant, you know? Puberty started to happen, I had a growth spurt, I started to wear glasses, I was always the tallest girl in the class - I never felt like the boys I had crushes on were returning that. I got fatter, I had acne and really low self esteem in high school and it took me a few years to rebuild that...I think the daddy/little girl dynamic allows me to be the young woman, or the teenage girl, that I aspired to be. You know? Pretty, and cute, and desired, even in spite of herself. You know, she’s not even doing anything and the guy can’t help but put his hands on her. I like the helplessness of it.

As Nicole suggests above, these ‘illiberal desires’ (Mahmood 2005) might be in conflict with some people’s understandings of feminism; yet for Nicole, it is about locating herself in her own desires against the weight of norms, obstacles and tradition (Mahmood

2005). Culturally situated in this particular moment in time, within a Western context, it can be argued that ‘choice functions as such a powerful bottom line argument’ (Stuart 2011, 100). Nicole’s choice to embody gender normative behaviour between sexual encounters and within the context of her relationship should *theoretically* welcome no further problematization or indeed, warrant any need for justification, particularly when considering that conforming to gender norms allows women to avoid the penalties that accompany being perceived as deviant and the subsequent social undesirability that emerges as a result (Sanchez et al. 2005). However, complicating this notion is the assumption that someone who identifies as a feminist might be more *non-conforming* to gender norms than someone who does not (Yoder et al. 2007). As a result, Nicole’s choice to conform actually *is* questioned, and within certain discourses of feminism, *does* warrant further justification. This is highlighted in her admittance that it is not safe to discuss these desires within certain circles; perhaps why she is “actively on the lookout for people to talk about these things with”. However, Nicole also contends that:

I’m not going to make my life adapt to feminism, I’m going to adapt feminism to my life and lifestyle. That doesn’t mean I don’t want to be challenged in what I do but at the same time like, it doesn’t make me a bad feminist if I read Young Adult literature, you know, that’s kind of heteronormative and subscribes to the romance ideal.

In short, Nicole’s desire to engage in a set of power dynamics that reinforce certain elements of a male-privileging power within the context of heterosexuality is actually less about the substance of the desire, and instead, about where those desires come from. Her inhabitation of gender norms and her insistence that feminism is subjective, fluid and open to many interpretations (including an investment in gender ideals), works to present a narrative that suggests the ‘rules’ are altogether limiting – the rules of feminism and the rules of her gender script. As a result, she must go beyond the compliance/resistance model (Trzebiatowska 2013, 205) and transform the rules that set out how she is expected to behave. Trzebiatowska’s study touches on these same ideas. For instance, the sisters mobilized notions of motherhood and chastity in order to create their own narratives of femininity. Where they were positioned to outsiders as simply giving up their role as a mother (believed to be the fundamental role of a Polish Catholic woman), many of the nuns found they were able to engage in ‘spiritual motherhood’ – this included everyday practices of care for orphans, the homeless, and elderly people. In addition, the sisters acknowledged the cultural assumption that nuns are not ‘real women’ because they are chaste and therefore genderless beings; yet, many of the sisters in this study did not deny

their sexuality, but rather actively spoke of it and recognized that just because they are not practicing sex does not mean they do not feel a ‘fire inside’. Indeed, both negotiations of femininity are seen as transformative, where the sisters produce their own model of femininity. I use Trzebiatowska’s work here to insist that although her research focuses on the experiences of Polish Catholic nuns – ‘a field where femininity is enacted and agency claimed in a potentially restrictive and patriarchal setting’ – so too are Nicole’s experiences of gender normative behaviour within the context of heterosexuality.

### 5.3.4 Summary

Going back to the idea that we currently live in a culture where choice functions as a powerful argument, it is interesting to draw on the idea that ‘traditional femininity has been deconstructed to the extent it may now be consciously and playfully performed’ (Budgeon 2014, 320). Moreover, where ‘traditional femininity was once blamed for undermining women’s access to empowerment, its role is now less certain and contested within gender theory’ (Budgeon 2014, 320). The implication for Nicole is that if she chooses to inhabit or invest in gender normative behaviour, that act is rooted in her feminist understanding. Alternatively, Genz maintains that ‘we cannot assume that women (and men) are now blessed with a sufficient amount of “knowingness” to allow for reinvention of femininity’ (2009, 11). This of course, ties back to the wider debate surrounding women’s engagement in the sexualization of Western culture – where women are seen to enhance socially prescribed gender norms to the point where their femininity becomes regarded as a kind of ‘hyperfemininity’ (Budgeon 2014, 214). So while Nicole seeks to suggest that the rules are *altogether* limiting, she has offered a way of understanding gender normative behaviour that plays with and thus, transforms the rules. As such, she offers a way of doing femininity that coincides with her understanding of feminism, that exists as part of a larger debate around choice, and that as a result, reinvents femininity by making it her own.

Cleo and Vanessa, however, highlighted the pressure to adhere to such strongly imposed scripts of gender normative behaviour. In doing so, both suggest that their feminist values, which aim to eradicate the same male-defined power seeking to govern their sexuality during encounters outside sex, are not enough in relieving some of that pressure; as a result, both reinforce the strength of male power and as a result, follow the ‘rules’. Megan and Ruby, however, acknowledged the strength of male power but actively worked to resist and subvert it. They have done so by positioning themselves within the

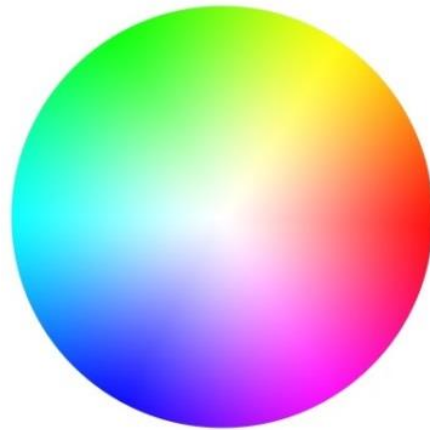
very masculine terms they seek to negotiate and challenge, and therefore offer a pathway of agency that is determined by freeing themselves from gendered constraints, prescribed by a male-defined heterosexuality. That said, this section has begun to draw on a set of narratives that recognizes heterosexuality, femininity, and masculinity as complex processes and identities, unfixed and ever-changing, but where these understandings are implicitly linked to engagements with personal definitions of feminism. Below I aim to further unpack these ideas by considering how heterosexual identities are constructed and shaped alongside feminist values. In doing so, I contribute to scholarship on sexual identities and moreover, consider how these identities are lived and experienced between instances of sex.

#### **5.4 Que(e)rying (hetero)sexual identities**

I begin by exploring the way participants self-identify as a means to situate understandings of heterosexuality with its relationship to feminism; in doing so, this section seeks to offer multiple understandings of heterosexuality*ies*. I use self-identification as a starting point for analysis because of the role it played alongside some of my methodological considerations, where the overall aim during recruitment was to avoid participants thinking that they had to *exclusively* identify as heterosexual in order to participate. Instead, I called for ‘women who engage in sex with men’ (as outlined in chapter 3, section 3.4). In doing so, I had hoped to actively bypass some of the critical reflections offered by many participants who either accepted or rejected their own participation in Kitzinger and Wilkinson’s (1993) anthology on the relationship between heterosexuality and feminism. In doing so, I aimed to offer potential participants in this research a more nuanced understanding of how I intended to approach heterosexuality - as *not* exclusively tied to a label or category. The motivation for this stemmed from the notion that in Kitzinger and Wilkinson’s research, women felt that ‘the label “heterosexual” limited and constrained them, and that it was an inaccurate definition of their (albeit apparently heterosexual) lifestyles’ (1993, 6). Many of the women were confused as to why they had been addressed ‘so categorically as a heterosexual?’ (1993, 5). Some highlighted their ambivalence about accepting this label while others, ‘perhaps because heterosexuality is so rarely “a purposefully political stance”’ (1993, 7), called for the dissolution of exclusive categories in favour of processes of self-identification; in short, fixed positions were thought to serve as unappealing labels and indeed non-representative of many lived experiences surrounding what it means to be a ‘heterosexual feminist’.



Within the anthology, Young argues for the use of a colour spectrum in order to understand heterosexual identities, whereby experiences, identities and practices can move more freely along multiple parts of a field (1993, 38). In using the analogy of a colour spectrum, this should be understood as less of a linear model (defined by opposing poles) and instead, more closely aligned with the image of a colour *wheel*.



**Figure 5.1 Visualization of a Wheel-like Sexual Spectrum**

It is my contention that a colour wheel (or wheel-like spectrum) like the one offered in figure 5.1, offers an image where differing colours simultaneously bleed into a variety of hues, tones, saturations and pigmentations - where all colours are connected by and to one another through some relationship, sequence or path. I work to offer a more complex understanding of heterosexualities as they intersect with feminist identities with this analogy always in mind. In doing so, the experiences outlined below also build upon theorizations of heterosexuality as detailed in chapter 2, section 2.1.

#### **5.4.1 Sexual spectrum**

The idea of a wheel-like spectrum effectively illustrates the processes and experiences of self-identification when considering the participants of this research. As Ella says, it has helped “guide my own sort of interpersonal approach but also my political stance...having the right to self-identify really carried through with me in all those [non-heterosexual] relationships”. Identifying as pansexual, Ella has been involved with:

Female and male identified lovers, as well as people who are gender queer or transgender....I was previously married to a trans

person. We pulled off a same sex wedding...I think that means my sexuality is more complex than 'bisexual'.

Unlike Kitzinger and Wilkinson, I purposefully wanted to allow for these non-exclusive, not so easily categorised (hetero)sexual identities, and it is Ella's description above which highlights this necessity. For her, having the right to self identify means she can comfortably engage in a complex set of relationship(s) with men and women (both cis and transgender), which as she says above, has previously helped in directing some of her 'non-heterosexual' experiences. Likewise, Sue offers a similar narrative, in that her sexuality is lived as something that is in constant shift; additionally interesting to consider here is how Sue's feminist politics evolves alongside these changes. For instance, Sue says that she first became interested in feminism when she "came out to my friends as being gay. So for me, the two were quite closely linked". In university, Sue began dating a man who, during their time together, transitioned into a woman. She says:

Because he had real issue with a lot of feminist things that I was studying and because of his mental health issues, about how he felt about his gender – he felt personally persecuted by feminists - so at that point I really backed off from feminism and the things I was interested in. So when I split up with that person [...] I came to the conclusion that I was bisexual and then I began seeing a lot of guys after that and kind of exploring my new found freedom and I think my relationship with feminism changed again because I was doing things like going to lap dancing clubs, which is not something that I would do now, but at the time it was about – 'well, what's the point of feminism if I can't feel free to do the things I want to do and explore my sexuality to decide what I like and what I don't like?' So it was a bit of an experimental period, I guess. And since then, I had another period of thinking I was gay and I became quite feminist again, but since then it's all quite settled down a little bit – I'm quite clear that I like men and women, and pretty much everything in between.

Here Sue begins by describing her sexual identity in a way that reinforces a hetero/homo binary. She frames her sexuality in an either/or way, which is further distinguished by the role feminism plays alongside her sexual identity, depending on what identity she claims at any particular time. However, Sue concludes by acknowledging the possibilities of the wheel-like spectrum which works to supplement the original hetero/homo binary. In doing so, Sue supports the idea that while opposite ends of a traditional linear spectrum may indeed produce dichotomous ways of understanding (in the either/or framework), what emerges in between, and what she acknowledges in the end, are the various hues, tones and saturations of the wheel-like spectrum - a spectrum

that helps to create nuanced and complicated ways of understanding (and living) multiple (hetero)sexualities.

Loosely inspired by Rich's lesbian continuum (1980), I offer the wheel-like colour spectrum as a way to highlight more inclusive ways through which individuals can construct their own sexual identity. For instance, Rich's lesbian continuum was centred around the need to include a new language and way of understanding lesbian existence in order to counter the culturally limiting term she felt associated with the term 'lesbianism' (1980, 648). I am arguing for the creation of a more extensive and encompassing wheel-like sexual spectrum in order to accomplish the same goal for heterosexuality - to create a new language and multiple ways of understanding (hetero)sexual existence in a way that does not limit the experiences and identities of 'heterosexuality'. In particular, the wheel-like spectrum seeks to include experiences and identities that are indeed non-heterosexual, and non-normative<sup>34</sup>. Therefore, I suggest the use of a more encompassing wheel-like sexual spectrum as a dynamic way in which the right to self-identify can emerge as an important and fundamental part of all sexual identities, including heterosexual ones. It is my contention that many participants in this research would show their support for the fluidity offered by such a spectrum as many do participate and have shown interest in non-heterosexual identities - either in their own gender queerness (as well as their partners'), and/or the incorporation of sexual practices that ultimately fall outside cultural definitions of what it means to engage in 'heterosexual sex'. By implementing the notion of a wheel-like sexual spectrum, these experiences are validated as meaningful ways in which to understand multiple, complex (hetero)sexualities.

#### **5.4.2 Compulsory heterosexuality**

Also positioned alongside Rich's lesbian continuum is the argument that heterosexuality, while perhaps an identity that is claimed by the majority of women, is an identity that is also imposed, propagated, managed and maintained by Western, patriarchal ideals, institutions, policies and practices - therefore rendering it compulsory (1980, 648). As illustrated above, Ella and Sue show through their own negotiations to the category 'heterosexual', that having the right to self-identify beyond dichotomous, limiting

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<sup>34</sup> I realize this claim may be viewed as problematic in that it could be interpreted as a desire to subsume non-heterosexual and queer identities under the rhetoric of an already privileged heterosexuality. This is not my intent. I loosely refer to the use of the lesbian continuum here as a way to suggest that the same fluidity and range of experiences be a welcomed way of understanding other sexual identities, including heterosexuality.

sexual labels seeks to challenge the notion that heterosexuality is always systematically and structurally imposed (1980, 648); in short, their non heterosexual relationships confirm their *choice* (not compulsion) to engage in *heterosexual* ones. However, not all participants have experienced the same nuanced understanding of self-identification in the way Sue and Ella have shown. In fact, Cleo, and Ashley both draw on their experiences of compulsory heterosexuality by questioning their motivation to engage in a heterosexual identity.

Both identify as radical feminists and as a direct result, admit to struggling with their desire for men and heterosexual identities. Moreover, Cleo and Ashley are university-educated, and with intent, have read Rich's ideas on compulsory heterosexuality in order to gauge and help guide their understanding of what it means to be heterosexual in a Western, patriarchal culture. Cleo, who finished her undergraduate degree in politics and philosophy during the course of this research, says she has always "felt heterosexual. I am not sure why though. I have read a little about compulsory heterosexuality and I think that probably has a lot to do with it!" Motivated to participate in this research as a way to "have an outlet for my confusing feelings about sex and feminism" (the latter often producing confusion about the former), it is actually Cleo's sexual encounter with a woman (which occurred in the weeks before our interview) that has impacted her own assumption about being heterosexual. She says: "I feel a lot more content knowing that I won't necessarily end up with a man and hate it! Having been with a woman I see there are other possibilities." Despite these other possibilities, the strength and cultural persistence of compulsory heterosexuality emerges below when Cleo describes the need to justify her sexual encounter with a woman.

I have felt that I needed to justify (the experience) to myself - that I didn't sleep with her because I wanted to 'try it out' or because I thought it would be 'cool' or because it aligns with my politics (all things that men have said to me about it!) - but because I was attracted to her and we had a connection.

Illustrated here is one set of cultural explanations as to why Cleo might want to sleep with a woman – that 'experimenting' in university is a socially acknowledged practice, that she wanted to appear 'cool' (perhaps as a means to appeal to the heterosexual male gaze), or that doing so would align with her radical feminist ideals (where the assumption that she sleeps with women might already exist). I find it interesting that the experience is justified to herself *and* other men (the latter indicated by men who have suggested she did it to be 'cool'), both of whom appear to maintain and

propagate (or at least consider) the idea that Cleo may have done it for reasons other than the attraction and connection she believes led to the encounter (albeit, also a cultural explanation). In other words, Cleo acknowledges and suggests that heterosexuality is something that may, at times, be experienced as compulsory, where it “makes me feel trapped, like I have to please men”. So, through a process of reflexivity (and by critically engaging with Rich), heterosexuality is understood as something she can choose, or prefer. However, Rich’s argument centres on rejecting heterosexual desire on the basis that it does not align with understandings of radical feminist politics; in this understanding, lesbianism is argued to provide a less oppressive sexual identity. But this argument is not really what Cleo aims to get out of her understanding of compulsory heterosexuality as she never indicates the desire to reject her heterosexuality on the basis of being politically in line with political lesbianism. Rather, I believe Cleo may have seen the worth in what Rich says about having the willingness to engage in the ‘intellectual and emotional work’ (1990, 648) that follows when one questions their motivation to have sex with men, and here is where I would argue the same right to self-identify (as Ella and Sue have shown above) emerges for Cleo. As a result, engaging with compulsory heterosexuality in this instance offers a way in which Cleo seeks to understand and make sense of her own set of experiences, which then help to create and inform her future sexual encounters, and identity.

Like Cleo, Ashley (who also completed her undergraduate degree during the course of this research), struggles in processing her heterosexual identity into a set of positive experiences, particularly when considered alongside her feminist values. Largely informed by her experience of rape and subsequent opinion that heterosexuality is a “poor deal for women”, Ashley says:

I'm not denying the desires, I just don't think we've reached a stage where I can have a heterosexual relationship where me and the guy really are on an equal level...the heterosexual act [is] uneven, the burden of fertility [has] such extreme consequences...I wonder whether trying to reconcile my heterosexual desire and my feminism is even worth attempting, since I would prefer to end up with a woman anyway.

If heterosexual desires are bound up with risk and danger, and if Ashley would prefer to “end up with a woman anyway”, she would theoretically avoid the pitfalls posed to her by men (and the consequences she believes them to represent), if she considered Rich’s political lesbianism. As Rich states, questioning the choice to be heterosexual not only offers a pathway to new ways of thinking and understanding sexuality, but a more

general clarity in personal relationships, and a 'freeing-up of thinking' (1980, 648). This consideration is highlighted by Ashley when I asked if her desire to "cut out any heterosexual attraction" is something she can actually envision happening. She replied by saying: "I read Adrienne Rich's 'compulsory heterosexuality' the other day and I was like, 'WHY DO I EVEN BOTHER WITH MEN?' I felt like I was letting the whole tradition (of lesbian existence), and letting myself, down. I don't know." So While Ashley insists that she does not deny her desire for men (a prerequisite for Rich), she *does* consider lesbianism as a legitimate option – one that would serve as an act of political solidarity (where she would not be "letting down" a whole tradition of lesbian existence), and one that would mirror her politics in a much less uncomfortable way than her current engagement with heterosexuality. However, in Rich's understanding, lesbianism is not about sex, but rather, about extending the thinking of feminism (Echols 1989, 223). It is clear then, that Ashley's need to justify her heterosexual identity, in large part, tied up with her sexual and romantic interest in women, but perhaps more explicitly, her feelings toward the unequal relations between men and women. Furthermore, it is informed by her attitude toward gender fluidity.

For instance, Ashley likes to engage in forms of gender play – she occasionally goes on nights out wearing a breast binder, she enjoys penetrating male partners and having gender-experimental sex with bisexual men - yet she admits that despite these non-normative encounters, "however idealist I can pretend to be about gender I can't wish myself out of the realities of gender inequality". Here Ashley refers back to her primary concern regarding heterosexual relations - that gender inequalities are precisely the foundation upon which (unequal) heterosexual relationships are built, and where they are easily transferred into practices of heterosexual sex; as a result, they require justification because they work to ignore and discredit Ashley's non-heterosexual relationships and non-heterosexual desires – a set of experiences which she believes begin and end on a *more* equal playing field. Moreover, Ashley feels like she is in constant negotiation with experiences of compulsory heterosexuality as she believes that "my heterosexual relationships evolve into a constant attempt to avoid societal scripts". Therefore, for Ashley, it is the very 'doing' of heterosexuality which indicates its compulsory inscription, and as a result, avoiding or negotiating its compulsion with non-normative, non-heterosexual encounters is a way in which she can more comfortably engage with her feminist politics and conflicted feelings toward a heterosexual identity.

