

Interruptus Coitus: Heterosexuals Accounting for Intercourse

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Abstract Intercourse remains the definitive heterosexual act, implied by terms such as ‘having sex’, ‘making love’, or even just ‘doing it’. However, the particular bodily mechanics of intercourse mean it carries considerably higher risks (of disease and unwanted conception for example) than other forms of sex. Because of this, we suggest a need to question the taken-for-grantedness of intercourse in heterosex. Drawing on data from interviews with 15 women and 15 men, we examine discourses and significations which continue to prioritize intercourse over other forms of sex. Intercourse was described as natural and normal, and as signifying intimacy, closeness, and love within heterosexual relationships. Somewhat paradoxically, it was also pragmatically described as easy and non-intimate. The tensions and inconsistencies created by competing discourses and alternative significations may offer a space to destabilize the taken-for-granted normality and naturalness of intercourse. Furthermore, a strategic construction of heterosexual sex around pleasure may help shift intercourse from being the inevitable goal and endpoint of heterosex to being one sexual possibility among many.

Keywords discourse, heterosexuality, sexual intercourse

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I think that um sexual intercourse, heterosexual intercourse is such a politicised minefield that um, that the p-p-p, the politics of it if you like almost outweigh the (*laughs*) actual enjoyment of it (W9)

Sexual intercourse¹ is the definitive heterosexual act. Although feminists have theorized the role intercourse plays in both symbolizing and enacting women’s oppression (e.g. Dworkin, 1987; Jeffreys, 1990; MacKinnon, 1987), it remains largely taken-for-granted as an essential part of ‘real’ sex. While both women and men have described ‘liking’ intercourse in various complex ways (Hite, 1977, 1981), we pose the question: Is it always worth it?

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As feminists have long realized, intercourse is a potentially risky form of sex for men and, particularly, women. The appearance of HIV/AIDS has led to widespread recognition that intercourse can be ultimately lethal. In addition, other STDs are prevalent, some of which can have severe and even life-threatening sequelae for women (e.g. pelvic inflammatory disease or cervical cancer). Additional risks for women include the adverse health effects of the more effective forms of contraception, and the social, psychological, and health implications of unplanned and unwanted pregnancy, or abortion. The potential costs of intercourse will vary greatly for the particular women and men involved, and in particular social contexts. Whilst for some women and men intercourse will be a relatively safe sexual practice, for others it is embedded in risk.

To illustrate the potential costs, consider the situation of women living with the extreme pronatalist policies of the Ceausescu regime in Romania between 1966 and 1989. Under Ceausescu, contraception was illegal, abortion was illegal to women aged under 40, and both were expensive and difficult to obtain on the black market. Death or permanent injury were very real risks associated with illegal abortions, due to regulations which meant women were unlikely to seek or obtain treatment or hospitalization for complications. In those 23 years 10,000 women died from illegal abortion complications (Baban and David, 1994). Moreover, the harsh social and economic conditions of the country at this time meant that considerable hardship could be involved in providing for children. Baban and David (1994) reported on in-depth interviews with 50 Romanian women aged between 18 and 55 years, about sexuality, reproduction and partner relationships. Multiple illegal abortions were common, and one woman reported 16 illegal abortions. (Also, prior to 1966, one woman had had 32 *legal* abortions, and another had had 19.) Baban and David paint a vivid picture of the stress this placed women under. For example, a woman who had had seven illegal abortions said 'When I was asked by my husband to make love with him I began to feel pains in my stomach because of fear' (p. 11). Another woman said, 'I felt like committing suicide when I found out I was pregnant again' (p. 13). Despite the common 'traumatic and catastrophic' (Baban and David, 1994: 13) consequences of unwanted pregnancy in this harsh social and economic environment, most women still engaged in intercourse even though many reported little or no pleasure from it. Although some women and their partners had chosen 'abstinence', only one woman reported that she and her partner had changed their sexual practices to only practising non-penetrative sex after an 'awful' abortion (Baban and David, 1994: 10).

This extreme example clearly exposes the robustness of a coital imperative (Jackson, 1984), which can support intercourse even in situations where, from a rationalist perspective, the potential costs almost certainly

outweigh its benefits. This coital imperative encapsulates the premise that intercourse is fundamental to sex, and that men possess a biological drive to have intercourse (Jackson, 1984). While the situation faced by women and families under the Ceausescu regime is indeed extreme, these women's anxieties about unwanted pregnancy and the social and health risks they took are not unique to women in that environment (Gavey, 1992; Gavey and McPhillips, in press).

Is intercourse so unquestionably essential that women and men cannot or will not forgo it, even when one partner does not particularly enjoy it, or when their health and life might literally depend on it? And if it is (understood to be) essential, why or how is this so? We do not propose that there are singular or simple answers to these questions. Nor do we wish to suggest that women always have a real choice about whether they engage in intercourse. Indeed much feminist research has documented the extreme levels of physical violence, rape, and/or emotional abuse that some women experience if they refuse intercourse. Furthermore, normative representations of heterosexuality, which position women as passive recipients of men's sexual urges, render the notion of choice problematic (Gavey, 1992). Notwithstanding this problem, our interest here is in understanding more about the norms governing intercourse in situations which do not seem to involve direct coercion.

In this article we explore how heterosexuals account for intercourse. That is, what reasons do they give for having intercourse? And how they otherwise talk about intercourse and other kinds of sex in ways that reveal the sorts of particular social meanings of intercourse which might help explain its place as the defining feature of heterosex (McPhillips et al., ms. subm.). In mapping the meanings of 'having sex' we are assuming that sex is discursively constructed (Foucault, 1981).²

Heterosexual practice and meaning is shaped by a number of competing discourses (e.g. Hollway, 1984a, 1989). For instance, a male sexual drive discourse (Hollway, 1984a, 1989), based on biological and reproductive reasoning, positions men as having a natural drive to have sex in the form of intercourse. Women, the passive objects of this discourse, have an absent sexuality. A permissive discourse (Hollway, 1984a, 1989) celebrates free sexual expression, ostensibly positioning both men and women as equally desiring subjects. Sex is explicitly constructed around pleasure rather than reproduction. However, in practice permissive discourse seems to offer freedom in a bubble – in the sense that it is not deployed in ways that contest the taken-for-granted acceptance of intercourse's central role. Even the sort of reciprocity of more seemingly 'enlightened' discourse on heterosexual sex, which involves an exchange of orgasms through men 'giving' women an orgasm in return for women giving men their selves and their bodies (Gilfoyle et al., 1992), is premised on intercourse for the source of men's

orgasms. The unequal forms of giving involved in this equation led Gilfoyle et al. (1992) to label it a 'pseudo-reciprocal gift' discourse.³

This study

We draw on data gathered in interviews with 15 women and 15 men. While participants were all Pakeha,⁴ and mostly tertiary educated, they varied by age (from 18 to 50 years), occupation, relationship history and status, parenthood status, and living arrangements. Participants were identified largely through word of mouth. Men were recruited through the various social and professional networks of the male interviewers (e.g. friends and contacts of the interviewers' friends and colleagues), and through snowballing from men interviewed. Women were recruited largely through the extensive networks of a colleague of the first two authors. Thirteen women were interviewed by Kathryn McPhillips and two by Nicola Gavey. Six men were interviewed by Tim McCreanor, six by Chris Dyson and three by a third male interviewer who chose to remain anonymous (we have given him the pseudonym Dave). Participants are referred to by a code number, preceded by W for women and M for men.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted for a 'Safer than Safer Sex: A Broader Perspective' research project which was designed to explore the place of intercourse in heterosexual sex, in relation to considering the viability of promoting sex-without-intercourse as a safer sex option for heterosexuals.⁵ Participants discussed what they understood sex to mean, their heterosexual experiences, and their ideas about the place and meanings of intercourse and non-penetrative sexual practices in their lives (including how they felt or thought they would feel about not having intercourse in actual or hypothetical situations). Verbatim transcripts of the audiotaped interviews were used as data, and were analysed using a poststructuralist form of discourse analysis (Gavey, 1989, 1992; Gavey and McPhillips, in press).

