

Queering Our Sex Lives: Listening to Women's Stories of Sexual Negotiation

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B.Comm, B.Arts (Sociology)

This thesis is presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts with Honours in Sociology at Murdoch University, 2015.

Student Declaration:

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains, as its main content, work that has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution, including Murdoch.

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Abstract

This study focuses on women's negotiation of sexual pleasure and engagement with their partner(s) in order to identify some of the ways women fracture heteronormativity and enhance their sexual freedom. The research design draws on feminist, qualitative approaches, influenced by Lather (1991), Reinharz (1992) and Haug (1987). Data was collected from semi-structured interviews with ten women. Participants were asked to reflect on how they came to understand constraints in their sex lives, and how they have negotiated/resisted these constraints. The analysis is structured around Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and field, whilst acknowledging the fine balance required between theory and women's everyday lived experiences.

A significant number of studies have asked young women about their understandings of sexual pleasure and negotiation living within a heteronormative world (Burkett & Hamilton 2012, Baker 2010, Powell 2008, Sieg 2007, Chung 2005, Holland et al 2003, Allen 2003, Tolman 2002, Walker 1997, Gavey 1992, Fine 1988). This study furthers this research in several ways. Firstly, the existing research is narrowly focused on the experiences of heterosexual girls and young women. I widen this focus by exploring the experiences of older women, and women with more diverse sexual orientations, who were able to reflect on their experiences and how these have changed over time and across various contexts.

Secondly, existing research has primarily analysed heteronormativity as discourse, telling us little about the ways in which sexual partners practice, negotiate and struggle over their sex lives. By taking negotiation as the focal point, I look to integrate women's sexual understandings ('intellectual empowerment') with their sexual practices ('experiential empowerment') (Holland et al 1998:12).

Lastly, the majority of existing research examines the way in which unequal sexual negotiations are produced and maintained, and at times steers precariously close to overlooking women's agency. By searching out women who were willing to reflect on the complexities and struggles within their sexual memories, and listening closely for their stories of resistances, I document some of the ways women resist unequal norms and negotiate alternative outcomes, both at an interactional and collective level. I argue that to

continue this work, we need an understanding of agency that is more nuanced, gentler and kinder to the ways in which both men and women challenge heteronormative understandings of sexual engagement and pleasure.

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Introduction

'Can straight sex ever be pleasurable? Can it, perhaps, even be queer?' (Jackson 2003:72)

In less than twelve words, Jackson captures the essence of a large body of feminist literature that documents the effect that patriarchal dominance has on female sexual pleasure, whilst calling into question whether this need always be the case. She also suggests the potential to 'queer' straight sex; thus transgressing the normative status of heterosexuality as a patriarchal institution and practice. Can women negotiate sex that challenges or transgresses heteronormativity? And if so, how? It is these questions that form the basis of this thesis.

In keeping with many feminist works, this thesis is personal as well as political. It was born out of my own confusion and frustration; that feeling of trying to wear a scratchy and ill-fitting jumper. As a young woman reading feminist texts, I found myself angered by the injustice of the world and determined that I would carve out a life for myself free of these structural inequalities. However, the more texts I read, the more this anger and desire for justice sank under a weight of depression and despair. These texts continued to highlight everything I was up against, and provided nothing to show me that things could change. Male dominance was so powerful, so overwhelming and so embedded that the fight seemed almost impossible. In regards to sexual negotiation and pleasure, whilst feminist texts enabled me to see how unequal power relations shape(d) my sexual experiences, I was left wondering whether my straight sex was ever really pleasurable? Or did I just think it was pleasurable because heteronormativity left me with no other options? Had I been coerced in all of my memories? No matter how much I applied this line of thinking to my past memories, the jumper didn't quite fit.

Sexual negotiations are constructed within a complex set of social, cultural and historical contexts and discourses (Parker 2009, Jackson & Scott 2007, Ussher 2005, Simon & Gagnon 2003, Gavey 1992, Vance 1984, Foucault 1981). These contexts and discourses influence our understanding of what counts as 'sex', how sex should be conducted and with whom, as well as the meanings attributed to, and the experience of, sex (Parker 2009, Braun, Gavey & McPhillips 2003). Sexual negotiations, specifically in the Western world, take place

in relation to a dominant, symbolically sanctioned, heteronormativity (Vance 1984, Rich 1986). Heteronormativity encompasses the 'normative status' of heterosexuality as the sexuality 'which renders any alternative sexualities "other" and "marginal"'; and also hetero-patriarchy, through which (hetero)sexuality is 'systematically male dominated' (Jackson 1999: 163). It is a body of norms that defines men and women sexually in relation to each other; his agency, her passive subordination, both bodies for his pleasure (Holland et al 2003).

Drawing on the concept of heteronormativity, the feminist movement has made strong inroads into 'anatomising our oppression [and] detailing the laws and sanctions ranged against us' (Rich 1986:4). The research around women's sexual negotiation and freedom comprehensively explores how heteronormativity constrains a woman's ability to negotiate and experience equality in relation to sexual outcomes, and how this inequality is produced and maintained (Burkett & Hamilton 2012, Baker 2010, Sieg 2007, Chung 2005, Gavey 2005, Wilkins 2004, Holland et al 2003, Tolman 2002, Walker 1997, Lee 1993, Fine 1988). This research details extensively how women continue to experience rape, sexual assault, unwanted and coerced sex as a result of heteronormativity (Burkett & Hamilton 2012, Basile 1999, Walker 1997). This work is invaluable for understanding the constraints we face as women negotiating sex, and the vital work that still needs to be done in this area. However, those familiar feelings of depression and hopelessness surfaced many times during the research for this thesis due to the depth of constraint this literature highlights.

To move through this hopelessness, I needed to see the possibilities for change. In her paper '*Undoing Gender*', Deutsch (2007) argues that, as feminists, we need to reframe research questions from 'doing gender' to ask how we can 'undo' gender. Deutsch encourages us to move from looking at how unequal sexual negotiations are constructed and maintained to examining how heteronormativity may be challenged and/or transformed. As Vance (1984: 24) states, 'social movements, feminism included, move towards a vision; they cannot operate solely on fear'. As such, we must continue pushing forward from an understanding of sexuality as a domain of 'restriction, repression and danger' to one of 'exploration, pleasure and agency' (Vance 1984:1).

The existing research, in demonstrating that women continue to experience heterosexual encounters that are heavily influenced by heteronormativity, steers precariously close to

overlooking women's agency. Dismissing women's heterosexual agency as a product of heteronormativity makes it harder to transcend these inequalities. Smart (1996) argues that in feminist sociology, the heterosexual feminist woman appears only as a victim, and thus a failure to produce a heterosexual subject has precluded us transgressing conventional heterosexuality. Similarly, Segal (1994) argues that a new focus on women's sexual agency should be a part of the move to destabilise the heterosexual order. Van Eredwijk (2009:22) takes this one step further, arguing that when feminist analysis 'focuses only on patriarchal control, without concentrating on creativity, diversity and empowerment, it reinforces the heteronormative...values it seeks to challenge'. Hence, we need to be able to talk about women's pleasures and what it is that makes sex more pleasurable (Vance 1984, Smart 1996) whilst still recognising the constraints we face.

Unfortunately, before embarking on this journey, I could only perceive one framework of 'exploration, pleasure and agency' available; the kind found in neo-liberal 'self-help' books extending sexual liberation to women. All I needed was to be more confident, improve my communication skills and perhaps buy some sexy lingerie. Maybe I had actually been sexually liberated all this time and just needed to 'embrace my pussy power' (Prentice & Hodges 2009:9)?

This popular postfeminist, neo-liberalist discourse positions young women as sexually liberated, desiring, unproblematically active and free from traditional gender imbalances (Burkett & Hamilton 2012, Gwynne 2011, Baker 2008, Renold & Ringrose 2008). Gill (2007) refers to this cultural mood as a 'postfeminist sensibility', characterised by the pervasive sexualisation of contemporary culture and a shift from women being portrayed as submissive, passive objects to being portrayed as active, desiring sexual subjects¹. We are seen to be negotiating sex on our own terms (Baker 2010, Jackson & Scott 2004) and are encouraged to reinvent our sexuality in new, liberated and empowered ways (Levy 2005). As opposed to the academic literature that has so much focus on constraint and in some ways has failed to highlight women's agency, this mainstream cultural discourse is all about freedom from constraint. Existing research documents how girls and young women are

¹ Gill's (2007) post feminist sensibility is also characterized by; the pre-eminence of notions of choice, 'being oneself' and 'pleasing oneself', a focus on self-surveillance and discipline, a makeover paradigm, the reassertion of sexual difference and media messages characterized by irony and knowingness.

increasingly using a discourse of equality, drawing on this post feminist sensibility to describe their sexual experiences. In doing so, young women frame their failed negotiations as individual choice (Burkett & Hamilton 2012, Powell 2010, Baker 2010, Chung 2005, Allen 2003). When I tried this 'post feminist sensibility' on for size it also felt itchy and ill fitting. The sense of agency available to me through this framework was one that closed down any acknowledgement of gender/sexual inequalities, and unlike the younger women in the existing studies, this was not the way that I understood, nor experienced, the world.

I needed to find a jumper that suited me; an alternative understanding of sexual agency that didn't rely on the binaries of constraint and freedom to describe a woman's capacity to negotiate. One that recognises structural inequalities but is nuanced and kinder to acts of resistance; that acknowledges the struggles and successes. An agency tied to constraint and risk. An understanding that can capture the awkward blend of heteronormative resistance and replication in women's everyday lives. One that recognises that the process of coming to be aware of a need to negotiate and learning how to do so does not necessarily produce a unified, free subject as a sexual liberation framework would suggest. I wanted a framework where I can recognise my own vulnerability, my own messiness – the complex process by which we scrape and drag through this process of queering² our sex lives.

I began to suspect I wasn't the only one who needed a different jumper. Maybe there were other women, similar to myself, who acknowledged the effect of heteronormativity but were working to overcome these constraints and/or negotiating their sex lives? Maybe these stories were being lost in the 'search for a grand narrative' (Renold & Ringrose 2006:314)? Some academics have begun this search, looking for alternatives to the constraint/freedom dichotomy, including Renold & Ringrose (2011), Powell (2010), Egan and Hawkes (2008), Karaian (2012), Stewart (1999) amongst others.

However this existing research tends to be narrowly focused on the experiences of heterosexual girls and young women. I wanted to widen this focus by listening to the experiences of older women who are able to reflect on their experiences and how these

² I am using the term 'queer' in the academic sense of 'non-heteronormative'. To 'queer' something is to challenge the accepted norm and associated binaries. As Youdell (2010: 88) explains 'queer is about interrogating how discourses of sex and sexuality are implicated in processes of subjectivation that constitute subjects who are sexed and sexualized in particular ways'.

have been shaped over time, as well as listening to women from more diverse sexual orientations. Further, this research has primarily analysed heteronormativity as discourse, telling us little about the ways in which sexual partners practice, negotiate and struggle over their sex lives. I wanted to integrate women's sexual understandings ('intellectual empowerment') with their sexual practices ('experiential empowerment') (Holland et al 1998:12).

And so, drawing on the stories of ten other women, I embarked on this journey. I sought out women who were re-authoring their stories – who were actively trying to queer their sex lives. I went 'search[ing] out those women who broke through the silence' (Rich 1986:4); listening for the stories of women where they had negotiated for better outcomes in their sex lives by resisting heteronormativity. With women's negotiations subject to heteronormative constraints, successful negotiation requires an act of resistance: a 'conscious attempt to shift the dynamics and openly challenge the givenness of situational power relations' (Ewick & Selby 2003:1331)³. What is it that enables these women to break through the silence? How do they come to embody strength? In what ways do they resist heteronormativity to enable negotiation?

In dialogic interviews, we examined the ways in which women could, can and do negotiate around sex. We exposed spaces where negotiation could have happened but didn't. How could the space have been negotiated and why hadn't we? When we do negotiate, how do we go about it, and what enables it?

In terms of theory, I was inspired by the work of Powell (2010, 2008) who adapts the central concepts of Pierre Bourdieu's work; habitus and symbolic violence, to understand the relation of structure and agency within (hetero)sexual negotiations. Powell is one of the few researchers who has applied Bourdieu's concepts specifically to the sexual field, however a growing number of feminist researchers are finding value in his concepts as a potential framework to bridge this gap between cultural determinism and the self-fashioning claims of neo-liberalism (Chambers 2005, McLeod 2005, Adkins 2004, Lovell 2000, McNay 2000). Bourdieu's concepts of 'habitus' and 'field', and the interplay between the two have provided structure for this thesis. However, at all times I have attempted to

³ Although resistance may take a number of different forms (Haug 1987, Jackson & Cram 2003), I am particularly interested in resistance that enables negotiation.

strike a balance between knowledge of a priori theory, and valuing the knowledge of lived experience that participants shared with me. In many places, and particularly in the last chapter on social change, I found Bourdieu's work insufficient for understanding women's experiences. I also wish to note the integral feminist works by academics such as Rich (1980), Haug (1987), MacKinnon (1989), and Butler (1990), amongst others, who explored similar themes either before, or at the same time, as Bourdieu. Heeding McLeod's (2005:13) warning⁴, I have worked to 're-engage' with Bourdieu's concepts, rather than 're-iterate' it as a form of subordination.

The thesis is divided into four chapters.

In the first chapter I explain my approach to this topic and the methodology utilised. I discuss Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and field, around which chapters two and three are structured respectively.

Chapter two looks at the thoughts and feelings around sexual freedom that women bring to negotiations. I begin the chapter by discussing how participants understood sexual freedom, and then proceed to examine the ways in which prevailing discourses of heteronormativity are both embedded in women's habitus and resisted through a process of critical reflexivity, sitting with vulnerability, and the adoption of alternative discourses.

Building on the analysis in chapter two, in chapter three I explore the 'field'; that is, the negotiations and struggles that take place between sexual partners, and the strategies that women draw upon as they work towards sexual freedom.

Lastly, I talk about how we can move from transgression at an individual and/or interactional level to a change in overall opportunities for women through a 'politics of transformation'⁵ (Lorber 1999). I suggest to do so we need to 'queer' our understandings; breaking apart the binaries of constraint/freedom, and individual/collective change. I conclude by returning to the question at the start of this chapter: 'Can straight sex ever be pleasurable? Can it, perhaps, even be queer?' (Jackson 2003:72).

⁴ Special acknowledgment must also go to my supervisor, Bev Thiele, for ensuring I heeded this warning!

⁵ Lorber (1999) argues that individual women may transgress norms in social interactions but have little effect on overall opportunities for women without a 'politics of transformation'.

Chapter 1: Methodology

'Our discussions have shown sexuality to be a crucial area of unhappiness (and of silence) for us as women.' (Haug 1987:29)

'Confronted with this "Great Silence", we have apparently had two paths to follow; the path of anatomizing our oppression, detailing the laws and sanctions ranged against us; and the path of searching out those women who broke through the silence, who, though often penalized, misconstrued, their work neglected or banned, or though tokenized in lonely and precarious acceptance, still embodied strength, daring, self determination; who were, in short, exemplary.' (Rich 1986: 84)

Approach

From the outset, this was a feminist project. Having only been exposed to traditional methodologies during my undergraduate studies, my supervisor introduced me to the feminist works of Haug (1987), Lather (1991) & Reinharz (1992, 1979) early in the project and I *inhaled* them. They spoke to me so deeply that I knew without hesitation I wanted my project to embody the values they outlined. Approaching work from a feminist perspective means taking pre-existing research methods and adapting these to feminist ways of thinking (Reinharz 1992). This includes adapting methods to represent human diversity, acknowledging the positionality of the researcher, respecting participants as agents of change and using methods that have the potential to create this change (Doucet & Mauthner 2007, Reinharz 1992, Lather 1991). Feminist research is also about recognizing that there is no 'one perfect method', but rather multiple ways of seeing, listening and constructing knowledge. There is no one 'objective reality' that needs capturing, but rather our reality is constructed and shaped by our experiences (Reinharz 1979). At every step of this journey, I have tried to stay true to these values.