Alongside Cleo and Ashley's experiences, it is important to recognize the academic capital present in both of their narratives. By academic capital, I refer back to Bourdieu's understanding of cultural capital, where linguistic competencies and critical thinking skills become codified in institutional qualifications like the undergraduate degrees both women were completing at the time of research. The idea here is that through their participation in higher education, both Cleo and Ashley are afforded the positionality and opportunity to critically reflect and engage with various facets of their lives, including their sexuality. For instance, having read Rich with purpose, both Cleo and Ashley position themselves in a social space where the implications of higher education allow them to negotiate the meanings put forth by dominant discourses of sexuality; and, as both demonstrate, this results in gaining access to texts and ideas that aid in the assessment of their understanding of and position within dominant constructions of (hetero)sexuality. What I am suggesting is that (in large part) their academic capital, a guaranteed product of the combined effects of cultural transmission by the family and cultural transmission by school and university (Bourdieu 1973), has a direct effect on the engagement they have with and thus experience of their respective sexual identities.

The notion of justifying a heterosexual identity also appears in Wendy's narrative. However, the heterosexual identity Wendy seeks to justify is actually that of her partner as he is, according to Wendy, "the stereotype of hegemonic masculinity". Here I turn to explore understandings of masculinity in more detail; I do so as a way to move beyond participants' own accounts of que(e)rying heterosexual identities and instead, consider how their partners' masculinities are constructed. In particular, I focus on how those constructions play an important role in the way participants go about choosing their sexual or romantic partners<sup>35</sup>. The aim will be to present a selection of feminist-informed ways of understanding masculinities, whereby the desire in seeking out various masculinities becomes reflected in participants' choice of sexual, romantic, and life partner(s).

### 5.4.3 Que(e)rying masculinity

As introduced above, Wendy often feels the need to justify her partner (specifically to others) as she believes her husband physically demonstrates very stereotypical,

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<sup>35</sup> I find it important to offer some way of understanding the role, voice and impact of these women's partners. I often wonder how this research would have been different or similar if these men were given a voice. I consider this section on masculinities as a tribute to those partners, and their silent but imperative role in the findings of research.

hegemonic, masculine traits; ones that (on the surface) may not appear to ‘match’ her feminist identity. At 6’2”, a police officer and avid kick boxer, Wendy’s husband trains almost daily in order to maintain his muscular, “rugged and manly” frame. Having always been attracted to this type of man, Wendy remarks: “I do just see a guy and say ‘ding dong!’ in my head, and he will be that image of the most hegemonic masculine kind of guy! What is wrong with me?!<sup>36</sup>”. Echoed in Kitzinger and Wilkinson’s anthology, Gill and Walker offer a similar contradiction ‘between what we think or know rationally [as feminists] and what we sometimes want and feel...and the irony is that *we know it* – but that does not make the desires go away’ (1993, 69, italics in original). For Wendy, it is most often when people know of her “strong feminist identity” that her partner’s appearance comes into consideration. The implication being that his normative, hegemonic masculinity (and profession) *must* permeate below the surface and is assumed to be a reflection of the power dynamics in his and Wendy’s relationship. However, she admits that having been together for almost 20 years, what she finds attractive about him obviously goes beyond his physicality, despite the fact that his physical attributes sometimes lead her to question what might be ‘wrong’ with her. Here Wendy refers to Gill and Walker’s notion of the often difficult task of negotiating one’s feminist identity so as to find a ‘position which feels comfortable, or, rather, less uncomfortable’ (1993, 69), particularly when managing people’s reaction to the stereotype of hegemonic masculinity that her husband is said to represent. Even though she is aware that these characteristics do not translate into her husband’s core values, the implication Wendy makes is that perhaps a feminist *should* not be attracted to a physically dominating man because that might somehow go against what she *should* aspire to as a feminist.

Interestingly, Wendy makes a concerted effort to demystify what her husband might *appear* to represent by highlighting his caregiving role within the family, namely his “sacrifice” to work part-time, and his role in taking care of their three young children; moreover, she attempts to counter his perceived masculinity by describing him as “so much more emotionally needy than I am”. In Backus and Mahalik’s (2011) study, heterosexual women reported on the ‘masculinity of Mr. Right’; in doing so, they determined how strongly an ideal male partner conforms to masculine gender norms. Their findings suggest that women who strongly endorsed feminist values were more likely to describe their partners as less conformant to traditional masculine norms (2011, 319).<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> The latter, of course, referring to what is wrong with her *as a feminist*.

<sup>37</sup> These norms were based on Mahalik’s previous work which identified 11 distinct masculine qualities endorsed by American culture, and include notions of ‘Winning, Emotional Control, Risk-



While I agree with the very foundation of Backus and Mahalik's inquiry, in that feminist identities play some factor in deciding what kind of partner to have (or aspire to have), I take issue with the idea that, within their study, feminist identities are measured on a scale (Downing and Roush's 1985 feminist identity development model), and the subsequent ease with which they over-claim feminism's role in choosing a partner - as if other factors do not come in to play. My contention is that this mode of inquiry can produce a set of feminisms that end up reinforcing what it might mean to be a 'good' or 'bad' feminist, depending on a male partner's level of conformance to traditional masculinity. I find this problematic because what it means to 'strongly endorse feminist values' is neither a static nor universal concept; moreover, it does not offer room for complex, contradictory feminist narratives. In doing so, this also limits the possibilities in allowing for multi-layered masculinities, thus these findings also negate the idea that while Wendy may be *physically* attracted to traditional masculine traits, this does not mean her husband embodies these traits intellectually or emotionally.

So while Wendy illustrates her satisfaction in having a physically strong, hegemonic and masculine partner, Danielle has no issue proclaiming a rather strong *dissatisfaction* with her long term partner's physicality as she misses that feeling of "lusting after" a masculine body. For instance, she says that Angelo<sup>38</sup> has a feminine body with no hair or muscles - naked, he is "just not sexy. [And] Maybe my imagination has just been colonized by evil images [of masculinity]." Moreover, unlike Wendy, Danielle longs for a sense of masculinity that *does* stem beyond something physical. She wants a partner who can "take charge" - so much so that she enrolled in salsa classes so Angelo would gain confidence, hoping to build on their lack of sexual chemistry and his inability to initiate or 'lead' in sexual encounters. As she says: "I'm using my dominating feminist girlfriend persona to force my boyfriend to tie me up and dominate me...It's kind of hard to take seriously when it doesn't really come from the other person". Interestingly, it is this exact "non traditional manliness" that she "loves about him in the non-sexual part of our life". In other words, the desire for normative masculinity only applies to certain aspects of their relationship - *within* sex. Here Danielle actually adds to the evidence suggested by Backus and Mahalik, in that women who endorse feminist values may prefer less traditionally masculine partners; however, as my critique has shown above, it is much more complex than this. This is illustrated by the fact that Danielle desires both a physically masculine

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Taking, Violence, Power Over Women, Dominance, Playboy (lack of emotional involvement in sexual relationships), Self-Reliance, Primacy of Work, Disdain for Homosexuals, and Pursuit of Status' (2011, 319).

<sup>38</sup> Angelo's name has been changed to maintain anonymity.

body *and* some of the more traditionally hegemonic behaviour outlined in Backus and Mahalik's 11-point scale - so long as these behaviours only exist within certain contexts of Danielle and Angelo's relationship.

It starts to become clear that understandings of masculinity can play an important feature in how participants might choose a partner. However, in opposition to Wendy and Danielle, three participants - Blair, Lana and Amy - all indicate that they would not date or are attracted to men that look physically overpowering or overtly masculine. For single and unemployed Blair, this allows her to feel like she is physically in control – in addition, she finds that these men “don't fall into the alpha male, macho category with ease and tend to be more sensitive and easier to relate to as a result”. This also maintains a level of safety for Blair; having experienced rape in 2006, it provides a way in which she feels able to manage physical negotiations with her male partner(s). For Lana, there exists a similar line of reasoning; her admission occurs when noticing an attractive man at work. Lana says that because he was a “big guy” she was put off by the idea of him – it was as simple as knowing that “physically, [I know] that guy could hurt me”. This is further highlighted when she describes her husband as “tall and slim, and [he's] not a physically overpowering guy and I think that's something that's important to me”. Likewise, for Amy, choosing partners of a similar physical size means she is able to keep her sexually submissive practices “in balance”. So where Amy may “actually like being overpowered, or a least physically repositioned in a way that indicates my partner is stronger”, the desire for, and demonstration of normative masculinity, is restricted to a context within sex. Additionally, Amy is wary of a dominant partner who has not “thought through their desire [to be dominant] in a critical way – I can't assume it's a bad thing on their part, but you know, it does give me pause sometimes”. In short, Amy requires a dominant partner whose very dominance is critically, or even better, feminist informed.

Ella, who was initially attracted to her partner because he overtly identifies as a feminist, offers a broader cultural engagement with ways of approaching and understanding masculinity. She argues that:

In some heterosexual couples where both man and woman might be dealing with insecurities, longing and discomfort – and where the woman might have access to a 'discourse' on this (provided that she is influenced in some way by feminist theory and experience), where is the man? What motivates his thinking, actions and feelings? Where is his compass in bed?

Ella recognizes something about her lived experiences in the experiences of her partner. She attributes this way of understanding to a change in response to some of the more pivotal (radical) feminist texts she grew up reading. By this Ella refers to the idea that some of these texts demonstrated:

A kind of disregard for men in our midst. And as I started to date people and have friends – and my brother – oh, watching my brother grow up and trying to figure out masculinity, you know I realized there is a lot that needs to be written about [it].

In other words, where men need access to deconstructive tools, and where women (radical feminists in particular, she argues) can “stand back and trust that when we allow the space for men to speak, and share their voices, that it’s not taking away from our power”. In her own experience, Ella describes it as both “startling and empowering” to realize that her and her partner “have more in common when it comes to sex, power, identity, voice and experience than is often said”. In recognizing this, Ella begins to offer an approach to understanding masculinity that is not restricted or reinforced by a strict set of gender normative behaviour. In doing so, multiple ways of understanding masculinity can perhaps be embodied (and accepted) within understandings of heterosexuality, as well as much wider cultural discourses surrounding what it means to be masculine. Here it starts to become clear that through these multiple narratives and ways of understanding masculinity, Ella helps demonstrate a nuanced pathway to understanding masculinities in terms of embodiment, where her partner’s masculinity need not be defined by resisting or subscribing to dominant cultural norms of what it means to be a heterosexual man. Making space for multiple masculinities not only works to dismantle culturally limiting ways of understanding masculinity, but it also highlights the often complex way these masculinities are understood by the participants in this research.<sup>39</sup>

#### **5.4.4 Summary**

This section has sought to unpack notions of identity – the heterosexual identities of my participants, as well as the masculine identities of their partners. I have intended to show that there are multiple ways of understanding heterosexual identities, and that

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<sup>39</sup> Moreover, the same understanding of agency and embodiment outlined in chapter 2, section 2.7 can be applied here. I suggested that understanding female experience through notions of a lived body rather than a gendered one arguably opens up the possibilities for understanding agency (where agency is achieved through notions of embodiment rather than through the elimination of gender constraints). Here Ella offers a way of considering male agency by approaching understandings of masculinity in these same terms – through notions of embodiment.

participants have shown to critically engage with ideas of heterosexuality in order to recognize their position within this discourse. First, I unpacked the importance of self-identification and the role feminism plays in supporting the idea that heterosexuality is not an exclusive label, category, or identity. Here I called for a wheel-like sexual spectrum in order to recognize the complexities and possibilities of (hetero)sexual identities that encompass non-heterosexual, non-normative identities. From here, I drew on Cleo and Ashley's recognition that compulsory heterosexuality has a place in their understandings of sexuality, and that by negotiating their sexual identity with Rich's 1980 article on the same topic, they are able to critically reflect and engage with their sexuality in a more informed way.

Lastly, I considered the role of masculinity, and in particular, the role it plays in many participants' choice of sexual or romantic partner. In some instances, it was made clear that participants have no interest in a man who appears physically dominant. This was often a reflection of past experiences, the need to ensure personal safety, or to keep a sexually submissive identity in check. In other instances, like Wendy's, she highlighted her strong desire for a stereotypically masculine man, but in doing so often felt the need to justify her partner to others. Danielle felt that even though she is currently not in a relationship with a traditionally masculine man, for her, this is acceptable *outside* the context of sex. It is *within* the context of a sexual encounter where she desires a more physically masculine and dominant partner. What Ella demonstrated, however, was that masculinity should be recognized as more than 'not feminine' because her partner experiences some of the same insecurities that she does, but without the tools to deconstruct them. She proposes that less culturally limiting narratives of masculinity would help to open up the possibility for recognizing and validating multiple masculinities. Indeed, many understandings of masculinity have been drawn on throughout this section, however it is interesting to consider the wider cultural implication and what this says about Western understandings of masculinity and what it means to be a heterosexual man.

## 5.5 Conclusions

This purpose of this chapter has been to consider the role of feminism in understanding ways of talking about desire, gender normative behaviour, and (hetero)sexual identities. These themes have been located between instances of sex as it is my contention that they reflect, shape and inform everyday gender interactions, broader

understandings of identity and as a result, do not occur within a sexual encounter (although they may work to inform what happens within one). In doing so, this chapter has demonstrated the often complex and dynamic relationship between heterosexuality and feminism.

I began by focusing on the way participants talk about desire; here I unpacked complicated understandings and interpretations of what it is like to engage with (dominant) ideas about female desire when considered alongside feminist beliefs. For instance, 36 year old Ella constructed a narrative of desire that both reinforced the gendered notion of the biological clock while simultaneously positioning her active and embodied desires as something beyond her control – a theoretical framework most commonly associated with male sexuality. In doing so, Ella exposed some of the ambiguities and inconsistencies of the gendered experience of desire. And while Nicole was able to produce an active, erotic voice when describing her desire (informed by a sex-positive feminist framework), Amy did not experience the same kind of support from her critical engagement with feminist understandings of female desire. For her, the mistranslation occurred because of the way constructions of femininity (like passivity) are organized around cultural expectations and deeply internalized norms. It is important to note that the findings here are not intended to produce a set of narratives where participants are defined along a spectrum of what it means to be a ‘good’ feminist or a ‘bad’ feminist - the latter of which being implied if an individual *does* subscribe to dominant narratives or *cannot* infer a feminist rejection of them. I have made it clear that I find this notion problematic; in other words, it is my contention that determining how strongly someone endorses feminist values (by measuring those values on a scale) inevitably sets into play a dichotomy that can easily lend itself to ideas of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ feminisms. Perhaps this is why the narratives constructed here are so varying and layered; to be included for this research, participants simply had to choose to identify themselves as a feminist – they were informed that there were no set of rules or values used in determining a feminist consciousness.

From here, I considered experiences of gender normative behaviour – in particular, following culturally imposed gender scripts, cultural expectations of femininity, and feminine passivity. At times, experiences of gender normative behaviour highlighted the fact that dominant norms are often so deeply embedded - a consistent and ever-present part of our culture’s construction of gender and sexuality - that it becomes a near impossible and overwhelming task to consider negotiating them, regardless of the feminist

values a participant might intend to use as a negotiating tool. At times, it appeared to be easier to adhere to the 'rules' of gender normative behaviour. I then illustrated that by breaking the 'rules', or subverting and challenging male power, participants end up framing their own behaviour in masculine terms, which ultimately reinforces male power as the dominant position within the context of heterosexuality. From here, I considered ways of understanding gender normative behaviour that work to transform the 'rules'. I offered an understanding where feminist values play an active role in the embodiment of dominant gender norms – or rather, as a way to aspire to and invest in gender norms. In this instance, it is important to note that it is not the substance of the desire that matters but instead, about where those desires come from (an expression of the self, from the self) - even if the female, feminist subject chooses to inhabit norms surrounding what it means to be a woman as defined by heteronormative terms.

Lastly, I considered that, much like the right to self-identify as feminists – whatever that might mean to each individual participants were equally interested in claiming a sexual identity that works best for them. Here is where I centred my findings around the notion of que(e)rying identities, whereby participants often questioned what it means to be heterosexual (through self-identification narratives), and as a result, often considered the very queering of these identities (outlined by Cleo's and Ashley's contemplation of compulsory heterosexuality). The former, however, meant that I called for the inclusion of a wheel-like sexual spectrum, an original contribution to scholarship on (hetero)sexuality. By understanding heterosexuality as full of both complexities and possibilities, the wheel-like spectrum allows for non-heterosexual practices and identities to ebb and flow through different hues, saturations and tones. This visually represents and therefore validates the complex, fluid and not so easily categorized identities of participants in this research. I have offered this as an original contribution to theorizations of (hetero)sexuality in an effort to avoid the pitfalls and perceived limitations of the category 'heterosexual'. By creating a wheel-like spectrum, the aim is to include non-heterosexual, non-normative ways of understanding, but in a way that does not seek to subsume or negate non-heterosexual identities and practices.

In exploring heterosexual identities, I also sought to engage with ideas of masculinity as a way to highlight and acknowledge participants' male partners and to illustrate the often careful and calculated process in choosing a partner, dependent on traits of masculinity and informed (or again, justified) by feminist values. Here I found it important to consider broader cultural understandings of what it means to be a

heterosexual, masculine man, and in particular, the important role masculinity plays in choosing a sexual or romantic partner for my participants. While feminist values may play a role in the ability to be critical of certain kinds of masculinity, it is equally as important to recognize that lived experience can also inform these choices. Nonetheless, what I have highlighted throughout this chapter is that the relationship between feminism and heterosexuality is often complex and contradictory, full of both confusion and possibility. From here, I turn to consider how these same themes of que(e)rying, submission, and desire and pleasure, are presented and understood, lived and experienced, in a context that goes beyond sex.





## 6. Beyond Sex

**I think sex should be a source of joy and wellbeing for everyone, however a person defines this and however sex brings you that [...] In my case, the joy and the well-being comes from getting physical and relational pleasure, from connecting with someone I love, and from acting out some of my fantasies. And potentially from getting those things with more than one person, eventually.**

**(Danielle, 29)**

### 6.1 Introduction

This chapter concludes my analysis by considering the relationship between feminism and heterosexuality as it exists in a broader context – *beyond* sex. So while the previous chapter focused on experiences and encounters that occur between instances of sex, *beyond* sex is positioned more as an *extension* of a sexual encounter – for example, fantasy can be understood as an extension of a sexual encounter as this marks its distinction from real-life sexual experiences. However, it is important to note that each participant’s feminist consciousness, indeed a part of their lived realities, has shown to play an important role in the construction of fantasies, particularly fantasies of submission. Fantasies of submission are not the only fantasies that participants spoke of; however, I have chosen to focus on them because of the interesting dynamic they represent when considered alongside feminist identities. Therefore, it is important to consider the frequency with which participants blur the lines between fantasy and lived realities as interestingly, many cannot talk of one without considering the other. As such, this section is framed around the idea as to whether fantasy is the place where participants can ‘let the feminism go’, so to speak, or whether their fantasies are aligned with their feminist politics. This section explores the varying responses to this question, and in doing so, I aim to make

original contributions to scholarship on women's fantasies of submission as very little is known about this topic.<sup>40</sup>

From here, I offer a set of narratives that both query and queer conventional understandings of heteronormative relationships – in short, the monogamous couple.<sup>41</sup> Here I suggest that feminist understandings help in motivating participants to question understandings of monogamy; in doing so, feminism also supports the desire to engage in 'alternative' relationship arrangements. Here I will consider Ritchie and Barker's claim (2007) that non-monogamy is a potentially feminist way of participating in heterosexual relationships. Additionally, in this section, 'queering' will include experiences of casual sex and other non-monogamies such as 'open relationships'; however, it is important to note that the focus is only on *sexual* non-monogamies. By presenting sexual non-monogamy as a way in which participants queer the conventional 'couple', I mark the difference between sexual and emotional non-monogamy (as the latter is not an area of non-monogamy my participants are interested in exploring). Therefore, in the final section I present ways of understanding pleasure that are facilitated by emotional intimacy (and monogamy) – in other words, the pleasures derived from sex. In doing so, I focus on the simple, everyday pleasures that are often grounded in the broader context of an emotionally intimate relationship. Overall, this chapter continues to establish further complexities and possibilities, contradictions and nuances, of the relationship between feminism and heterosexuality in practice.