It might be worth noting that while we are using the language of 'accounts' here to discuss our interest in explanatory discourse about intercourse, we are primarily interested in what Antaki (1994) distinguishes as 'predominantly content-based analyses' (p. 120). That is, our interest is in reading people's accounts for an understanding of what they can tell us about the broader cultural patterns of meaning that support the social maintenance of intercourse's privileged place in heterosex. We pay less attention to reading people's accounts in terms of the sort of interactional 'work' conversation analysts might be interested in. Another caveat: when we talk about 'culture', we are interested in the particular cultural context we shared with our participants (and male interviewers) in New Zealand in the mid-1990s. Obviously culture is an extremely complex and multi-layered

concept. We assume that dominant Pakeha New Zealand culture, as it relates to the structures and meanings of heterosexuality, is shaped in important ways by more global Western cultural influences. These include shared traditions and historically common patterns of social organization, for example, as well as contemporary social developments, and cultural trends represented in global English-speaking media. We make no claim about the generalizability of our findings, but assume that they will find some resonance in at least other Anglo-Western societies at this point in history.

Accounting for intercourse

Participants drew on a range of explanations in accounting for why they engaged in intercourse. In particular: it is natural, normal, healthy, and pleasurable. Many of these explanations were consistent with dominant discourses of heterosexuality, such as a male sexual drive discourse, a permissive discourse (Hollway, 1984a, 1989), and a discourse of reciprocity. Moreover, these explanations were underpinned by more diffuse cultural assumptions about the natural and normal place of heterosexuality.

'It's natural': a biological imperative

One important body of explanation for intercourse drew on biology, citing that the desire to have intercourse is 'natural'. For example, as one man said:

M8: I think it's pretty natural for two people who love each other to want to have sex [specified by the interviewer in the previous turn as 'sex as in penis-vagina penetration']. (mid 20s)

He later went on to explain: 'I think it's biological, it's one of these biological things that happen and for extremely good biological reasons'.

Instincts, drives, and procreation Some participants offered explanations which were more explicit about what these specific biological reasons might be. For example, one woman said:

W6: I think it's probably fairly natural as far as that's – I think, um, you know, that's the way that we, as I said, as we procreate. (Kathryn: Procreate) So it, it must be some sort of instinctual thing, yes, to do that. (Kathryn: Mhm) Definitely. It would be a natural thing yeah.

As is evident in the extracts above, the notion of naturalness implies biological origins (Tiefer, 1997); it rationalizes the desire to have intercourse as something that can be thought of as existing prior to culture. The procreative function of intercourse allows it to be understood as instinctual – biologically determined to ensure the survival of the species. Moreover, there is something imperative about the notion of a 'drive':

W2: I do think it's natural and normal. And I think that that's quite a drive. (Kathryn: Hm) That's where you're heading most of the time. (early 30s)

Some men drew on a male sexual drive discourse to account for their desire to have intercourse. One man in his early 40s explained why he preferred intercourse over being masturbated:

M12: I think that closeness and, and that sort of, and probably some sort of desire to plant my seed somewhere probably, you know, (Dave: Right) I think there's definitely that goes on (Dave: Yeah), in my experience, and ah, ah, you know, men's experience I believe. (Dave: Yeah) Well it's a deep, you know, an old, (*pause*) very ancient, you know, thing that's built into our systems, that we, that we've got to plant our seed somewhere. You know I mean that's, that's life eh. (Dave: Right) That's our life-giving force. (Dave: Okay) So I suppose there's some sense of that, some drive in that about doing it – [. . .] I mean I think there's something very unconscious in our – in our whole cellular makeup that, that drives us to, to want to plant our seed.

Another man reflected:

M10: I'm quite bemused by this desire to penetrate that I *do* have, you know, and and it – I think it is probably contradicting myself from an earlier point, but I do think that I have this thing that's quite real, now that we've come to the end of the interview and I've thought about it a lot, you know, um, and it does seem to be a little biological or something, you know, it's certainly there in the programming of the plumbing, but there's all this other stuff that then [tape ends] (mid 20s)

Like M8, who suggested that the drive to have intercourse was 'not under conscious control', and M12 who suggested an 'unconscious' force, M10's bemusement about his desire to penetrate also suggests it emerges from something 'deeper' than conscious choice.

In these examples, the 'deep' and 'very ancient . . . thing that's built into our systems' (M12), which is there 'in the programming of the plumbing' (M10) is naturalized by reference to 'cellular make-up' or it is simply claimed to be biological (although M10 does start to go on to talk about 'all kinds of other stuff'). This naturalization accords intercourse an imperative status. If something is natural, it tends to be thought of as beyond question, it is 'just the way things are'. As Tiefer (1997) has argued, the language of the natural evokes the kinds of biological explanations which imply something is 'universal, pre-social, and essential' (p. 366). The popular cultural notion that men are driven to 'plant [their] seed' also evokes the link between sex and reproduction implicit in the concept of a sexual drive and the male sexual drive discourse. It is, after all, a drive to reproduce – intercourse is just the means to the end. Our selfish genes are making us do it.⁶

Such naturalistic and reproductive reasoning is also echoed in a conflation of male orgasm with intercourse. A number of participants appeared to assume that intercourse was essential (or at least highly preferable) for male orgasm. This was most clearly articulated by M12:

- Dave: So would-like-like to have sex without sexual intercourse is that, is that a, does that happen at all in your relationship at the moment?
- M12: I don't think it does, no.
- Dave: Right. (M12: Yeah.) So, by that I mean you know either or both of you coming to orgasm without actually having intercourse. [pause] Or engaging in sexual activity in a prolonged sort of way.
- M12: Sorry? Coming to orgasm without having sexual intercourse? So how would that happen?

The corporeal architecture of heterosexuality The concepts of nature and biology were also drawn on by participants who explained that women's and men's bodies were 'designed to fit':

- W7: I just find that s-sex ultimately leads to intercourse [. . .] Because that's the way we're designed (Kathryn: Mhm) basically (Kathryn: Mhm) So it seems um like a natural progression of things. (Kathryn: Mhm) Yeah. If you go to bed with someone. (mid 30s)
- W8: You're part of each other (Kathryn: Mhm) completely for, for whatever length of time he's inside you, you fit. (early 20s)
- M10: It seems to be that human bodies sort of were built to lock into each other.

This participant later went on to explain his enjoyment of intercourse in such terms:

- M10: [it's] really great having your dick in there, you know, it's got stuff like, there's nowhere else in the world, you know um, (*laughs*) it's sort of, it's designed to fit, well different models are, anyway um, and, you know, it's not like a hand or a mouth or, or I don't know vacuum cleaner.

Here, the vagina is presented as the best part of a woman's body for tending to the sexual needs of the penis. It is a fit that was 'designed' and 'built to lock into each other', thus more natural than a woman's mouth or a hand. This list of contrastive places to the vagina, that place 'like nowhere else in the world', is completed by a vacuum cleaner – an extreme example which works to emphasize the naturalness of the vagina.

Explanations for intercourse as natural and biologically based were drawn on by a number of participants, and were frequently organized

around male sexual drive discourse. Permissive discourse and discourse about reciprocity or pseudo-reciprocity do not speak so directly to the biological bases of a coital imperative, but neither do they necessarily challenge the logic of these arguments.

'Penetration is a normal kind of thing': a social imperative

As intercourse occupies a privileged place in heterosexual practice as the socially taken-for-granted norm of sexual behaviour (Tiefer, 1995), people are often not used to talking about, or necessarily even thinking about, why they engage in intercourse. The concept of normality may be underpinned by tacit biological explanations, but it also seems to operate at a purely social level. The coital imperative is reflected in, and reinforced by, the understanding and practice of intercourse as simply 'perfectly normal behaviour' (M9). For example:

- M10: Having sex for me, at least, with penetration is a normal kind of thing, um, and so to make love to a partner, would involve that, just, just as a matter of course.