I focus on qualitative data as my research question looks at the 'how'; the process and strategies that women draw upon to negotiate sexual outcomes, and how these negotiations potentially disrupt heteronormative understandings. It is an intricate, nuanced

and sensitive subject, more suited to qualitative methods (Patton 2001), which allow women to tell their own stories, rather than 'fitting into' pre-determined questions/instruments (Doucet & Mauthner 2007).

My methodology is built on the value of reciprocity, whereby participants, including the researcher, are seen as collaborators (Lather 1991). This requires an understanding of participants as knowledgeable actors rather than objects to be studied, and an acknowledgment that participants have a moral right to have a say about the knowledge that is created in regards to them. As Lather (1991: 58) emphasizes, 'researchers are not so much owners of the data as they are majority shareholders who must justify decisions and give participants a public forum for critique'. In practical terms, I had hoped this would mean collaborative interviewing, reflection, and theorising; conducting interviews in an interactive dialogic manner with self disclosure on my behalf, sequential meetings, recycling emerging analysis back to participants and providing opportunities for building theory together (Lather 1991).

Reciprocity also required I act as co-participant, moving from detachment to involvement (Lather 1991). The impact of the research on the researcher, and the impact of the researcher on the research, is therefore expected, recorded and valued (Reinharz 1979), just as it is for other participants. I acknowledge that despite attempts to reduce power imbalances, the privilege, assumptions and a priori concepts I brought to the project potentially impeded mutuality and reciprocity, shaped the data I collected and the ways in which I have interpreted the data (Farvid 2007, Ramazanoglu 1989, Riessman 1987). This supposed 'bias' exists in all research, but conducting the research with this in mind, I continually reflected on, and examined my own assumptions and frameworks. Being 'in' the research was an exhausting but invaluable part of my own journey.

For all these reasons, memory work was my preferred methodology. Developed by Haug and colleagues (1987) to research female sexualisation, memory work involves the recording and analysis of personal memories and stories and the collective analysis and theorisation of experience within a feminist context. Group members, including the 'researcher' are both research participants and researchers: putting forward their own experiences as data and undertaking a collective analysis of this data (Stephenson & Kippax 2008). Memory work not only qualitatively describes and explains, but also *intervenes* in

the social production of experience as it is employed. It encourages participants to go beyond the identification of constraints to imagine other ways of being and to participate in their construction. For example, Haug and colleagues (1987) used the process to interrogate the social production of their experiences of female sexualisation, attempting to identify points at which these experiences were amenable to being reinterpreted, reworked, or lived differently.

Importantly, memory work was not developed with the intention of being a fixed unchanging set of practices (Stephenson 2005). Hence, Haug is not explicit with any particular methodological rules in *'Female Sexualisation'* (1987). Rather, it was expected that the principles would be adapted and developed depending on need and context⁶. Hence, when initial discussions with expected participants revealed they may not feel comfortable writing accounts of their memories (as suggested in Haug's work), I settled on capturing women's memories through semi-structured, dialogic interviews. I planned to write collective memories from these accounts that the group could collectively analyse and theorise.

Unfortunately, I was perhaps too ambitious in what I could achieve within an honours project. Whilst the interviews and writing up of collective memories went ahead, the group work did not because, try as I might, I could not get the participants in this follow up stage to commit to a communal time. Many participants had full time jobs, were raising children, and two were interstate. Logistically, it was hard to coordinate in a short period of time. Further, memory work can be a confrontational process that requires significant emotional energy (Rocco 1999, Davies et al 1997). Traditionally, women participating in memory work are well known to each other, yet my participants were not familiar enough to have a pre-established level of trust. As I discuss in the following chapters, talk about sex can be imbued with shame, guilt and judgement, and challenging these ideas within a group context is difficult. The procedure I outline below, therefore, is an adapted version of my original intentions. Despite the collective analysis not proceeding as planned, I have had several participants during the course of this project mention a change in their understandings as a result of being able to discuss and reflect on their memories during the interviews. I attribute this partly to the nature of the interviews, (in which I shared my own stories and provided space for participants to theorise), as well as the use of memory,

⁶ Refer to Koutroulis (2001) and Mahoney (2007) for ways that memory work has been suitably adapted.

which provides the conditions for women to reflect on how their experiences have been shaped over time (McLeod & Thompson 2009).

Procedure

The Murdoch University Ethics Committee granted ethics approval for this project. Participants were provided an information letter and reflection sheet prior to participation. All participants signed a consent form⁷.

Qualitative data was collected from semi-structured interviews, conducted in an interactive, dialogic manner guided by open-ended questions. Questions were designed to assist participants to reflect on, and share their memories of, coming to understand constraints within their sex lives and attempting to overcome these constraints through negotiation. These questions were piloted with the first two participants. As there was no need to make changes, these 'pilot' interviews became part of the data set. During the interviews, particular emphasis was placed on building a connection between participants, which included empathetic listening, reassurance and self-disclosure on my behalf where suitable.

Interviews were audio recorded, and later transcribed. During this process, data was de-identified using a participant selected pseudonym. I also substituted the names of any sexual partners mentioned. All transcriptions were provided to the relevant participant to check for accuracy and encourage further reflection. One participant provided further reflection, which was included in the data.

An initial thematic and narrative analysis was undertaken on this data, following guidelines recommended by Riessman (2008). Using this analysis, in an adaption of Haug's (1987) memory work methodology, I wrote generalizable memories drawing upon key themes identified in the interviews. These memories are a way to move from framing experiences in terms of individual circumstances, to reframing them in terms of the commonalities between the memories shared by participants. Thus the written memories contained elements of each participant's experiences, but they are not theirs alone. Although the

⁷ Relevant forms in appendices.

memory work did not proceed, and these collective memories were not used to further discussion with my participants, they were helpful to the analytical process I undertook.

Participants

Ten women participated in the study. General invitations for participation were distributed through my personal networks using Facebook and resulted in seventeen women expressing interest in becoming involved. Another contacted me after hearing about the research from a participant. To participate, women needed be willing to talk about their experiences of sexual negotiation. With a cultural discourse that tells us that sex is something private and taboo, just speaking about personal sexual experiences is a form of resistance (Gwynne 2011). As participants highlighted, we talk about 'sex' often, but rarely about our own personal and intimate experiences. For this reason, I needed to tread a fine line when following up potential participants. Some participants who initially expressed interest did not respond to 'follow up' emails or prompts for scheduling a time to meet. I chose not to pursue these women as assertively as I would have had the research topic been less intimate. From those who expressed firm interest, ten women were selected whom best fitted with the project requirements.

I purposefully recruited for a rich and diverse source of stories to identify multiple sites of resistance and what has been helpful or unhelpful in negotiating sex. I specifically targeted women over the age of 23, and sampled women across a variety of age groups. My reasoning was twofold. Firstly, I was asking women to reflect on their past experiences, and what has shifted for them over time: I made an assumption that this would be easier for women who had more to reflect on. Secondly, the vast majority of research in this area targets young women aged 15-21. I wanted to listen to the stories that are documented less often. The final ages ranged from early twenties to late fifties.

I also looked for a balance of women who had same-sex experiences and heterosexual experiences. I was acutely aware of the lack of research in this area that encompassed a diversity of sexualities. Where woman who identify as queer⁸ are included, it is often

⁸ In my recruitment posts, I used the word 'queer' as an all-encompassing, reclaimed term to identify that the study was inclusive of individuals who were not heterosexual or cisgender.

treated as incidental and irrelevant to the findings (Ussher & Mooney-Somers 2000). I had a hunch that women with same sex experiences may be able to provide a rich source of data in regards to reflexivity and negotiation. For example, women who have had sexual relations with both men and women are able to reflect on how these experiences differ in terms of their ability to negotiate. Women in lesbian relationships are less able to 'pass' as heteronormative, and are therefore potentially more acutely aware of the privilege that is afforded to others and not to them, and to have developed strategies to overcome some of these barriers. This is opposed to women who may also be queer (e.g. bisexual, asexual) or actively queering a relationship (e.g. negotiating an open relationship) but able to 'pass' as heteronormative through a heterosexual relationship. Secondly, as heteronormativity is composed of two elements; the normality of hetero-sex and hetero-patriarchy (Jackson 1999), women with same sex experience may have more success negotiating one of these elements better than the other. Two women in the study identified as lesbian (with both having previous heterosexual interactions), one as bisexual (with only heterosexual interactions), five as heterosexual (with one having both same sex and opposite sex interactions), and one did not identify (was attracted to both male and females but spoke only about heterosexual relations). All participants were cis-gender⁹.

As the research progressed, it became apparent that I was also fortunate to have (inadvertently) selected women who could speak about casual sex experiences and sex within a committed relationship. In chapters three and four, I explain how these contexts vary in regards to the 'rules of the game' and women's ability to negotiate around these rules. Five out of the ten women described memories that involved casual sex, ranging from one-time sexual experiences with someone they had only just met, to long-term sexual arrangements outside of a 'committed' relationship¹⁰. Five participants were in long-term, monogamous, heterosexual relationships at the time of interview (four by marriage). One of these women, Polly, felt her relationship had reached the end of its course in its

⁹ 'Cisgender' refers to individuals for whom there is a match between their assigned sex and their gender. I was clear in my ethics application that I was targeting women (which included trans and cisgender women, as well as individuals who may identify as non-binary (individuals who do not identify within the gender binary of male/female)).

¹⁰ In some of the memories participants shared, it was unclear whether the partner involved was someone they considered a 'casual sex' partner or whether the experience was part of a committed relationship.

current form, and was waiting for material circumstances to change to enable her to end the relationship¹¹.

Finally, it is worth noting that the majority of participants were white and university educated. I have in no way adequately, nor could I, represent the diversity of experiences that occur as a result of the interactions between gender, class, race, religion and so forth. Whilst qualitative methods are incredibly valuable in sourcing in-depth knowledge about particular processes and strategies, it is important to highlight that this knowledge is not representative of 'all women'. Each participant provided stories or examples of how she came to understand constraints, and or pleasures, and actively sought to resist or seek out these respectively. The stories highlight just some of the diversity of experiences, the different ways that we are affected by heteronormative understandings and therefore the different ways we can resist them. As such, the research cannot be taken for more than what it is. It is a sample; a starting point, generating insight that adds to the pre-existing literature and allows us to consider sex and agency in a slightly different way.

Weaving together theory and experience: the use of Bourdieu

A potential issue with research reciprocity is 'false consciousness' (Lather 1991), or what Bourdieu (1991) refers to as 'symbolic violence'. Drawing on Marx, Lather (1991: 59) explains that false consciousness is the 'denial of how our common sense ways of looking at the world are permeated with meanings that sustain our disempowerment'. Whilst I am not fond of the term 'false consciousness' as it implies the researcher 'knows better', Lather (1991) aptly points out that when negotiating meaning and making knowledge claims in collaboration with participants, we cannot simply adopt a participant's common sense understandings of her situation. Therefore, sole reliance on participant involvement is misguided unless participants, including the researcher, are propelled into a self-sustaining process of reflexivity and critical analysis. I felt this was particularly important for this project due to the strong hegemonic discourses (or 'grand narratives') that exist in relation to women, sex and an ability to negotiate sexual pleasure within Western society. However, I also wanted to come from a place that values women's knowledge and lived experience and does not dismiss them as 'duped' (Levy 2005).

¹¹ Refer to the appendices for further background detail on participants.

As mentioned in the introduction, I found Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and field useful for engaging in a critical analysis of our 'common sense understandings'. As such, I provide a brief explanation of these concepts below in preparation for the following chapters.

Habitus

A key Bourdieusian concept, habitus refers to a deeply internalized system of dispositions and schemas ('habits') through which we interpret and respond to the world in a seemingly 'common sense' way (McNay 1999). Our habitus provides us with a pre-reflexive level of practical mastery, allowing us to navigate social environments without having to consciously reflect on each experience or go through rational decision-making. Our habitus is formed through an ongoing socialisation process, whereby we learn the sexual desires, feelings, roles and practices typical of our group within society, without consciously being aware of doing so (Parker 2009). Bourdieu (2001) refers to this as our 'feel for the game'. Because habitus is so ingrained, Bourdieu argued that people often mistake the 'feel for the game' as natural rather than developed through our social environments. Bourdieu (1991:23) saw heteronormativity as part of the habitus, legitimising 'a relationship of domination by embedding it in a biological nature that is itself a naturalised social construction'. Because heteronormativity is so deeply embedded pre-reflexively, we come to see ideas like 'he wants sex, she wants romance' (Gray 1995:1) as 'natural' or 'common sense'. The concept of habitus is particularly useful for understanding why change is often not the 'simple conversion of...wills' that neo-liberalist discourses would lead us to believe (Bourdieu 2001:41-42).

The Field

The 'field' describes a social playground where cultural rules, such as the rules associated with heteronormativity, apply. It is both a 'field of forces' and a 'field of struggles' (Bourdieu 1977). In other words, it is a social space in which discussions, negotiations and interactions take place between agents and institutions (whereby agents 'struggle' for positions within the field), and also a space where our dispositions (our habitus or 'feel for the game') are formed. The 'rules' of the field (in this case heteronormativity) are

internalised by agents (in the form of habitus) so that we can move through the world without consciously reflecting on every thought and action.

The interaction between the field and habitus

By explaining practice as a complex interplay between field, habitus and capital¹², Bourdieu (1977) attempts to reconcile the binaries of sociological thought around constraint/freedom and micro/macro. The strength of Bourdieu's concept of habitus, as opposed to the traditional dichotomy of structure and agency, is understood to be both its inherited and innovative nature; it is affected by institutions but then shapes these institutions. Bourdieu (1984:170) states;

'Habitus is neither a result of free will, nor determined by structures, but created by a kind of interplay between the two over time: dispositions that are both shaped by past events and structures, and that shape current practices and structures and also, importantly, that condition our very perceptions of these'.

It was for this reason I was drawn to Bourdieu's concepts in my search for a way through the binaries present within the literature and cultural discourses. As I discuss in the following chapters, this interplay between the habitus and field is useful for understanding the durability of heteronormativity, and the ways in which changes in the field may affect our ability to negotiate. By acting in conformity with the field (through our habitus), the field is both confirmed and reproduced. However for the same reasons, I found it less useful for understanding how women come to challenge heteronormativity. It is here that the value of women's lived experience and understanding really came to the fore.

¹² Bourdieu's original work was focused around class relations where the concept of capital has more value. For the purposes of this thesis, this value was limited and thus I have chosen to focus instead on habitus and field.

Chapter 2: Thinking and Feeling

One of the few direct questions I asked participants concerned their personal view of sexual freedom. I wanted to ensure I had an understanding of what participants were negotiating for, rather than cloak their desires with my expectations. Their answers suggest two aspects to sexual freedom. The first, which I explore in this chapter, was articulated as a *feeling* of sexual freedom, existing independent of a sexual partner. This freedom was articulated as *embodied*; a feeling of sexual confidence *'to say exactly what you want'* (Brooke) and *'be... in the moment'* (Sam) without *'feeling embarrassed or ashamed of myself'* (Jane).