## 6.2 Fantasies of submission

As introduced above, in the context of this research fantasy is an area where feminist values play an important role in the way fantasies are constructed and understood. This particularly occurs when fantasies incorporate elements of submission or force<sup>42</sup>. Currently, Shulman and Horne (2006) present the only research to have explored the effect of feminist beliefs on women's submissive fantasies – previous literature on

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<sup>40</sup> To my knowledge, there is only one piece of existing literature (Shulman and Horne 2006) that considers the effect of feminist beliefs on fantasies of submission.

<sup>41</sup> Relationships have been situated here as I believe they exist as an extension of sex; for instance, sex might be grounded and/or occur within the broader context of a relationship.

<sup>42</sup> I use 'fantasies of force' and 'fantasies of submission' interchangeably. I think it is important to note that only two participants referred to themes of force as 'rape fantasies' – even when this phrasing was used it was done so in a way where the fantasy that was being described (or referred) to was not as *extreme* as a 'rape fantasy'. As such, I prefer to refer to such themes as forceful or submissive.

forceful fantasies has been from a theoretical standpoint (see Bartky 1994). Moreover, as Gil notes in his research on fantasy and guilt experienced by conservative Christians (1999), background factors like, for instance, the value system of a sample population, are rarely if ever mentioned. As such, I implement Gil's approach and consider feminism a value system worth exploring – in doing so, I aim to build on Shulman and Horne's suggestion that 'qualitative research grounded in women's experiences would be particularly useful to shed light on this seemingly complex relationship' (2006, 375) between feminist beliefs and the construction of force fantasies. Therefore, this section considers participants who insist that 'anything is permissible' within the realm of fantasy and alternatively, those who believe that 'letting the feminism go' is not possible. While the former tends to draw on the understanding that fantasy exists beyond the context of lived realities, the latter highlights how some participants find a way to negotiate fantasies of submission so that they exist in a place that comfortably aligns with their feminist politics. As such, I also consider whether participants feel guilty about force fantasies and whether they experience the need to justify them. Throughout this section it is most important to recognize that participants often spoke about their sexual fantasies with some aspect of their real-life sexual encounters in mind. For instance, a number of participants express their desire for fantasies to feed into their real-world encounters, while others offer a narrative where their fantasies have actually become realities.

If fantasies are indeed 'private mental thoughts whose sole purpose would seem to be to induce pleasurable feelings' (Zurbriggen and Yost 2004, 289), then it would make sense that they exist in a safe space where women are able to 'experience desire and pleasure free from danger' (ibid). In Pelletier and Herold's (1988) research on the role of guilt within women's force fantasies, they found that more than half their female sample experienced fantasies of being forced to submit sexually. Likewise, Zurbriggen and Yost (2004) contend that fantasies of submission are common among women. This is even echoed among my participants – for instance, Amy says that her fantasies follow a "pretty conventional subby [submissive] path". The fact that she describes her fantasies as "conventional" suggests the normalcy with which she believes women experience this kind of fantasy. That said, it is interesting to consider that although research on force fantasies rarely, if ever, focuses on feminist-identified women, Shulman and Horne suggest that this does not make a difference with regards to the prevalence of force fantasies. For instance, they suggest that although women who identify as feminists may have a heightened awareness of the 'intimate connections between the personal and political as well as the overarching subordination of women perpetuated by the power differential in male-

female sexual relations' (2006, 370) they are, like other women, exposed to the same media, cultural expectations, and moreover, are part the same socio-cultural trope that socializes women and men to eroticize domination and submission. It is not surprising then, that feminist women entertain force fantasies with the same frequency as non-feminist women (Shulman and Horne 2006, 370). Although this might be true, it is still necessary to explore the varying roles that feminism plays in the construction and experience of these fantasies in order to offer a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between feminism and fantasy.

### 6.2.1 Fantasy and the 'real world'

In general, force fantasies are typically said to involve the use or threat of physical force to 'coerce a woman into sexual activity against her will, that is, against the will of the character she identifies with in the fantasy' (Critelli and Bivona 2008, 58). These themes undoubtedly appear in the way a number of participants discuss their fantasies. For instance, Wendy refers to reading *Fifty Shades of Grey* and *Mills and Boon* novels – she says these inevitably turn her on because she starts to fantasize about a “domineering guy who takes over [this] woman’s life and dictates everything for her”. These storylines, she argues, are extremely appealing in the context of constructing her own sexual fantasies. For Amy, a similar pattern appears in that her fantasies *always* centre on non-consensual sex; likewise for Vanessa, there is an element of “roughness” that is consistently featured in her fantasies. In addition, 59 year old Dawn went into great detail in her diary about one of her most recurring fantasies – in fact, she describes the majority of her fantasies as “all pretty shocking [as they] are about men dominating women, which is something I am strongly against!”. Here Dawn describes one of these fantasies:

I am in a large space, it could be a warehouse - it is pretty unfriendly. There are several other women there. We are all naked and restrained with chains and handcuffs that are attached to the walls at intervals all around the room. There is a group of men in the room with us and they are fully clothed. They are talking [about] us women and what needs to be done with us. We are to be kept as pleasure slaves and the men in the room are to take turns with us - to get us ready for our new life. The men take off their clothes and move around the room on their own or in groups or 2 or 3 and perform sex acts on me and all the other women.

Interestingly, almost the exact same narrative appears in Nancy Friday’s seminal collection of women’s fantasies *My Secret Garden*, where (feminist-identified) Julietta says

she is brought to a warehouse, 'against my will. I'm stripped naked and the only thing I'm allowed to wear is a black silk mask...In my mind I can imagine the men, all big and powerfully built. They're naked, too, while they wait their turn with me' (1975, 110). In GoLM's fantasy, the same elements of darkness, fear, and submission appear. Inspired by an Italian horror film that GoLM saw years ago (where the female protagonist is 'hunted' by a killer who wears black leather gloves), she says there are particular moments in the film where the "black leather clad fingers of her 'killer' caressing her skin and [another scene] involving a cut throat razor" have led to her own fantasy about leather gloves. In this fantasy she is hunted down in her own house, which usually "culminates in sex where I am completely submissive to the master/mistress's needs".

What I highlight here is that (in theory) fantasy exists as a means to imagine 'sexual experiences that are never likely to occur due to legal, ethical or other constraints' (Chick and Gold 1987, cited in Shulman and Horne 2006, 368). Yet, the lines can start to become blurred between fantasy and reality – for instance, Dawn says she "doesn't understand" how she could have such fantasies because they go against what she believes in reality. Thus, it is important to note that although these fantasies centre on elements of coercion, force or submission, 'the message isn't in the plot – but in the emotions that story releases' (Friday 1975, 109). This also emerges in the way Amy reflects on her understanding of force fantasies:

The characters and actions of the fantasy can't be realized [in reality] but there is some - the feeling that I get from them – there's some sort of emotional and psychological content that *can* come up in real life...and are often used to express a sexual dynamic.

What Amy suggests here is that the feelings and emotions elicited by the fantasy are what makes them so appealing - and moreover, are something she desires in the context of real-life sexual encounters. The characters and actions in Amy's fantasies will never actualize - they are not something she seeks outside the safe sphere of fantasy. What makes the characters and actions possible is that the fantasist has complete control as no actual violation of body and will is experienced (Shulman and Horne 2006, 368). However, for 51 year old Ruby, the fantasy of force has been experienced as a horrible reality (a fantasy that her rapist did not know she had). Ruby says that despite certain things having happened to her, she has since found some of these activities pleasurable, and moreover, often wonders how she can *still* fantasize about force, and read or view porn that centres on such themes, *after* experiencing rape. Similarly, she reflects on the

desire to have someone spank her when she used to avoid this at all costs while growing up in a violent home. She refers to these reconciliations as the darker side of fantasy.

While Ruby's experience is an example of how fantasies are capable of becoming realities (against one's will), she admits that she has had positive experiences of doing this as well. Danielle also spoke of her fantasies as something that has the potential to be transferred into a specific dynamic or feeling within her real-life sexual encounters (similar to what Amy describes above). However, she says it is often frustrating to even construct this kind of force fantasy (in her head) when her real-life encounters are so different from it. Here Danielle is hinting at the fact she has to *ask* her partner to dominate her – as such, she says that she cannot even construct a fantasy of him dominating her either. Again, the lines between fantasy and reality start to become blurred because there are certain elements and dynamics of what is constructed in the safe space of fantasy that participants actually want to exist as part of their real-life sexual encounters. When GoLM reflects on her fantasy “about a guy with leather gloves on” she only considers this fantasy appealing when she imagines the hunter as “the one person I’m in a steady relationship with who understands my boundaries” – her partner. She goes on to say that the more she thinks about the fantasy, “I edit it down to make it work for me...but then it’s not the fantasy, it [would be] something else”. Here GoLM goes through a thought process in realizing that although fantasy is an extension of reality, it is something that, as outlined by Shluman and Horne, is never likely to occur *in the same way* when experienced (or considered as a potential) real-life encounter.

The distinction between fantasy and reality can also be recognized in the more practical and logistical considerations of real-life that Megan refers to - “when it comes to reality a lot more barriers pop up because I want to be safe, physically and emotionally”. In fantasy, this kind of safety is not a concern, as demonstrated by Megan’s “pervasive fantasy of a doctor manipulating me”. So while Friday contends that ‘fantasy has no book of rules’ – in other words, reality can inspire fantasy just as much as the woman having the fantasy knows whether or not it should stay where it is (Friday 1975, 269) - it is nonetheless interesting to consider alongside the role of feminism. For instance, outlined above is one of Dawn’s recurring fantasies where she and other women become sex slaves. And while Dawn admits that does not understand them - “because they totally go against my way of thinking” - they do not cause her any guilt *as a feminist*. Instead, they are just “quite difficult to understand”. In doing so, Dawn suggests that because these are fantasies, they do not have to make sense. A similar sentiment is expressed by Ashley who says that

although she thinks fantasies “should ideally align with your political beliefs, I think we can’t generally control [them] so I don’t beat myself up about them.” This is also alluded to in Cleo’s admittance that she does not let most of her fantasies have a voice and furthermore, is scared of exploring them because they are so separate from her (desired) reality. So while there is much consideration among my participants as to whether their fantasies (or elements of them) should or can become a part of their real-life sexual encounters, Gloria, a contributor in Friday’s collection of fantasies, says: ‘what’s significant isn’t whether [her] real and fantasy lives coexist, or even whether she acts out her fantasies, but that each does exist and is accepted’ (1975, 248).

### 6.2.2 The feminism effect

As outlined above, Shulman and Horne’s (2006) study on guilt and women’s force fantasies was the first to consider the effect of feminist beliefs on such fantasies. Their results suggest that further research, grounded in women’s experiences, be considered as a way of producing more nuanced discussions on this ‘seemingly complex relationship’ between feminism and fantasy. Therefore, I aim to make original contributions to scholarship on women’s fantasies by broadening the scope of Shulman and Horne’s suggestion for further research in an attempt to consider whether feminist values play a role in the construction of fantasies *in general* (in other words, beyond the scope of force fantasies). By broadening the scope, I aim to present ways of understanding the relationship between fantasy and feminism on more widespread terms.

For participants who explicitly described, spoke of, or alluded to sexual fantasies, I asked the following question: do you think your feminist consciousness influences your fantasies? In other words, is fantasy a space where feminism can be ‘let go’ - where anything is permissible? Or, does fantasy have to align with feminist beliefs? Lana simply insisted that “there is something that’s hardwired [that] I won’t even allow my fantasies to be taken over by something that isn’t part of my feminist principles”. Likewise, in describing how uncomfortable she felt reading *Story of O*<sup>43</sup>, Sue also admits she is not comfortable with any kind of fantasy play that is associated with unequal power relationships, particularly where the female is submissive. As a result, her fantasies “don’t

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<sup>43</sup> Written in 1954 under the pen name of Pauline Réage, *Story of O* centres on the protagonist ‘O’ and her path to becoming a sex slave. Initially struggling in her role, O eventually becomes immersed in it, is passed on to her Master’s brother who ‘continues to break down her boundaries, subtracting avenues of agency until O becomes that which is signified by her name: lost in (her) nothingness, less than human, stripped of her subjectivity’ (Tsaros 2013, 865).

involve any of that kind of stuff". Additionally, Sue believes that "dressing up in a nurses' uniform or something like that? To me, that's not a female fantasy - that's a male fantasy. A female is doing that for the male". Here Sue alludes to the same kind of hardwiring as Lana – that *something* will not allow these kinds of fantasies to occur because they make her uncomfortable. As a result, both illustrate an understanding of fantasy where not everything is permissible and where a feminist consciousness helps to shape and inform the contents of a sexual fantasy. Nicole echoes these claims by admitting that "unfortunately" fantasy is not the place where anything becomes permissible. She says:

It is hard to completely let go of your critical self. I don't even know if that's possible...I can never truly be in a place where I'm removed from my feminism or my critical thought. [But then] I try to let all these things be, exist with the questions and the contradictions, and accept[ing] the whole of it.

Nicole implies that if she *were* able to let go of her critical self, then contradictions between her fantasies and her understanding of feminism might arise. For Ella, a similar sentiment emerges when she admits that "I have never been in to rape fantasies. I think if I were in to that, I'd have more to work out as a feminist." However, for Ella this also has a lot to do with the fact that she is a "survivor of childhood sexual assault". So, while feminism does influence her fantasies in that they have to occur "in the context of what I find comfortable...and it's pretty limited", they are just as likely to be shaped and informed by lived experiences - which again, touches on the link between fantasy and reality. What Ella and Nicole also allude to here is the idea of *potentially* having to justify (to themselves and their feminist consciousness) or feel guilty about certain fantasies *as a feminist*. This occurs for Ella when she says that if she did, in fact, have rape fantasies then she would have more to "work out". And even though Nicole says she tries to be accepting of these contradictions (also evidenced when she says "I like hearing a discourse that doesn't encourage shame"), Nicole admits that she *chooses* not to feel guilty as this is counterproductive to both her understanding of feminism and her understanding of sexuality (including her sexual fantasies).

The idea of having to (potentially) justify certain fantasies *as a feminist* also emerges for Cleo, largely because she associates the concept of fantasy with "patriarchal sexuality". As introduced above, Cleo does not let her fantasies have a voice as she is uncomfortable with the fact that fantasies are, broadly speaking:

Shaped by sexism...if letting them have a voice is really just perpetuating gendered norms and sexist assumptions (especially



for the men I played out such a fantasy with) I think it would probably do more harm than good.

Unlike Nicole, who contends that “I don’t like a kind of feminism that doesn’t allow room for contradiction”, Cleo remains cautious of fantasies that might be influenced by something *other* than her feminist consciousness. In fact, when I asked Cleo if she thought fantasy was a place where she could ever imagine ‘letting the feminism go’, she admitted: “Yeah, I think that’s probably what I’m scared of – and I don’t want to see a side of me that I’m not comfortable with politically!” The narratives provided here are interesting to consider alongside Shulman and Horne’s claim that the more feminist minded women were, the less guilt they experienced with regards to fantasies of force (2006, 374). For instance, Cleo shows that when the structure or contents of a fantasy are not aligned with her feminist principles, this has a particular poignancy in terms of the guilt or justification she feels is necessary. Because Cleo associates fantasy with exoticism, patriarchy, and the sex industry, she will not allow her fantasies to encompass themes of this nature - yet at the same time, she is fearful that her fantasies *might* include these themes if she gave them a voice. Alongside Cleo, Blair also expressed the guilt she feels when she fantasizes about submitting sexually. Reflecting on one of her fantasies, she wrote:

[It’s] not very feminist, I know...These fantasies don't make me feel comfortable. As a feminist, my ideal fantasy is one where power is distributed equally between me and my partner. However sometimes this feels like a far-off goal.

The fantasy guilt experienced here is done so on feminist terms, whereby the fantasy ends up evoking this idea of what it means to be a ‘bad feminist’ or, as Cleo says, something she is not politically comfortable with.

Much of the guilt Cleo experiences in relation to her potential fantasies is similarly illustrated in Gil’s 1990 study on the way guilt and fantasy are experienced by conservative Christians. Gil’s research aim focused on where fantasy guilt comes from – for instance ‘is the content of the fantasy – the scripts or subjects therein – significant in an association with guilt feelings?’ (1990, 631). In other words, if feminism is broadly equated with power-sharing and anti-oppressive understandings, feelings of guilt undoubtedly have the potential to emerge when fantasies do not align with these principles. Like Cleo’s fantasies which are capable of evoking the feeling of a ‘bad feminist’, fantasy guilt among Gil’s participants is experienced in terms of religion, whereby the fantasies evoke the feeling of not being in God’s good grace (1990, 636) – and moreover, that their fantasies were morally wrong. This is interesting to consider alongside research that suggests women who

report fantasies of submission are said to experience less sexual guilt and moreover, that a greater endorsement of feminist beliefs is directly associated with decreased sexual guilt (Bay-Cheng et al. 2007; Shulman and Horne 2006; Zurbriggen and Yost 2004). In the context of this research, when positioned alongside fantasies that (in theory) conflict with feminist principles like power-sharing, many participants use their feminist consciousness to help to shape and inform their fantasies so that they exist in a place that is more or less comfortably aligned with feminist values.

In contrast, many participants in this research felt as though they ‘let the feminism go’ when it comes to content of their sexual fantasies - there are some interesting implications as to why. For instance, Megan says: “I give up my feminism and let myself being objectified and used to the max”. Because these fantasies are “not something I would ever want in reality”, this allows Megan to ‘surrender’ her feminism so that fantasy can exist as a place where anything is permissible. She contends that because her fantasies are so extreme it is simply “hard to see when that would happen” in reality. Amy actually laughed when I asked if her fantasies align with her political beliefs. This was followed with: “No, they are not aligned with my political beliefs at all! Yeah, they’re just not!” Likewise, Ruby admits that she will try anything out in her head. Interestingly, Ruby says she used to *only* fantasize about being submissive, whereas in more recent years she only fantasizes about being dominant. Where this becomes interesting is when reminded that (within the context of sex), Ruby prefers to be submissive. In instances that occur between sex, Ruby also admitted to embodying gender normative behaviour and at times, says she displays “victim behaviour”. The fact that ‘anything is permissible’ in the context of her fantasy means she can more comfortably be the dominant partner as it is far beyond the context and preference of her lived realities.

### **6.2.3 Summary**

This section has sought to address Zurbriggen and Yosts’ concern that ‘many interesting questions about fantasy have not yet been considered’ (2004, 288); as such, I have presented a collection of sexual fantasies that work to highlight various ways of understanding the relationship between fantasy and feminist beliefs, and moreover, the effect that the latter may have on the former. I have attempted to address the idea that even though ‘feminist beliefs may help to counter the shame that women often feel about sexual desire’ (Shulman and Horne 2006, 374), this may not so easily translate into the

context of fantasy, as many participants actually felt feminist-induced guilt because of content and theme of their fantasies. In some cases, this guilt is not actually realized because of the way in which participants implement their feminist consciousness as a way to help shape and inform fantasies so that they comfortably align with their feminist politics. An equal number of participants felt as if fantasy is the place where anything is permissible, even against their feminist principles. Most often tied to this way of understanding was the idea that fantasy is distinct and separate from real-life sexual encounters, and therefore beyond the concern of feminist values. However, emerging in both sets of narratives is the idea that fantasy does have some kind of connection to lived realities. Some participants spoke of the desire for their fantasies to feed into their real-life sexual encounters; in these instances, it becomes clear that understandings of feminism are not simply about resisting or subverting a set of norms that does not comfortably align with feminist politics - like Nicole says "I choose not to be ashamed...shame is a lie somebody told you about yourself".