These sorts of explanations suggest that the centrality of intercourse to heterosex is beyond question. Indeed, some participants found it difficult to express reasons for why they had intercourse, and many seemed to find it difficult to articulate the social norms. For example, one woman in her early 20s stated:

- W13: It just usually sort of follows on, things sort of – (Kathryn: Mhm) sort of logical conclusion (*laughs*) type of thing to, um (*pause*) Yeah, I mean I don't usually have intercourse unless I – it sort of – I'm, sort of will stop it if I don't want to (Kathryn: Mhm) at some stage or – (Kathryn: Mhm, mhm) It's not that it – nothing to do with the fact I feel I have to or anything. It just seems to be logical (Kathryn: Mhm) follow on.

While this participant was unable to articulate a clear reason for engaging in intercourse, she draws on an implicit normative script⁷ for heterosex, to make sense of why she has intercourse. Sex is progressive and intercourse is the 'logical conclusion', unless there is a particular reason for stopping it (W13 earlier noted that having her period would be such a reason). It is interesting that W13 spontaneously clarified that no coercion is involved. In doing so, she presents herself as someone who believes that sex should be voluntary and related to desire; however, the popular construction of women's agency that she deploys here is a limited one. Being relegated the right and ability to 'say no' or otherwise 'stop' sex, implicitly suggests that the sexual progression is typically orchestrated by the male partner.

A standard by which to judge and be judged The power of normality works both at the level of the social normalization of intercourse (it is 'sex', after

all) and also at the level of women's and men's desires to appear/be 'normal' in both their own eyes and the eyes of their sexual partners (see also Gavey, 1992). Normal sex becomes 'the beacon by which we gauge our inadequacies, or . . . the monument against which we define our difference' (Patton, 1993: 259). Intercourse is a convenient measure by which we can be judged. For example, one woman in her mid 40s talked about how she had been labelled and judged (to be frigid) if she said 'no' to intercourse:

W5: I've had sexual relationships with people because I think that's what I have to, that's what I needed to do to keep their regard or their friendship (Kathryn: Mhm) or whatever (Kathryn: Mhm). Whereas in actual fact when I look back on in hindsight I probably could have said 'no' a few times and still kept the friendship. I don't know, but (Kathryn: Mhm) my early experiences were that that um (*pause*) you know, if I'd said 'no' I was (*pause*) disapproved of. [. . .] it's like saying 'are you frigid?' (Kathryn: Yeah) or 'is something wrong with you?' (Kathryn: (undecipherable)) and 'oh well if that's how you feel then, you know, forget it'.

Kathryn: Mm it's never seen as a competent self-care thing (W5: No). It's always seen as a frigid –

W5: And that's how I was made to feel. That's how I felt and it stayed with me (Kathryn: Mm) for a long time.

This social regulation of individual sexual behaviour in this case can be seen as an effect of a norm constructed by the permissive discourse (Hollway, 1984a, 1989; for other examples, see Gavey, 1989, 1992). The permissive discourse permeates and creates a social context where women are expected to have, and enjoy, sex. Although the permissive discourse does not limit sexual expression/experiences to intercourse, the continued influence of a coital imperative establishes this standard form of heterosex as the window within which most opportunity must take place (unless specifically, and with difficulty, negotiated otherwise). Furthermore, the historical linking of permissiveness with the widespread availability of the contraceptive pill further suggests that the permissive discourse is largely premised on intercourse.

It's healthy

Notions of normality were further manifested in discussions of intercourse as 'healthy', or as an important sign of a healthy relationship:

M9: But I think as a healthy sexual relationship, penetration does occur, at least sometimes. (mid 20s)

Specifically, it can confer emotional health, as M4 explained:

M4: I mean it [intercourse] also meant, in those – in, in the early part of the relationship, it meant really important things about normal – being normal, being um, being somehow normal, physically. Physically normal, normal as a couple. You know

Tim: Can you tell me more about that? That – what’s normal mean?

M4: Well (*pause*) normal there is meaning if we, if we hadn’t had intercourse sex, as often, I would’ve felt um – and she would have too, that um that there was something wrong with us, that we were blocking emotionally as it were.

Intercourse told M4 and his partner that they were normal and healthy. However, this sign of health was affirmed not merely by the presence of intercourse in their relationship, but by its regularity:

M4: We had intercourse pretty regularly. Like for quite a long time we always had a belief that daily was pretty healthy, you know. (mid 40s)

Normality extends beyond appearing normal in the eyes of others (e.g. having intercourse as a teenager to be ‘normal’) to being normal in your own eyes (one participant described having intercourse with women to try to reassure himself he was not gay – it didn’t work). If sex is in part about losing control, it is also about being in control in the sense of self-governance. Women and men control themselves to ensure they have intercourse – they do it to be normal. Thus inferred normality, and the desire to be normal, become mechanisms whereby the centrality of intercourse is reinscribed (see also Gavey, 1992).

Reflexive subjectification Some participants appeared to draw on social norms without a critical awareness of them, but some women and men identified the expectation and normalization of intercourse as socially constructed. For example:

M14: I as a male I was supposed to have sex with women . . . I suppose my first sexual experience [with intercourse] was based on a desire to, perform normally, or what I thought society expects me to perform. (age not available)

This kind of reflexive social analysis was often accompanied by narratives of resistance. For example, learning to resist the sorts of norms that organize women’s sexuality in ways that are not always consistent with their own desires:

W3: I know as a teenager there were times I allowed penetration that weren’t really wanting it because I thought I should, you know (Kathryn: Mhm) it’s all that female adolescent crap that girls have but um now I don’t buy into that. You know I, if I don’t want it I don’t have it. (early 30s)

Others also described their own sexuality in ways that (somewhat) resisted the norms they identified:

M7: Well, I suppose there's – it comes back to the social thing of, of, is penetration important? I guess so. I guess that's – that's the thing.

Chris: Mm. Is it?

M7: No, not in my experience. (*laughs*) I mean they're different but – and they're both enjoyable – well whatever you engage in is enjoyable, one assumes but – yeah, they're all – they're all nice in their own way, and how you rank them is a matter of personal choice but society says that, I, I, I think, I think (*indecipherable*) society places more emphasis on PVP [penis–vagina penetration] or penetrating than perhaps I do, so (early 20s)

These participants articulated a social imperative to have intercourse in a way which distanced themselves and their practices from it. Such critical awareness of these social imperatives is likely to be an important precondition for resisting them in ways that do not easily backfire with destructive implications for identity. (For example, the woman who refuses unwanted sex without access to some feminist discourse about women's rights or some other way of critiquing the sort of tacit norms that provide pressure to 'do it anyway', may suffer through identifying with labels such as 'frigid', 'cold', 'a tease', and so on.)

In these two sections we have discussed the naturalistic and normative arguments that a number of participants drew on to explain the place of intercourse in heterosex or, more particularly, their participation in intercourse. Regardless of whether the coital imperative is based on biological or social explanations, or both, it is likely to be difficult to resist. Naturalistic arguments may be particularly hard to disrupt or challenge because there is a strong justificatory logic within the terms of the argument. It is not difficult to see intercourse as a biological necessity – it has been convenient, if not necessary, for the survival of the species! Moreover, biological explanations provide a plausible reason for the apparent historical and cross-cultural (and inter-specific) place of intercourse. To strengthen the common-sense power of this line of argument, modern scientific versions of these sorts of explanations (i.e. sociobiology) are currently quite popular (although not without critics even within biology, e.g. Rose et al., 1984).

'It's part of sex that I enjoy': pleasure and desire

Not only is intercourse normative in heterosex, but it tends to be represented as the ultimate sexual experience. Both men and women talked about enjoyment and pleasure associated with intercourse, and a number

mentioned enjoyment as a reason they would not like to exclude intercourse from sex. However, pleasure was seldom directly mentioned as a 'reason' for having intercourse. (This may to some extent be an artefact of the questions participants were asked and the interview process. However, it is interesting to note that only 3% of Hite's male respondents mentioned 'orgasm' in their responses to the question 'why do you like intercourse' – Hite, 1981: 336.)