As one participant, Jane, said; *'[it's about being] able to feel freedom... It's an internal thing, mostly. I don't think it is anything to do necessarily with your partner allowing you to be free... it's inside me and what I am as a person.... [to] not be afraid to take control or even bring it up'*.

Some remarks made around this first aspect of sexual freedom reflected neo-liberalist thinking in that sexual freedom is something to be achieved by women as a personal endeavour, rather than something to which they were entitled. For example, *'I am mostly there [in attaining sexual freedom] but not quite'* (Frankie) and *'the freedom is there but...I haven't made the choice; sometimes I have tried and sometimes I haven't'* (Jane). These remarks appeared to reflect the idea that it is a woman's individual responsibility to develop the confidence to control and express her own desires (Holland et al 1998), to *'bring... up'* an issue to be negotiated.

Nonetheless, participants did not display evidence of a 'post feminist sensibility' (Gill 2007). Rather, they were critically aware, at varying levels, of the heteronormative rules that hindered their sense of sexual freedom. Featuring heavily, for example, in their descriptions of sexual freedom was a desire to be free of feelings of shame and guilt about sexuality and sexual pleasure from others and/or society at large. Sexual freedom meant *'not having any shame around it'* (Polly); *'not feeling guilty or oppressed by other's opinions'* (Julie).

Participants did not position themselves as ‘victims’ with no sexual freedom, but nor did they present themselves as ‘sexually liberated’ with total freedom. It is the space between these two positions that I explore in this chapter; ‘the contradictions, tensions and dilemmas at the interface of dominant discourses [which offer] up opportunities for resistance’ (Jackson & Cram 2003: 123). I explore what the women I talked to thought and felt about sexual negotiation and freedom. I reference Bourdieu’s concept of habitus for understanding how heteronormativity is drawn into the body and affects how we talk about and ‘feel’ freedom. I explore how women are constrained by dominant discourses but also able to challenge these ‘embedded dispositions’ through a process of critical reflexivity, sitting with vulnerability and the adoption of alternative discourses. I have selected four themes to examine these processes. Through the first theme: ‘the myth of love and romance’, I highlight women’s ability to question heteronormative understandings through a process of critical reflexivity. Next I look at the alternative discourse; ‘there is more to relationships than bumping uglies’, through which I discuss how sitting with discomfort may prompt a change in habitus. I discuss how partner interactions impact on the women’s habitus in ‘It’s easier for men- its all physical’. I also discuss casual sex in this section; drawing on arguments that casual sex consists of different ‘rules’ than sex within a committed relationship (Farvid & Braun 2013, Heldman & Wade 2010). Lastly, I discuss the idea that ‘(hetero)sex is all about the penis’.

The second aspect of sexual freedom, which I discuss in the following chapter, was something that was negotiated *between* partners. This type of sexual freedom was described as connection, intimacy and mutual respect. It involved a ‘*language*’ (Betty) between the people involved, being ‘*really connected*’ (Julie) in a way that allowed one to be ‘*quite open and honest about what you like and don’t like*’ (Emma). The thoughts and feelings of participants that I explore in this chapter provide the context for the following chapter on negotiation, whereby this second aspect comes to the fore.

‘The myth of romance and love’

‘I think like any girl I bought into the idea that I want[ed] to be loved and treated like a princess and all that crap... I’ve just landed in this position after a very long time of buying

into the myth... the myth of romance and love, romantic love, and I've made decisions through the lens of romantic love.' (Polly)

Three participants reflected on the 'romantic love' discourse; an idealised version of love expected to fulfil all emotional and sexual needs (Renold 2006, Chung 2005, Burns 2000, Rocco 1999, Duncombe & Marsden 1996, Holland et al 1996). Polly's reference of wanting to be '*treated like a princess*' is reminiscent of childhood fairy-tales such as Cinderella, in which the princess is swept off her feet by a handsome, chivalrous and charismatic prince. The fairy-tale romance encapsulates all that is heteronormative; the idea that individuals fall into either male or female categories, that each gender is different and has natural and complementary roles in life, and that the only natural relationship is between opposing genders (Jackson 1999, Vance 1984). Within this narrative, every woman has a predestined 'Mr Right' waiting to be found, and her sense of self is wrapped around finding, and sustaining a relationship with this 'Mr Right' (Wilkins 2004, Ussher 1997)¹³. Feminist academics have highlighted the issues with this discourse reinforcing the compulsoriness of heterosexuality (Rich 1980) and male power (Chung 2005, Gavey 2005, Burns 2000, Giddens 1992).

Polly, who had predominantly been in long term heterosexual relationships, reflected on how this ideal of romantic love meant she had made choices that she felt were not her own: that her choices and ability to negotiate had been constrained by '*buy[ing] into the myth*'. Within this framework, Polly had been unable to comprehend alternatives to this discourse. Another participant, Jay, also discussed how the romantic love discourse had impacted on her ability to negotiate in the past;

'At the time I really don't think that I did [have the capacity to negotiate]... [I] had this sort of young person's idea that this is 'the one'. This is the one that I love and so you make sacrifices for love.' (Jay)

Discourses of hetero-femininity position the 'good woman' as sexually passive or receptive, as well as caring and nurturing (Hollway 1996, Ussher 1991). She must prioritise the needs

¹³ See also Gill & Herdieckerhoff (2006:500) and Gwynne (2011) for discussions of how erotic memoirs and modern 'chic lit' 'rewrite' this discourse with a 'post feminist gloss' that continues to reinforce the ideal of 'one day my prince will come'.

of a male partner and children before, or in spite of, her own (Powell 2010). To fail to do so would risk relationship loss, and with one's identity tied up to so closely with sustaining a relationship with 'Mr Right', this can present a significant loss of self (Wilkins 2004, Jack 1991). This same sense of responsibility for sustaining relationships is not reciprocated in the construction of heterosexual masculine love. Therefore rather than love involving joint sacrifices (i.e. a compromise that works for both parties within a sexual relationship), women prioritise men's sexual pleasure at the expense of their own (Hayfield & Clarke 2012, Powell 2008, Allen 2003, Holland et al 1998).

Within this framework, Jay sacrificed what was important to her; she '*tolerated*' her partner's desires that didn't feel right to her. She also put her partner's feelings first at the expense of silencing herself;

'I think I was closeted partly because I was a little bit concerned [about] the effect on him [of] me being out as queer... seems mad in hindsight but at the time I worried that it might make him feel uncomfortable'. (Jay)

As with Polly, at the time, in Jay's mind, there was no clear alternative course of action. She becomes, as Haug (1986), MacKinnon (1989) and Bourdieu (2001) all point out, complicit in her own domination. Bourdieu (1991) used the term 'symbolic violence' to describe such situations in which domination is exercised upon an individual/group with their complicity. Women's complicitness with heteronormativity is achieved through the 'construction of desires and thoughts, influencing what choices people want to make so that some options are ruled out beforehand' (Chambers 2005:330). Jay's options had been ruled out pre-reflexively, before they were even considered, so that she never came to actually choose.

However by referring to this as '*the myth of romance and love*', Polly indicates that although for a time she had made decisions through this framework, she had come to understand it as a social construction that doesn't work for her. In doing so, Polly 'thinks the unthinkable' (Holland et al 2006:245). That is, she reveals and problematizes the 'taken for granted and unnoticed' (Ewick & Selby 2003:1328), the pre-reflexive part of her habitus. Jay and Betty, another participant, also presented themselves as now sceptical of the romantic love discourse. Despite the hegemonic nature of this discourse, their memories suggest women are able to identify the discourse and reflect on how it has shaped their

previous understanding of themselves and the meanings they attribute to past experiences. This critical reflexivity is a key component of resistance (Walter & Whitehouse 2012, MacKinnon 1989, Holland et al 1996). Through a process of reflexivity, these women became critically aware of the power imbalances present in the myth of romantic love and how this had restricted their ability to negotiate for their needs and desires.

Their reflexivity did not, however, generate the kind of 'girl power' of post-modern (Baker 2008). Whilst both Polly and Jay now display a confidence and assertiveness (in place of earlier passivity and vulnerability), they neither assume hyper-responsibility for their freedom nor that they are free from imposed constraints. They identified, rather than disavowed, power imbalances that produced unfair constraints and opportunities. Jay commented;

'I think it's partly that there's always been a bit of me that has felt in the core of my being that the devaluing of women as compared to men was not right. I can just viscerally feel it.'
(Jay)

An option for Jay and Polly would have been to acknowledge and accept the injustice as something that 'just is'. Indeed, for some participants, this was the case. Four other women had been in long-term, married relationships that involved children. These women did not mention the myth of romance, but rather drew on a pragmatic understanding of love and marriage – one that was based in their everyday realities. Possibly through their lived experience, they had accepted that Prince Charming wasn't going to ride in to save them. Several appeared resigned. Emma, for example, talked about the gap between her 'perfect world' and reality; *'It is what it is... its just married life'*. Similarly, Catherine joked *'once you get married... do you have sex?!'* Polly had experienced similar thinking with her group of friends;

'I recently wrote to a group of women on Facebook ... I called it "my division of labour rant" and they all wrote and said "yeah my husband is exactly the same but men are like that, they don't know, they don't help". And I thought, "Yeah, that's the difference". Everyone's going through that shit but I don't accept it. And it's the same I guess around sexuality "oh we don't have any sex anymore" – but I never accepted it... I've realised that a lot of women go through similar stuff but either buy into the myth or are okay with it I guess.' (Polly)

Existing research reflects these comments that whilst women are able to reflexively recognise and articulate sexual inequalities, they cannot see a way forward to resolve this imbalance, and so instead revert to essentialist statements about gender difference (Beres & Farvid 2010, Maxwell & Aggleton 2010, Maxwell 2007, Chung 2005, Jackson & Cram 2003). Chung (2005), for example, found young women excuse potential sexual inequalities by reverting to essentialist statements about male 'emotional incompetence', requiring women to do the 'relationship work' because men are not skilled in this area. Young women do not expect men to move away from heteronormativity and therefore integrate their narratives back into a traditional framework when aspirations are not translated into practice (Maxwell 2007). However these women were different. Some were walking away from relationships where equality could not be achieved. In order to actively engage with, and challenge men about their need to re-skill in both emotional intelligence and relationship work, women need to be able to comprehend this as a possibility. Perhaps life experience had provided these women with opportunity to see these possibilities.

Jay adopted an alternative understanding that was more pragmatic; seeing a relationship as something that needed to be worked at and constantly renegotiated;

'...I think when you get a bit older... your idea of love is a little bit less dramatic and a little more grounded in reality, but [still about] what you both want and need.' (Jay)

This was an understanding of a relationship as a joint thing to be worked on, negotiated, and renegotiated, together. An understanding that love is made, not found.

Polly, had come to accept her sexual desires could not be fully satisfied by one person within a heteronormative framework. Instead, she imagined a new reality where she could 'compartmentalise' parts of her life; a future where she would *'have a friendship with people, or a co-parenting arrangement, and then sexual relationships with other people'*. She linked her ability to conceive this alternative to her upbringing;

'I was exposed to a lot of unconventional relationships so that may have been why it was easier for me... other people might have those feelings and not know where to put them and not know there are alternatives, and [they] just end up being unhappy.' (Polly)

By reflecting on the romantic love discourse and how it had constrained their choices, Jay, Betty and Polly were able to consider alternative discourses that challenge the heterosexual imperatives of love and romance that are central to the social construction of heteronormativity. Their stories open up the possibility that women can conceptualize and develop new 'scripts' over time (Connell 1983, McNay 2000) that don't privilege one partner's needs or desires over another's. The self, after all, is not a fixed structure, but is always 'in process' (Gavey 2005:92). However, this was not an easy or straight-forward process, it involved a significant amount of emotional discomfort and vulnerability, which becomes apparent in the discussion of 'there's more to a relationship than bumping uglies'.

'There's more to a relationship than bumping uglies'

'We were sitting in the Board room a few weeks ago and it was all women and we were talking about going home and having sex with our husbands and I was like "na"... They were like "oh, you should do it. It's important for your relationship. He'll wander if you don't." Well, if he does, he doesn't value the relationship. There's more to a relationship than bumping uglies.' (Catherine)

Catherine's colleagues articulate the heteronormative discourse that sex and love are intimately linked, and that the health of a relationship can be gauged by its sex life (Elliot & Umberson 2008, Duncombe & Marsden 2006, Rocco 1999, Rubin 1991). Her colleagues' comments also place this responsibility for maintaining the health of the relationship with women; she must have sex with her husband or '*he'll wander*', an understanding well documented in the literature regardless of the gender of the partner (Ronson et al 2012, Strong et al 2006, Phillips 2000, Barbach 1982). One of the study's participants, Emma, also held this belief. She saw it as her duty to ensure her partner was sexually satisfied for the sake of the relationship;

'It doesn't mean that if you couldn't [have sex], you wouldn't still have a relationship, because it would be a medical reason and you still really love that person regardless [of the absence of sex]. But in a relationship where there [are] two healthy adults, I believe that if

you don't have [sex], then the rest of it – as soon as you go into rocky roads; that's when it doesn't work.' (Emma)

Again, despite the hegemony of this belief, several participants offered an alternative discourse, which acknowledged the difficulties of combining love and sex, and positioned them as two separate, yet interrelated entities. This alternative understanding recognised that love and sex don't necessarily go hand in hand; love can exist without sex and sex can exist without love. Sex isn't a by-product of love, nor does great love make great sex.

It also involved an understanding that both require ongoing negotiation, and a commitment to negotiation, as circumstances change. By seeing this work as an endeavour of exploration that can be enjoyable, enlightening and engaging, women were able to reframe it from a problem, to an instigator of growth and evolution within their relationships and themselves. Sexual negotiation became something that represented a strong relationship; rather than proof that the relationship was failing.

In the above example, Catherine rejects her colleagues' assumptions and instead suggests that her husband needs to also value more in the relationship '*than bumping uglies*'. Both Catherine and Brooke critiqued the kind of obligation that Emma felt. They discussed an article together¹⁴ in which the author had outlined how women should make sex a priority. Both talked about how, as new mothers, they were already prioritising so many things ahead of their own needs, it seemed ridiculous to prioritise sex with their husbands.

'[A friend] posted on Facebook this week those ten things to a happy marriage. And I read it and I got quite, not offended, but I do; I dunno, maybe its just food for thought... it was all about as women, sex is a gift from God... and we should make sex a priority once a week. I just think, God, its like scheduling in going to the bloody doctors.' (Catherine)

This societal pressure based around the idea that it's women's responsibility to maintain the health of a relationship, combined with an understanding that a healthy relationship is dependent on a healthy sex life meant that some participants did not feel comfortable being honest with others about their sex lives. Brooke, for example, mentioned how '*you talk [your sex life] up to be socially accepted*'.

¹⁴ Catherine and Brooke requested to do their interview together.

Catherine's hesitation when she talked about the Facebook article (*'I got quite- not offended – but I do – I dunno'*) was reflective of the tension that many participants felt where rationally they could identify this societal pressure and reject it, but continued to feel in some ways constrained by it. The tension between these two understandings was further reflected in Catherine's comments;

'I know we should be having sex more, well, I feel like we should be having sex more... It would be good for our relationship... Society has views about how often we should be having sex, its everywhere. Its on the TV.' (Catherine)

Catherine's self-correction (from *'I know'* to *'I feel'*) is telling. While she critiqued Emma's position and confidently said *'I don't think in my experience people leave just because they are not having sex'*, at the same time she *'worr[ie]d sometimes that I don't make enough effort... I worry about our relationship because I constantly turn him down'*. Catherine articulates the disjuncture many participants felt between their thinking and their feelings.