It is interesting to link this discussion of feminism and submission back to the idea that submissive fantasies are said to be common among women in general (Shulman and Horne 2006). As such, I wonder whether, for a feminist-identified woman, it might be considered even naughtier and/or sexy to actively and knowingly engage in submissive fantasies. The narratives I have presented here are largely informed by a feminist lens, and as a result, I consider whether a critically informed reclamation of passivity and submissiveness might offer a space where these fantasies can be played out and exist as a parodic critique of traditional notions of female passivity. Because most participants who experience fantasies of submission have indicated elsewhere (in their diaries and our interviews) that the most powerful position in a heterosexual dominant/submissive (sexual) relationship lies with the submissive, I consider the possibility that submission is not a surrender of power and that as a result, the fantasies outlined here present submission in the context of a hyperfeminine play on passivity. Moreover, the way these fantasies are experienced *as a feminist* work to reflect the many variations of feminism, each worthy in their own right, and each developed alongside a consciousness that helps to shape and inform many aspects of sexuality – in this instance, playing a formative role in the experience and construction of fantasy.

### 6.3 Que(e)rying (hetero)normative relationships: casual sex

This section explores the way participants query and queer conventional understandings of monogamy alongside feminist motivations and understandings of sex. I begin by considering experiences of casual sex, and in particular, aim to locate these experiences within a wider cultural context, one that is marked by an attitudinal (and social) shift toward the openness and acceptance of ‘uncommitted’ sex (Garcia et al. 2012).<sup>44</sup> I position these experiences as ways of ‘queering’ traditionally normative romantic relationships as they are often characterized by a ‘sexual encounter between people who are not dating or in a relationship, and where a more traditional romantic relationship is NOT an explicit condition of the encounter’ (Garcia and Reiber 2008, 196, emphasis in original). In doing so, I also consider the cultural consequence for women who choose to engage in casual sex by drawing on the sexual double standard. From here, I continue to focus on non-monogamies that are characterized by polysexual open relationships, in which both partners are allowed to seek out *additional* sexual partners (Barker 2013, 103). In both instances, I pay particular attention to the role feminism plays in the experience and motivation for engaging in non-monogamy.

#### 6.3.1 Engaging with the ‘double standard’

I begin by exploring the role feminism plays in experiences of casual sex and in particular, the way feminist values are used as a way to query, problematize and/or challenge the sexual double standard regarding women’s engagement in casual sex. The well-known double standard I refer to here is one where having many sexual partners means women are judged negatively and labelled as ‘sluts’, whereas men gain status as ‘studs’ (Farvid and Braun 2013; Glenn and Marquardt 2001; Hamilton and Armstrong 2009; Reid et al. 2011). Although cultural shifts in (Western) dating are argued to emerge in the 1920s, it is said that the widespread availability of birth control, rise of feminism and liberal sexual rhetoric of the 1960s played one of the most important and formative roles

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<sup>44</sup> As a reminder to the reader, I have chosen to situate experiences of casual sex in a context beyond sex because of the way these experiences both query and queer conventional understandings of heteronormative relationships (in particular, the monogamous heterosexual couple). While experiences of casual sex could undoubtedly be framed in chapter 4 (Within Sex), I locate them here as a way to acknowledge the idea that engaging in casual sex is a form of managing (sexual) relationships outside the traditional monogamous couple.

in emphasizing the visibility and cultural acceptance of casual sex<sup>45</sup> (Garcia et al. 2012, 3). Moreover, in the last 15 years, popular culture increasingly depicts hook-ups as 'normal', expected, widely acceptable, and indeed, 'perfectly sensible'<sup>46</sup> (Garcia et al. 2012, 3). While television programmes like *Sex and the City* have arguably helped in representing and validating women's engagement in casual sex (Farvid and Braun 2013, 379), scripted television programmes like *Skins*, 'reality' programmes like *Geordie Shore* and *Made in Chelsea*, and films such as *Friends with Benefits* and *No Strings Attached* (both released in 2011), all focus on sexual relationships that transpire without the promise, intention or desire, for a more traditional romantic relationship.

It is also important to consider that the emergence of a hook-up culture has become an established area of study within academia and features such topics like negotiating oral sex and women's orgasms in college hook-ups (Backstrom et al. 2012); gender difference in approaching friends with benefits (Furman and Shaffer 2011); and predictors for hooking-up behaviour (Lewis et al. 2012). As shown by these titles alone, the majority of hook-up research centres on twenty-something university students - however, these studies nonetheless contribute to and reflect the increased visibility of casual sex and hooking up; in doing so, they aid in explaining the cultural acceptance and openness surrounding less conventional ways of forming sexual connections.

Theoretically, these changes or transformations of intimate life are described by Giddens as a form of plastic sexuality, whereby sex is uncoupled from reproduction and as a result, brings people greater freedom in their intimate lives - for instance, the freedom to pursue sexual pleasure in ways that might have been previously sanctioned, like casual sex. In his understanding, Giddens suggests that individuals have the freedom to enter in and out of relationships as they so choose, and that these relationships are to be understood as temporal contracts founded upon a mutual desire *for* the relationship, satisfaction (both sexually and emotionally) *in* the relationship, and only continued insofar as both parties want to *maintain* the relationship (1992, 58).

In the context of this research, many participants drew on *past* experiences of casual sex throughout the course of their diaries and interviews; as such, they are often

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<sup>45</sup> I use the terms casual sex and hook-up interchangeably as both are characterized by a lack of commitment, occur outside a formal relationship, and are therefore often engaged in without a conventional reason (love, procreation, commitment) (Garcia et al. 2012, 4).

<sup>46</sup> I realize that writing a section about 'queering' relationships and then almost instantly describing casual sex as normative could be read as potentially problematic. However, I maintain that while casual sex may be positioned as 'normal', it is *differently* normative to the conventional ideal of monogamous heterosexuality.

framed in terms of a ‘learning experience’. For instance, in reflecting on a recent string of casual encounters, 51 year old Ruby realized that she actually *does* want more than a physical relationship. She contends that it was only through “misbehaving” that she has come to such realizations. In her last diary entry, Ruby made a commitment to celibacy, enrolled in a professional dating agency, and said she will wait until a potentially *meaningful* relationship comes along. Like Ruby, GoLM refers to her past hook-ups as a time when she was not sure about what she wanted or who she was, ultimately concluding that these experiences were unfulfilling and that she did not have a lot of self-respect during this time. A similar reasoning is illustrated when Vanessa says that she is “through with casual sex”. However, when I asked at the very start of our interview if she thought her feminist politics played a (more general) role in influencing her sexual practices, the first thing Vanessa said to me was that: “[feminism] supports the belief that women can enjoy casual sex just as much as men do and should [be allowed] to have sex without emotional attachment”. It is my contention that Vanessa provides an understanding of feminism that supports her right to choose whatever kind of sexual relationship she wants, and as a result, feminism is framed as an important tool in eliminating the (potential) shame associated with women who choose to engage in casual sex (much in the way it did when she purchased her first sex toy, outlined in chapter 4). Like Vanessa, Sandy also believes that “there’s no reason for women not to engage in [casual sex]. And I think maybe subconsciously I thought I was going to set out to [do it] because I’m a woman – because I can and I should be able to”. Here it is clear that the same kind of entitlement to engage in casual sex (that Vanessa draws on) is also present in Sandy’s motivation to participate.

That said, Vanessa is no longer interested in casual sex as she has experienced a kind of backlash against this idea that women can and should be able to engage in casual sex. I describe this as a backlash because of the way Vanessa thinks she is perceived by men in these kinds of sexual scenarios – in other words, where the sexual double standard comes in to play as Vanessa believes that men do not respect her in the context of casual sex. Reflecting on this, she says:

Ok, we only have sex, and I'm not your girlfriend [certainly], nor do I want to be, but you still have to treat me like a human being, you know. I don't play in the latest porn film you watched last night - you have to pay attention to what I want too.

Here Vanessa implies the kind of context in which she *is* willing to participate in casual sex - where her pleasure is considered equally as important to her partners and where those partners do not treat her poorly *because* she is engaging in casual sex. By setting these limits, Vanessa demonstrates a sense of assertiveness and sexual confidence often associated with women who endorse feminism 'between the sheets' (Bay Cheng et al. 2007). And although Vanessa also engages with the dominant construction of 'woman as gatekeeper', by setting these limits and boundaries she simultaneously implements a notion of 'self care'. In Beres and Farvid's (2010) analysis of women who engage in casual (hetero)sex, one participant Agnes similarly implemented a notion of 'self care' when she recognized the emotional cost of engaging in casual sex; like Vanessa, Agnes simply decided to 'place limits on when she would have sex with someone' (2010, 386). For Vanessa, the emotional cost emerges in the consequential double standard and as a result, she negotiates this perception of her by setting limits on the kind of context in which she will engage in casual sex.

Sue (single at the time of her diary) provides another interesting way of understanding the sexual double standard in relation to experiences of casual sex. She reflects on how the sexual double standard plays a role when considering *how* to find a sexual partner, as a single woman in her 30s. During the diary phase, Sue was using a free online dating service to meet potential sexual (and romantic) partners. And while she was both successful and unsuccessful in these attempts, the double standard starts to emerge when describing her frustration with online dating - "what do I do as a single woman who's perfectly capable of making sensible choices, in order to fulfil my sexual needs?...Where and how in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, do you find a safe way of doing that?". She elaborates by saying that:

The frustrations of internet dating and people who seem to promise they are interested in [the same] things and then mess you about or are just full of shit...I was going on a year and a half, two years, without sex [at one point], and I didn't really want to be in that situation again. But at the same time, do you have to put yourself in these vulnerable positions in order to have sex with somebody? For men it seems quite easy to do and there seems to be no risk for them, in that sense. I mean, there's a sexual health risk but whether or not they care about that is their choice.

Although Sue recognizes that men and women are equally vulnerable to sexual health risks, I find it interesting the way she positions men as not having any *other* risks, whereas she has more to consider if she wants to actively find a sexual partner when she is

single. Moreover, Sue worries about how to do this safely – it is unclear whether she is referring to her physical safety when meeting someone from an online service, or the importance of constructing her sexual identity to these potential partners as ‘not slutty’ – likely a combination of the two. As she says regarding the latter:

I’ve been trying to balance a fine line between ignoring guys who send messages like ‘are you a nudist?’ (and ask me if I’d like to date them and their girlfriend), and being up front about some of my sexual interests so I don’t seem completely vanilla.

This “tricky balance”, as Sue describes it, is of particular importance in Beres and Farvid’s (2010) findings as they found that women often ‘care for the self’ by constructing their experiences of casual sex through an ‘it just happened’ narrative. In doing so, this works to avoid the consequential double standard. However, one participant in my research, single and 31 year old Carrie, unapologetically pursues casual sex. She provides a set of experiences that does not follow the ‘it just happened’ narrative; moreover, she sees the (feminist) possibilities in reclaiming the word ‘slut’. As she contends, “I will freely admit this as part of my identity”.

Claiming that she is “one of these rare women who can have sex and not get emotionally attached...I often have multiple partners and swap between them at will”, Carrie’s experiences of casual sex are most interesting to consider when positioned alongside (what she believes is) her friends’ perception of her promiscuous lifestyle. For instance, by engaging in casual sex, and by knowingly and actively expressing her desire for it, Carrie assumes that her friends think she is “being used by men for sex”. She says that because her friends are mostly in “cosy relationships”,

Having sex with lots of men isn’t a very nice feminist, middle class educated thing to do, is it? This feeds into the idea that women only give sex in exchange for security of a relationship etc., not because they just want it for sex sake. I keep a lot of my sex life to myself as if I told me friends [the things I have written above] then I think they would be quite shocked.

Here Carrie suggests that engaging in casual sex (in her friends’ opinions) *must* be an un-feminist thing to do and therefore not something Carrie should be doing *as a feminist*. She also reflects on the cultural assumption that women offer sex in exchange for something – love – however, Carrie prides herself on not get emotionally attached to sexual partners. In doing so, she works to challenge broader cultural assumptions that suggest women (should) prioritize relationships over sex. Unlike the ‘it just happened’



narrative, which works to reinforce self-preservation against the consequential double standard, Carrie challenges the cultural assumption that women want love and men want sex (Allen 2003), and in doing so, unapologetically pursues sex.

Situating Carrie's experiences within a broader cultural context, it is worth mentioning that the tone with which she reclaims the word 'slut' reflects relatively recent feminist discussions (and activism) known as Slutwalk marches. Emerging out of a Toronto police officer's 2011 comment that if women want to avoid rape, they should not dress like sluts (Valenti 2011), Slutwalks have occurred in over 200 countries as a direct response to culturally pervasive myths about rape that often shame the women who experience it while simultaneously making assumptions about their sexuality. However, one of the common critiques about Slutwalks revolves around the notion that 'celebrating' the word 'slut' only seeks to embrace pornified understandings of female sexuality; however, as Valenti (2011) suggests, this global response might actually be indicative of the 'future of feminism', and here is where I locate Carrie's claim on this sexual identity. Primarily organized by younger women, Slutwalks have rallied a generation of women, organizing under the word 'slut', and most importantly, who 'do not apologize for their in-your-face tactics' (ibid). As Valenti suggests, perhaps it is worth considering the implication of these marches alongside new movements of feminism – in other words, are we entering 'a new day in feminist organizing'? (ibid). Although such claims cannot be made on the findings of this research (as Carrie is the only participant who discussed this kind of reclamation at any length), it is my contention that her motivation to engage in casual sex operates under these same set of in-your-face tactics that Valenti suggests above.

### **6.3.2 Summary**

As outlined above, my participants have problematized, questioned and reflected on the sexual double standard in a variety of ways when considering experience of casual sex. For instance, Vanessa suggests that her feminist politics plays an important role in eliminating the shame that emerges from the double standard; however, Vanessa thinks she is perceived negatively by men within the context of casual sex and therefore believes that she gains little respect from them. For Sue, the sexual double standard is used as a way to consider the logistics in safely finding a sexual partner. In other words, she problematizes the sexual double standard insofar as she considers how it affects her choice to engage in casual sex, and more importantly, how she can go about engaging in it

safely. And last, by reclaiming the word ‘slut’, Carrie works to problematize the sexual double standard in a way where women can unapologetically pursue casual encounters and as a result, challenge the cultural imperative of monogamy as well as the assumption that women want love and men want sex. Below I will unpack the cultural imperative of monogamy in further detail and in particular, consider how participants explore the potential and possibility in sexually non-monogamous or ‘open’ relationships. I continue to explore the role feminism plays here, as well as the motivation for participating (or at least considering) the potential benefits that non-monogamous relationships may have for their overall understanding and experiences of sexuality.

#### **6.4 Qu(e)rying (hetero)normative relationships: non-monogamies**

Despite the increased acceptability of sex outside marriage, the monogamous couple still remains the cultural ideal in Western cultures (Barker and Landridge 2010). Furthermore, because monogamy is closely associated with sexual fidelity and exclusivity, it is also understood as morally superior because of the assumption that monogamy is centred on ideas of love and trust. These features, often enforced by ‘cultural products (media), economic restraints (tax incentives, cost of single living), social factors [...] and the idea that this is “how it is”, this is “natural”’ (Rosa 1994, 108 cited in Robinson 1997, 144), aim to imply that non-monogamous relationships do not and cannot include the same features. Rather, non-monogamies are often associated with promiscuity, shallowness, and a lack of security – the latter being only, of course, offered by monogamy. However, Barker notes that while it may be the norm to *claim* monogamy, whether it is the norm to *be* monogamous is another issue entirely (2013, 99). By this Barker refers to the idea that non-monogamy is, in fact, the norm in (Western) culture when we consider the prevalence and frequency of infidelities and affairs (2013, 99). However, the kind of non-monogamy I refer to throughout this section includes a variety of relationships that are open, consensual and known about by all individuals involved. While there is much contestation about the language of non-monogamies (see Klesse 2006), for the purpose of this section non-monogamy refers to couples who have ‘openly sexual (but generally not love) relationships with other people’ (Barker 2013, 103).<sup>47</sup> And while these sexually open, non-

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<sup>47</sup> When using the word polyamory (poly), I do so because this is the term used by the participant I might be discussing – whether or not this aligns with the view that poly is about having multiple love relationships that are not necessarily sexual, is debateable. In these instances, I use the terminology of the participant.

conventional relationship arrangements may not be considered the norm, Wilkinson notes that there is 'an increasing number of people [who] are beginning to participate in polyamorous relationships or at least embrace the principles of it' (Barker 2004, cited in Wilkinson 2010, 244).<sup>48</sup> This is particularly interesting to consider alongside a feminist critique of monogamy and as a result, provides an approach to viewing non-monogamy as a potentially feminist way of managing sexual and emotional relationships (Ritchie and Barker 2007).

#### **6.4.1 Sexual non-monogamy as (potentially) feminist**

Ritchie and Barker (2007) conducted a focus group with polyamorous bisexual women who spoke about their understandings and motivations for non-monogamy. One participant, Jane, articulated the possibility of understanding non-monogamies as 'potentially feminist' (2007, 146). She says that if people have an alternative way of looking at things - 'for example, a feminist perspective...then they might be more likely to do things differently in other ways too' (Ritchie and Barker 2007, 146). The implication and critique found here is that monogamy 'fits us into neat, well-defined categories which don't allow for the complexity and realities of the diverse ways in which human beings relate' (Robinson 1997, 145). As Robinson contends, monogamy operates through 'the mechanisms of exclusivity, possessiveness and jealousy, all filtered through the rose-tinted lens of romance' (Robinson 1997, 144). Thus, a feminist critique of monogamy suggests that it may not serve women's best interests as it infringes on ideas of individual autonomy (Jackson and Scott 2004; Robinson 1997). Non-monogamies then, have the potential to be viewed as a 'broadly feminist way of conducting relationships, empowering women to move away from the oppressive regime of compulsory heterosexual monogamy' (Ritchie and Barker 2007, 2). As such, the aim here is to highlight how participants navigate their way through the possibilities and potential in *sexual* non-monogamies (and as will be shown, position emotional monogamy as a relationship ideal).

Nicole was in a relationship of five months when writing her diary. Although this relationship ended during the course of the diary phase, she reconciled with her partner and says they were in a much more stable place at the time of our interview. During the

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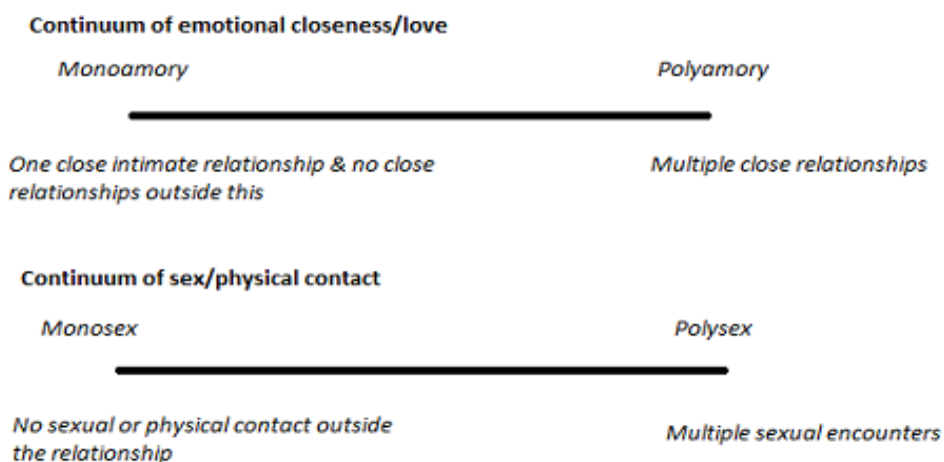
<sup>48</sup> In the same way that an increase in hook-up culture has been matched by an academic interest in it, Barker and Landridge (2010) suggest the same is true of non-monogamies, whereby an increase in its participation and cultural visibility has been matched by an academic interest since the early 2000s.

diary phase, Nicole initiated a conversation with her partner about the possibility of being non-monogamous. Nicole's desire for non-monogamy is strictly sexual. As she says:

I don't think I want to have multiple relationships, like with high emotional involvement [right now, that's not what I'm looking for]...there's a couple of my friends that I would like to be sexual with from time and time and it's fun that now that door is open.

The idea of a sexually non-monogamous relationship (and an emotionally monogamous one) becomes further highlighted when Nicole and her partner create rules in order for their arrangement to work. When considering the idea of a threesome, she insists that the woman would not be allowed to sleep over, and that Nicole would have to be sure her partner had no intentions of pursuing the other woman afterwards. Moreover, if her partner pursues a new sexual relationship on his own, Nicole needs reassurance that "he doesn't get to call anyone else his 'little fawn' like he does me". It is clear that emotional monogamy is important to Nicole, and as a result, it is only multiple sexual relationships she is interested in exploring. This distinction, between sexual and emotional monogamy, is articulated in Barker's (2013) integrative guide to sex, love and relationships, wherein they suggest that part of negotiating and navigating the rules of monogamy (and subsequently, non-monogamy) means figuring out exactly what kind of non-monogamous relationship both partners want. In doing so, Barker develops a monogamy continuum (see below) which aims to suggest monogamy is more complex than an 'either/or thing' (Barker 2013, 102).