Despite the ascendance of the permissive discourse, which ostensibly allows for both women and men as equally desiring sexual subjects, various authors have noted that a discourse of female desire is largely absent from the public domain (Cairns, 1993; Fine, 1988; Tolman, 1991). This absence arguably reduces the possibilities for women's sexual agency through permitting, by default, discourses of heterosexuality to be structured around male desire (see also Holland et al., 1994a). In particular, it may reinforce a focus on intercourse (to the exclusion of other sexual practices). While there is a commonsensical understanding that intercourse is particularly pleasurable for men, there seems to be more ambiguity about the relationship between intercourse and sexual pleasure for women.

In the rest of this section, we attempt to map out fragments of women's desires/pleasures around intercourse. While a number of women discussed enjoyment of intercourse, and desire at some level, such desire was not always easy to articulate in detail. For example:

W11: Sometimes I just want penetration. You know, that's what I want and it's really good (late 30s)

Several women described their enjoyment of intercourse in these broad sorts of terms, in which it was not always clear what kind of pleasure they meant. It would be missed according to some women because, simply, 'it is a part of sex I enjoy' (W15), or because of 'the pleasure it gives' (W3), or because of 'the excitement of it' (W3). In this context a concept like 'excitement' is ambiguous. Although sexologists talk about sexual excitement as a physiological sexual response, excitement is also talked about as an emotion which is embodied more diffusely. Some women clearly did locate desire for intercourse on a specifically sexual physical level. For example, while W12 noted that she usually liked intercourse because of the 'closeness', she also said:

W12: But – sometimes if, as I say, if you're just that – sating that physical urge, then that f-, then then that, the friction, say, is – (Kathryn: Mhm) Yeah that can be quite exciting, pleasurable, in, in and of itself. (mid 30s)

Here, a sort of 'body-wanting' for penetration is described. As other

women described, it can be a form of desire and pleasure quite distinct from orgasm (although sometimes felt directly after orgasm).

W6: It [orgasm] usually is the thing that um makes me want to have intercourse.

Kathryn: Right, and what part of you is it that's wanting to have intercourse then? Is is, like what I'm trying to ask is,

W6: It's a physical thing.

Kathryn: It's a physical thing?

W6: Definitely.

Similarly:

Kathryn: So why do you have sexual intercourse after your orgasm?

W7: Generally I want it then.

Kathryn: Mhm. What do you want about it?

W7: I don't know. It's just a physical feeling like I need it. (Kathryn: Mhm) Bit of, bit (*pause*). Yeah, it just seems like the, the (*pause*) the final part, just to complete it. It's okay if I don't have intercourse but I don't know, it just, maybe my body's ready for it.

Kathryn: Mhm. So it completes it for you somehow?

W7: For me somehow, yeah. And also I know that he needs it as well.

Kathryn: He needs?

W7: He needs to be, you know, he's got pretty turned on while I'm having an orgasm so he needs to be fulfilled as well.

Kathryn: Mhm. And intercourse. Is that the way he gets. In your relationship that's the way he gets, he comes?

W7: Generally.

W6 and W7 described desire for penetration as a physical want or 'need'; which for W7 coincides with her partner's 'need' for intercourse too; in his case, in order to be 'fulfilled' through orgasm (it is implied). Other women described pleasure from intercourse that was explicitly unrelated to orgasm, and yet not quite in terms of the desire for penetration expressed by the previous women. For example:

W10: I could still get a lot of satisfaction without necessarily sort of actually having an orgasm myself [. . .]

Kathryn: You said it's not the norm so why would you sometimes have intercourse?

W10: Because I probably would want to.

Kathryn: You'd want to have it (W10: Mm) and why would you want to have intercourse?

W10: Because I guess it is just one other way of expressing yourself sexually really (Kathryn: Aha) and I do think it's pleasurable, not on an orgasm level but I do find pleasure in it. (mid 20s)

Similarly:

W12: I like the feeling of a penis inside me (Kathryn: Mm) I really like that. Whether I have an orgasm that way or not, I really like, I really like that f-, I really like that feeling.

While W10 appeared to be talking about physical pleasure, and W12 clearly identified her pleasure as physical, they both disrupt the reduction of sexual pleasure to orgasm, the supposed 'goal' of sexual behaviour (Nicolson, 1993; Segal, 1994). As many women did not conflate sexual pleasure or desire with orgasm, wanting intercourse seems to relate, at least partially, to a range of pleasures not represented by orgasm. Although heterosexual pleasure has been seen as highly problematic by some (radical) feminists (e.g. Dworkin, 1987; Jeffreys, 1990; Kitzinger, 1994; MacKinnon, 1987),⁸ it may be possible to strategically use pleasure as an important dimension for exploring and creating female sexual agency.

Like W7, a number of women spoke of wanting to have intercourse, or choosing to have intercourse, to give pleasure to their male partner. Although we explore the concept of giving (and receiving) pleasure more thoroughly elsewhere (Braun et al., unpublished paper), we briefly comment on this here. The notion of pleasing the male partner by having intercourse seems to revolve around a concept of 'giving' – a fundamental part of a discourse of reciprocity which, at least partially, seemed to inform the sexual relating of a number of participants. However, it also seems to lie within a far more traditional role for women where they are expected to sexually please their men, by at least being sexually 'available' (Eichenlaub, 1961; Gray, 1995), or face the predictable consequence that he will look elsewhere to have his 'sexual needs' met. If women's role in heterosexual relationships is constructed around the necessity of their pleasing their male partners, then intercourse may not be a real choice (see also Gavey, 1992).

So far, we have used data from both women and men to explore why heterosexuals engage in intercourse. However, our discussion of desire/pleasure has focused on women's accounts. While we do not wish to ignore desire as a reason men have intercourse, the articulation and exploration of female (hetero)sexual desire seems a comparatively important task, given the 'missing' discourse of female desire (Cairns, 1993; Fine, 1988; Tolman, 1991), and the hegemonic construction of heterosexuality around male desire (e.g. the male sexual drive discourse). We have attempted to highlight that reductive analyses which simply equate

women's sexual pleasure/desire with orgasm are inadequate to explain the pleasure that many women talk about experiencing during intercourse. Furthermore, an association of pleasure with orgasm can lead to an assumption that intercourse without orgasm is therefore not pleasurable. The inadequacy of this logic can be illustrated with reference to Hite's (1977) research. Although Hite reported that only 30 per cent of women *regularly* orgasmed from intercourse, and 29 per cent of women *never* orgasmed during intercourse, 87 per cent of her sample(s) answered *yes* to the question 'do you like vaginal penetration/intercourse? Physically? Psychologically? Why?' (Hite, 1977: 422). Only 4.5 per cent answered *no*.

Identifying the 'reasons' women and men provide for choosing to have intercourse is useful on two counts. Firstly, it may reveal the grounds on which intercourse could or should be excluded from sex. Secondly, the identification of assumptions underlying these reasons, and the discourses in which they are embedded, is part of a process of disrupting the common sense authority they have and making room for a refusal to see intercourse as an imperative. However, in addition to intercourse being described as 'natural' or 'normal', intercourse is a powerful signifier for a range of relationship qualities and emotions (such as love). Intercourse *means* things – as discussed in the following sections.

What does intercourse say and mean?

In this section we illustrate some of the feelings participants associated with intercourse, and thus what it can signify in terms of identity, relationships, and so on. While these meanings were not explicitly deployed by participants as reasons for having intercourse, they nevertheless can be seen to function as rationales for it. We suggest that the following sorts of social meanings that intercourse confers (often in contrast to other sexual practices) may help to maintain its perceived importance and centrality within heterosex.

'The ultimate intimacy'

As other researchers have noted (Hite, 1977, 1981; Hollway, 1993), almost every participant described intercourse as meaning closeness and connectedness. Intercourse was valued by both women and men as being a very close, intimate act, if not 'the ultimate intimacy' (M13), both physically and emotionally. For example:

- M4: Emo-, emotionally it meant being, it meant being, being connected, feeling um, close, being close with her, ah feeling um, feeling intimate in the sense of ah, even at times feeling a kind of a blurring of the distinction between, between us, you know.