Understanding heteronormativity as a pre-reflexive component of a women's habitus provides a framework from which to understand the conflict between Catherine's feelings and thoughts. Emotions, according to Bourdieu (2001), are 'embodied thoughts'; they form part of our habitus. Catherine's emotions of guilt and worry disclose her habitus in a way that her explicit beliefs did not¹⁵. Whilst being able to voice alternative discourses, most participants nonetheless felt a discomfort; shame, guilt, anger, frustration. This was a re-occurring theme regardless of the partner's gender.

This conflict is evidence of women beginning to challenge heteronormativity, as without this conflict, the symbolic violence of heteronormativity would remain hidden. If Catherine was acting or thinking in a way that aligned with her 'feel for the game', then she would not be experiencing this discomfort. These conflicts are the starting point of '[questioning] the things that are self-evident' and challenging the 'acceptance of *commonplaces*' (Bourdieu 1998: 8). They expose what Bourdieu calls the 'paradox of doxa' – a conflict hidden under the surface of the common sense notions that rule our social reality. Unsettling dominant discourses can prompt discomfort (Beals et al 2013, Atkinson & DePalma 2009, Rocco 1999); it is an unpleasant, jarring feeling where we exist between two interpretive worlds.

¹⁵ See Miriam (2007) and Bartkley (1990) for further discussion.

This is why memory work feels uncomfortable. Haug's colleagues (1983: 267), in their memory work examining female sexualisation, talk about experiencing a 'loss of stability, crisis and guilt feelings', revealing the ways in which 'ideological socialisation exercises power over our bodies'.

To a researcher, this discomfort may not be immediately apparent, and for this reason the binary of women as 'victims' or 'cultural dupes' is woefully inadequate. These women are both resisting and replicating in an internal dialogue that may not be obvious to the outside world. Challenging the embedded aspects of our selves is a journey. Polly and Jay, from the previous section, acknowledged the long and sometimes painful journey to get to their current understandings. For Polly, it wasn't until the struggle trying to make it 'fit' was greater than the struggle needed to challenge the heteronormative discourse;

'I think coming to that understanding that I don't want to do this long-term (commitment) is a process. The process has been an unfolding of getting to know myself and really being accepting of the fact that actually this is how I'm going to live my life and these are the rules that work for me and I'm not going to adhere to someone else's rules.... I think I'm just starting to get to this point. I'm actually happy where I'm getting to, where I'm not buying into the fairy tale anymore. It's actually quite liberating. Before it was always a struggle. I've gotta get this and I've gotta get that – its like trying to fit a square peg in a round hole. It just does not fit. It doesn't. I've tried. I wont say that it doesn't fit for anyone else but it does not fit for me.' (Polly)

Our emotions therefore, may provide potential for change. If, as women, we can recognise this uncomfortableness as part of challenging our habitus, and sit with it (rather than recouping with dominant discourses); if we can persist with this discomfort, it may assist in breaking through to a new understanding (Atkinson & DePalma 2009). Butler argues; '... we need to pursue the moments of degrounding, when we're standing in two different places at once; or we don't know exactly where we're standing... That's where resistance to recuperation happens. It's like a breaking through to a new set of paradigms' (Butler, Osborne, and Segal 1994: 5).

'Its easier for men – its all physical'

Evident in all participants' stories was 'the male sex drive discourse' (Hollway 1989:54). This discourse casts men as the active initiators of sexual activity, with uncontrollable urges which women are paradoxically expected both to satisfy and restrain (Jackson & Scott 2007). Emma and Catherine, for example, understood male sexual pleasure as a purely physical act, which allows them to have sex detached from emotion and without having to 'think about' their partner. Reflecting the male sex drive discourse, this was seen as a biological trait, as opposed to one that may have been socially constructed;

'I think men can turn it on and off. It's more a physical act.... It's a bodily function isn't it? It's just how they are. And they're logical. Men are logical – women have all these emotions wrapped up in it but men are logical, that's why they can sleep with lots of girls. I mean I know some women can too, but overall I think it's a lot easier for a man to have sex with someone they don't think about or have any connection with.' (Emma)

The male sex drive discourse normalises the idea that men always want and are ready for sex, thus positioning them as 'entitled' to sex (Walker 1997). In turn, this legitimates any pressure they bring to bear, which disrupts negotiation (Burkett & Hamilton 2012, Powell 2008, Gavey 2005, Allen 2003).

Within a heteronormative framework, females are positioned as the opposites to men, and thus women are positioned, as Catherine put it, as, '*more emotionally invested. Guys can distance themselves... We are more vulnerable. More emotional attachment.*' Within the male sex drive discourse, women are understood as emotional nurturers, desiring emotional security over pleasure as a desired outcome (Gavey 2005). This is exemplified in the following through Jane's use the word 'obviously';

'He cooked me a meal, before we even started the meal he came straight out and said "I'm in love with you". So he scored that night – obviously.' (Jane)

Missing from this framework is an understanding that both parties within a sexual encounter are emotionally vulnerable. Just as heteronormativity makes assumptions that pigeon hole women, this idea of hegemonic masculinity also erases/stigmatises certain aspects of men; we erase their emotional vulnerability, their desire for love/intimacy, their

insecurities. As Holland et al (1996) argues, for men, negotiating a close relationship (as opposed to a sexual conquest) is risky, because it can give a private space for women's power. Uncovering the pervasiveness of this discourse was a surprise to me, despite so much research documenting the strength of it (Hayfield & Clarke 2012, Powell 2008). I had assumed that being in a close relationship with men would expose women to their vulnerability. There was certainly no shortage of accounts about a partner's sex drive changing over time and/or where the woman had wanted sex more than the male. And it is not to say their partners never challenged their assumptions. In the quote below, Sam recalls her partner's response to her understanding of the male sex drive;

'I said that to [my partner] the other day and he got really upset and I was like "na, I don't believe that anymore". I will still get offended – I know it's irrational. He said, "that's not very fair Sam, 'cause if guys don't feel like it, they don't feel like it". And that's fine, but I still think because I value that – I mean intellectually not but its messy and he was like, "it's a bit hypocritical if you're saying all about equality, and guys are expected and have all this pressure to perform and to be ready for sex all the time". He's like, "I might just be tired. It's got nothing to do with you". (Sam)

Again, evident in Sam's memory is the conflict between her thoughts and feelings. She identifies that *'intellectually'* this discourse is culturally constructed, but she is still *'offended'* if her partner doesn't want sex. Her description of it being *'messy'* identifies the conflict between her habitus and her *'intellectual knowing'* that she is working through.

As with Sam, in some contexts, the experience with another helped disrupt this discourse. However, resistance is often tenuous and fragile, and recuperation with a dominant discourse comes easily (Atkinson & DePalma 2008). Close relationships with men who do not fit within heteronormative standards may help women to break away from the idea of men as *'other'*. However, as Atkinson and DePalma (2008:23) argue, *'re-inscription needs not only momentary subversion, but also persistence'*. Otherwise it is too easy for women to assume *'that was just one exception'* (Sam).

I suspect recuperation came easier with this discourse because of its links to biology. Whereas the myth of romance and love, and sex and love can be challenged as cultural understandings, the male sex drive discourse is firmly tied to *'biology'*. Assumptions about

our biology play a powerful role in maintaining unconscious views about our differing and 'opposite' physiological and sexual natures and what constitutes normal behaviour (Tiefer 1995). Fine (2007) and Birke (2000) have written extensively on how science reinforces heteronormativity. Gavey (2005) also suggests that critiques of the male sex drive discourse and coital imperative (discussed in the next part) are not as widely available as the other discourses I have discussed.

Interestingly, the rules in regards to emotion played out differently when it came to casual sex encounters. Existing literature has documented how the 'rules' of casual sex differ from sex within a committed relationship, and this was reflected in the memories described by participants. Farvid & Braun (2013) detail that cultural rules of casual sex are highly gendered, and for women, stipulate a detachment of emotions from sex. Drawing on neo-liberalist and permissive discourses, these rules suggest we need to 'manage' ourselves to avoid emotion and 'doing casual sex wrong' by becoming emotionally attached (Farvid & Braun 2013: 370, Gilmartin 2006).

As I discuss in the next chapter, some women utilised this separation of love and sex as a strategy for negotiating pleasure. Sam, for example, explained this untangling of the traditional intertwining of sex and 'romantic' love as *pulling apart that you can still have an amazing time, even over an extended period of time... without falling in love*'.

Gilmartin (2006:444) alongside others (i.e. Hollway 1996, Levy 2005) have emphasised the negative effects of cutting sex from its 'romantic and emotional moorings'. They suggest that women are 'passive dupes' (Levy 2005) of these cultural rules that enhance men's 'rights' to a heterosexual practice and protect men from having to admit their own needs for intimacy. This argument suggests women hope for emotional closeness alongside sexual intimacy but do not achieve it. However this is not how participants positioned themselves.

This argument is reliant on the idea that (young) women adopt a 'permissive' and/or 'have hold' discourse in which casual sex 'just happens', or they 'go along' with casual sex in order to secure a committed relationship. Whilst this may be the case for younger women, participants in this research were actively seeking out casual sex to fulfil their desires. Secondly, it suggests women are under a false consciousness if actively desiring non-committal sex. Participants were very critically aware of the complexity of dominant discourses surrounding their choices to participate in casual sex.

Some women, for example, challenged the idea that sex needs to be *emotionless*, thus challenging the compulsoriness of these rules. Both Polly and Julie, for example, spoke about a temporary 'love' they felt during casual sex encounters;

'I think I love most people I've had sex with because you give something of yourself when you agree to that, in whatever capacity you're agreeing to, you are giving a part of you.'
(Julie)

'I look back on those experiences and they were enjoyable and they were fun and they made me learn and sometimes that feeling of – you know I used to always say that I messed up that feeling of love and lust – but I don't know if I did – I just did feel love for those people at those moments, and sure some of them I wouldn't have wanted to have long term loving relationships with, but I felt love for them in those moments.' (Polly)

'Sex is about the penis'

Participants also struggled with challenging the 'coital imperative' (Jackson, 1984: 44); the assumption that penetrative intercourse (involving a vagina and penis and ending in the male orgasm) is the most natural and essential form of heterosexual activity (Braun et al 2003, Nicolson 1993, Segal 1994). Other forms of sexual pleasure are considered peripheral to real sex: as foreplay, afterplay, or immature play, or as safe sex, but never as 'real sex' (Hayfield and Clarke 2012, Tiefer 1995). Many empirical studies have shown that both men and women hold these views (Ussher et al 2013, McPhillips, Braun & Gavey 2001, Meadows 1997, Holland et al 1996, Stewart 1994, Gavey 1992, Kippax, Crawford & Waldby 1990). Some women in this study talked about alternatives such as masturbation and oral sex, but these were framed as not 'real' sex. For example, when illness or injury prevented some women from participation in intercourse, they felt guilty for not having 'real sex' with their partners.

One of the obvious alternatives to the coital imperative was available to the lesbian participants. Jay, who had previously been sexually active with men but now identifies as lesbian, explained the difference between lesbian sex and heterosexual sex as follows;

'One of the things that is really interesting about queer sex is that often it isn't linear... I think heterosexual sex can be quite linear and it's linear on a male kind of timeline. Like the guy gets turned on and that's visible and it's obvious and then sex often ends when he finishes... Whereas I think with queer sex, particularly between two women, it's more like different kinds of pleasure. And a lot of the things that queer women do only really physically give one person pleasure at a time... there's no sense that I need access to your genitalia so that I can get off. It's more like "I would like to make your genitalia feel awesome". (Jay)

I asked Jay what prevents hetero-sex from being this way. Logistically, there is no reason why a male and female couldn't have 'non-linear' sex. Drawing on her awareness of the coital imperative, Jay responded;

'The idea of queer sex with a man, that's seems really difficult to negotiate, because most of the things that women do with each other could also be with a man if he was down with that but that would be very difficult to negotiate because a lot of it requires one way pleasure, which means that the almighty penis is not getting attention.' (Jay)

Betty, who identified as bisexual, was also critically aware of the coital imperative but felt it was really hard to negotiate;

'[Sex has] always been that idea that it will end when he is finished. That's a shitty way to do things – but it's so hard to negotiate because it's so entrenched that that's what sex is. It's really hard.' (Betty)

Frankie also identified as lesbian (but had previously engaged in heterosexual sex) and believed that *'biologically, ultimately, for men to have sex it means a certain thing'*. Sex with women, however, was much more open to exploration and *'tailoring every little detail'*. Frankie was able to critique the coital imperative but had difficulty conceiving any alternative for heterosexual sex because of men's biology. This reflects similar findings from Chung (2005) and Pilcher (2012) that lesbian women, despite being outside of the charmed circle of sexuality (Rubin 1984) continue to exhibit rigid binary gendered and sexualised constructions of the roles of men and women in sexual interactions. Whilst

perhaps having a greater degree of freedom to adopt alternatives, lesbian women are still not free of heteronormativity (Holland et al. 1998).

The Context for Negotiation

In this chapter I have attempted to reflect the nuanced and complex thoughts and feelings participants had in regards to their sex lives.

Women currently live in an interesting context in which current discourse tells us we are sexually liberated, deserve equal sexual pleasure and have the power to say 'yes' and 'no'. Women are seen as negotiating sex on their own terms (Jackson and Cram 2003, Jackson and Scott 2004) and are encouraged to reinvent their sexuality in new, liberated and empowered ways (Levy 2005). At the same time, we live in a context in which we remain exposed to 'the dominant cultural narratives of dualism, male hegemony and heteronormativity' (Myerson et al 2007:95, Sakaluk et al 2014) that are constraining and damaging in a number of ways.

These contradictions, tensions and conflicts at the interface of the dominant discourses were visible in all of the memories shared with me. Women often felt in the middle of two places; they were certainly not unified, free subjects but rather were engaging in negotiations of self that were complex, creative and messy; that both replicated and resisted dominant discourses. As Betty said;

'It's a real negotiation in yourself, kind of – what you feel like today you might not feel ok with tomorrow, and the sort of pressures what you have internalised, what other people have told you, what the bigger picture is telling you. I always feel like it's a struggle...'
(Betty)

It is these understandings (which are neither monolithic, hegemonic nor entirely conscious) that women bring to the field of sexual encounters. For when we engage in sex with another, it is not about 'abstract bodies meeting in asocial place, but embodied social beings interacting in a social context, bringing with them a good deal of cultural and biographical baggage' (Jackson & Scott 2007:101). Whilst messy and contradictory, the

emotional baggage which Bourdieu would say is how we wear the consequences of the habitus also suggest that it is more accessible to individuals than he would have us think. Women can, and are, challenging heteronormativity at an intellectual and embodied level. In the following chapter, I discuss how this may be enacted within the field of sexual relations.

Chapter 3: Negotiating

In the preceding chapter, drawing on women's stories and Bourdieu's concept of the habitus, I looked at how heteronormativity is pulled into the body but also resisted or re-worked. In doing so, I aimed to provide a general understanding to what thoughts and feelings women bring to negotiations with a sexual partner(s). In this chapter, I move to look at what transpires within the 'field'; how negotiations¹⁶ unfold at an experiential level and the strategies that women use when negotiating for sexual freedom. Bourdieu (1998:32) describes a field as:

'a field of forces, whose necessity is imposed on agents who are engaged in it, and a field of struggles within which agents confront each other, with differentiated means and ends according to their position in the structure of the field of forces, thus contributing to conserving or transforming its structure.'