As shown in figure 6.1, Barker imagines emotional *and* sexual monogamies – existing separately, and therefore negotiated separately on their own terms.



**Figure 6.1** Drawing of Barker's monogamy continua

This model works well to highlight Nicole's motivations to participate in non-monogamy and further establish her own set of rules. However, even though Nicole wants to engage in a 'polysexual' relationship, it is interesting to consider her conflicted feelings when her partner does indeed become sexual with someone else. During our interview, Nicole reflected on the experience of attending a sex party where her partner "went off at some point with another person and that was – I wasn't [like] jumping up and down for joy – but it was okay". The uncertainty in Nicole's tone cannot be detected here; yet, what became clear in her narrative is how feelings of insecurity are reconciled when she remembers the (feminist-informed) motivation and commitment she has made to challenge monogamy in order to see how it can work for her. For instance, Nicole says the "poly blogs that I read or spaces I participate in have a feminist, anti-oppressive framework. Like trans inclusive, body positive, and you know, accepting gender fluidity". Moreover, she has seen how non-monogamy has worked for many of her (feminist) friends. That said, Nicole is adamant that her and her partner are not going to:

Prove to ourselves how cool and open we are – [let's] take it at our pace and talk about it...you know, if you don't want to feel like you're being left alone while I'm off having fun, well I probably don't want to feel the same.

Highlighted here is the notion that 'feelings of jealousy cannot be wished away through political analysis' (Cartledge 1983, 173 cited in Jackson and Scott 2004, 152). Although these feelings might not be wished away, the underlying principle found in Nicole's narrative is similar to what Jackson and Scott argue – in other words, that it is 'worth retaining our commitment to non-monogamy and work[ing] to make it possible rather than allowing our lives and the lives of others to be circumscribed by our most negative emotions (jealousy, possessiveness, insecurity, etc.)' (2004, 153).

#### **6.4.2 Sexual non-monogamy as (potentially) un-feminist**

Like Nicole, Amy also initiated a conversation with her (now ex) partner about having a non-monogamous relationship. In her diary, Amy said that her 'ideal' relationship consists of a "long term, committed primary relationship that is also open to us having sexual *and* emotional connections with other people" (my emphasis). At the time of keeping her diary, Amy had achieved this ideal – she had a primary partner (of five years) and three secondary partners with whom she had sexual *and* emotional relationships. I

asked Amy if she thought feminism played a role in her attitude toward non-monogamy and she said that it “makes more space for female sexual freedom, including the freedom to look for sex outside of a relationship”. However, what makes Amy’s experience of non-monogamy interesting is that almost six months later (at the time of our interview) she was in a long distance *monogamous* relationship with none of these men, but rather, a new partner named Mike<sup>49</sup>. And while they plan to be ‘open’ in the future, Amy says she cannot afford to “split her focus” right now because the beginning of their relationship was “so emotionally intense”. The reason for this is quite complex:

[Mike and I] got into this relationship where he knew I was in another relationship and so we had talked about – well, he had talked from very early on that his ideal (which he is content in never happening, but you know, ‘pie in the sky’) - his perfect situation would be to be in a stable poly triad with two women...the problem was that we had this really intense month together and said ‘I love you’...and then I went away and slept with [one of my secondary partners]. I told Mike and he was really, really, really hurt by it. Like, this was something we hadn’t explicitly said would be monogamous but we had also said some serious relationship-y stuff so I should’ve known [that he’d be upset]...it’s funny because it is making me challenge whether I actually want to be open [with Mike] because I’m really happy being closed with him and because the thought of him being with someone else makes me feel a little jealous more so than with my previous partner.

Since being monogamous with Mike, Amy said it is really difficult for her to talk about non-monogamy as positively as she used to – the reason for this is that, upon reflection, she actually thinks a large part of the appeal in having multiple relationships “has really un-feminist roots”. By this Amy means that:

A lot of what I got out of polyamory was the excitement of having a new partner...wanting to feel that sexual pull from someone else, like wanting to feel someone else [besides my primary partner] desire me...I know that’s not a good thing in myself and hopefully part of what makes me not attracted to that now is that I’m with another partner who is better for me, that I no longer feel the desire to be desired by other people.

Admittedly, Amy feeds into some of the assumptions and stereotypes surrounding non-monogamy – that the motivation for participating in it is rooted in shallowness of emotions and vanity (Robinson 1997, 153). So while Amy’s approach to non-monogamy is supported by a feminist understanding that women are free to seek sexual freedom outside the context of a relationship, it is interesting to consider how Amy’s transition from

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<sup>49</sup> Mike’s name has been changed to maintain anonymity.

polyamory to monogamy makes her realize how potentially “un-feminist” her motivation to engage in polyamory might have been. In doing so, she also contributes to the cultural understanding that monogamy remains the ideal relationship arrangement, illustrated by the fact that she (for the first time) experiences jealousy when thinking about Mike with other women - and moreover, that she no longer feels the need to be desired by other men.

### 6.4.3 Demanding sexual non-monogamy

Danielle further highlights the distinction between sexual and emotional monogamy by having an underlying agreement with her long-term partner Angelo. Rooted in the fact that she once cheated on a partner, Danielle said that she:

Demanded the condition that [her and Angelo] be allowed to sleep with other people. Knowing I can, if I want, makes it much easier to accept that Angelo is not my sexual one-and-all – if something becomes frustrating, I can always find a lover to fulfil my desires.

While she notes that Angelo is “not thrilled” about the idea of non-exclusivity, she contends that “I did not really make it optional”. Highly motivated by their lack of sexual chemistry (and Danielle’s lack of physical attraction to Angelo), she firmly believes that having the opportunity to have sex with other people will only strengthen the satisfaction she feels in her relationship with Angelo. For instance, she says:

I would be worried Angelo would leave me for someone with large breasts *if* we were monogamous, but if he can sleep with a large-breasted woman once in a while and then we can have our lovely life together the rest of the time, then there is no problem.

In Danielle’s understanding, sex cannot threaten their relationship; however, emotional non-monogamy *can*. So while she contends that “feminism gives you the confidence to be more assertive with your partner, and makes women more at ease with their sexuality, including lusting after other men”<sup>50</sup>, she also believe that if Angelo were to emotionally connect with someone outside the context of their relationship, this would serve as a threat - “it competes with what I see as the core of the relationship, which is the emotional intimacy and general getting-along on a daily basis”. It is clear that the ‘connectedness’ she refers to is at the core of her relationship with Angelo; as a result, this

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<sup>50</sup> It is remarkable how similar Danielle’s and Amy’s use of feminism is in their approach to non-monogamy.

understanding may also help guide her negotiations of non-monogamy and help in drawing the line, so to speak, around ideas of sexual non-monogamy and emotional monogamy.

In *Understanding Non-Monogamies*, editors Barker and Landridge caution against ‘taking one group of non-monogamous people, practices and ideologies as representative...both between and within groups and individuals practicing openly non-monogamous relationships’ (2010, 5, my italics). So, by considering Klesse’s research (on gay and bisexual non-monogamous relationships) alongside my own, I seek to further establish the kind of non-monogamy my participants are interested in, and more importantly, the kind they are not. In doing so, I aim to not only build on the theorizations of heterosexuality as outlined in chapter 2 (section 2.2), but also to locate my research as another way of understanding and thus ‘doing’ non-monogamy, as Klesse’s research provides a marked difference to the narratives constructed by Amy, Nicole and Danielle - thus highlighting the distinction between sexual and emotional non-monogamies even further, where the latter is framed as a more ‘responsible’ or ethical approach to non-monogamy (Klesse 2006, 571).

In the context of Klesse’s research, love is argued to be central to the discourse of polyamory, both etymologically and in terms of how it is experienced among his respondents – as a result, by emphasizing love, there is a de-emphasis on sex (Klesse 2006, 571). Polyamory then is not about having multiple sexual partners but rather, about investing in a small number of emotionally close long-term relationships (ibid). One of Klesse’s participants, Marianne, makes this distinction clear when she compares her own understanding of polyamory to that of a (poly) woman in her circle of friends: ‘she’s much more open to sort of sex with friends and sort of more casual sex, and I guess [for me] polyamory’s more about love and non-monogamy’s more about sex really’ (Klesse 2006, 572). So while Marianne’s friend understands non-monogamy in exclusively sexual terms (much like the participants in my research), Marianne contends that polyamory actually prioritizes and values emotional intimacy *more*. As highlighted throughout this section, within the context of my research, emotional intimacy *is* considered a threat, if not *the biggest threat* to the primary relationship. In fact, it is arguable that my participants’ experiences of sexual non-monogamy more accurately reflect the understandings often associated with ‘swinging’, which tends to be associated with ‘more sex or pleasure-focused styles of non-monogamy’ (Klesse 2014, 94). As Barker suggests, sexually open relationships ‘can maintain the privileging of romantic love over all other forms because



partners in the couple tend to be viewed as more important than other sexual relationships' (2013, 107).

#### 6.4.4 Summary

Many of the motivations behind Nicole, Danielle and Amy's experiences of non-monogamy are rooted in what Barker describes above - the desire to maintain the privileging of romantic love while exploring other sexual partners. Even when Amy was in a polyamorous relationship, she admitted that the main attraction was rooted in the sexual aspect. Moreover, I think the disinterest in emotional non-monogamy lends itself to potential feelings of insecurity and jealousy that some of my participants experience in their negotiations of sexual non-monogamy. This is highlighted in the way Nicole creates rules, and in Amy's (now) disinterest in being open with her new partner. As noted above, Barker and Landridge highlight the fact that many differences exist within and across individuals practicing non-monogamy, and I find it worth considering that perhaps the major difference between Klesse's findings and my own are the result of a longer cultural tradition of gay and bisexual non-monogamy, one that has perhaps been worked through differently than heterosexual non-monogamy. I say this because of the very rose-coloured, self-assured accounts of non-monogamy in Klesse's research - where relationships are invested in on primarily emotional terms, and where sex may not even come into play. My own participants appear to be much less assured, providing hesitant accounts where the emotionally monogamous couple is still upheld as the relationship ideal. As Wilkinson notes, despite the fact that individuals choose 'when, how and with whom we have intimate relations with, it appears that we may not be loving that differently at all' (2011, 63).

It is also important to note that initiating conversations about the possibility and potentiality of non-monogamy tends to emerge from a feminist understanding about the freedom to explore sexual partners and practices outside the context of a stable relationship, and as a such, it was Nicole, Amy and Danielle who began these dialogues with their respective partners<sup>51</sup>; it is my contention that this strengthens the possibility of non-monogamy as a potentially feminist way of managing and approaching relationships. It is possible then, that these women's feminist values support their desire to be sexually non-monogamous, but that privileging the idea of romantic love (and emotional

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<sup>51</sup> This was also found in Megan and Ashley's approach to discussions (of non-monogamy) with their current or past partners.

monogamy) remains an important feature in navigating their understanding of non-monogamous relationships. For instance, now that Amy is monogamous with Mike, the need for “other options” is no longer required. So while feminism may support the right to sexual freedom and expression - to explore sex outside the context of a relationship - the narratives presented throughout confirm Barker’s continua approach, whereby sexual and emotional monogamy are managed and negotiated separately and differently. With that in mind, the following section further unpacks the importance placed on emotional monogamy and intimacy (and its connection to sex).

## 6.5 Pleasures derived from sex

The narratives presented here are framed as an extension of sex because they are often located within the broader context of a relationship - here I refer to ways of understanding pleasure as something that is derived from sex. In order to establish these pleasures, I first draw on participants’ reflections of what ‘good sex’ entails.<sup>52</sup> In doing so, I draw on a radical feminist critique of love - one that is similar to the critique of monogamy outlined in the previous section. The aim of including narratives of ‘good sex’ is to highlight that the common theme put forth by participants is that there is an important connection between sex and love (or, emotional intimacy) and that this connection is incredibly important in creating a sense of pleasure that can be derived from a sexual encounter and grounded in the broader context of a romantic relationship. For instance, Beasley et al. suggest that because emotional closeness is experienced as such an important feature of intimacy, it is not surprising that ‘romantic love remains highly influential in organizing intimate relations’ (2012, 41). As will be outlined below, because ‘good sex’ is often equated with a sense of emotional intimacy, I argue alongside Beasley et al. that understandings of pleasure can include ‘sharing everyday joys rather than grand passions and are [therefore] about recognizing (hetero)sexuality as something broader than penetrative intercourse’ (2012, 67). Thus, while I have theoretically called for an expansion to the definition of (sexual) pleasure so as to include the pleasures that can be derived from sex (found in chapter 2, section 2.3 [desire and pleasure]), I turn now to participants’ lived experiences of physical closeness and emotional intimacy in order to highlight how these understandings do indeed shape the broader context of sex.

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<sup>52</sup> I realize I am drawing on actual sexual encounters by doing this, but as will be shown, this is to illustrate how these ways of understanding are actually grounded within a broader context.

### 6.5.1 Critiquing love

In exploring the connection between sex and love, it is important to note that while I am interested in unpacking the idea that 'good sex' is equated with a sense of emotional intimacy, I am not interested in exploring concepts of love as they are theoretically imagined, as this lies outside of the key aims of my research. Feminist critiques of love, and in particular, marriage, arguably date back to key theorists like Wollstonecraft (1872), Goldman (1971) and Beauvoir (1949). In these earlier instances, love and marriage were considered the basis upon which women's oppression existed as the latter is seen as a way for men to possess women, and where women remain subservient (Wilkinson 2011, 62). From a 1970s radical feminist standpoint, many of these critiques were still prominent. In *Straight Sex: Rethinking the Politics of Pleasure* (1994), Segal argues that while feminists in the 1970s were politicizing the area of sex and reproduction, the concept of love was also being presented as a 'major obstacle to [women's] ideal of relations based upon autonomy and equality, wedded, it seemed, to a romantic ideology which served only to keep women subordinate' (1994, 45). The implication here is that the politics of feminism cannot so easily co-exist with notions of romantic love because within such circumstances, women are disadvantaged from the outset. Here Beauvoir highlights how this has historically occurred through marriage:

She takes his name; she joins his religion, integrates into his class, his world; she belongs to his family, she becomes his other 'half' [...] she is annexed to her husband's universe; she gives him her person: she owes him her virginity and strict fidelity (1949, 442).

A generation of second wave feminists like Firestone (1971), Freedman (1979), Millet (1969), and Rich (1980) argued for their own utopian versions of love and in doing so, presented romantic coupledness as a patriarchal structure where women, quite simply, lose their sense of self and identity. These critiques of romantic love suggested that women need to be freed from the burden of reproduction in order to be truly equal (Firestone, 1971). Some believed women must live communally (without men) and be able to love freely in order to reject the assumption that 'we all desire exclusive romantic love' (Wilkinson 2011, 162). As I have noted in the previous section, a feminist critique of *monogamy* argues many of these same points. So where monogamy is said to promote dependence, possessiveness and jealousy (and therefore hinder female autonomy), love is similarly said to debilitate women because of its 'accompanying destructive emotions of jealousy and possessiveness' (Segal 1994, 46) – or rather, where the concept of romantic love 'affords a means of emotional manipulation which the male is free to exploit' (Millet

1969, 37). However, the narratives I present below work against these feminist critiques and in turn, offer ways of understanding where emotional intimacies and romantic love are simply understood to make sex 'better'.

### 6.5.2 What is 'good' sex?

When reflecting on certain sexual encounters during both their diary and interviews, it became clear that some women alluded to this 'good sex' narrative. And while there is merit in Schnarch's contention that 'nobody gets a yardstick that measures "good sex"' (1994, cited in Smith 2007, 70) – in other words, I recognize that there is no universal understanding of what makes sex 'good' - there is, however, a common theme that emerges in the context of this research. Using a self-determination approach in order to ascertain what makes sex 'good', Smith's research tracked participants' sexual encounters and in doing so, found that if participants perceived that their sexual needs had been met, this resulted in more satisfying and positive experiences, and greater sense of sexual well-being. In these instances, 'good sex' is said to occur. Smith implemented his approach from Sheldon et al.'s study centred on 'what makes a good day?'. On days when these participants felt that their fundamental needs had been met, these were considered 'good days' - evidenced by satisfaction in mood and a sense of well-being (Sheldon et al. 1996; Reis et al. 2000).

For the participants in my research who alluded to the 'good sex' narrative, I asked what kind of elements they felt were included in order to claim a 'good' sexual encounter. Dawn said sex is a very emotional experience and that it includes "lots of touching and lots of kissing and lots of closeness". For Cleo, it is a sense of "emotional closeness", one that she says often develops *alongside* physical intimacy, which makes for 'good sex'. Sandy echoes this sentiment in that "the sense of closeness" she experiences when in a relationship helps to produce a 'good' sexual encounter. Moreover, Sandy says it is *only* in the context of a relationship where this "sense of being close to someone like that [emotionally]" emerges. The obvious and common thread here is that there is a sense of closeness – an emotional connection or a sense of emotional intimacy that goes into making 'good sex'. Going back to Smith then, it is clear that within the context of my research, great importance is placed on emotional intimacy and that this therefore facilitates experiences of 'good sex'. Emotional intimacy is perceived as a fundamental

need in the sexual wellbeing of my participants and perhaps plays a more crucial role (than physical intimacy) in facilitating a pleasure that goes beyond the context of sex.

In considering heterosexual couples who engage in distance relationships<sup>53</sup>, Beasley et al. suggest that these couples work to undermine normative conceptions of intimacy because of the fact that they are not in close physical proximity. As a result, they tend to have a much 'broader view of (embodied) pleasures' (Beasley et al. 2012, 68). These 'distance relaters' and their subsequent understandings of pleasure work well alongside those presented within my own research as they highlight similarities in the way that pleasures are various and not simply about conventional sex - rather, that they can be experienced by the 'sharing of small pleasures' (Beasley et al. 2012, 81) – ones that extend beyond the context of sex.

For instance, when talking about the specialness of reuniting, the common narrative of distance couples is not characterized by 'highly intense portrayals of sexual excess, but [rather, they] communicate much about fairly quiet pleasures probably recognisable to many heterosexual couples' (Beasley et al. 2012, 77). What Beasley et al. refer to here is the pleasure in physical closeness, sitting in bed reading together, cooking for each other, and showing affection - where pleasure is experienced 'in just being together' (Beasley et al. 2012, 77). These instances of pleasure may include physical intimacy - for example, their respondents Joanne and Mark said that when they are able to spend a weekend together 'we hold hands a lot and we just, well mostly [Mark] gives me back rubs – but that kind of physical contact, [we have] quite a lot of that' (Beasley et al. 2012, 75). So while physical intimacy *is* referred to here, and moreover, the physical contact described *does* have the capacity to be coded as sexual and appear within sexual encounters, Joanne and Mark illustrate the significance of emotional closeness and the pleasure in *not* being sexual.

For Danielle, the pleasure in simply 'being together' is at the core of her long-term relationship with Angelo. She believes that "relational compatibility" is the very foundation of a good relationship; in fact, Danielle says that when her and Angelo are "60 or 70 [years old], companionship will prove to be more important than sexual chemistry". A lack of sexual chemistry is therefore less of a concern than a lack of emotional intimacy would be, as it is the latter which gives Danielle the satisfaction required for a well-rounded relationship. This sentiment is echoed in the way almost all distance couples focus on

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<sup>53</sup> In the findings that Beasley et al. consider, distance relationships are said to be a result of work commitments, care responsibilities or the desire for personal autonomy (2012,46).