- M13: Um, it's procreative, it's joining, sort of like the most intimate thing, yeah, it's where I become or two become one, I become one, uh, it's a very very good feeling, it's sensually it's exquisite. (early 40s)
- M9: Physical penetration for, for some reason makes, it, it, makes it um more intimate, much more intimate. Cause like I say it's about as intimate as you can get physically, I think.
- W11: With penetration the intimacy is because he's actually inside you. (Kathryn: Mhm) (*taps table*) I mean.
- Kathryn: I mean what does that mean?
- W11: Well, if you're both there there's nothing as close as that. (Kathryn: Mhm) I mean there's nothing as close as that.
- W3: It's [penetration] a real, real (*pause*) closeness. It's a, it's an acknowledging that this person's precious, or something.
- W12: Instead of it being us playing and having fun it was just like you know, really, really connecting with this other person on, on, a-a-a, on body and soul kinda thing [. . .] That was usually full intercourse with him inside me.

While W12 attaches intimacy and connectedness to intercourse, she also draws on and reinforces the distinction between intercourse and other kinds of sex. Intercourse is depicted as serious; other sex as play or fun. Many participants reinforced a separation between intercourse and other sexual practices, with some women and men describing oral sex or mutual masturbation as less intimate/close (see Kippax et al., 1990, for similar descriptions). For example:

- M7: [With mutual masturbation] you're not as close to someone as you are when you are actually engaging in penetrative sex.
- M13: Oral sex seems to be a singular thing, like an individual thing, like you're having it done to you, that's how I experience it often, and that's very nice whereas the intercourse, the penetration is something that's a joining thing, two people are doing it.
- W2: I don't find it [oral sex] as intimate. (Kathryn: No) Not at all.
- Kathryn: What about with um, when you say are sucking him or something, do you feel that?
- W12: I don't feel quite that same degree of connectiveness with that. I mean it's something that I enjoy doing, but it's not, um I don't feel any great um. It's sort of like fun, it's not (Kathryn: Mhm) it's not that emotional component.

Not all participants were able to explain why intercourse meant closeness and intimacy, or why they experienced other practices as less intimate.

A few participants commented that being face to face and looking at each other (assuming certain sexual positions) was important. For example, one man in his late 20s described the difference between intercourse and masturbation:

M11: When I'm inside her I'm looking at her body, connected to her, looking into her mind a bit, I guess, watching her face, I like to see how her face changes, and contact with that, whereas if I'm on my back, I might be fantasizing about somebody else and she probably knows that and um, so there's a um, a separateness that occurs, um, when I come inside her I'm, I feel like we're moulded together.

Other participants referred to closeness represented by part of the man being *inside* the woman, and others referred to the mutuality of both *doing* the same thing at the same time: 'You're both doing it together (Nicola: Yeah) you're both there in the moment' (W15). The extent of the sort of connection that can be symbolized by intercourse is alluded to by some of these men's accounts that it can blur the distinction between two people (M4). It's where 'two become one' (M13) or where they become 'moulded together' (M11). A similar range of reasons for liking intercourse was described by participants in Waldby et al.'s, (1993) research.

Sometimes it's too intimate Almost all participants described the connectedness and intimacy they experienced with intercourse as positive and one of the main reasons why they enjoyed it. However, one woman noted that at times the intimacy can be too much.

W3: There are times also when penetration can be very intimate and sometimes I don't want to be that intimate (Kathryn: Mhm) which I've realized is just me. I suppose it's like there are times I don't feel like um sharing every aspect of how I'm feeling with a friend, and other days I do. There were just times I'd think I don't want a penis right up inside me (Kathryn: Mhm, mhm) You know and I just don't –

Kathryn: And is that, h-how does that relate to the intimacy?

W3: Well I think sometimes it feels (*pause*) like a real opening or something. Taking in of something, giving it a part, you know, making it a place in you, giving it a place in you. (Kathryn: Mhm) I mean that's sort of symbolic I suppose. The physical symbol of it, of what it is emotionally, and there are times when emotionally I don't want to be that close. I don't really know why that is but it's, I've just always thought well that's how I feel.

W3 articulates how her experience of intercourse powerfully symbolizes for her a sort of deep intimacy that she does not always want. This is consistent with Sanders' (1988) suggestion that (mutual) vulnerability and trust lead to intimacy – and sometimes people are not going to want to

experience that sort of vulnerability. While this idea of intercourse-as-intimacy is certainly one familiar cultural meaning of intercourse, other women have described it as a more mundane physical experience – like ‘having a cup of tea’ (Gavey, 1992) or like ‘brushing your hair’ (Gavey, 1989); which is arguably a pragmatic construction for women who are not always able to determine if and when they have intercourse.

Intercourse to find intimacy A small number of participants talked about how they used intercourse as a means of getting (emotionally) close, of feeling intimate with a person. For example, a man described how after his partner had had their first baby, he felt that the baby ‘took my partner away from me’ (M13), and that he used intercourse as a means of trying to regain that intimacy:

M13: I think the sex was a manifestation of the lack of intimacy, me wanting it more and being more demanding or yeah, demanding of it, and her not wanting it as much as me, I know for a number of years that was an issue for us, that I wanted it far more often and intellectually I considered that was what it was about, it was the lack of intimacy that we were having all around and that was where I had intimacy, and –

Dave: And sex was synonymous with intercourse? (M13: Yes) So sex and intercourse became synonymous with intimacy too? (M13: Yes) And somehow that made you feel closer?

M13: Absolutely (Dave: Right) and I guess it was to do with my own understandings around this, and my own misunderstandings that that, sex was intimacy, intimacy was love, love was sex you know, this whole thing about it, that’s the way you get, and show and express and get love.

Men’s ‘need’ for emotional intimacy is possibly one of the open secrets of heterosexuality – something that cannot or will not be acknowledged within some representations of masculinity, or which must only be expressed in circumscribed ways. M13 was quite ready to talk about the importance of intimacy and love; but in doing so he recognized that within his relationship he understood that this was communicated through intercourse. As Kippax et al., (1990) have contended, intercourse acts as a metonym for emotional intimacy in men. The unfortunate irony of this particular kind of displacement is that it possibly only allows some imaginary form of intimacy for the man. In the situation described by M13, where his relationship was characterized by ‘the lack of intimacy that we were having all around’ subsequent to the birth of a child, he found himself ‘wanting it more’ and ‘being more demanding’ at the same time as his partner was ‘not wanting it as much’. Therefore, for him to ‘get’ more intercourse/intimacy he may have risked coercing and distancing his partner in the process – thus achieving an (illusory?) intimacy which she may not have felt part of.

If intercourse is the ultimate signifier of intimacy, then the most intimate intimacy can possibly only be achieved through intercourse. But if other practices can also be intimate, intercourse does not necessarily have to occur for a couple to experience intimacy. Although the majority of participants suggested that intercourse was the ultimate intimate act (especially within a long-term relationship), others described a range of sexual behaviours as more intimate, or equally intimate. For example:

W3: And yet it's [intercourse] not the only intimate thing. I mean I think oral sex is really intimate. Um, I mean of – so much of sex is.

W13: Um (*pause*) no, I probably prefer sort of the sort of touching, um, (*pause*) kissing, that sort of thing rather than actual intercourse (Kathryn: Mhm) (*indecipherable*) and probably oral sex as well.

Kathryn: Mhm. When you say prefer it what, what do you mean by that?

W13: Well I sort of find it a lot more intimate than actual (Kathryn: Mhm) intercourse.

'I'll take the easy way out': intercourse as non-intimate and easier than other sexual practices

Many participants described the intimacy and closeness associated with intercourse as being experienced through an emotional relationship. That is, the raw act of intercourse was not itself intimacy. Intercourse was also, somewhat paradoxically, described as the least intimate, the least meaningful, and in pragmatic terms, the easiest sexual act, particularly in situations where there was little emotional connection.

Casual sex, intimacy, and intercourse The one-night stand was used as a good example of intercourse which was neither intimate nor meaningful. For example, one man described sex in a one-night stand as:

M7: It's basically – it's like a transaction. Effectively. (Chris: Mhm) Um, you want to get out of it – get as much as you can, basically, and, yeah, I suppose in that case then – (*pause*) Yeah. Having sex, whatever form that took, would probably be as much as you could get out of that person.