It is in this chapter that the second aspect of sexual freedom described by participants (that concerned with a sense of connectedness, equality and mutual respect) really comes to the fore. This aspect expresses participants' desires to adopt a practice of equality with their sexual partners. They didn't want to wrestle power *from* their partners. Rather, they wanted to struggle *with* their partners to increase mutual respect in their sexual engagements and desire. Existing research has argued that whilst women may be able to change their own understandings, their ability to translate these into practice with their partners is limited (Sieg 2007, Maxwell 2007, Chung 2005). I argue that by looking closely at the various contexts and factors, it becomes evident that in certain situations, women have an increased likelihood of achieving *both* aspects of sexual freedom, an individual and a negotiated sense of freedom.

Bourdieu's concept of the field draws our attention to the mediating factors that interact with a woman's habitus to determine how well she can 'struggle' and 'transform...its

¹⁶ The term 'negotiation' is drawn from the work of Crawford, Kippax, and Waldby (1994:571) and refers to 'the interpersonal communication which takes place during a sexual encounter in order to influence what happens in that encounter in terms of the needs and desires of the two people involved.'

structure'. For example, many women in the study said that their sense of sexual freedom was heavily dependent on the relationship at the time of the memory. They explained that just because they could negotiate well with one partner did not mean they would be able to necessarily do so with a different partner. Different relationships bring different agents and 'differentiated means and ends' into the field. Similarly, because the rules of casual sex differ from traditional rules of heteronormativity (as outlined in chapter three), they present two separate fields of relating, and therefore the potential for women to experience power and negotiate differently within each field. Women who identified as lesbian had access to alternative positions within the field compared to those who were only attracted to the opposite sex, and so forth.

I have divided this chapter into the various negotiation strategies that participants adopted (indirect, semi-direct, direct) depending on the interaction between their habitus, the field, and other agents within the field (i.e. their sexual partner). I begin by discussing indirect and non-verbal negotiation strategies, which tended to be adopted by women when they were most constrained by heteronormative discourses and/or had less power in the relationship. I then explore some of the ways and contexts in which women were able to negotiate semi-directly. Finally, I discuss contexts in which women negotiated directly or recalled 'starting from' a powerful position. In doing so, I aim to reveal *how* women may negotiate to do sex differently in ways that generate significant transformations of the habitus and field over time (Bryant & Schofield 2007, Dowsett 1996, Connell 1995). It is worth noting that women shared with me far more contexts, strategies, and tools that I could possibly explore in this thesis. I have chosen certain stories to provide examples, but these are by no means the limit to women's creative and resilient ways of living in a heteronormative world.

Indirect negotiations

Of all the strategies women shared with me in their stories, an indirect approach was the most prevalent. This is consistent with past research and has also been well documented within the HIV prevention literature (Lam 2003). It is characterised by being non-confrontational, passive and/or vague (Choi et al 2004). Participants described both verbal and non-verbal strategies that could be categorised as indirect. These included 're-

positioning' one's body for increased pleasure, 'faking' an orgasm to move things along, 'rolling over' when sex was not desired, or conversely 'dressing up in sexy lingerie' to encourage another's sexual desires.

As noted above, an indirect strategy was most often adopted where a woman's power was constrained by dominant discourses of heteronormativity. In particular, it was often used when women felt the risk of losing the relationship was too great to negotiate directly, or when they felt there was a risk they would be shamed by their partner. An indirect strategy, particularly using non-verbal cues, was also adopted when women had not yet had the opportunity to learn the skills required to negotiate directly.

Frankie, for example, sometimes adopted non-verbal communication or indirect communication (what she referred to as '*skirting around*' the issue) to negotiate. Currently, this was a way to not offend the '*soft ones*' (women who she felt were more emotionally vulnerable), but in relation to earlier memories she attributed it to her lack of communication skills. Here, for example, she talks about using repositioning in an attempt to improve the situation;

'I was seeing this girl and she suggested a 69¹⁷ and I hadn't done that yet so I was like "okay" and so [I was] kind of taking the lead but I was also learning [that with] the different positioning I wasn't getting the same gratification... I was still kind of in that position of not knowing how to communicate so I basically redirected either by positioning myself or saying... just vocalising during the act... It was better but I still didn't get right to really the best it could have been but I did improve the situation... I was sixteen and quite new to talking about things.' (Frankie)

Frankie developed other indirect strategies such as '*telling them with stories*' or '*say[ing] things like "these are the types of things I enjoy"*'. During sex she would '*direct, but by moving or [at most] by saying, "there, lower" or whatever*'. Frankie indicated during our discussion that she wanted to be more assertive in asking for what she wanted but felt constrained by '*being overly concerned about how the other person is going to be... the whole thing about not wanting to offend*'.

¹⁷ '69' was a term used by participants to describe simultaneous oral sex.

This fear of not wanting to offend or hurt someone was one of the main reasons women seemed to adopt an indirect approach. As discussed in chapter three, discourses of heterofemininity position the 'good woman' as caring and nurturing (Ussher 1991, Holloway 1996). To fail to prioritise the needs of her partner over her own would put Frankie at risk of relationship loss (Jack 1991). Whilst Frankie, who identifies as lesbian, may in some ways be less constrained by heteronormative ideals, her habitus continues to be influenced by the gendered expectations that a woman needs to prioritise another's feelings and desires before her own.

Whilst Frankie's experiences involved same-sex interactions, this pressure was replicated across heterosexual interactions. For instance, Sam (although she had since adopted different ways of negotiating) talked about how when she was younger she would '*never...tell a guy what to do*' and instead would do it '*subtly*'. She explained there were never questions about '*how much [sex] would you like? And I would never say if I didn't like something.*'

In practice, this meant she was unable to negotiate for more pleasurable sex;

'I was about 16 or 17... I was really horny and I dressed up in lingerie and I was all excited and he just jumped on top and it happened really quickly and it was the first time when I was kinda like, "oh that's what people are talking about. Is that it?!"... I remember lying there [afterwards] thinking "what?! Are you gonna wake up again? What do I do now?!"... There was just no way. I wouldn't have brought it up then. I just rolled over and went to sleep. Girls wouldn't bring that up. I wouldn't want to hurt his feelings by saying "that's terrible". (Sam)

'... over a progression of three years... I had a couple of... not totally negative experiences, but just enough that I kind of went "oh its just 95% about men" and just if I get lucky, when I get lucky, then it's just a nice bonus.' (Sam)

From an early age, women have learned through heteronormative discourses what they should or shouldn't do/say. Betty recalled a similar memory where she felt '*strangely obligated*'. She recalled turning down a casual sex partner when she didn't want sex but feeling the need to come up with an elaborate excuse rather than just say '*I don't feel like*

it'. While she was not keen on the idea of having to 'make someone happy', she nevertheless felt an uncomfortableness that 'just sort of bubbles under the surface' about being direct, and worried about the possible consequences;

"He's going to be upset... I'm never going to be able to sleep with him again... like its just... in the end I just didn't respond, I had no idea what to say." (Betty)

Betty and Sam's experiences are slightly different in that in Sam's memory, she didn't know any other way. At the time, her habitus matched the 'rules of the game' and therefore she accepted that 'girls wouldn't bring that up'. Echoing the symbolic violence I discussed in chapter three, the choice to negotiate was ruled out pre-reflexively. In comparison, Betty is older in her memory, and at the time was able to intellectually challenge the idea of having to 'make someone happy' at the expense of her own pleasure. However she is unable to convert this reflexivity into practice because part of her habitus still contains the expectation that she should prioritise his pleasure before her own.

Betty's memory is an exception because in most memories of casual sex, where the woman just wanted physical pleasure (as opposed to seeing sex as a gateway to a relationship¹⁸), a direct approach to negotiation was used. Without talking to the male in Betty's story, we cannot know whether he would have been upset or not. However, other women talked about the emotional coercion they experienced in regards to sex (whether their partner did this consciously or not) that influenced how, or if, they would negotiate. Jay, for example, talked about the 'emotional fallout' of rejecting a male partner's sexual advances;

'It was more just about not wanting it as often as he did and negotiating those situations where he wanted it and I didn't and me having to think "... do I deal with the emotional fallout of him being just generally kind of understanding but moody and cranky about the fact that he's not getting laid today or should we just have quick sex and then he'll be really happy and cuddly?" Its consensual but it might not be enthusiastic...' (Jay)

Sam described a similar experience;

¹⁸ Some women talked about having casual sex in the hope that this would develop into a committed relationship. In these situations, the women were more likely to use indirect communication to avoid the risk of emotional fallout and losing 'Mr Right'.

“... it was just hurting ‘cause he was using his fingers way too hard and I was [thinking] “oh way too quick”... he was like “did you find that enjoyable?” At least he asked! [I said] “you can probably go slower”. And then he just kind of went “oh well” and just stopped. Because... I had given some not so particularly positive feedback... and so that’s what happens when you give a guy feedback... You know they are going to go sulking for two days. Its not worth it.’ (Sam)

Heteronormativity provides men with a sense of entitlement in regards to women’s bodies. Some men, whilst they may be committed on a rational level to equality (Jay says her partner was *‘generally kind of understanding’*), their habitus still revolves around entitlement. When women challenge this, men feel a friction between their feel for the game and the putative rules of the game, which may be expressed as anger, moodiness, and/or resentment. Women have two options here, neither of which are ideal. They can either resort to the old rules of the game (so that the man no longer feels the mismatch) or they deal with the fall-out of the man being *‘sulky’*. Calling men out on this behaviour and challenging their habitus requires a women knowing that not all men are like this (or need to be like this) and having to sit with vulnerability and risk. In situations where women are unable to do so, they often perform what Duncombe and Marsden (1996) call *‘sex work’*, managing their own emotions according to the rules of how sex ought to be experienced in order to simulate a sexual fulfilment they did not feel spontaneously. These women were aware of what they were doing, but made a choice to go with the status quo in order to conserve their energy or maintain the relationship. As Betty put it; she decided whether to negotiate or not based on the *‘feeling of being self satisfied, whether it will jeopardise the relationship, or whether it’s worth the effort...sometimes it’s not’*. As I have previously argued, transgressing heteronormativity can lead to significant emotional and relational distress, which women may sometimes opt to avoid.

Hence an indirect approach was sometimes employed in situations where women simply didn’t have the energy, emotional capacity or time to negotiate in a specific instance. For example, whilst Brooke and her husband had quite a semi-direct approach to sexual negotiations, she used a non-verbal/indirect approach of simply *‘rolling over’* when she tired and didn’t feel like sex. Similarly, Sam described how she sometimes makes the conscious choice to fake an orgasm when she is tired, despite at other times engaging in more direct negotiations around not needing to always have an orgasm.

These examples highlight the strength of heteronormativity in constraining a woman's power to assert her needs and desires. Whilst there was some sense of agency or choice, reflecting back on the memories women recognised how constrained their choices were, and the ineffectiveness of this approach to negotiation. In some situations, it temporarily 'eased' the situation, but it did not contribute to their sense of sexual freedom. Jack (1991) has argued that the self-silencing that comes with women putting others' needs first and the self-negation required to bring themselves into line appropriate female behaviour, contributes to a fall in self-esteem and feelings of a 'loss of self' (see also Ayling & Ussher 2007). Further, indirect approaches are more open to being misrecognised by partners (Hollway 1984). In a telling example, Hollway (1984) suggests that when *men* behave defensively, *women* tend not to read it as stemming from vulnerability. Heteronormative discourses about men being rational, confident creatures leads to misrecognition that discourages open negotiation.

However, the majority of memories that involved in-direct negotiations were just that; 'memories'. Women talked about these memories in their younger years, but had since learnt other ways of negotiating, drawing on alternative discourses and other means of power that had become available to them over time. The existing literature's preoccupation with young women's sexual negotiations means that this potential for change remains hidden. Further, as I discuss in the following chapter, there is an assumption that women are 'failing' if they use indirect negotiation, as it does not 'render male power immediately fragile' (Allen 2003:235). However, as Allen (2003) argues, this cannot be simply dismissed as 'false power'. In the following chapter, I discuss how, whilst these moments may not immediately render heteronormativity fragile, when women recognise and articulate the potential for change, regardless of whether it is taken up in that specific situation or not, it provides the opportunity to contribute to collective change.

Semi direct negotiations

A semi- direct approach (Choi et al 1994) combined a concern for self (through a certain level of assertiveness) with a concern for others (through a degree of empathy). Women using a semi-direct approach tended to avoid direct statements about their desires and

instead framed their requests in the form of a question, or as an open, non-confrontational statement. This approach, sometimes referred to as a 'bilateral' (Lam 2003) or 'integrative' negotiation (Canet-Giner et al 2007), seemed to be consistent with what participants sought in the second aspect of sexual freedom. Rather than wanting to have power *over* their partners, this strategy positioned women as struggling *with* their partners for sexual freedom.

Women using this type of negotiation framed their requests or issues as a shared problem, rather than a personalised struggle. In most cases, women had learned from experience that a semi-direct approach was an effective way to engage their partners in the project of mutual sexual freedom. As mentioned in chapter three, they had available, alternative discourses that they could draw on, such as recognising the vulnerability of their partner, recognising that sex drives change over time and in context and that there was '*more to a relationship than bumping uglies*' (Catherine). For the negotiation to be successful, women also needed a relationship with a high degree of trust and respect, a partner willing to change/adapt and strong communication skills. For this reason, a semi-direct approach was used most often in committed relationships.

Brooke and her husband, who had been married for a number of years and shared experiences that included study, employment and raising children, adopted a semi-direct style in regards to negotiating the 'ups' and 'downs' of both her, and her husband's sexual desire. Brooke recalled that they '*used to have a lot of sex...like all the time*' but '*it changed when he started working*'. Rather than accepting this as 'the way it is', she questioned him; '*this is weird, why don't you want me so much?*' Her partner was able to explain that he was simply tired, and as a result, didn't desire sex as much.

By raising this conversation, Brooke didn't assume there was something wrong with her because they weren't having sex, and by framing it as a question, she and her husband were able to have a conversation about the issue. They had had similar discussions when she hadn't been interested in sex: her partner had expressed his vulnerability when she had rejected his advances, asking whether she still wanted him. Brooke was able to see that her partner was just as vulnerable to rejection as she was, and together they were able to learn ways to re-assure each other. Understanding her own lack of sexual interest as '*just your state at the time, it's not about him*', helped her not to be defensive about his. Brooke also

framed the issue as a shared problem, not a personal one (*'well you know we don't really initiate anymore – like either of us'*), and was able to challenge the idea that a healthy sexual life equals a healthy relationship (*'It's still the same, I still love him just as much or more. Its just a different type of relationship'*).