‘missing gentle touch rather than passionate sex’ (Beasley et al. 2012, 75). For example, in Beasley et al.’s study, Liam and Kirsten talk about how they spend a lot of time in bed when they reunite. However, Kirsten admits they are ‘just not really doing anything actually but erm just doing those things like y’know sitting reading together’ (Beasley et al. 2012, 75). Liam and Kirsten blur the boundaries between what is considered sexual intimacy and what is experienced as physical intimacy because the physical closeness Kirsten draws on here does not necessarily amount to sex – as such, I argue that this intimacy helps to ground the broader context of an emotionally intimate relationship. Moreover, it is important to note that these day-to-day pleasures are not experienced as boring but rather as a ‘frisson of excitement’ (Beasley et al. 2012, 77) – where the pleasure in being together can be derived from a relationship that might include sex, but is not defined by it.

This same kind of excitement experienced in the everyday pleasures of a relationship was articulated by Danielle when she sent me an email (a couple of months after our interview) to say that she and Angelo were getting married in the coming weeks. So although Danielle’s diary was littered with internal deliberations about their lack of sexual chemistry and “mismatched libidos”, the excitement in spending the rest of her life with Angelo draws on the importance of this broader understanding of pleasure. As she says, their compatibility is precisely what she loves about their (non-sexual) life together. This works to strengthen the argument that ‘considerable care and enjoyment for each other [is] displayed not simply through conventional sex, but via the sharing of small pleasures’ (Beasley et al. 2012, 81).

Throughout this section little attention has been paid to the role of feminism in these broader understandings of pleasure. For instance, there is no indication that love is debilitating to women; there is no sense of having to justify the desire for conventional heteronormative ideals – in fact, as Nicole insists, she is not ‘bad feminist’ if she subscribes to the romance ideal or experiences a desire for emotional intimacy. Inhabiting these norms *as a feminist* is illustrated by GoLM when she reflects on an instance where her fiancé (now husband) complimented her cooking:

[He] told me I’d make a great wife. Obviously he is the only person who can get away with saying this to me. I genuinely do want to be a good wife...but oddly, for a feminist, his positive reinforcement is also a massive turn on, because he genuinely loves me.

Because there is a sense of trust, an intimacy formed beyond the context of sex, GoLM can “oddly, for a feminist” (as she says) experience a sense of pleasure in her investment to being a good wife *and* a feminist. Patricia Payette’s contribution to *Jane Sexes It Up: True Confessions of Feminist Desire* (2002) grapples with this same theme. Newly engaged, Payette reflects on her role as a ‘feminist wife’. In doing so, she suggests that the desire to be both a feminist and a wife can actually work to represent an understanding of feminism that acknowledges its varying capacities, and in particular, where feminism can undergo transformations ‘at the hands of young women like myself who are refusing to submit to outmoded [feminist] paradigms that tells us what we should and shouldn’t desire for ourselves’ (Payette 2002, 141). Like Payette, GoLM acknowledges that there are many different understandings of feminism, and as such, she is entitled to her own version, even if this is critiqued or found to be contradictory by other feminists. This echoes Nicole’s underlying feminist principle – “I’m not going to make my life adapt to feminism. I’m going to make feminism adapt to my life and lifestyle” – even if this involves inhabiting and investing in the romance ideal, or the privileging of emotional intimacy.

### **6.5.3 Summary**

This section has considered how understandings of ‘good sex’ are closely linked to experiences of emotional intimacy; in doing so, emotional intimacy and romantic love often emerged in participants’ accounts as an ideal form of organizing relationships. Although little attention has been paid to the role of feminism in facilitating emotional intimacy, it is important to note that feminism is implicit throughout and therefore plays a role within the narratives described above because they offer a critical understanding of pleasure, one that indeed, goes beyond the context of sex and includes a much wider set of embodied, everyday pleasures. As such, I have chosen to compare these experiences of pleasure with heterosexual couples in distance relationships as I see many similarities in the way pleasure is understood in much broader terms - grounded in an emotionally intimate relationship that includes but is not defined by physical (and sexual) intimacy. As Beasley et al. suggest, heterosexual pleasures are various and most certainly extend beyond the context of a sexual encounter – ‘they involve talking, touching and giving and taking pleasure. Its everyday practice is both thoroughly scripted and full of surprises’ (2012, 82).

## 6.6 Conclusions

This chapter has considered the relationship between feminism and heterosexuality in a context beyond sex. In doing so, ways of understanding this complex relationship are largely grounded in the context of a romantic relationship (as ways of understanding pleasure and relationship arrangements have shown) or situated as an extension of lived realities (shown through an exploration of fantasy narratives). At times, these ways of understanding appear to be directly informed and shaped by a sense of feminist politics – at others, feminism did not explicitly emerge. This highlights how multiple understandings of feminism can lead to and inform multiple experiences of heterosexuality; therefore, I have attempted to illustrate a more nuanced and complex approach to understanding feminist heterosexualities as they are situated beyond a sexual encounter.

I began by exploring ways of understanding submission - here I drew on fantasy narratives where some element of force was represented. I highlighted that feminism plays an active and formative role in the construction of 'feminist fantasies', and in doing so, I made an original contribution to what little literature is available on the effect of feminist beliefs in women's fantasies of force. However, it is my contention that more needs to be unpacked here in terms of how feminist beliefs might affect *other* fantasies as well. For instance, there is evidence to suggest (in my own research as well as Zurbriggen and Yost's [2004]) that fantasy is also the place where female pleasure is guaranteed. It would be interesting to consider the role feminism plays here as this may also draw on a set of understandings where female pleasure is *not* guaranteed in real-life encounters. That said, a similar distinction between fantasy and lived realities was a strong theme in considering force fantasies because participants often spoke of fantasy as a potential reality, or as something they want to feed into their actual sexual encounters - and in the case of Ruby, something that became a reality against her will.

Next, I went on to consider feminist motivations for challenging understandings and experiences of monogamy. The common theme here was straightforward - feminism was understood to support the right to engage in casual sex, and moreover, encourages women to seek sex outside the context of a conventionally monogamous relationship. Here I suggested that casual sex narratives work to problematize, question and reflect on the sexual double standard. In some cases, experiencing the double standard led to a disengagement from casual sex; in others, it was viewed as a way to reclaim sexual



freedom and trouble the cultural imperative of monogamy as well as the stereotype that women want love and not *just* sex. The discussion generated here lends itself to a broader cultural context where women are often pressured to be sexual, yet simultaneously stigmatized if they are *too* sexual. Moreover, it touches on what Valenti (2011) refers to as the ‘future of feminism’, where younger women are perhaps organizing themselves under a rhetoric of feminism that seeks to reclaim the sexual double standard. This in-your-face tone that Valenti sees as the basis for a new wave of feminism was echoed by Vanessa when I asked what her sexual mission statement might be. She quickly replied by stating: “I am”. She elaborated on what this meant by saying, “[it means] I don't need to explain anything. I'm here, so I deserve respect and that should be enough, I shouldn't have to ask for it.”

From here, I drew on participants who were in various stages of negotiating open relationships with their primary partners. Here it was important to bear in mind that these women only want multiple *sexual* relationships. The motivation for engaging in multiple sexual relationships was, again, based on an understanding of feminism that allows women the choice to express their sexuality in ways that challenge conventional understandings of monogamy. I grounded the idea that non-monogamy is a potentially feminist way of managing relationships by drawing on the fact that it was the participants who initiated these conversations with their respective partners. Furthermore, I made it continually clear throughout this section that there is a marked difference between wanting multiple sexual relationships and wanting multiple love (or emotionally intimate) relationships. As such, I refer back to Wilkinson's claim here - that despite a newfound control to have sex when, how and with whom one wants, having sex differently is not (in the context of this research) necessarily accompanied by the desire to *love* differently. The latter, in fact, was rejected as a possibility because emotional non-monogamy was viewed as a threat to the primary relationship. In doing so, I contribute to the existing literature on understanding non-monogamies by drawing on feminist-identified women who have sex with men – as Barker and Landridge contend, the groups and individuals who practice non-monogamy provide multiple meanings and understandings about practicing openly non-monogamous relationships (2010, 5); what I have included here is another set of individuals who practice non-monogamy and as a result, have highlighted another way of *doing* non-monogamy – one that is characterized by an emphasis on sex and a de-emphasis on love.

Therefore, I suggested that what remains part of the heterosexual relationship ideal is a sense of emotional intimacy and connectedness – one that, as the final section of

this chapter showed, facilitates 'good sex' and moreover, locates pleasure in a much broader understanding of (hetero)sexuality. Here I focused on the simple, everyday pleasures that can be derived from sex and grounded in the broader context of an emotionally intimate relationship. I rejected many feminist critiques of romantic love as the women in this research aspire to emotionally intimate closeness and moreover, invest in the romance ideal and broader understandings of pleasure that are often grounded in the context of their romantic relationship. I compared these ways of understanding pleasure to those suggested by couples who engage in distance relationships as both provide a set of experiences where pleasure is understood to occur beyond the context of sex, and as a result, is rooted in a much more encompassing understanding of pleasure. In doing so, this chapter has offered an array of lived experiences that go beyond the context of sex, grounded in broader understandings of pleasure, submission, and what it means to question heteronormative relationships, all in an effort to highlight nuanced and complex understandings of the relationship between feminism and heterosexuality in practice.

## 7. Conclusions

**There is feminism and there is fucking. As I see it, they can fit together quite as smoothly (or as painfully) as feminism and any other human activity. Straight feminists [...] have everything to gain from asserting our non-coercive desire to fuck if, when, how and as we choose.**

**(Segal 1994, 318)**

### 7.1 In theory: feminism and heterosexuality

This thesis has addressed a range of theoretical concerns regarding the relationship between feminism and heterosexuality, and in doing so has attempted to provide a nuanced understanding of the complexities and possibilities that Segal alludes to above. In order to accomplish this goal, the theoretical framework of this thesis was informed by a feminist phenomenological poststructuralist approach. As a result, it worked to emphasize the underlying notion that the subject is both capable of creating meaning while simultaneously shaped by pre-established, already existing meanings. This theoretical model has proven to be valuable as it recognizes the many possibilities that emerge from the subject's actions, but which also seeks to ground those actions in a broader socio-cultural context.

As separate theoretical frameworks, feminist poststructuralism and feminist phenomenology are not enough to wholly account for the complexities and possibilities of many heterosexualities. For instance, I have argued that an experiential-based framework like feminist phenomenology does not fully explain the lived experiences that occur within the broader social world; in order to understand Western, patriarchal norms and rules (as well as their subsequent implications with regards to the female subject), I recognized the need to attach the concept of female lived experience to something larger and more broadly based. Feminist poststructuralism works to supplement these shortcomings as it understands that there is an already established world, beyond our bodily gestures, that seeks to explain our experiences for us (Weedon 1987). That said, a framework of feminist poststructuralism, while interested in offering more deeply rooted critiques of where

meanings come from and how they inform the subject, can sometimes work to deny the subject control over their actions and experiences, where the subject can be reduced to a mere 'carrier of citations' (Vasterling 2010, 213), leaving little room for the possibility of the subject's actions and lived experiences. Feminist poststructuralism has the capacity to neglect the embodied contours of the individual and furthermore, does not necessarily allow for diverse subjectivities. Therefore, in order to maintain the validity and importance of lived experience, I identified the value in a feminist phenomenological approach and thus fused the strengths of both frameworks.

Fusing these frameworks to establish the theoretical location of this thesis meant I could validate the sense of self-determination and identification in my participants' lived experiences and thus open up the possibility to engage with many different heterosexualities; moreover, I could simultaneously recognize that each participant's set of lived experiences ultimately exists within a wider context. In other words, as individuals they are part of culture that has pre-defined meanings attached to the very narratives they produce (Weedon 1987). As such, it was most important to locate participants as both an acting body and a 'semantic template' (Bell 2000, 182) – both a producer and carrier of meaning. Therefore, the intersection of a feminist phenomenological and feminist poststructuralist approach offered a theoretical space in which I was able to conceptualize both the complexities and constraints of living in a Western, patriarchal culture *as well as* the possibilities and potentialities of understanding the lived experiences of feminism and heterosexuality in practice.

I have argued that some areas of poststructuralism are less suited for some of the major theoretical concerns of this thesis. In understanding agency I argued for more of a phenomenologically inspired account, one that is based on embodiment and the body's ability to act and create meaning rather than something the individual needs to free themselves from in order to acquire a certain level of autonomy. If *acts* are understood as the means of creating an agentic subject, then it starts to become clear that the focus is less on the Western, patriarchal constraints that produce the subject as agentic, and more so on the ability to make activities one's own. By focusing on agency as something to be attained once independent from the constraint of dominant social norms (which, as previously stated, is how poststructuralism frames it), agency is only ever understood in dualistic, dichotomous terms where the subject either confirms or subverts dominant social norms. Understanding the possibility for agency from a feminist phenomenological

approach means that the subjects' actions become understood as a lived set of embodied practices and potentialities.

This conception opens up the possibilities for agency. It places importance on what the subject is capable of doing, rather than something to be attained once independent from the constraints she experiences, as well as the subsequent meanings attached to her as a gendered body. By considering the notion of agency as a sort of 'freedom to', the focus centres on the individuals' lived practices rather than abstract symbolic structures; in doing so, the possibilities for understanding female lived experience begin to expand and diversify. As Grosz suggests, we should keep the meaning of agency open and constructively work to 'gain new knowledge by creating narratives out of the phenomenologically accessible, yet never fully intelligible dimensions of our bodily and relational lives' (2010, 160).

Overall, the theoretical location that I have reiterated throughout this thesis, both in its review of the literature and analysis of findings, revolves around the idea that both feminist phenomenology and feminist poststructuralism have their limits. However, when working through each theory's strengths and fusing them into one framework, an arduous but valuable task, they usefully locate my research subject, the Western, patriarchal culture in which she lives, the norms that effectively operate within said culture, and the way these norms can be negotiated, rewritten, inhabited, lived and embodied.

## **7.2 By design: feminism and heterosexuality**

The design for this research emerged as an extension of its theoretical location, in that I needed to provide an avenue through which the social world could be constructed by the actions (and stories) of participants, who are, in turn, being constructed by them (Scott 1992, 37). In order to establish this as an ontological positioning, I drew on Plummer's understanding that stories are resources which help the individual to make sense of their social world (1995, 176). In doing so, these stories represent a particular moment in time and place. Moreover, I argued that experience is the foundation upon which explanations are built and through which meanings are made (Scott 1992, 25); however, I equally stressed that these experiences are also already interpreted in the cultural context in which they occur. With this idea of story-telling in mind, I created a research design that legitimated the intimate experiences I aimed to learn more about and that placed my participants' stories at the forefront of analysis.

While diaries have a rich history in areas like the sociology of health and illness, they only appear within sex-based sociological (and to a lesser extent, feminist) research when linked to issues surrounding sexual behaviour and sexual health. Previous work that greatly helped to inform the design of my research included the socio-sexual investigations of gay men and HIV/AIDS (Coxon, 1999); examining memory for heterosexual college students' sexual experiences (Garry et al. 2002); sexual experiences of men who have sex with men (Horvath et al 2007); eliciting emotion in HIV/AIDS research (Thomas 2007); and, performing sexual identities (Holliday 2004). The focus and aim of these studies are quite narrow; as mentioned above, there is little stemming beyond issues relating to sexual health or sexual risk behaviour (with Holliday being the notable exception here). While the format of these diaries is varied – they range from logging daily sexual behaviour, time-stamped daily web entries, questionnaire diaries, photo, and video diaries - I was interested in creating a space that would enable more of an unedited stream of consciousness. It was my contention that this style of diary would allow participants to tell their stories in their own uninterrupted way. Because this method of diary-writing is an under-utilized and thus under-researched area within sexuality studies, I conducted a short survey (with my participants) about the experience of keeping a diary so as to provide a pathway for further research in this area<sup>54</sup>.

It is important to note that I am not claiming that the diary or interview process were original in and of themselves; neither am I suggesting that when paired together, diary-interview, that this two-stage approach is necessarily innovative. I *am* claiming that the feminist methodology that informed my design is underused in feminist sex research, particularly when grounded in the content, research subject, and overall aim of this thesis. In other words, I operated under Oakley's advice that as a feminist researcher, I would be more likely to gain intimacy through reciprocity; and that investing myself in perhaps unexpected ways 'is the condition under which people come to know each other and to admit others in their lives' (1981, 58). Therefore, I suggest that using this feminist methodological approach in my research design positively impacted the findings, enabling rich and detailed narratives, fostered through a rapport between myself and my participants – one that was continually built over the course of the diary phase (via weekly email reminders and arranging interview times) and that carried itself through to the interviews. I credit the generous information shared during our interviews to the

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<sup>54</sup> I have presented these findings at the 2014 BSA Annual Conference at University of Leeds and the Transformative Feminist Methodologies Conference at Durham University (September 2014). My talk was entitled, "The feelings and thoughts were all there, I just needed to write them down": The use of solicited diaries in explorations of female desire and pleasure.

understanding that I already knew many things about each participant before having entered the interview itself. During the diary phase, I had been entrusted with information that, in some cases, had never been told to anyone else, and the interviews benefited as a result.

While I will reiterate here that I understand and acknowledge that this approach, and my position as an insider, does not eliminate power relations between myself and participants, I do believe that there existed a shared understanding that I too, was attempting to negotiate the same themes in my own heterosexual practices, identity, and relationships, and that as a result, information was disclosed that may not have been disseminated to another researcher. Therefore, what I am arguing here is that the use of solicited diaries and the subsequent rapport established with participants helped in creating and further enabling a safe space. I also believe that the two stage process, diary-interview, enabled such productive and fruitful interview sessions *because* of the quality of the diaries and the knowledge they afforded me going into the interviews. To my knowledge, the process I implemented in this research has not been used elsewhere in sexuality studies.

### **7.3 In practice: feminism and heterosexuality**

This thesis has addressed one overarching, two-part research question about feminism and heterosexuality in practice: how do feminist values inform, shape and influence sexual practices, identities and relationships? How do these practices, identities and relationships in turn, inform one's feminist consciousness? This wide scope of address lends itself to many different areas of exploration; as a result, I chose to frame and ground the findings of this research across three distinct contexts – within sex, between sex, and beyond sex. Within each of these contexts the same three themes were applied - submission, desire and pleasure, and what it means to que(e)ry various aspects of heterosexuality. Each theme then took on slightly different meaning as it moved through and across each context<sup>55</sup>.

By approaching the findings in this way, I aimed to highlight the fact that feminist values inform, shape and influence much more than just what an individual might interested in, in bed. So while choosing to be submissive, negotiating (female) pleasure,

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<sup>55</sup> To refer back to the visual diagram, see chapter 1, section 1.4.

and the inclusion of non-normative sexual practices might occur *within* the context of a sexual encounter, the themes I discovered extend far beyond this. For instance, they also influence: the way desire is talked about; everyday experiences of gender normative behaviour; heterosexuality as a compulsory identity; fantasy; everyday pleasures that are grounded in romantic relationships; and how those relationships are sometimes managed in sexually non-monogamous ways. What these wide-ranging themes suggest is that participants often reflexively negotiate the role of feminism within the context of their (hetero)sexual *identities* and *relationships*, and not just in the context of their sexual *practices*.

Broadening the scope of analysis to include what occurs between and beyond sex meant I could offer nuanced and complex understandings of the relationship between feminism and heterosexuality; in doing so, I have also highlighted that the themes explored throughout can sometimes produce a complicated relationship between feminism and heterosexuality, where finding the appropriate balance varies from individual to individual, and moreover, is not without its continual navigation and constant negotiation. Participants experienced and expressed this in a variety of ways; while some felt that little tension existed between their sense of politics and sexuality, others had worked through the tensions over the course of time - characterized by 29 year old Danielle as “a long process of acceptance”. Others more explicitly addressed the struggle to negotiate or manage their feminism and heterosexuality - sometimes to the point where it appeared as if one would have to be comprised so that the values of the other could rightfully exist.

Regardless of how participants had worked out the balance between their feminism and heterosexuality, there became a number of areas where they felt they had to justify their (hetero)sexual practices, identity and relationships, much more than they felt the need to justify their understanding of feminism. For instance, this occurred when Wendy felt the need to justify her partner’s masculinity; when Cleo defended her choice to have sex with a woman; when Ashley reflected on her desire to ‘cut out’ her attraction to men; when Nicole admitted to subscribing to heteronormative, romance ideals; and when a number of participants chose to engage in submissive sexual acts and practices, and entertained sexually submissive fantasies. To whom these behaviours were justified mostly included other feminists, ones who would arguably disagree with their actions and behaviours; and secondly, to themselves, which returns to the point that many kinds of tension are capable of emerging in understanding the relationship between feminism and heterosexuality.