Although this participant acknowledged a range of possible forms of sex, he then described what would most likely be involved:

M7: If you're out to um, in this one night stand, take out all your sexual frustration then probably the quickest way of doing it is to have PVP [penis–vagina penetration].

Drawing on the male sexual drive discourse, M7 implies that the sex on a one-night stand is solely about relieving sexual frustration. Not only is

it not intimate, but it can be bluntly constructed as a commodified 'transaction' which involves taking as much as you can get.

For different reasons, also premised on the lack of intimacy, some women also favoured intercourse over other kinds of sex on a one-night stand. Some women suggested that intercourse could be the 'easy' option if they did not know the man well. It was described as being more suitable for interactions where a woman might actively want to avoid intimacy – because it is more private and less vulnerable than other sexual practices. For example:

W8: To tell the honest truth, it was more of a, it was more of a 'I'll take the easy', well for me it was 'I'll take the easy way out' . . . It's not completely as cold as disassoci-, disassociating myself, 'cause I really liked him, but it was just more of a feeling. I don't really want you to know the other parts of me that, that (Kathryn: Mm) that are m- that for me are private (Kathryn: Mm) and this is something that, yeah I like but I don't, you know, I'm not sort of giving anything I guess in some, in some ways. [. . .] I just didn't really feel like him touching me or, or having oral sex or anything like that (Kathryn: Right) 'cause for me that's something that I really share with someone that I like.

Similarly:

W10: With people I don't know that well I actually don't want to tell them how long it takes for me to have an orgasm or how I achieve an orgasm or any of those things, it's none of their business and it's almost like if you engage in very ritualistic normative sex then they're going to quite likely not actually know that much about you . . . what else could that person say about you other than that you were a good or bad fuck or something but they couldn't actually say anything about your sexual peculiarities and I guess maybe it's more about trusting them with that information about yourself really . . . it's easier for me to do something quite normal so they can't have an opinion about me.

These and other women described other sexual practices such as oral sex as more intimate in some ways and therefore more difficult to practise with someone who is not well known (see Miles, 1997, for a similar account of non-penetrative sexual practices being more intimate and harder to negotiate, especially in casual sexual encounters). In these situations the most conventional heterosexual script is easiest and safest – that is, 'just kissing and touching and then intercourse basically. . . . [not] much else' (W12).

Relationships, non-intimacy, and intercourse While many participants described non-intimate intercourse as a part of casual sex, some women also described non-intimate or non-meaningful intercourse taking place in long-term relationships. Again, one woman described intercourse as the sort of standard minimal 'contribution' to sex:

W6: I wasn't that keen so therefore I would just have intercourse because I didn't want to go through the whole thing, especially after I had a child. It became much harder for me to have an orgasm.

In this way intercourse became a kind of pragmatic compromise to manage her lack of desire within a relationship. A number of women described having intercourse for such reasons (see also Gavey, 1992). For example, one commented:

W8: But it was just easier just to say 'oh fine, just do it', and then you can go to sleep and I can go to sleep.

This woman also described her experience of intercourse with her first boyfriend in similar terms:

W8: I think it was one of those things that you'd, you'd, you'd kiss and he would make feeble efforts to touch me but it was sort of like I couldn't be bothered to teach him. (Kathryn: Mhm) And I couldn't be bothered to hang around while he learned either so it was just like 'let's just, let's just do it' sort of thing.

That women can speak of intercourse in terms of such expediency challenges the taken-for-granted conflation of sex and love for women (see also Gavey, 1992, 1996). Women's accounts in this instance show that the choice for intercourse is made from a limited range of options, and that sometimes sex-without-intercourse doesn't seem like a choice. In reading these sorts of expediency accounts it seems particularly relevant to note the context of inequality and the power of discourses which dictate that men must have intercourse, in shaping the conditions in which women sometimes choose intercourse.

Another woman talked about sex, which included intercourse, within her relationship as a sort of 'invasion', as mechanical and boring. In this instance, where the expediency of her choice is not so apparent, intercourse can nevertheless appear irrelevant to intimacy:

W9: I came to feel like it was a great invasion, you know, I really. There was no coercion or anything like that but just the situation, you know, was (*pause*)

Kathryn: So you, when you had sex with him you wanted sex with him?

W9: Um, well I didn't want what I got, (Kathryn: *indecipherable*) put it that way. [. . .] It would just be sort of a few preliminaries and then intercourse (Kathryn: Mhm) that would be it really.

Kathryn: And was orgasm an issue for you at that time, like was that something you were wanting?

W9: Oh I could reach orgasm but it was very mechanical, you know. I mean you kind of 'if I do this then you do that, then I'll do this'. You know, very sort of boring. (mid 30s)

Some men also described intercourse within relationships that was non-intimate, although this tended to be with reference to different kinds of relationships where there was no 'emotional commitment' (M9). In men's accounts there was not the same sense that intercourse was particularly functional in avoiding intimacy or as a pragmatic solution to a lack of sexual desire. However, it could similarly occur in a way that was irrelevant to intimacy. For instance, M9 described a relationship 'where basically [it] was just sex', and noted the missing emotional component 'doesn't effect how you feel physically, when you're having sex at all' (M9). In contrast to this latter point, we note that another man described how he did not have an orgasm during the first two or three times he had intercourse with his partner: 'it wasn't until she told me she loved me that I did, which may sound a bit strange but that is in fact the truth' (M7).

This paradoxical state of affairs, in which intercourse is both the most intimate and least intimate sexual act clearly demonstrates the fluidity of meaning of the physical act itself; while it is often metonymically linked with intimacy, this relationship of meaning is clearly not fixed.

'It reassures the love connection': intercourse as signifying commitment and the importance of the relationship

A binary logic underpinning the conflation of sex with intercourse has the effect of allowing a vast array of sexual practices to be understood as *not* sex. For example, women and men can engage in multiple sexual practices before they 'lose' their virginity (associated with first intercourse; Holland et al., 1996b; Richardson, 1996). Two women referred to this. One said 'we did everything but penetration, because I had this thing about losing my virginity, and I thought well (Kathryn: Mhm), you know, I'll just try to hold off' (W3, late 20s). Another, when talking about what she and her partner had done before they had intercourse, said that they 'got into some pretty major um sort foreplay I suppose. Um, you know, kissing and sucking each other's genitals and that type of thing, but that whole thing about your virginity' (W12, mid 30s). As these women indicated, this binary allowed them to still position themselves as 'virginal' while engaging in a range of sexual behaviours other than intercourse (see also Schuster et al., 1996).

The construction that real sex involves intercourse also makes it possible for some to rationalize infidelities as something less transgressive if intercourse is not involved. For example, one woman described why she did not have intercourse with a particular man:

- W5: With [man's name], no it wasn't intercourse based at all because unfortunately (*indecipherable*) getting married and um, and um he had this stupid thing in his mind that he could do everything other than have actual intercourse (Kathryn: Mhm) and that kept him faithful to his wife.

A number of participants noted that first intercourse indicated the move to a more serious relationship. Some also discussed how having intercourse can signify the importance of a relationship, and their commitment to it. Intercourse can be used as a (reassuring) message of love; it can communicate someone's commitment to another person and to their relationship, and it can convey that a relationship is going well. For example:

- M4: Like the role of sex [intercourse], how much at that stage was as um a sign that things were okay, that our relationship was, was working.
- M13: It reassures the love connection, um, union, marriage, it reassures, it's a reassurance, when it comes to that possessive, I know when I'm coming from that – me – that I want to make love to reassure me that everything's okay.
- W4: Then I felt like had something to cling on to yes 'cause we made love and um I loved him and (*indecipherable*) (Kathryn: Right). In a way I was kidding myself. I realise that now. (early 20s)

While intercourse within a relationship meant 'commitment' or 'love' for a number of participants (also noted by Hite, 1977, 1981), two men indicated that the message of commitment/love that intercourse provides does not have to be entirely truthful. In line with its paradoxical status as both highly intimate and relatively non-intimate, intercourse can be deployed as a non-verbal lie, conveying (false) 'information of love' (M10).