Whilst having lived experience that challenged the male sex drive discourse, as well as the availability of alternative discourses, Brooke also attributed her ability to negotiate to her partner's personality;

'I think it depends your partner as well. Like with [my husband] I'd be comfortable talking about any of that stuff but if I was with someone else that was a bit different I might not be as comfortable... It depends on their personality as well'. (Brooke)

Having a suitable partner to negotiate with was a common theme running through most of the discussions, supporting research undertaken by Wood et al (2007) and Risman (2004). A supportive partner was one dedicated to equality, open to communication, and open to exploring different needs. As previously discussed, interaction with a partner was able to re-shape a woman's habitus-

Sam, for example, attributed her ability to negotiate effectively – her *'turning point'* - to a casual sex partner she met whilst travelling overseas. Recall that Sam had previously thought there was nothing to negotiate, and adopted a passive attitude of *'if I get lucky [i.e. the sex is good] it's a nice bonus'*. Here she describes how this changed when she met 'Ric';

'... [he said] the whole experience of having sex is that you explore each other, and have fun and get lost. And so he would give me amazing head¹⁹ every time. And because I wasn't on any time frame, I wasn't worried about anyone walking in, I wasn't worried about who knew what I was doing, so that shut off my brain a lot more... I was happy to just lie down and if it took twenty minutes [to orgasm] I didn't care because I had nothing else I had to do...And I think it was him coming forward – and me saying what do you want me to do and him saying; "no I'm happy. This is what I like doing". And that kind of shifted [my understanding], I was like "oh". And his whole perception that it was actually; "if you're not enjoying it then there is no point for me... I was like "hey you're right!" [AS: It changed your

¹⁹ 'Head' was a term used by some participants to describe oral sex

whole framework of thinking?] *Yeah, because it was a guy that had said it...because it was a guy saying "no this is the way sex should be"... If a girl had told me I would be like "you're asking too much" because that's not the way it works. I had never had that experience with a guy before.... It wouldn't be a normal thing that you should expect... It would just be a particularly nice guy that would do that. Whereas now I think it should just be normal.'*
(Sam)

Sam's experience in the field contributed to the re-shaping of her habitus that she then carried forward into new relationships. As opposed to Brooke, Sam was in a relatively new committed relationship with 'Ben' at the time of interview. In the below excerpt, where she is negotiating with Ben for an increased level of pleasure, Sam also frames the conversation in a way that involves both of them 'figuring' out what works, as opposed to it being one person's responsibility;

'One weekend we had sex four times... and he had cum four or five times... and that's fine and its pleasurable. I don't feel like I need to orgasm every time I have sex... I don't feel I need to, but I was a bit like "well over a weekend you want to [cum] at least once" – a bit of attention. And I said to him after we had sex; "... I'm practicing my being assertive skills or something" and I explained that and said "it's not that I don't like it; its just that I wanted some more particular attention to make sure that I had enough pleasure before he continued"... In the end he was a bit upset, which I knew he would be, but he was only upset for about ten minutes and then he was like "well what do you want?"... And I went – "oh, I don't know!" And he was like "well if you tell me what you want I'll do it. No problem", and I said, "well – I don't know!" And so I changed it and said "look I don't know either but I'm just identifying that it would be good if it was a bit more balanced". I said, "Well we can discover it and both make it work? I'll figure out what I want and you can play around."
(Sam)

By using a semi-direct approach, Sam was able to shift the 'rules of the game' and open up a more developmental and equitable space in which sexual pleasures could develop. Importantly, Sam's story also talks to her ability to tolerate Ben being upset during the negotiation. A capacity to take the risk and sit with vulnerability, or letting go of emotion work, provided stronger outcomes when using a semi-direct approach. Having taken the risk of bringing up an issue with a partner, women had to resist the urge (stemming from

their habitus) of then trying to 'make it better'. This also provided the partner the space to reflect on, and challenge, their own understandings.

Sam also drew on a mix of indirect and semi-direct negotiation when it came to the orgasm imperative (Potts 2000). Whilst male concern that their partners experience orgasm may signal the development of more egalitarian and reciprocal sexual standards, Vance (1984:12) has argued that the anxious question, 'Did you come?' may demarcate a new area of woman's behavior men are expected to master and control – female orgasm (see also Braun, Gavey, and McPhillips 2003). Whilst Sam occasionally faked orgasms, she also explained the negotiations she has been engaging in, drawing on a framework of exploration, to enjoy sex without feeling the pressure to have an orgasm. In this first excerpt, Sam articulates the double-edged sword for women when pleasure is reduced to an orgasm; that is, it becomes 'imperative' for a woman to orgasm and, therefore, 'fake' when she hasn't so as not to offend the male ego. In the second part of this statement, Sam challenges the orgasm imperative by trying to 'educate' her partner. She is aware of how much he bases his self-esteem on making sure she gets pleasure and so uses a semi-direct strategy to work around this.

'Two days ago [I remember faking an orgasm]. I was tired... 'cause the whole thing at the moment is that I feel like [he] bases his self esteem on the sex and he is really wanting to make sure I get pleasure as well....he has a definite interest in [sex] being pleasurable because of my negotiations. [In those situations] when I know that I'm not going to particularly orgasm, even though I found [sex] really pleasurable and I enjoyed it and I would do it again straight away; I'm happy for it, I just haven't orgasmed. [In those situations] he is like "have you [orgasmed]?" And I'm like "mm...yeah" and he's like "sweet!" [AS: So there is an emphasis on your orgasm rather than your pleasure?] Yeah, which is what I'm trying to explain to him. Like it felt really good, so unless he asks me specifically I won't ever tell him or lie about it. I say like "that was awesome". So I'm trying to get the emphasis away from it. I'm like 'girls are a bit different sometimes – sometimes you do have a massive peak and then release, but sometimes it just feels awesome for the whole time or little peaks'. (Sam)

As a final example of semi-direct negotiation, one of Jay's memories is particularly valuable as she demonstrates how she felt comfortable negotiating with a woman but wouldn't with

a man. In this excerpt she describes a memory where she couldn't determine whether a woman who had expressed sexual interest in her was still interested;

'I didn't actually know how much she was interested in me and using alcohol to feel ok about being interested in me, or how much she was maybe not but changing her mind when she was drunk... it was more just trying to figure out; are you actually interested? And if so, you were interested before and now suddenly you're not and I don't know... I talked about it; "what's up?" and she would say, "I'm suddenly feeling nervous". We sort of talked about it and I guess I found myself – I felt like – if you imagine the stereotypical male-female romance, I felt like I was only playing the role that is typically ascribed to the male half of that – of being like, you know the "we don't have to do anything that you're not comfortable with"... I had never been in that role before so it was interesting, to feel that way. And to have to think about really, really taking care of her in the sense of making sure she didn't feel she was being pressured, because I didn't want to pressure her but I was afraid she might feel pressured. There were other times when she was really into me. So I don't know.' (Jay)

In contrast, if it had been a male partner, Jay admitted that she probably would have assumed the fault was hers (that she was lesser than) and just walked away rather than start a dialogue;

'I think it probably would have [played out differently if it was a male]. There is such a thread of misogyny in the script for male-female dating practices that I think, in that situation and it had been a man, I would have just assumed he was not interested in me and I might have jumped to the conclusion that he was not interested in me because there is something about me that is not good enough. And that's kind of sad... I would not have made the effort to talk about it and delve into the why, I would have just assumed it was my fault. I hadn't really thought of that until you asked but I think there really is a cultural script for male-female dating that we get taught through stories and movies and people's tales of their escapades – there is a script that people play whether they mean to or not, choose not to play it and deviate from it in interesting ways. But with queer relationships there is less of a script – or you end up trying to play bits of a script from the straight societal script but its never quite a clear role and often you're both playing both roles.' (Jay)

Jay's memory shows how heteronormative thinking 'others' the opposite sex, prohibiting negotiation. In the case of negotiating with another female, she was able to adopt a position of co-subject, whereas with a male her positioning was as an object of his request. Also of note is the way that Jay associates having to ask for consent as '*playing the role that is typically ascribed to the male half*'. Jay's memory demonstrates that regardless of whether we are inside the circle of heteronormativity or outside it, we remain affected by it. As she says, whilst perhaps not as pronounced, there are still 'scripts' within queer relationships. Thus in order to 'queer sex' we can't simply replace hetero sex with queer sex. Rather, a fracturing of heteronormativity needs to question the very binaries upon which sex exists.

These memories show that given the right context and mitigating factors, women are able to draw on a strategy of semi-direct negotiation to attain what they desire. It was a delicate balance of a concern for self (which required the skills and confidence to be assertive), and a concern for others (which required recognition of partner vulnerability and an ability to sit with this vulnerability). Sam described this as a skill to be learnt;

'Whereas now I realise you can actually have the conversation without being over the top – without being dominating, without making them feel awkward about it, and it will improve. I feel like that whole thing is a skill.' (Sam)

Direct Negotiations

'Starting from' a powerful position (Maxwell and Aggleton 2010), was a direct, pragmatic approach that some women were able to adopt in certain contexts. It involved a woman claiming a space for herself with an attitude of 'this is how it is'. Sam, for example, had negotiated a practice with her current boyfriend, 'Ben', whereby, knowing that he falls asleep straight after an orgasm, he pleased her orally first. Sam then claims ten minutes of 'bathing in her happiness' before she reciprocates sexual pleasure;

'I'm always happy to [reciprocate sexual pleasure] but I'll come back [after I've been pleased] when I'm feeling like it. It's not like they jump straight on me. I want ten minutes to chill out, have a chat and then bathe in my happiness and that's fine and you can sit

there and wait. And then when I feel happy for it [I'll pleasure him]... After he got off you wouldn't have a hope – he falls asleep straight away – so he is really respectful of that because if it was [him, he] wouldn't want to at all.' (Sam)

Here Sam creates a position of power with an assumption of equality. She feels confident that she deserves equal pleasure and expects reciprocity from her partner. In a heteronormative society, in which women's pleasure is considered less important than maintaining a relationship, this can be a risky approach. There were, however, several contexts where this approach was more accessible for women. These included at the start of a relationship before a woman was emotionally invested and during casual sex.

In Sam's situation, she adopted this position from the start of the relationship with Ben;

'It was really good then with [Ben] because I was like – "this is how it's going to be. I don't want you to expect [head], it should be a mutual thing. If I give you head its because I enjoy doing it and I do like it and that's when I'm doing it. And if I'm giving you head its because I'm enjoying it, not because I'll resent you for doing it later. So I'll tell you if I don't want to do it and you have to respect that when I say that ... We had these talks at like four weeks [into the relationship] – so it was really early – because it was a tinder²⁰ thing as well – so I was like well I don't have anything to lose because he's either going to say "yes that's okay or no" and that's fine.' (Sam)

Sam's mention of the relationship being a 'tinder' thing reflects the relationship's non-committal nature at the stage she chooses to voice her sexual rights/desires. She feels more able to voice her desires 'really early' in a relationship because she doesn't 'have anything to lose'. Sam challenges the male entitlement to sexual priority and asserts her expectation of sex needing to be a mutually enjoyable activity. By stating her rights and values early on, she increases her capacity to negotiate further down the track by ensuring her partner would be someone committed to working towards equality. This way, she negated the risk of being too invested in the relationship should the partner refuse the direct request.

²⁰ Tinder is a social networking application that is increasingly used for heterosexual dating, but also well known for facilitating casual/non-committal sex.

Sam had learnt this strategy from previous experiences where she had felt unable to assert her needs. She recalled a past boyfriend, 'Matt' who continued to insist upon sex when she didn't feel like it;

'There was just no way of negotiating with 'Matt' though. And that's pretty much why I broke up with him. Cause his values; they were very different... And so coming off that I guess I was a bit more passionate about saying – well I know what I want... I can just set that up from the beginning rather than letting it go too far.' (Sam)

Similarly, Polly, who was planning on ending her long-term relationship at the time of the interview, explained that in future sexual interactions, she intended to articulate her needs and desires around sex and intimacy up-front. In her current situation, the emotional fallout from negotiating has left her feeling restricted and convinced it was impossible to reach a common understanding. From now on, she wanted to 'start from' a powerful position rather than having to try to negotiate this power from a partner later. By establishing an expectation for negotiation (whereby both parties would be co-subjects) directly at the start of the relationship, these women felt more able to walk away from the relationship if a partner was not willing to come on the journey with them.

Sam and Polly's practice reflect one of the ways in which the women in Maxwell & Aggleton (2010)'s analysis of young women's narratives of intimate relations demonstrated 'agency in action'. An unwillingness to have the situation repeated meant that both women were adopting a new subject position going into a relationship, 'starting from' a powerful position, rather than having to 'react into' agency (Maxwell & Aggleton 2010). Sam's experiences within the field drove her to develop a sustainable form of agency. Her conceptualisation of power shifted from an understanding of power as a limited resource that must be divided between partners (what Maxwell & Aggleton describe as 'reacting into agency') to a narrative that portrays power as a position that she can occupy without resistance. Sam's new understanding means that she can 'be powerful', without this being to the detriment of her partner. In her previous relationship with Matt, she had to wrestle power from him by refusing sex, whereas in her new relationship, she was able to enter the relationship from a position of power, using what Maxwell & Aggleton termed an active 'I decide' voice. By doing so, both Sam and Polly are setting new rules to the game, which would make future negotiations easier.

In addition to the 'I decide' voice, Maxwell & Aggleton (2010) suggest three other ways in which this positioning can be adopted; through having 'confidence'; by being 'a strong, powerful person'; and by being 'ambivalent' towards relationships and/or sex. The stories shared by women in this study reflected these findings. Polly, for example, talked about her strong personality and sense of self as a contributing factor to the position she adopted;

'I've got a strong personality and I've got strong opinions.... I'm not good living with people, I'm not very good committing to people, I'm not very good with change around what I want to happen in my house with my child, I'm pretty controlling, and I'm very, very opinionated.'
(Polly)

Feeling powerful and describing your personality as powerful and strong may offer some women the possibility of sustainable agency over time and across contexts. Maxwell & Aggleton (2010) suggest this discursive positioning may reinforce powerful approaches to sexual relationships and the way women respond to partners' behaviours and expectations.

Being 'ambivalent' towards sex was the fourth positioning that Maxwell & Aggleton (2010) suggest as a way of 'starting from' a powerful position. In the conversations I had with participants, it was specifically ambivalence towards forming a relationship in the context of casual sex that emerged as a space where sexual desires and pleasures could be negotiated more directly and with greater success. Some women drew on the 'rules' of casual sex (as discussed in chapter three) as not involving emotional ties or obligations to feel freer to ask for sexual pleasure without having to worry about the consequences for the relationship. Betty talked about pursuing casual sex with a male sex partner without the desire for a committed relationship with him;

'[I felt] able to assert what I wanted and there weren't very many repercussions (because I) don't have to worry about what we are going to be like together as a couple... I don't really see him very often... it was just sort of like I could enclose it. I can do what I want; sort of assert myself and that's going to be ok'. (Betty)

Similarly, when Sam describes her interactions with Ric;

'Because we were there just as new friends having lots of great sex, living on the other side of the world. So I didn't have to play a certain type of girl - All my ideas of what I should do were gone because there was no long term prospect.' (Sam)

Another participant, Jane reflected on a time in her early twenties, when, for a two to three week period she 'hooked up' with an older man where there was no long term potential for a relationship. Up until this point, Jane's sexual experiences had only been in long term relationships where she took on a passive role to her male partner, or fielded off unwanted advances from other men. In contrast, Jane's voice in this memory was very active.

'[It was] the most amazing sex ever. But it was different in a way that - I felt like I let all my inhibitions go - I don't know why - because I wasn't in a long term... the only difference I know that is obvious was that with this guy there was no long term relationship, there [were] no ties, there was no nothing.' (Jane)

Casual sex gave Jane access to sexual freedom that she defined as challenging the passive voice that had been present in some of her past experiences;

'Take some control - trying to take away the submissive view that I have personally grown up with, or I guess society has taught me.' (Jane)

This lack of obligation, of having to play a '*certain type of girl*' gave these women the freedom to pursue pleasure in a more active way. The social discourses of casual sex meant they felt free of the obligation to perform the kind of femininity associated with heteronormative values. Material conditions since the 1970's have helped break down these old rules of women having to bargain sex for love/emotional commitment, and are a good example of how changes at an institutional level can flow down to individual practices. Prior to the availability of reliable and easily accessible contraception, the probability of pregnancy was ever present. Widespread availability of contraception, particularly those temporally disconnected from acts of sexual intercourse (i.e. IUD, the pill) has meant that sexual expression and procreation can be viewed as separate rather than related experiences (Albury 2011). Although the responsibility for parenting still tends to fall to women, contraception has altered the conditions under which women engage in sex. They have a greater ability to enter casual sexual relationships on the same terms as men.