## 7.4 Contributing to the literature

By exploring the many ways feminism has been shown to impact and shape heterosexual practices, identities, and relationships, this thesis has contributed to the literature in a variety of ways and at times, created new discussions entirely. For instance, I offered ways of understanding fantasies of submission that include the effect of a feminist consciousness – an area only explored by Shulman and Horne (2006) and thus, where relatively little is known. Although further empirical research is required here, I have started a discussion that seeks to consider how a feminist consciousness effects the contents of a fantasy and whether feminist-identified women can and/or want to ‘let their feminism go’ in the context of this safe space. Moreover, I argued against previous work that suggests (on more general terms) that women who identify with feminism are found to experience less sexual guilt (Bay-Cheng et al. 2007; Fitz and Zucker 2013; Schick et al. 2008). In the case of submission fantasies, I highlighted a set of experiences where guilt is experienced by feminist-identified women and that the guilt experienced is feminist-informed.

I also broadened understandings of heterosexuality as an identity category by offering a wheel-like sexual spectrum that emerged out of the necessity to self-identify and thus, where (hetero)sexuality is understood as fluid and diverse, unfixed and ever-changing. The sexual spectrum I proposed resembles that of a colour wheel, where identities are able to shift in hue, tone and saturation, bleeding into one another through a variety of sequences and paths. It is my contention that re-imagining (hetero)sexuality in this way works to defy the often monolithic and boring reputation it has acquired; moreover, it seeks to include the possibility for non-heterosexual practices as part of an otherwise (hetero)sexual identity, and vice versa. Because these fluid and diverse meanings were a key component in many participants’ understandings and experiences of heterosexuality, it was necessary to implement a sexual spectrum that stemmed beyond the assumption that heterosexuality needs no explanation, and that heterosexual individuals can be neatly packaged into this category. The spectrum I have offered aims to include non-normative practices and non-heterosexual desires so as to open up the possibilities for understanding many heterosexualities. In doing so, I have also challenged the idea that there exists some kind of (mythical) heterosexual norm for ‘doing’ heterosexual sex.

I have further contributed to discussions on non-monogamy by focusing on a group of individuals who provide another way of ‘doing’ non-monogamy, one that is

centred exclusively on having multiple sexual partners and initiated by feminist-informed approaches to sexual freedom and a woman's right to seek pleasure outside the context of a romantic coupling. The implication found here was that emotional monogamy remains the ideal form of managing a relationship, but that feminism allowed participants to seek sex outside the context of that emotionally intimate relationship. While neither of these points may appear original on their own terms, when positioned together they create a way of understanding non-monogamy that both seeks to transform heterosexuality through a feminist lens while reinforcing one of its most culturally pervasive ideals – romance. Here I also separated my findings from the rose-coloured view of polyamory which is argued to be centred on emphasising love while de-emphasising sex and in turn, drew on narratives that suggest non-monogamy is not so easily negotiated (as feelings of insecurity and jealousy are admittedly experienced) but that feminism, at times, makes navigating those feelings easier.

Last, throughout all three analysis chapters, I have drawn on an understanding of agency that seeks to disrupt the idea that an individual needs to reject, subvert or challenge gender and sexual norms in order to gain some form of agency. I *have* presented this view of agency in some instances - for example, when I explored what it meant to 'break the rules' surrounding gender normative behaviour. However, I more commonly urged an understanding of agency where inhabiting and investing in dominant heterosexual norms also offers agentic capacity on the basis that these investments recognize the possibility that heterosexual norms might also be deep-seated desires - regardless of what particular areas of feminism might suggest, and regardless of what cultural expectations might purport. These understandings developed across all three contexts – within, between, and beyond sex – and most often occurred in conversations that revolved around justifying or not justifying whatever particular norm was being inhabited, transformed, or aspired to. For instance, while choosing to be submissive in the context of sex *as a feminist* might appear to warrant a sense of justification, I highlighted that this is not always the case. Participants were often aware of their perceived contradictory sexual practice and politics, but so long as these were negotiated alongside their feminist consciousness, then, as GoLM said, "the outside world is irrelevant". Gender normative behaviour (between sex) and fantasies of submission (beyond sex) were also themes where participants most often felt the need to justify their practices or desires. The implication here was that what they were doing could, would or perhaps even should be regarded as contradictory to their feminist identities. While internal conflict and negotiations emerged in some instances, in many cases accepting these contradictions on

the basis that the desires are informed by what the body and self find pleasurable, were indicative of an understanding of agency that is about having the freedom *to* explore desires, pleasures, identities and practices, and not in what the subject must remove herself from in order to escape gendered understandings about what she should and should not do within, between and beyond the context of (hetero)sex.

## 7.5 Engaging in current cultural debates

Many of the themes produced in my analysis drew on much larger cultural debates, found in both feminist and mainstream discussions on sex, sexuality, and feminist identities. While the bulk of these discussions were introduced in the analysis, I offer them in more detail here to reiterate the cultural relevance of this thesis. Overall, these discussions link back to debates around ‘choice’, where choosing particular sexual practices, identities and relationships are at the forefront of consideration. For instance, generated through notions of justification and non-justification, the idea of what it might mean to be a ‘bad feminist’ has emerged in many areas of this thesis. This was a concept that many participants explicitly acknowledged as it was a sentiment implicit when considering whether they did or did not feel the need to justify certain aspects of their sexual practices or overall sexuality<sup>56</sup>. However, what it means to be a ‘bad feminist’ was not always a result of how participants actually felt about the practice, identity, or relationship in question (although at times it was); more commonly, these justifications revolved around how they might be perceived by other feminists.

Take Beyoncé’s recent closing act performance at MTV’s Video Music Awards as an example: while singing ‘Flawless’ in front of a screen that displayed the neon white glow of the word ‘FEMINIST’, it has been argued that this solidified feminism as Beyoncé’s official brand (Zeisler 2014). Although she has publicly defined herself as a ‘modern-day feminist’, openly discussed gender inequality in mainstream magazines (notably *GQ*, a men’s magazine that would not normally cover such topics), the VMA performance has been celebrated as somehow ‘showier, more definitive’ (Zeisler 2014) in her claim on a feminist identity. However, Beyoncé has also received many criticisms for her claim on feminism, wherein ‘booty shaking and stamping your husband’s last name on a product of your own

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<sup>56</sup> 29 year old Nicole even directed me to an article she had recently written for a French Canadian feminist website/blog on the same topic. I have refrained from referencing it here as it would contravene her choice to remain anonymous.

creativity makes a lot of folks question your feminist values' (Harris 2013). For instance, a 2013 article in *The Guardian* was simply titled: 'Beyoncé: being photographed in your underwear doesn't help feminism' (interestingly, this is the same *GQ* shoot and interview mentioned above). She has been criticized for calling her solo world tour 'The Mrs Carter Show' (a nod to her husband, who does not use this surname himself), and in February 2013, she received much backlash for her costume choice during the Super Bowl XLVII halftime show – arguably highlighting the fact that 'the male gaze objectifies and fetishizes the otherwise powerful female body' (Harris 2013). With these instances in mind, Beyoncé's contradiction, so it seems, assumes that embracing sexuality is not *also* for women; that such a powerful female does not need to use her husband's name on her own world tour; and, that her sexed-up performance at the Super Bowl centres on a sporting event that caters to a predominantly male audience. So while perhaps outside the particular themes within the relationship between heterosexuality and feminism explored in this thesis, what I aim to highlight by drawing on Beyoncé's feminism is the ensuing and continual debate in mainstream and popular culture surrounding *who*, *what*, and *how* feminist-identified women always seems to hold the potential to be perceived as a 'bad' feminist.

Pioneered out of the rigid, judgmental divisiveness of second wave feminism (Snyder-Hall 2010, 257), third wave understandings of choice seek to recognize the plurality of women's experiences and thus, the multiple definitions and varying capacities of feminisms – in other words, where Beyoncé's feminism is *not* undermined by how she chooses to express her femininity, sexuality, and personality (as a stage performer). Professor Roxane Gay, author of *Bad Feminist* (2014), argues that there exists an essential feminism from which notions of right and wrong (or 'good' and 'bad' feminists) emerge; and moreover, where there are consequences for doing feminism wrong<sup>57</sup> (Gay, 2012). Much like an essential understanding of gender or sexuality, an essentialist view of feminism undoubtedly ignores the complexities of human experience and individuality; and thus, leaves little room for discordant points of view, collective effort, and mutual respect (Gay 2012). A third wave rhetoric of choice and an understanding of feminism's plurality play an important role here in that it becomes imperative to recognize there is no shared experience, identity or understanding of what feminism can mean (or is restricted to mean). In doing so, feminism exists and operates as a more inclusive, fluid and diverse

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<sup>57</sup> Informed by Butler's 1988 essay 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution', Gay proposed the idea of an essential feminism that is similar to Butler's understanding that performing one's gender wrong is met with a set of punishments, while performing it well offers reassurance of essential gender identities (Gay, 2012).

space - where it can mean something different from individual to individual. Indeed, this is precisely the case among my participants, whose feminist values are as wide-ranging as the differing personal experiences from which they emerge and are shaped by. As Budgeon argues, any understanding of the relationship between feminism and women's lives has to recognize women's wide-ranging differences and individual experiences - this allows the individual to develop their relationship to feminism in ways that are relevant to the specific characteristics of their lives.

Here I am reminded of the confidence and clarity with which my participant Nicole said "I'm going to make feminism adapt to my life and lifestyle". For Nicole, this meant even if she is inhabiting certain dominant norms, practicing certain sexual dynamics, privileging romantic love, and entertaining submissive fantasies that might be considered 'wrong' or contradictory to certain understandings of feminism. Throughout the findings of this research, I have highlighted a wide range of sexual practices, identities and relationships that have sparked the notion of what it might mean to be a 'bad feminist'. As outlined above, the practice, identity or relationship in question is experienced as discordant with feminism (either their own feminist values or those of other feminists). However, the most important point of consideration here is that the contradictions that emerge between my participants relationship to feminism and (hetero)sexuality is often the only way they can embrace themselves *as feminists* while simultaneously *being* themselves.

It is thus interesting to consider in the context of this discussion – what makes a 'good' feminist? Is it someone whose politics has no qualms with their sexuality? Who denies an important part of their politics? Or rejects a part of their sexuality and the desires that inform it? Which is considered the most important? As noted in the epigraph of chapter 1 (see page 1), 'people who want to get rid of sexuality for the sake of their feminist politics and people who want to get rid of feminism so they can feel good about sex are choosing artificial comfort over the uneven path of conflict' (Gallop 2002, xii). This uneven path, argues Gallop, helps to sharpen (rather than dull) the edge between feminism and desire. Thus, by acknowledging that feminist values and identities are as wide-ranging and multiple in meaning as the desires and sexual interests that accompany these identities, it becomes possible to debunk the myth that there are 'good' and 'bad' feminists. This is done by urging for a dissolution of debates surrounding what exactly 'counts' as feminism. Such dualistic understandings do not enable productive conversations because the possibility in understanding feminisms' plurality becomes

undermined by an imaginary feminist dogma that has outlined what a feminist should and should not do. It is interesting to consider if this is not just as potentially damaging as the same patriarchal scripts that seek to constrain women in the same way, through different means.

The understanding that feminism can mean different things to different people takes on another vibrant discussion when considered alongside cultural representations of BDSM, particularly when focusing on the many critical responses to *Fifty Shades of Grey*. At the time of writing this chapter, the first official trailer for the 2015 film adaptation's (Valentine's day!) release began circulating online<sup>58</sup>. One of the conversations that emerged revolved around another familiar debate - what is Beyoncé, the self-proclaimed feminist who sings about economic autonomy, body pride, and female independence, doing on the *Fifty Shades* soundtrack? (Le Tellier, 2014). The implication of course, is that *Fifty Shades* remains decidedly anti-feminist.

The *Fifty Shades* effect has been met with a range of responses, including the claim that the commodified version of kink is not representative of 'real kink'. As argued in a *Sexualities* special issue on the erotic trilogy, *Fifty Shades of Grey* has placed kink in the mainstream spotlight, but only as a particularly light, fluffy and socially acceptable kind of kink (Deller et al. 2013). This was immediately identified by 23 year old Megan when, in her first diary entry, she identified herself as a kinkster: "but not the stupid *Fifty Shades of Grey* shit!". While BDSM communities are founded on principles of communication, enthusiastic consent, safety, and a sense of community, the argument against *Fifty Shades* is that it is characterized by none of these things. For those who might consider themselves 'real' or authentic BDSMers, *Fifty Shades* appears to be anything but representative, primarily because the relationship between Anastasia and Christian is not reflective of a BDSM relationship but instead, an abusive one – and in particular, one that is *not* characterized by the same 'safe, sane and consensual' manifesto that guides BDSM communities.

Considering that many of the participants in this research *do* have an interest in some variety or dynamic of kink, the question that becomes most relevant in relation to this thesis addresses feminism and BDSM more generally: how can an individual claim feminism as an important part of their identity *and* practice BDSM? While this is not a new debate (and remains a topic that is almost always asked of me when speaking at

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<sup>58</sup> Five days after its release, it became the most viewed film trailer of 2014 with 36.4 million views (Child, *The Guardian*).

conferences or engaging in conversations with colleagues), it is important to consider whether it re-emerges here as a result of the misrepresentation of BDSM in *Fifty Shades* and thus a misunderstanding of BDSM communities in general; or, whether it stems from an uninformed misunderstanding that a woman who chooses to be sexually submissive cannot simultaneously be regarded as powerful, empowered, and/or a subject of agency? Active member of the BDSM community and feminist sex blogger Cliff Pervocracy addresses the potentiality in BDSM and feminism quite succinctly:

[Because] I trust women to know their own desires. [Because] BDSM does not stand apart from the world at large, and if we have to live in this world anyway, we might as well do what we love. [Because] I love and respect my body, my mind, and my potential as a human being – and all three are going ‘hell yeah, I totally want this’ (2012).

By recognizing individual autonomy as the principle through which an informed choice is made, The Pervocracy argues that as a culture, it might be worth trusting that women know what they want sexually, rather than assuming they have been duped by a larger patriarchal instruction of meaning. It is interesting to consider that while the very popularity of *Fifty Shades* demonstrates how common BDSM fantasies are, it has undoubtedly provided an opportunity with which to openly discuss and communicate about what women might want sexually, and as a result, acts as a platform that seeks to open up ‘a diversity of erotic possibilities’ (Barker, cited in *The Independent*, 2012).

While this discussion also links back to ideas of choice –in other words, the choice to have the kind of sex an individual wants without the vilification for making the ‘wrong’ decision alongside feminist values - a similar rhetoric exists outside the discourse of BDSM. For instance, it also appears in cultural discussions centered on female entitlement to sexual pleasure, freedom, and the right to seek sexual relationships where and with whom an individual wants. As outlined throughout my analysis, a number of participants in this research were either currently engaging in, or exploring their interest in sexual non-monogamy, casual sex, and in the case of Carrie (31), reclaiming ‘slut’ as an important part of her sexual identity. While the latter has re-sparked debates within feminism since the emergence of 2011’s Slutwalk, there remains a divide in feminism on the issue of reclaiming negative words, one that similarly mirrors many of the anti and pro stances found in the 1980s ‘sex wars’. While some argue that the term ‘slut’ is so deeply rooted in the patriarchal Madonna/whore view of women’s sexuality that it is beyond redemption (Klein, 2011), others contend that it can be reclaimed from a shaming slur into a symbol of

sexual choice (Hodge, 2012). Here Slutwalk Seattle explains why using the word “slut” is an important act of political defiance:

[It] serves to provide a sex-positive term for women (and men), few or none of which currently exist, and allows sluts (individuals of any gender who have and enjoy frequent consensual sex, especially with multiple partners) to identify as part of a cohesive group for political representation. We feel that offering a place for women who lead such a lifestyle to self-identify as sluts does not disrespect them.

Focusing on the right to self-identify one’s sexuality is undoubtedly a theme within this research and in the broader feminist debates that have informed a large part of my discussion throughout. While Carrie (31) was the only participant to identify with and explain what reclaiming ‘slut’ meant to her, I offer the feminist debate around this topic as a link to having the right to self-identify one’s sexuality in much broader terms. For instance, the women in this research felt entitled to choose the kind of sexual relationships they want, and indeed, define their sexuality without the limitations or restrictions of a boxed-in category. In the Autumn 2014 issue of *Bitch* magazine, Joshunda Sanders addresses the same wheel-like spectrum I have used to inform the sexual identities of my participants. Sanders similarly suggests that because continuums are framed by opposing poles, heterosexual – bisexual – homosexual, ‘they do not capture all the important spaces in between’. Moreover, they ‘confine us to think about desire in compartmentalized ways’. Being able to visualize these in-between spaces through, for instance, a wheel-like spectrum, helps to enable a sense of fluidity, diversity and thus more possibility with regards to self-identification – whether this be the individual’s sexual identity, or their right to re-claim negative words. Here it is interesting to consider Valenti’s (2011) argument, where she suggests that a generation of women are politically organizing themselves around a framework that not only allows for, but also embraces the freedom to explore sexuality, sexual practices, pleasures and desires. Although she refers to this in the context of reclaiming ‘slut’, I consider the possibility that such claims also extend to a discourse that includes the right and entitlement to choose sexual identities and relationships that are not constricted by cultural categories, ‘in a culture that demands definition’ (Sanders 2014).



## 7.6 Plural feminisms and multiple heterosexualities

As I have highlighted throughout this thesis, there exists a multitude of ways in which participants' feminist values, beliefs and identities have helped to inform and shape their (just as wide-ranging) understandings and experiences of (hetero)sexuality. While I have reconciled the lack of diversity in my research sample, what has remained at the forefront of my ontological assumption is that I, as a feminist sociologist, have been motivated by my desire to capture in-depth looks into women's lives and experiences. However narrow in focus their representation may be, their accounts are rich and detailed, and their contributions in exploring the relationship between feminism and heterosexuality in practice hold great value. Grounded in often complex lived experiences, the stories that have informed this research demonstrate a continued need to move toward an understanding of plural feminisms and multiple heterosexualities. Like the model of agency I have drawn on throughout, it is my contention that offering a relationship between feminism and heterosexuality that works to acknowledge both its complexities *and* possibilities, in turn, opens up the potential for engaging with the relationship between feminisms and heterosexualities in much more nuanced ways.

An important part of this research has been to not only consider the complexities of feminism and heterosexuality in practice, but also to create a space to engage with the potentiality and possibilities that emerge as a result. So while the struggles, contradictions, and tensions of this relationship have undoubtedly played an imperative role in the findings of this thesis, I want to conclude by focusing on the potentiality and possibilities and thus return to the starting point of Chapter 1 - Henderson's 'Hey Girl' meme. As I have argued, the 'Hey Girl' meme accurately represents an exploration into the contradictions of feminisms and heterosexualities, wherein there exists the possibility of engaging with both narratives *without* having to deny one set of principles for the other – in other words, where each narrative does exist and *is accepted*. In other words, where both feminist understandings and the lived experiences of (hetero)sexuality can exist simultaneously, play with one another, interact at various points, and perhaps most importantly, support and challenge one another in equal measure.

As Gallop suggests, 'if we are honest about our difficulties and our contradictions, we can turn out to be...(what? The words coming to mind are all wrong, so I'll leave the sentence unfinished – full of possibility and capaciousness)' (2002, xiv). By doing this, she argues, we add 'to the honesty with which any of us can grapple with our bodies and our

desires in this world' (Gallop 2002, xiv). It is my contention that getting to this point requires a continued expansion of the very meanings attached to feminism and as a result, the varying experiences of (hetero)sexuality. In doing so, there are no 'bad feminists'; there is no monolithic heterosexual experience or identity. Rather, there exists a set of possibilities – an inclusive, plural, diverse, and fluid understanding of feminisms and heterosexualities in practice.