- M1: I've had sexual intercourse as a means of reassuring my partner (Tim: Falsely reassuring) falsely reassuring in my opinion (*laughs*) that I still love them and cared about them and wasn't involved with anybody else. (Tim: Right) Therefore I couldn't be in love with anybody else. (early 40s)
- M10: The sex started to become used as a, as a sort of information of love thing,
- Chris: Right, by,
- M10: By by my partner and I guess by myself too, you know, um like I can confirm my love for you if I can make love to you, um –
- Chris: And by make love to you you mean have penetrative sex?
- M10: Have penetrative sex, yeah yeah exactly, and that I wasn't at all comfortable with that, you know I found that was really um, you know really destructive, um because (Chris: Destructive?), hard to tell because in reality I was actually very uncomfortable with the whole relationship, therefore it was a bit like a lie you know penetrative sex became a bit of a lie that I love you, you know, um, and that's not, that's no good, I don't like lying, and sort of lying and penetrating at the same time.

'You're not a man till you've had a woman': (first) intercourse as signifying manhood

We briefly discuss another function of intercourse. Some men talked about intercourse as almost an achievement, something which separates the men from the boys (see also Cairns, 1993; Hite, 1981; Holland et al., 1996b). One man commented that, socially, it was considered that 'you're not a man till you've had a woman' (M13). For example, when talking about his first intercourse, one man commented:

M7: It felt strange to me because like no one else was gonna know about this and no one else knows about it, but – and yet I think that it makes me feel different, or something like that, or that, you know, society places value on this.

While boys may gain their manhood through intercourse, women 'lose' their virginity (and do not gain their 'womanhood'). The differential embodiment of the 'loss' of virginity and the early inscription of heterosexual identities for men and women (Holland et al., 1996b) is clearly illustrated in one woman's report of her first experience of intercourse:

W8: When I did it I bawled. I cried all the way. It was just so – doesn't feel very good and it wasn't so much that it hurt afterwards, it was just that it was like something that I'd lost. Which I had, (Kathryn: Mhm) but it felt really empty.

What does *not* having intercourse say and mean?

Given the various positively valued meanings associated with intercourse, such as 'commitment' and 'intimacy', we asked participants how they would feel if a partner did not want to have, or did not have, intercourse. Some indicated they would miss or lose the intimacy and closeness, especially if not having intercourse was ongoing in a long-term relationship. Other participants indicated that if a partner did not want intercourse it would lead to them feeling 'self-doubt' (M15). It may, however, evoke a variety of contradictory responses, as illustrated by W5's response to the possibility of a short-term relationship with a man who did not want intercourse:

W5: I think I'd be quite happy. I think I'd be amazed. (Kathryn: Mhm) Um I might – I might even question my own sort of sexuality and wonder why (Kathryn: Mhm) ah,

Kathryn: In the sense that?

W5: Um (*pause*) I sort of think – I, I don't know, (*indecipherable*) think doesn't he find me attractive or doesn't he like me, perhaps, I don't know. (Kathryn: Mhm) Could feel like that.

Interestingly, while W5 initially thought she'd be 'quite happy' about a man not wanting intercourse, she quickly moved to the negative interpretation that this would mean he did not find her attractive or did not like her. Given the prominence of the male sex drive discourse, which constructs men as always wanting (and needing) sex,⁹ a man's lack of desire for intercourse will tend to be interpreted against this normative backdrop as marking the situation as abnormal in some way – either he is unusual or his lack of desire is a negative comment on her (lack of) attractiveness. As Hollway (1984a) has argued, intercourse acts as a signifier to women that they are attractive (to men). There is no position in the male sexual drive discourse or permissive discourse for men not wanting intercourse (without some extraordinary 'reason'), or wanting sex without intercourse. Therefore, a particular man's not wanting intercourse will be a marked communication of some sort – one which is most likely to convey some negative connotations unless these are directly and successfully denied.

The position for men in the male sexual drive discourse of wanting/ needing intercourse can be problematic for men too. It can create a pressure to have intercourse and to perform. One man commented that he thought men would be 'bloody rapt' (M4) to hear that they could have, and enjoy, sex without penetration (see also Hite, 1981, for men commenting on not having intercourse, and some men reporting that women not liking intercourse reduces 'pressure').

Men can also report feeling doubtful or 'rejected' if their partner does not want intercourse. For example:

Tim: If you seem to be, if you both seem to be aroused and you have an erection and um she seems receptive and then that stops, what does that mean?

M15: What what meaning do I –

Tim: Yeah what feelings do you get and (*indcipherable*) therefore what meaning do you take?

M15: Frustration (Tim: Okay) non-acceptance, worry that there's somehow sort of something wrong with the relationship, with the process um feelings of insecurity, um self-doubt. (early 40s)

Tim: Can you think of instances where where that's actually happened? Been engaged in sexual activity with someone and reached that point and, not progressed to intercourse?

M3: Yeah, yeah, I have done.

Tim: So what are the feelings that you can dredge up out of that?

M3: So it was, okay, it was in my teens and it was like, oh, darn, um, feelings of un, I guess wanting to uh, perhaps feelings of disappointment? Like I wanted to, and um, it just, a lot of wondering, wondering why

not? Yeah, why didn't she want to? Or thoughts of, yeah, wondering like uh, why not? What's the matter with me sort of stuff, self-doubt, so disappointment and self-doubt. (late 20s)

Both M15 and M3 describe self-doubt among a range of feelings (M3 *also* described sexual frustration) associated with not having intercourse during sex. Similarly, when talking about going to bed with a woman and her not wanting intercourse, one man commented:

M12: I think I suppose I, it would reflect on how I saw myself maybe. It might say well maybe that I'm not good enough or something. (Dave: Right) I'd probably take it personally.

These men describe a range of negative emotional experiences evoked by not having intercourse in a situation that they would have expected to. M3 contrasted these to how he felt after intercourse, and described the feelings associated with having intercourse:

M3: If we have sex, if we have intercourse, and um, there's feelings of warmth and acceptance that go along with that, this person that, wants to have sex with me.

(Consensual) intercourse appears to be strongly connected with positive characteristics, such as acceptance, intimacy and love, and not having intercourse with negative characteristics, such as self-doubt. Some men and women indicated that they would interpret a partner not wanting intercourse as reflecting on them personally (e.g. as the partner not finding them attractive), rather than accepting that the other person does not desire intercourse *per se*. This is a major hurdle that safer sex promotions of non-penetrative sex would have to overcome. It will presumably be difficult for men and women to negotiate sex-without-intercourse if intercourse is not only natural and normal, but also the most automatic sexual signifier of warmth, acceptance, intimacy and love. However, a number of participants indicated that many of the negative meanings associated with not having intercourse could be removed, reduced, or altered if the possibility of *not* having intercourse was explicitly discussed and negotiated.

Putting research into practice – implications for safer sex?

Intercourse remains taken-for-granted as normal sex. The possibility that intercourse could be a choice for sexually active heterosexuals is rarely publicly aired. The popular safer sex options of condom use or monogamy reinforce the sexual status quo (Wilton, 1994), and continue to prioritize intercourse as central to, and vital for, sex. The option of sexual abstinence is usually only recommended within a particular moral code to people

(such as teenagers) whom it is judged should not be having (real) sex anyway. These strategies all covertly undermine the possibilities of promoting sex-without-intercourse as (real) sex.

However, the health risks and social costs that can be associated with intercourse highlight an urgent need to question more broadly the inevitability of intercourse. In this article we have outlined and discussed the sorts of reasons participants gave for why they engaged in intercourse. While many located their reasons for intercourse in terms of the familiar discourses of heterosexuality – permissiveness (and pleasure), reciprocity, and the male sexual drive – a number of women also talked about ‘choosing’ to have intercourse for expedient or pragmatic reasons. By only talking about women choosing intercourse we do not wish to inadvertently reinforce an idea that we have critiqued – the assumption that men do not *choose* intercourse but instead *always-already* ‘need’ it. If we can unravel and understand the reasons why women and men choose intercourse, we may open the possibility for women and men to choose to *not* have intercourse when those reasons do not exist, or when they can be met in other ways (in circumstances where the potential costs of intercourse are high). This may help shift intercourse from being what is simply done without thinking to being an action which can be consciously chosen for a reason which can be articulated. Of course, as in the case of any choice, this reason will not always be conscious or one-dimensional. Nor will it always be able to be articulated. However, we suggest it is important to make a distinction between explaining why people *ever* have intercourse, and why they *always* have intercourse when they have sex. Some of the particular meanings of intercourse and what it signifies can explain why men and women have intercourse at all. The coital imperative and meanings of *not* having intercourse suggest reasons why people almost always have intercourse as part of heterosex, and why it is difficult to exclude it.