These memories provided an alternative story to research findings that young women are empowered to say 'yes' but have difficulty shaping the trajectory of sexual encounters once they have commenced (Holland et al 1998, Tolman 1994). Crawford, Kippax and Waldy (1994:584) undertook memory work with nine women and a focus group with four men, all aged 30 to 50 examining communication and negotiation in heterosexual encounters. Their findings indicated that 'occasioned and shared meanings' (providing a greater capacity for negotiation) may be facilitated if the encounter is casual, a one night stand or takes place on holiday, and when both parties are sexually experienced (similar to the experiences shared by participants), because these contexts occur outside of the pressures of normative heterosexual relations. However, they also found that in such encounters the negotiation is typically about *whether* to have sex or not; not what kind of sex. The participants in my study gave a different account. They created situations (i.e. only have casual sex with someone who they respected and trusted) and frameworks (i.e. idea that sex doesn't have to be emotionless) that enabled them to negotiate around 'what kind of sex' as well as whether or not to engage in sex.

However, these memories also suggest that had the interactions been one where they wanted a future as 'a couple', it would have been more difficult to negotiate sexual pleasure so assertively. When Sam says she knows how to play the 'rules of the game', she means she knows what a heteronormative relationship looks and feels like – she knows the behaviours and expectations; that she has to '*play a certain type of girl*'. For Sam, being on the other side of the world and not being interested in a committed relationship meant she could 'side-step' the rules of a heteronormative relationship. Hence we can see that women may be able to challenge one aspect of heteronormativity whilst not another. By participating in casual sex without the desire for a committed relationship (with the particular partner), these women challenge the idea that a heterosexual monogamous relationship is the desired outcome for sex (Jackson and Scott, 2004). However Sam's mention of not having to be a 'good girl' draws on the idea of the Madonna/whore discourse in that she can be a 'whore' now, knowing that she can play 'Madonna' for 'Mr Right'.

Negotiating sexual freedom

In this chapter I have examined the various ways and contexts that both constrained and enabled a woman's ability to negotiate for sexual pleasure or her rights to engage/not engage in sex. In doing so, I have aimed to contribute to the small body of research that looks at when it is possible, or may be possible, for a change in habitus to be enacted in the field. The few studies (i.e. Powell 2008, Maxwell 2007, Gwynne 2011, Gavey 2005) that have attempted to examine this relationship have thus far concluded that 'whilst individuals have been able to adopt non-traditional subject positions within certain areas of their sexual relationships, these 'alternative' narratives [are] not usually sustained or actualized when describing actual relationship experiences' (Maxwell 2007:546). Heteronormativity makes it difficult to embody and enact these changes in everyday practice, leading to a disjunction between expectation and experience (Sieg 2007, Maxwell 2007, Chung 2005, Allen 2003, Blaisure & Allen 1995, Sharpe 1987).

Whilst there is no doubt in my mind that the women in this study struggled to negotiate with their partners and to translate their intellectual understandings into practice, their stories are evidence that it is not impossible. These women scraped through, hurt themselves, got back up and tried again, re-directed, left relationships, argued, fought themselves and exposed their vulnerabilities. They were resilient in a world where the status quo doesn't always support them. Achievement of sexual freedom for these women did not follow a linear path from learning the rules of the game to developing alternative discourses, to successful negotiations with their partners and increased sexual freedom. Rather, these women used a multitude of strategies depending on the context and power available to them at the time, giving credence to Risman (2004)'s argument, there is not always one right answer for all places, times and contexts. By paying attention to the field, and women's 'differentiated means and ends' within the field over time, we have been able to expose some of the ways in which negotiation becomes possible.

Holland et al (1992) suggest that young women fail to recognise and capture this intimate space of sexual interactions where men's power can be subverted and resisted because they lack a critical consciousness of their disembodied sexuality and are uncomfortable with their own desires. Highlighting the advantage of memory work, women shared stories with me where this used to be the case, but over time they had learned ways to narrow the gap between expectation and practice. This is perhaps something that the research looking

at younger women's expectations and experiences is unable to capture. In the final chapter, I move to discussing how these moments of negotiation may be drawn upon to have an effect larger than changing the power dynamics between the individuals involved.

Chapter 4: Moving beyond the bedroom

'Our aim is to change the world lovingly.'

(Haug 1983:283)

In chapter two, I explored the thoughts and feelings that women bring to negotiations around sex. I searched for the ways in which heteronormative discourses are both embedded and resisted. I argued that whilst Bourdieu's concept of habitus was useful for understanding the difficulty of change, the stories shared by participants suggest that change is possible. The women I spoke to were resisting heteronormativity through a process of critical reflexivity, sitting with vulnerability, and the development of alternative discourses with which to understand themselves, their bodies, their partners and their sex lives.

In chapter three, I looked at the process of negotiating around sexual pleasure and engagement (or in Bourdieu's terms; the interaction between our habitus and the field). I explored if, and how, women were able to negotiate with their partners to change sexual assumptions and habits. I suggested that under certain contexts and mediating factors, women are able to do so at an interactional level.

This brings us to challenging heteronormativity at a macro-level. Heteronormativity, like any set of norms, must be challenged at each dimension of the social; at the individual, interactional and institutional level (Risman 2004, Jackson 2006, Risman 2004, Connell 1995, Smart 1996, McCleod 2005, Deutsch 2007). Whilst what I have discussed thus far lends itself to understanding how individual women may come to negotiate more equitably with their sexual partners, it says nothing about a transformation of heteronormativity at a macro-level. We may be able to negotiate for more equitable outcomes within the privacy of our bedrooms but what does this mean for overall opportunities for women? Women shouldn't have to learn to negotiate 'twice as well' as men to achieve the sexual outcomes they desire. Rather, we need to be working towards a playing field where both men and women can have equal negotiating skills and still achieve the same outcomes. As Haug (1987: 278) argues, we cannot simply leave 'each and every women (to) confront the

reflection of her failings and abnormalities alone', nor can we 'simply... develop techniques for a more satisfying sexuality'. Instead we must 'revolutionise these relations...of sexual subjection as they exists today'.

This is particularly important if we consider the weight of evidence about young women's sexual negotiations, which continue to be largely individual struggles with heteronormativity, sometimes aided by chance in the form of non-traditional interactions (As the stories in this thesis and research by Wood et al (2007) and Risman (2004) suggest). In some cases, structures need to change before individuals can reasonably resist domination (Adkins 2004), and the sexual freedom afforded by contraception is a case in point. However, change at an institutional level doesn't always flow down to the interactional or individual level, particularly when it comes to gender and sexuality (Risman 2004). The sexual freedoms sought by my participants are not those traditionally associated with sexual liberation. What is missing from the research thus far is how change at an individual and/or interactional level may spur on the process of change at an institutional/collective level. In other words, how can the habitus shape the field? It is to this that I now turn by way of conclusion.

Whilst I have used Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and field to structure the thesis thus far, in the end, we part company. His usefulness in terms of understanding social change from a ground-up perspective is limited, and has been well criticised within feminist works (Adkins 2004, McNay 1999). There is some value in his account of the difficulty associated with change; it 'provides a corrective to certain theories of reflexive transformation which overestimate the extent to which individuals living in post-traditional order are able to reshape identity' (McNay 1999: 113). However, when it comes to imagining social change, rather than bridging the gap between structure/agency, constraint/freedom, Bourdieu breaks with his main theoretical principles (Adkins 2004). For the purposes of this chapter, I see two issues with Bourdieu's theorising, both of which are related to the same binary thinking he sought to overcome.

Firstly, as Chambers (2005) argues, Bourdieu treads a fine line denying the possibility of women's agency. Bourdieu suggests that because our habitus is created within the field that we exist, we have limited potential for changing it. Hence, Bourdieu (2001:41-42), a product of Marxist influences, saw change as only possible through a change in institutions;

'...the symbolic revolution called for by the feminist movement cannot be reduced to a simple conversion of consciousness and wills... the relation of complicity that the victims of symbolic domination grant to the dominant can only be broken through a radical transformation of the social conditions of production of the dispositions that lead the dominated to take on the point of view of the dominant on the dominant and on themselves.'

Bourdieu (2001) argues that because we only have the cognitive instruments of patriarchy, we are unable to construct an alternative consciousness. Instead, revolution can only occur when the field to which our habitus is produced, is transformed. This is problematic from a feminist standpoint, as we want to argue that change is not only possible, but that women themselves can be agents of this change (Chambers 2005). It also conflicts with the stories shared in this paper, that have shown that change does occur, and we are capable of challenging our complicity at an individual, and interactional level without a 'radical transformation of the social conditions of production'. I address this issue in the first part of this chapter, arguing that we need a kinder, more nuanced approach to agency.

Secondly, Bourdieu argues that even if we engage in resistant acts, for these acts to have lasting force they must have an impact on social structures, awakening a 'critical consciousness of their arbitrariness and fragility' (McNay 2008: 193). Whilst this argument has merit (indeed on this point he and Haug (1987) agree!), he also argues that resistant practices only impact superficial relations of the field (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992), providing no sense of the field being altered by the habitus (McNay 2004). Thus, even if we come to recognise the way we are both situated within, and replicate, heteronormativity, we can only transgress heteronormativity through negotiation, not transform it. To deny the ability to queer heteronormativity is to deny the emancipatory methods of feminism and feminist research upon which this project, and innumerable feminist projects before it, are built. In the second part of the chapter I argue that individuals *can* move from transgression to transformation.

Understanding agency and resistance

'...a word for the fear, dislike, hesitance most people have about turning their lives upside down and watching everything they have ever learned disintegrate into lies. "Empowerment" may be liberating, but it is also a lot of hard work and new responsibility to sort through one's life and rebuild according to one's own values and choices'.
(A student's definition of resistance, as quoted by Lather 1991:76).

When I first started reviewing the literature for this thesis, I continually found myself stuck on the dichotomy of agency that *ruptures* heteronormative understandings and agency *within* heteronormative understandings. As I came to read more, and talk with participants, I came to understand this as a false dichotomy set up in the existing research (and in my own head), similar to the dichotomy of agency and structure that I was seeking to overcome. Reflecting on Lather's (1991:24) comments that we only categorise things that are fluid, diverse and changing in order to block or control, I realised by categorising women's behaviour into two types of agency, I was saying more about my biases at the time. I was judging which type of agency was better, despite wanting to reconcile structure and agency. Although embarrassed to admit it now, I tended to believe that agency *within* heteronormative understandings was a cop-out, a false consciousness, whilst agency that *ruptures* heteronormativity was the 'real work' of resistance. Queer women, sex radicals (those outside of Rubin's (1984) charmed circle of sexuality) were the real 'heroes', the rest of us practising 'vanilla' (plain) sex were just contributing to heteronormativity²¹.

By polarising these two positions, researchers paint themselves into a corner where they must pass judgement on women's inability to completely disrupt heteronormativity, or must present the heterosexual feminist woman as only a victim (Smart 1996). Heterosexual women become the 'dupes of patriarchy' (Levy 2005); the 'sexy woman who has "bought into" male pressure or is engaged in appeasement' (Wolf 1997). By dismissing the instances of agency *within* heteronormativity as buying into heteronormativity, we fail to produce a female sexual subject (Smart 1996).

²¹ Reflecting on this belief throughout the journey of writing this thesis, I have come to understand this bias may have developed from my own internalized shame being a bisexual women in a heterosexual relationship. Bisexual women are often criticized for 'buying' into heteronormativity (see for example Hayfield, Clarke & Halliwell 2014).

Lather (1991:13), prompts us to remember that 'the goal is to keep things in process, to disrupt, to keep systems in play, to set up procedures to continuously demystify the realities we create, to fight the tendency for our categories to congeal'. 'Agency in spite of' and 'agency within' should not be seen as dichotomous categories. The women who shared their stories reminded me of how much more 'grey' there is; it is the multiplicities and pluralities that make us human and describe our existence in a world where we do far more than just 'submit' or 'resist'. Further, we can not dismiss the 'murmurs' (Jackson & Cram 2003:123), the micro-resistances and moments of disruptions to the status quo, regardless of whether they are successful in achieving the desired outcome or not.

I am not alone in my call for an alternative understanding of agency that doesn't rely on a binary approach to freedom and constraint, and resistance and conformity. A revised understanding of agency has long been a concern of feminists (Pilcher 2012, McNay 2000, 1999, Butler 1996, Lather 1991). McNay (1999) argues our current conceptions provide a one-dimensional version of agency, whereby an individual can only disavow or repress. Similarly, Butler (2006) also asks 'do we...in concentrating on moments of "escape", unwittingly create a framework in which only two options exist: submission or flight?' Lather (1991: 25) suggests we can destroy the binaries of 'liberation' versus 'oppression' by moving to an understanding of multi-centred discourse with differential access to power. Bourdieu's concepts of field and habitus were useful in drawing our attention to these discourses and one's differential access to power, yet his thinking around change contributes to this one-dimensional version of agency, despite trying to bridge the gap between freedom/constraint. Within a Bourdieusian framework, it is only once we are free of the institutions of heteronormativity that we can be truly free.

However, drawing on MacKinnon (1989), Chambers (2005) asserts it is precisely because women's consciousness's are formed by patriarchal social structures that women have access to, and can understand, the nature of patriarchy, or in this case, heteronormativity. Using the linkage between lived experiences and social structures that habitus creates, Chambers (2005) suggests we can look inwards, at ourselves, as well as outwards, at the world, and in this way begin to think about our actions, preferences, and the institutions of inequality that influence us. Similarly, Ewick and Selby (2003) claim that through everyday experiences of heteronormativity, individuals can come to identify the cracks and vulnerabilities in institutionalized power. Resistance requires both the consciousness of

being less powerful (constraint) and a consciousness of opportunity (agency) (Ewick & Selby 2003). Hence Butler (2006:533) asks; 'How does one stay in the matrix of rules enough to survive, and how does one bend and redirect those rules in order to breathe and live? ...a certain errancy within expertise, a certain poeisis that shows what else a set of rules might yield offer us options that exceed the binary framework of coercion, on the one side, and escape, on the other.'

It is this understanding that drives memory work. In the first instance of using the methodology, Haug and her colleagues (1987) collectively worked to unravel their socialization by analyzing memories, looking for omissions, contradictions, clichés and silences that may indicate pre-reflexive and embedded habits. They called this 'the general training in the normality of heteronomy': to make conscious the patterns of thought drilled into us by others (Haug 1987: 7). By doing so, they were able to identify points where experience is 'amenable to being reinterpreted, reworked and lived differently', moving participants from victim to actor (Stephenson & Kippax 1999:386). The women participating in this project, reflecting back on their past, were able to identify similar points of resistance, both within, and in spite of, heteronormativity.

To understand women's stories and do them justice, we need an understanding of resistance that differs from its standard usage as acts of challenge that agents intentionally direct against societal power relations (Atkinson & DePalma 2009), to one that is conceived as a capacity to act in an innovative fashion (McNay 1999:15), whilst recognising the constraints we face. An understanding that recognises our capacity to sustain and reconcile multiple and often conflicting meanings (Maxwell & Aggleton 2008; Atkinson & DePalma 2009), and that recognises the temporal complexity of our habitus (Adkins 2004). Renold and Ringrose (2008:313) argue that 'cracks and ruptures' in heteronormativity are often overlooked because of the search for a grand narrative, yet are 'crucial to map if we are to perceive the malleability and multiplicity of [female] subjectivities, which exceed heteronormative femininity and phallogentric desire'.