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## **Participant biographies**

### **Dawn**

Dawn is 59, White British and educated to GCSE level. She is in a monogamous, five year relationship and has made the choice to live alone, despite being in a committed long-term relationship. Dawn lives in London and works as a housekeeper. She describes feminism as a woman's right to speak up and have opinions, and that women should not be treated poorly. Dawn started identifying with feminism when she left a controlling marriage in her 30s.

### **Amy**

Amy is 27 years old, Caucasian and Canadian. She has a BA in Women's Studies and works in the production side of theatre. At the time of her diary, Amy was in a polyamorous relationship with one long-term primary partner and three secondary partners; she was monogamous (with a new partner) at the time of interview. She describes herself as a lower case 'r' (radical) feminist. Moreover, she says feminism has always been her inclination because of her upbringing, and the influence of her mother and father.

### **Cleo**

Cleo is 21 years old, single, White British, middle class, and (at the time of research) worked as the Women's Officer at a British university student union (where she completed a BA during this time). Cleo has been strongly influenced by her mother's feminist identity. She identifies most with radical, second-wave feminist values. Her main concerns revolve around violence against women and in particular, the role that porn culture plays in perpetuating said violence. During this research, Cleo had sex with a woman for the first time and is now interested in exploring the possibility of dating women.

### **Sandy**

Sandy is 31, Caucasian and lives in London. She works in the travel industry and has a high school education. She went from being single (with a 'friends with benefits' arrangement) to a monogamous relationship with the same friend during the course of this research. Because of her conservative upbringing in South Africa, she says feminism carried negative connotations and so she had previously shied away from identifying as such up until the last year.

## **Vanessa**

Vanessa is Greek, 25 and single. She has a degree in English and currently works as an English tutor in Greece. She has identified as a feminist since childhood. She says she has always been inspired by women who fought against injustices and stereotypes, and in particular, those who choose to live a life without guilt. Vanessa admits that feminism, for her, is all theory and minimal practice. In Vanessa's diary, she constructed a narrative about the process, pros and cons, shame and liberation in buying her first sex toy.

## **Ella**

Ella is 36. She lives in Montreal, identifies as Anglo-Saxon, middle class, and lives with her cis-gender partner of nearly two years. Identifying as pansexual, Ella is divorced from a transwoman. She works as a community development leader and at the time of interview, was 13 weeks pregnant. This was an unplanned but welcomed pregnancy as she has always wanted to be a mother. Ella is a third generation feminist and thinks her partner is a "penis-toting feminist hero!".

## **Nicole**

Nicole is Caucasian, French Canadian and lives in Montreal. She is 29, considers herself middle class/upper middle class, and has a BA in Communications. Nicole works as a community organization coordinator. She is in a monogamous relationship although her and her partner recently began negotiating to what extent polyamory might become a part of their sexual practices. The kind of feminism Nicole ascribes to comes from an anti-oppressive, queer-positive, body-positive framework. It was not until she attended college and began reading feminist blogs that she developed a feminism that worked for her.

## **Danielle**

Danielle is a 28 year old Caucasian French-Canadian, and is studying for a PhD in Switzerland. She describes herself as 'overeducated middle class' and is in a monogamous long-term relationship (with the intention of being polyamorous in the future). The decision to explore sex with other people is based around Danielle's insistence that there is a lack of sexual chemistry between her and her partner. Danielle says her 'feminist epiphany' occurred (as a teenager) while reading Faludi's *Backlash*. She aligns herself with third wave, queer, postcolonial feminist values.

**Wendy**

Wendy is White British, 36 and works as a principal lecturer at a British university. She has three young children and been married for over 10 years. At the heart of Wendy's understanding of feminism is a woman's right to choose the life she wants. Admittedly, Wendy said she struggled throughout the course of this research to recognize an explicit connection between her feminist values and sexual practices as feminism stems way beyond the discourse of sexuality and is therefore hard to centre around *just* sexuality.

**Megan**

Megan is 23, American, Caucasian, and lives in New York. She has a BA in History, works at a museum, and considers herself to come from an upper-working class, rural family. She lives with her partner and is in a monogamous partnership of three years. As a self defined kinkster, Megan believes that feminism is about having the right to her own desires; masochism is a dark and wonderful part of her sexuality that she wants to celebrate, not be shamed for. Megan says feminism supports her confidence to communicate about the kind of sex she is entitled to have.

**Ashley**

Ashley is single and 22 years old. She is Scottish, Caucasian and considers herself lower-middle class. Ashley finished her undergraduate degree during the course of research, with the intention of starting a career in journalism. Ashley's interest in feminism emerged as a critique of religion (she grew up in a strict Christian household) and more generally, women's role in history. Much of her own feminist values are focused on rape culture, and in particular, the confusion and anger Ashley often feels regarding her own heterosexual desire (having experienced rape herself).

**Ruby**

Ruby is single, 51 and White British. She is completing a part-time doctoral degree while working as a lecturer at a British university. Feminism was not something Ruby identified with until recent years; however, she did recognize certain feminist tendencies when she finally decided to leave her first marriage many years ago. Ruby places a lot of importance on how everything comes back to choice and that even though she may not have had the power to embody or enable this sense of agency when she was younger, she says it has always been within her, and that this is a powerful thing.

## **Lana**

Lana is 56. She is White British and considers herself middle class. She is a senior lecturer at a British university where she is also completing a doctoral degree. She has been married to her (second) husband for over 20 years. They have 4 (adult) children between them. She describes a second wave feminist narrative of what it was like to witness strong women in the 1970's who were 'doing it for themselves'; she followed suit as a result, after ending her first marriage.

## **GoLM**

GoLM is 29, White British and considers herself middle class. She is engaged (and married her partner two weeks after our interview). She works as an administrative assistant and has a BA in creative writing. She says she grew up as the opposite of a feminist; yet, upon reflection, she admits that hanging out with boys and being 'one of the lads' has probably helped inform her feminist consciousness today. GoLM started explicitly identifying as a feminist when she got involved in roller derby. GoLM stands for 'Goddess of Love-Making' – this is intended to be humorous!

## **Carrie**

Carrie is 31, White British, and single. She has a PhD, works as a researcher and considers herself middle class, although raised in a working class family. At the time of interview, she was in a new (monogamous) relationship; however, her diary was centred on experiences of casual sex and how she openly claims the word 'slut' as part of her sexual identity. Although Carrie says her family is 'anti-feminist', she describes herself as influenced by second wave, radical issues because she believes many of these have not yet been resolved or appropriately addressed.

## **Blair**

Blair is a 28 year old, Slavic immigrant living in Australia. She is an unemployed writer with some university education. She is single, currently lives with her parents, and considers herself middle class. As a feminist, Blair is concerned with the power dynamics in heterosexual relationships, particularly how they translate into the bedroom. During the diary phase, Blair was diagnosed with Vaginismus and attributes this to her experience of rape in 2006. Blair declined an interview.



**Sue**

Sue is 31, White British, and lives in London. She has an MA and is employed as a youth work manager. At the time of diary, Sue was single. Her last diary entry was about a trans man she had just met - they are now in a serious relationship. When she was 18, Sue was forced to examine the role of gender and sexuality as her (then) male partner transitioned to female. At times, Sue has identified as a lesbian, bisexual and heterosexual and as a result, her feminism evolves and changes with these changes in sexuality. As such, Sue's understanding of feminism revolves around choice and challenging understandings of sexuality and sexual practice.



## Appendix A

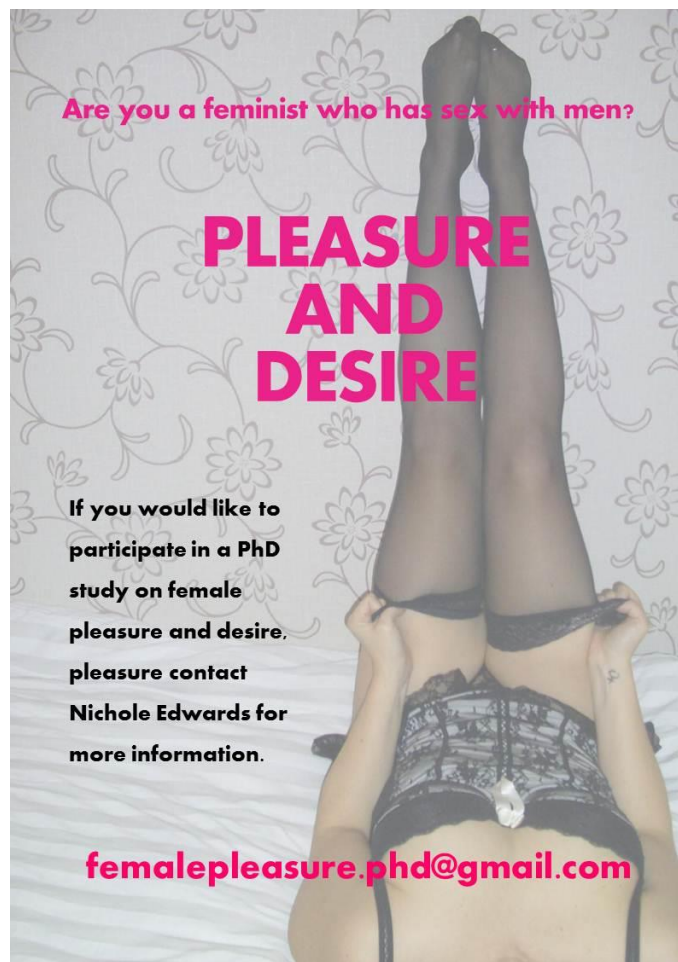
### A.1 'Kiss' flyer



### A.1.2 'Pink sheets' flyer



### A.1.3 'Subject' flyer



### A.1.4 'Floral' flyer



## Appendix B

### A FURTHER INFORMATION SHEET....

#### Experiences of Pleasure and Desire in the Heterosexual Practices of Feminist-Identified Women

**Thanks so much for your interest in this project! Here's your opportunity to find out more now that we now you meet the criteria for inclusion....**

#### **What is the purpose of this study?**

The aim of this research is to explore how women, who define themselves as feminist and who have sexual experiences and fantasies that feature men, experience pleasure and desire. That said, the purpose is not *just* to understand your sexual practices but also your thoughts, feelings and fantasies of pleasure and desire (in which case, no, you do not have to be having sex all day every day during the course of this research!) Towards the end of the project, I would also like to situate your findings to our current culture's attitude toward pleasure and see how they match up.

#### **Do I have to take part?**

Absolutely not! This project is entirely voluntary and I encourage you to take however long you need before deciding if you want to participate. Even if you contact me for more information, you are not obligated to accept. If you do choose to take part, you will be asked to sign a consent form which I will then copy and give to you for your own personal records. Please be assured that you are free to withdraw from this project at any point in time, after signing the consent form, during the actual research and up to 3 months after my final analysis has been completed. If you do choose to withdraw, all paper data that has been collected will be securely disposed of and any electronic data, including your personal information, will be permanently deleted from my computer. I will even return your diary (more on this below!) if you would like to keep it. You do not have to give me a reason and your choice to leave the project will not be held against you.

#### **What will I be asked to do if I decide to take part?**

The first part of this research involves keeping a diary of your sexual thoughts, feelings and experiences. You will decide if you want to keep a handwritten diary or if you want to make your entries in an ongoing Word document - whichever is most comfortable or works best for your lifestyle. You will be asked to keep this diary for a minimum of 3 month and a maximum of 4. This is to cater to busy lifestyles, etc. You will be encouraged to write as often as possible; but like I said above, please do not think you have to be sexually active as it is your thoughts and feelings of pleasure and desire which I am also interested in, not just your sexual practices. The diaries will then be collected for analysis in order to determine how you experience pleasure and desire; this analysis will also be used as a way of tailoring the second phase of the research, involving a discussion with me about your diary entries - about what it was like to keep the diary and about the things you wrote. This chat will happen in-person (where possible) and online, on a forum such as Skype, MSN or Facebook chat, whichever you prefer.

Please note that all information you give to me will be confidential. If you want, I will change your name (you can even pick the name!), the name of any sexual partners you discuss and any specific locations that you might refer to. This will make it impossible for anyone to identify your participation in this research.

**When will the diary phase begin?**

Not just yet! Ideally the diary phase will occur begin in October. So again, if you have a busy lifestyle as many of us do, you do not have to keep the diary from this exact date. This will be encouraged, but I understand that people have jobs, families and so on. The interviews won't occur until February or March 2013. If these dates do not work for you and you are really interested in taking part, we can try and make other arrangements to suit you.

**Are there any risks?**

There will require a certain amount of care when you are keeping the diary. I would encourage you to keep a handwritten diary somewhere safe and reliable. If you choose the electronic method, I would ensure that you keep your entries in password protected files. It is possible that you could misplace your diary or leave your pc/laptop open and the contents could then be revealed to someone who you hoped would not read them. Taking absolute care of its placement will be your responsibility, however I would like you to immediately contact me in the even that it becomes lost or misplaced.

It is also possible that during our follow-up chat, you might think the topics are too sensitive to discuss. If that were to happen, I would encourage you to tell me and we will immediately move on to something else or stop the chat entirely. If, at any stage of the research process, you feel like you need to talk to someone about how you are feeling, I will put you in contact with the appropriate organization.

**What are the benefits?**

You, along with approximately 20 other participants, will have the opportunity to contribute to understandings of female pleasure and desire. There is a lack of research in this area, specifically within the identity position that you occupy so you can take great pride in knowing that you are helping to create a more informed dialogue about the way pleasure and desire is experienced. Also, past research involving diaries show that the process of keeping a diary can be extremely personally rewarding!

**Thanks so much for taking the time to read this!**

**Please contact me, Nichole Edwards, for any further questions.**

**[femalepleasure.phd@gmail.com](mailto:femalepleasure.phd@gmail.com)**

**Hope to hear from you soon!**

**APPROVED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE**

## Appendix C

### Experiences of Pleasure and Desire in the Heterosexual Practices of Feminist-Identified Women

Now that you've confirmed your participation in this study, I'd like to know a little bit more about you so that I know exactly who is participating in this research. Please do not feel obligated to answer all categories if you are not comfortable doing so.

**Name:**

**Age:**

**Location:**

**Educational background:**

**Ethnicity:**

**Socio-economic background:**

**Occupation:**

**Relationship Status:**

*Please send this form back to [femalepleasure.phd@gmail.com](mailto:femalepleasure.phd@gmail.com)*





## Appendix D

### The 3 most important things to remember...

- 1) You can write as much or as little as you like for each entry.
- 2) There is nothing you do in your sexual experiences that would be considered unworthy of writing about. Nothing is 'boring' or 'ordinary'. It's *all* relevant!
- 3) Have FUN with your diary!!!

### A few housekeeping items...

- Getting into a routine has proved to be the best way forward with diary-based research. Try writing in the same space or at the same time when you make an entry. This has been proven to help create an effective way of writing.
- You do not have to answer all of the prompts and you can change the wording of them if you wish ('What is your biggest fantasy?' could become 'What is your most *taboo* fantasy?'). Feel free to play around with the creative guidelines as much as you like – you can also make multiple entries on the same topic.
- You are also encouraged to write freely without the prompts, and instead, about whatever comes to mind!
- Please try to write about any sexual experiences that occur during the time you keep this diary as some of the prompts encourage you to reflect on past experiences (since you do not have to be having sex at the time of diary-keeping!)
- If you wish to alter the names of people and places that you mention in your diary, it is your choice to do so (these will be changed in my thesis even if you do use 'real' names now). If you wish to choose a pseudonym for yourself, please include the name you would like me to use at the start of your diary.
- If you choose to handwrite your diary, I will cover all postage costs in getting it safely back to me. For those of you in Canada/US, I will ask you to post your diary to my Canadian address as I will be visiting home from early December to early January.
- If you are keeping your entries on a desktop pc or laptop and wish to know more about how to hide files and/or folders, I am happy to send you step-by-step information on how to do this.

**Please feel free to contact me during the process of keeping your diary for any motivation or further guidance!**

**HAVE FUN AND HAPPY WRITING!**



## Appendix E

- ❖ Describe 3 of your most profound sexual experiences.
- ❖ Write a sexual mission statement to yourself.
- ❖ How do you choose to define pleasure in the context of your sexual practices?
- ❖ At what point can you remember becoming most aware of your desires as a sexual being? Write about this.
- ❖ What's the most important thing you seek from your heterosexual practices? What do you never hope to be a part of your sexuality?
- ❖ How does your feminist politics influence your sexual practices, how you view your body, and your body's entitlement to desire and pleasure? Visa versa – how do your sexual practices influence your feminist politics?
- ❖ Do you ever feel like you have to justify your sexual desires as a feminist? Who are you justifying them to? Why?
- ❖ To what extent does fantasy place a role in your sexuality? Does your fantasy life and your reality ever cross over?
- ❖ Write about 2 (or more, if you like) of your sexual fantasies – why are they fantasies? Does anything about them shock you?
- ❖ Spend a day or two being very aware of anything sexual – an ad/commercial, a sex scene in a film/tv, a flirty waiter at a restaurant – how did these instances make you feel? What did they make you think about?
- ❖ Write about something that really turned you on today
- ❖ Write about a sexual experience where the mere thought of it brings vivid memories in that you can remember how it physically felt. Describe this experience.
- ❖ Describe an experience where you were completely uninhibited. What factored into it? Why? Write the same for an experience where you *were* inhibited.
- ❖ Write a sex scene about yourself (in any situation you want, with one person, many people, just yourself, etc). Writing in 3<sup>rd</sup> person might make this easier 😊
- ❖ Write a letter (never to be sent!) to your favourite sexual partner – why are/were they your favourite? Tell them how they made your body feel, and how your desires and pleasures engaged with this person? Do the same for your least favourite sexual partner.
- ❖ Write a list of 5 sexual things/acts that you want to do (ie, I want to be spanked). Explain why you do want these in your practices. Do the same for 5 sexual things/acts you do NOT want in your practices.
- ❖ At this point in your life, what is your ideal sexual relationship, and the what's, when's and why's behind it. What is the sex like? What kinds of acts are involved? How often do sexual encounters occur?

Remember - you can tweak the wording, alter it to your liking, make multiple entries on the same topic, and most certainly write anything and everything you want on top of these suggestions!



## Appendix F

### Consent to take part in *Experiences of Pleasure and Desire in the Heterosexual Practices of Feminist-Identified Women*

	Add your initials next to the statements you agree with
I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet explaining the above research project and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the project.	
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason and without suffering any negative consequences. Any hard copy data that has been collected from me will be securely disposed of and electronic data permanently deleted from the researcher's computer. If I would like my diary returned to me, the researcher will do so. In addition, should I not wish to answer any particular question or questions throughout the research process, I am free to decline.	
I understand that my diary and interview responses will be made anonymous and that my name, those of the people I mention, and any specific locations, will not be identifiable in the thesis that results from the research.	
I understand that my responses will be kept confidential and securely locked in a cabinet at the University of Leeds and that all electronic data will be stored in password protected files that only the researcher will have access to.	
I understand that it is entirely up to me to decide how much information I will disclose to the researcher and that I am by no means obligated to share thoughts, feelings and experiences that I am uncomfortable with.	
I understand that there is an element of personal risk in keeping a diary about my sexual thoughts, feelings and experiences and that I am responsible for looking after my diary. If I misplace it, lose it, or it gets stolen, there is a chance that nothing could be done to retrieve it or keep others from seeing the contents.	
I understand that the extent to which my diary will be used in the final PhD thesis may vary from other participants, but that this in no way bears reflection on the contents of my diary. I also understand that if I am not asked to take part in a follow-up interview, I may be asked to answer a few written questions instead.	
I understand that if I become distressed at any stage, the researcher will be happy to provide a list of local organizations that I can seek aid or advice from.	
I agree for the data collected from me to be used in relevant future research.	
I understand that the extent to which my diary will be used in the final thesis may vary from other participants.	
I understand that if I disclose information about committing a criminal act the researcher will contact relevant authorities.	

Name of participant	
Participant's signature	
Date	
Name of lead researcher	Nichole Edwards, <a href="mailto:femalepleasure.phd@gmail.com">femalepleasure.phd@gmail.com</a>
Signature	
Date	

Once this has been signed by all parties the participant should receive a copy of the signed and dated participant consent form, the letter/ pre-written script/ information sheet and any other written information provided to the participants. A copy of the signed and dated consent form should be kept with the project's main documents which must be kept in a secure location.