Almost every participant talked about experiencing and enjoying intimacy and closeness with intercourse. Many women who indicated they would not have a long-term sexual relationship without intercourse noted that this was because they felt that they would lose and miss the closeness, connectedness and intimacy ascribed to intercourse in long-term relationships. Although men’s and women’s reasons for the association between intercourse and intimacy were not always explicit, a number of participants discussed features such as sharing, being face to face, and the sense that through intercourse two people become one so the self is joined with the other. Ironically, however, in a one-night stand, intercourse was often described as not meaningful or intimate. Moreover, even within intimate relationships intimacy can be irrelevant to intercourse, sometimes chosen by women for pragmatic and expedient reasons.

Thus intercourse may occur for a range of reasons which are different

within long-term relationships and more casual sexual encounters. Many participants identified a powerful implicit contract for intercourse in one-night stands. It is practical and 'easier' in the sense that a normative script can be followed which does not require intimate negotiation with a new person. While intercourse within a longer-term relationship may still reflect the influence of the coital imperative, it can also signify intimacy and love. Such differences may impact on health promotion strategies that encourage alternatives to intercourse. Strategies focusing only on the normative aspect of intercourse may miss various significations which continue to prioritize it in a more established sexual relationship. The issue of how to make intercourse only one of several sexual options in a relationship is especially pertinent given the 'trust to love' myth whereby women and men often replace condoms with oral contraceptives when in a 'steady' relationship (Holland et al., 1996a; Moore and Rosenthal, 1993; Plumridge et al., 1996; Willig, 1995).

A number of participants drew on a biological imperative which was evidenced in arguments that having intercourse is natural or that there is a drive to have intercourse. We might expect naturalistic arguments to limit the possibilities for dethroning intercourse from the centre stage of heterosex. Naturalistic (biological) explanations for intercourse maintain it as a given, as something which is not to do with negotiability (Kippax et al., 1990; although see Note 6). Furthermore, Patton (1993) contended that naturalistic rhetoric constructs heterosexuality and intercourse in particular as 'safe by nature' (p. 259; see also Kippax and Crawford, 1991). Patton suggested that such reasoning positions safer sex in opposition to natural sex, and constructs safer sex as 'dehumanized' and 'unnatural' (p. 259), as some form of punishment.

In contrast, 'pleasure' may provide a valuable tool for moving towards less-coitally centred heterosexual practice. Patton (1989) has contended that we need to expand the concept of (hetero)sex to increase discussion of pleasurable possibilities and eroticize measures/practices that reduce transmission of all STDs. Constructions of homosexual safer sex around pleasure have had some success in changing behaviour (Kippax et al., 1990). However, as already mentioned, 'pleasure' is not an unproblematic concept. In particular, heterosexual pleasure has tended to be 'fundamentally gendered and inequitably assigned' (Wilton, 1994: 88). Radical feminists have critiqued heterosexuality and heterosexual pleasure as an eroticization of inequality, and inherently implicated in women's oppression (Dworkin, 1987; Jeffreys, 1990; Kitzinger, 1994; MacKinnon, 1987). Without disregarding such critiques, there may be room to explore and identify heterosexual pleasures in ways that not only disrupt the naturalness of intercourse, but might create space and language for women to articulate desire and experience different kinds of pleasures. It may even,

as Crawford et al. (1994) have suggested, ‘challenge and confront existing power structures’ (p. 585).

However, redefining sex for women and men in terms of pleasure (along with an explicit questioning of the place of intercourse) may not be easy. Many women described oral sex or masturbation as more or at least *as* sexually pleasurable, in terms of orgasm, as intercourse. In contrast, some men were more ambivalent about the pleasures offered by fellatio (for example), and described intercourse as more pleasurable. For example, as M7 commented ‘the reality doesn’t live up to it, put it that way’, because ‘teeth . . . and stuff like that . . . the sensation isn’t all that great’.

If male heterosexual pleasure remains premised on orgasm normatively achieved through intercourse, the possibilities for sex-without-intercourse may be limited. The intersection of a male sexual drive discourse with a discourse of reciprocity (which constructs sex around an exchange of orgasms) may further induce women to have intercourse (after her own orgasm or at least after some ‘performance’ directed to this purpose) so that the man can have his orgasm. However, we suggest that more explicit discussion of the coital imperative and other normative facets of heterosexuality, such as a male sexual drive discourse, may, through revealing their constructed nature, provide the tools for dismantling them. Through being in a position to critically reflect on some of the norms that govern behaviour, we may start to understand these silent imperatives and our own subjectification to them differently. As one of Hite’s (1981) male respondents said: ‘It bothered me to perceive that I had believed I authentically felt things (like the desirability of penis–vagina intercourse) which upon examination I discovered I only believed I ought to feel in order to fit cultural norms’ (p. 465). This is not to say that cultural norms can *easily* be resisted; indeed, poststructuralist theory holds that language and discourse are powerful in constituting subjectivity.

Meaning and signification are not fixed in the act of intercourse *per se*, but constructed within various discourses in various contexts in multiple ways. The somewhat paradoxical description of intercourse as both the most intimate sexual act but also the easiest, least intimate act highlights this. Even the most seemingly natural and fixed meanings or reasons for wanting intercourse may be contestable and open to change. While intercourse acts a signifier for many valued relational qualities, it does not mean that other sexual practices cannot also become signifiers of, for example, intimacy or love. Anything that is signified (e.g. intimacy) need not only have a limited number of signifiers (e.g. only intercourse). Similarly, the exclusion of intercourse from sex does not necessarily have to signify ‘rejection’. Disrupting these relationships of meaning may be an important process for destabilizing the place of intercourse; for moving it from being an unquestioned and inevitable mark of ‘real’ sex to being one possibility among many.

Notes

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1. We use 'intercourse' to refer to penis–vagina penetration.
2. Although we see sexuality as socially constructed in this way, we do not premise this analysis on an exclusion of biological processes and structures. Rather, we see the distinction between social/cultural and biological causes as a false dichotomy between kinds of processes that are co-constructing (see Gray, 1997; Oyama, 1985).
3. Although Hollway (1993, 1995) has contended that more genuine reciprocity/equality *is* possible in heterosexual relationships.
4. New Zealanders of European descent (one male participant preferred to be described as 'European').
5. This article is one of three related papers describing different aspects of this study. In McPhillips et al. (submitted) we look at how heterosex is defined and ask how imperative is the coital imperative. In Braun, Gavey and McPhillips (unpublished) we consider the complexity of reciprocity and mutuality in heterosexual sex.
6. It is interesting to note here that even the biologist Richard Dawkins who was responsible for popularizing the concept of the selfish gene (Dawkins, 1978), and who has often been negatively described as a genetic determinist, has been at pains to point out that genes are not 'super-deterministic, in comparison with environmental causes'; rather, he claims, this assumption is a 'myth of extraordinary tenacity' (Dawkins, 1982: 11).
7. Here we use the term 'script' in an informal way. Our use of the concept shares some of the assumptions and perspectives of script theory (e.g. Gagnon, 1990; Simon and Gagnon, 1986); however, a fuller discussion of our own position on a scripting perspective in relation to our theoretical starting points and debates about script theory (e.g. Edwards, 1997) is beyond the scope of this article.
8. For contrasting discussions around heterosexuality and heterosexual pleasure see Vance (1984), Segal (1994), and Hollway, (1993).
9. See Hollway (1984b) and Holland et al. (1994b) for discussion of both boys and girls thinking that intercourse is what men want.

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