What I propose then, is an understanding of agency that is more nuanced, gentler, and kinder to the ways in which women challenge heteronormative understandings of sexual engagement and pleasure. One that recognises the 'fear, dislike and hesitance' described in the quote leading this part of the chapter. As Betty observed during her interview;

'...when it's stressful you just default to what is expected of you...it's hard. It's a lot harder to have those conversations [about alternatives] rather than just be [in a] monogamous, rigid, heterosexual relationship.' (Betty)

Often our challenges are not 'strident voices', but rather 'murmurs' (Jackson & Cram 2003:123). This alternative understanding of agency is needed to listen out for these murmurs, so as not to 'miss the varied and powerful ways in which women are negotiating heteronormative understandings'. We need it to validate that individuals participating in hetero(sex) can 'queer' the space whilst existing within the field. The women's stories recorded here are testament that resistance is not limited to lesbians or sex radicals²², nor does being lesbian mean that practices are always rupturing heteronormativity. We need to create spaces where it feels safe to share our stories in an honest and authentic way. To provide spaces where it is okay for women to admit they are complex and nuanced creatures that change and don't have it together all the time. This can only be done if we move beyond the binary of constraint/freedom, which creates judgment and shame, and excludes women who participate in hetero(sex). This understanding of agency is particularly important, as I suggest in the next part, because by telling our stories, we can progress from an individual to a collective impact.

Telling Stories

'Subversive stories are those that break that silence...those that bear witness to what is imagined and unexpressed' (Ewick & Selby 2003: 25).

The second issue with Bourdieu's theorising of change is his claim that resistant practices only impact superficial relations of the field. Bourdieu is right to push us past a 'simple act of will alone', but his overly pessimistic outlook disregards great social movements happening from the ground up. As Deutsch (2007: 121) states, 'institutions may be impervious to individual acts, but acts that change consciousness could encourage collective action to transform institutions'. Gerson & Peiss (1988) and Shaw (2001) have

²² Some feminists such as Jeffreys (2003), see also OnePress (1981) and Rich (1980) have seen heterosexuality (rather than heteronormativity) as pivotal to women's oppression and lesbianism as resistance.

argued that when individuals challenge boundaries by resisting conventional behavior in social interactions, it can facilitate feminist consciousness. For example, Shaw (2001) writes about how a mother taking leisure time does more than expand an individual's identity. Women who witness other mothers who take leisure may be emboldened to do it themselves, she writes. These new conceptions can drive a collective consciousness that transforms institutions.

Obviously, this is more difficult for sexual negotiations and engagements as they tend to be a private act. However we can fuel a 'collective notion of empowerment' through the sharing of stories. Sexual stories that identify how and when individuals may resist heteronormativity provide a starting point for others to build practical strategies for transforming sexual relationships (Holland et al 1992, Ewick & Selby 2003, Ioanatta & Kane 2002).

As stories multiply and interact, they become part of a stream of socio-cultural knowledge about structures and power (Ewick & Selby 2003). Resistance is collectivised by the circulation of stories narrating moments when the social structure is exposed and the usual direction of constraint upended – even if only for a moment. By telling stories, we expose the taken for granted and the unnoticed. Similarly, Atkinson & DePalma (2009) propose the continual shaping of our habitus may have transformative potential beyond that of the individual – the presence (or stories) of someone who doesn't fit the mould of heteronormativity disorganises consent, creating discomfort that shifts equilibrium, until eventually a new paradigm fits more than the older one.

Of course, it would be wrong to think that sharing stories is always transformative. As Haug (1987) argues, discussing personal experiences does not necessarily lead to greater understanding, and long term it may sap our courage for action. As I highlighted in chapter two, reflexivity needs to be disassociated from individualism (with its tendency to ignore structural forms of determination) and de-traditionalisation, with its assumption that it is easy to overturn traditional norms (Adkins 2004). Consciousness-raising incorporates not just reflexivity but also an understanding of habitus/symbolic violence (Chambers 2005) and a commitment to critically reworking our understandings in a collective environment.

Hence, when Ewick and Selby (2003) talk about the potential of stories, they highlight how narratives of resistance express not only recognition of social structure as it operates within transactions, but also how a momentary reversal of the more probable relational outcome was achieved. Stories of resistance, they argue, must show how/where heteronormativity could be fractured, if only for a moment.

Unfortunately, women I talked to were quick to point out that women don't speak about sex; we don't tell stories about what we do to achieve sexual pleasure or to negotiate a more mutual relationship. Several women felt sex was considered a 'taboo' subject by others. Many women mentioned to me in relation to the interview, that it was good to be able to discuss it because it was something that they didn't feel they have the opportunity to do in their everyday lives.

*'I don't think its something that you have [an open discussion], even with your girlfriends you don't really have open [discussions]... no one talks about [it]. They might joke around and say "we went out last night" but its not really - if anyone was ever having issues it would never be [discussed]. It's an actual subject that people don't talk about. I remember sitting there once years and years ago with a group of mums and I remember just joking saying "so, how many times a week do you reckon is normal?" They were just – no one listened! Even the woman that talks about sex all the time, and just has sex with her husband all the time, did not answer the question. So obviously you just don't go there... they were just horrified... we talk about health, but how often do you sit down with your girlfriend and say we are really having problems. Its very "this" level – you might talk about that you had a fight and this happened and this happened but you don't talk about [sex]'.
(Jane)*

Hence it is so vital to create safe spaces where we can share our stories. Heteronormativity is the enemy, not ourselves, each other, or hetero(sex). Let's stop shaming ourselves for not having the capacity to negotiate, for not being able to do it all, and instead turn our attention to the points at which we can contribute to change. What is within our capacity to do? What resources can we draw on? How can we prevent this for future generations? We need to have empathy and compassion for ourselves and others. We need to recognise our achievements, moving from 'I'm a terrible feminist/woman/lover' to 'I'm doing the best I can'. As feminist researchers, we need to be careful not to overlook women's agency

and/or draw moral boundaries around appropriate notions of sexuality, and who is 'better' at queering their sexual lives (Wilkins 2004).

We also need to broaden our understanding of change; change via individuals can be slow but this doesn't invalidate it. Sustainable change often happens as part of a community over generations and generations. In this post modern world we are taught to believe that change happens overnight – that we can move mountains if we just get our head in the right space – we grow up thinking we can change the world – and in a way we do – but not in this massive, overhauling way that is currently expected. We can change the world in small, subtle ways – and we need an understanding of agency that reflects this. Rather than trying to knock down a wall in one hit, we can start fracturing (or stop reinforcing) a wall so that one day it will fall.

And so I return to the question posed at the very start of this paper: 'Can straight sex ever be pleasurable? Can it, perhaps, even be queer?' (Jackson 2003:72). I think the answer to this is yes. Women can, and are, fracturing heteronormativity through narratives of negotiation. But we need a way to listen to women's stories and identify the ways in which this is happening. We also need an understanding of how this is linked to wider social change. Because, at the end of the day, feminism is a revolutionary project. We are interested in reducing or eradicating social inequalities – not just describing them. Thanks to the women I shared stories with, I feel one step closer to finding that jumper that fits.

Appendices

A: Information Letter to participants

B: Participant package (consent form and themes for reflection)

C: Interview protocol

D: Participant background

Dear

We invite you to participate in a research project exploring the ways in which women negotiate their sexual freedom. This study is part of my Honours Degree in Sociology, supervised by A/Prof Bev Thiele at Murdoch University.

Nature and Purpose of the Study

A number of studies, both locally and internationally, have asked young women about their negotiation of sexual pleasure and freedom. These studies have focused particularly on the ways in which women are oppressed and victimised by cultural understandings of what sex means and what being a woman means.

I want to build on these studies in several ways;

- Firstly, the existing research tends to lack a focus on diversity of experiences. I hope to bridge this gap by listening to experiences of women who are able to reflect on their past experiences and how these have been shaped over time. I will also be listening to women from more diverse sexual orientations.
- Secondly, as the existing research tends to focus on the ways in which women are constrained in regards to negotiation, stories of resistance or negotiation are often lost. There may be women, similar to myself, who are resisting these constraints and/or negotiating their sex lives, but these are not yet well documented.

Therefore, the aim of this research is to explore the ways in which women negotiate the terms of sexual engagement and pleasure in ways that potentially disrupt cultural understandings of sex.

If you consent to take part in this research study, it is important that you understand the purpose of the study and your involvement in the study. Please make sure that you ask any questions you may have, and that all your questions have been answered to your satisfaction before you agree to participate.

What the Study will Involve

In order to participate in this study, you must be over 18 and identify as female.

If you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to:

- Participate in a discussion about what sexual freedom means to you, and reflect on the process by which you have come to negotiate outcomes for yourself in regards to sexual engagement and pleasure.

You may select to do this individually, or if you would prefer, with a small group of women that you feel comfortable with.

It is estimated that the discussion will take 1-2 hours, but this will be determined by how much you would like to share.

- You will also be provided the opportunity to attend a small group discussion of the initial findings of the project. It will provide a chance for us to reflect on the project, discuss together our understandings of the findings and possibly create new meanings.

Benefits of the Study

The study will hopefully provide you:

- an opportunity to reflect on, and share stories in regards to your ability to negotiate outcomes in everyday life
- an opportunity to listen to common negotiation strategies and learn from others
- a greater understanding of the cultural standards we take for granted, but also our ability to challenge these to achieve better outcomes individually and collectively

It is possible that you may receive none, or only some, of these benefits from participation in this study.

While there is no guarantee that you will personally benefit, the knowledge gained from your participation may help others in the future. Your participation may;

- contribute to knowledge and understanding of the process of negotiating outcomes
- contribute to a starting point from which women may further resist unequal norms and negotiate outcomes that redistribute power, thus increasing the health and wellbeing of women.

Possible Risks

Reflecting on aspects of past sexual experiences could potentially create apprehension or anxiety in some participants.

You should only elect to participate in the study if you feel comfortable discussing sexual negotiations. I have attached a list of themes we may discuss for you to reflect on before meeting. You are welcome to alert me before we meet up of any questions you would prefer to not discuss.

You will lead the discussion and it is your right to reveal as much or as little as you choose.

The study has been specifically designed to reduce any discomfort, however if at any time you are feeling distress, you may elect to;

- pause the interview
- take a break (i.e. grab a tea/coffee)
- move onto another topic
- ask me to share my experiences
- change our environment (i.e. go for a walk)
- re-convene the discussion at another time
- withdraw from the research process.

If these feelings persist after the completion of the session, I can assist with identifying support services for you to access support from at no expense to you.

Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal from the Study

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may withdraw at any time without discrimination or prejudice. All information is treated as confidential and no names or other details that might identify you will be used in any publication arising from the research. If you withdraw, all information you have provided will be destroyed.

Privacy

Your privacy is very important. Because we may have friends or colleagues in common, whether you elect to participate or not will be kept entirely confidential. If you choose to participate in the workshop or in a group interview, this respect for your privacy will be required of all participants. It will not be possible to identify you in any of the transcripts; neither will you be identified in any publication arising out of this study.

If you have any questions about this project please feel free to contact either myself, Aimee Sinclair on 0405 365 122 or via email: aimeesinc@yahoo.com or my supervisor, A/Prof Bev Thiele, on ph. 9360 6154 or via email: b.thiele@murdoch.edu.au. My supervisor and I are happy to discuss with you any concerns you may have about this study.

Once we have analysed the information from this study we will email a summary of our findings. You can expect to receive this feedback late 2015. You are also welcome to contact me at any time to add further thoughts or view the study progress.

If you are willing to consent to participation in this study, please complete the Consent Form.

Thank you for your assistance with this research project, and I really look forward to learning from you.

Sincerely

Aimee Sinclair

This study has been approved by the Murdoch University Human Research Ethics Committee (Approval 2014/197). If you have any reservation or complaint about the ethical conduct of this research, and wish to talk with an independent person, you may contact Murdoch University's Research Ethics Office (Tel. 08 9360 6677 or e-mail ethics@murdoch.edu.au). Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully, and you will be informed of the outcome.

'Negotiating sexual freedom' Interview

I have read the participant information sheet, which explains the nature of the research and the possible risks. The information has been explained to me and all my questions have been satisfactorily answered. I have been given a copy of the information sheet to keep.

I am happy to be interviewed and for the interview to be audio recorded as part of this research. I understand that I am free to choose what I want to discuss and what I don't want to discuss and do not have to answer particular questions if I do not want to. I understand that I can withdraw at any time without needing to give a reason and without consequences to myself.

I agree that research data from the results of the study may be published provided my name or any identifying data is not used. I have also been informed that I may not receive any direct benefits from participating in this study.

I understand that all information provided by me is treated as confidential and will not be released by the researcher to a third party unless required to do so by law.

Participant's name: _____

Signature of Participant: _____ Date:/...../.....

I confirm that I have provided the Information Letter concerning this study to the above participant; I have explained the study and have answered all questions asked of me.

Signature of researcher: _____ Date:/...../.....

I have outlined below some key themes that you may want to reflect on before we catch up.

Please note it is not necessary to do this, however I have included it for those who like to be able to think about and reflect on things before talking.

Others may wish to reflect by writing, drawing or any other form of self-expression you find helpful. Please feel free to bring this when we meet.

You may also want to choose a pseudonym that you would like me to use when transcribing the data rather than using your real name.

I have attached a teabag & hot chocolate should you want to take some time out to do this.

For reflection....

What sexual freedom means to you

An instance/experience(s) in your past when you were first conscious that you needed to negotiate a sexual outcome for yourself (regardless of whether you were successful or not)

C: Interview Protocol

As we have discussed, I am interested in talking with women about how they negotiate for better sexual outcomes for themselves. What made you decide to take the time to talk with me about this?

What does sexual freedom mean to you?

Prompts:

- *what would sexual freedom look like for you personally*
- *in a perfect world, what would sex mean to you*

Can you tell me about the first instance where you were conscious of needing to negotiate an outcome? (Regardless of whether you were successful or not)

Prompts/follow up questions:

- *May be a period of life when you started to question the way things were? What was this like?*
- *How did you come to know that you wanted these things?*
- *How did you go about this?*

Thinking back on your past experiences, do you think your ability to negotiate has changed over time?

Prompts/follow up questions:

- *Why?*
- *What did you do differently now compared to then?*
- *How satisfied do you feel with your ability to negotiate? If very satisfied – what enables this? If no – what frustrates you?*

Is there anything else you would like to add to your story?

If not expressly divulged during the interview, I will confirm the follow demographic information at the end of the interview:

Age?

Sexual identity?

General relationship/sexual history?

Any children?

Level of education?

Anything else that you think may be relevant to understanding your story?

D: Participant Background

Participant pseudonym	Sexual identification (self identified)	Relationship status at time of interview	Same sex experiences referred to in discussion	Opposite sex experiences referred to in discussion	Age			Children
					Under 30	31-40	41-60	
Beth	Bisexual	Single	X	X	X			
Catherine	Straight	Married		X		X		X
Brooke	Straight	Married		X		X		X
Julie	Straight	Single	X	X	X	X		
Frankie	Lesbian	Single	X	X	X			
Emma	Straight	Married		X			X	X
Polly	Non-descript	Partnered	X	X		X		X
Jane	Straight	Married	X	X			X	X
Sam	Straight	Partnered		X	X			
Jay	Queer	Single	X	X		X		

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