

Unpacking the ‘Pleasures’ and ‘Pains’ of Heterosexual Casual Sex – Beyond Singular Understandings

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Discussions of heterosexual casual sex are often imbued with (gendered) assumptions regarding the motives for, and drawbacks of, such a practice. The pulls of casual sex are often depicted as sexual gratification and the drawbacks relayed in terms of physical risk (e.g., STI/HIV transmission). Most of the research in this area has largely focused on undergraduate university students or ‘emerging adults’ in North America, using primarily quantitative methodologies. We build on this work and a growing (but small) amount of qualitative research to unpack the complex psycho-emotional and experiential dimensions of casual sex. We report on a critical thematic analysis of interviews with 30 ethnically diverse women and men (aged 18-46) in New Zealand about their experiences of heterosexual casual sex to achieve two things. Firstly, we demonstrate the complexity by which women and men discussed their casual sex experiences, highlighting how the practice was varied, contradictory and multi-faceted. Secondly, we illustrate how this talk was governed by contemporary Western discourses of intimate relationships and the shape of (gendered) heterosexuality. We conclude that casual sex research must always consider the broader sociocultural context, as well as the interpersonal context, within which any sexual relating is situated.

Keywords: *gender, male sexuality, female sexuality, heterosexuality, casual sex*

Introduction

Heterosexual casual sex has become a hot topic globally and in contemporary Western culture. Talk of this practice is often characterized by moral panics describing a ‘hook-up culture’ that is rampant among young people ultimately damaging for both individuals and society (Freitas, 2013; McIlhaney & Bush, 2008; Preidt, 2010; Proctor, 2009). Casual sex is often assumed to take place because individuals are seeking ‘sexual gratification’ when they are not in a committed sexual relationship (Farvid, 2011; Bogle, 2008). The main ‘pull’ of casual sex is typically, although not always (Rosenthal, Gifford, & Moore, 1998), assumed to be the desire for uncommitted sexual activity (Armstrong & Reissing, 2015; Garcia & Reiber, 2008; Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009) and casual sex is often described as being about sexual *pleasure* (Cooper, 2002; Regan & Dreyer, 1999). The drawbacks of casual sex are depicted as the heightened risk of contracting sexually transmitted infections (including HIV), unwanted pregnancies (Baker, Morrison, Gillmore, & Schock, 1995; Cousins, McGee, & Layte, 2008; Paul & Hayes, 2002), the potential for negative affective responses following casual sex (Eisenberg, Ackard, Resnick, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2009; Grello, Welsh, & Harper, 2006), as well as the possibility of dangers to (women’s) physical safety (Littleton, Tabernik, Canales, & Backstrom, 2009).

In this paper, we seek to ‘complicate’ such understandings of casual sex by addressing the complex psycho-emotional and experiential dimensions of the practice. To do this, we draw on a critical qualitative study with a diverse range of adults that deployed creative methodology in an attempt to access novel or unheard accounts of casual sex. Our aim here is twofold. First, we seek to unpack and the current understandings of heterosexual casual sex, framing it as a fluid but socially and culturally bound practice that moves us beyond singular or individualistic definitions. Secondly, we highlight the ways in which the practice of casual sex continues to be governed by contemporary Western cultural discourses of intimate relationships and the shape of (gendered) heterosexuality. Building on earlier assertions that “there is little that is casual or emotionally uninvolved about casual sex” (Paul & Hayes, 2002, p. 656), we argue that casual sex research needs to pay closer attention to the varied, contradictory and complex ways this practice is experienced.

Heterosexual Casual Sex Research

The majority of casual sex research to date has focused on (predominantly white) university students in the US (Grello et al., 2006; Kalish & Kimmel, 2011; Paul, 2006; Paul, McManus, & Hayes, 2000; Regan & Dreyer, 1999) or other groups of ‘emerging adults’ in North America (Lyons, Manning, Giordano, & Longmore, 2013; Lyons, Manning, Longmore, & Giordano, 2014), and predominantly used quantitative methods. Aside from a few studies (Herold & Mewhinney, 1993; Moran & Lee, 2014a, 2014b; Paik, 2010; Rosenthal et al., 1998), the experiences of older adults or non-tertiary students remain absent, and more in-depth and qualitative analyses are lacking (Beres & Farvid, 2010; Currier, 2013; Farvid, 2014). In the current paper, we seek to address this gap by analyzing interview data from New Zealand that talked to ethnically diverse individuals aged 18-46 with various casual sex experiences.

Heterosexual casual sex is a varied and complex practice that is hard to define. A range of contextually, relationally and historically diverse activities may fall under its rubric (Farvid, 2012; Reay, 2014). Early terms included “permissiveness without affection” (Reiss, 1960) “premarital coitus” (Hunt, 1975) and “premarital sex” (Tavris & Sadd, 1975). Currently, casual sex is typically defined as any (ostensibly consensual) sexual activity (coital or otherwise) that occurs between two people (i.e., strangers, recently met acquaintances, friends) outside the context of a committed, romantic, or longer-term relationship (e.g., Paul et al., 2000; Regan & Dreyer, 1999). Different forms of casual sex are often defined based on the prior relationship between the two individuals involved, the frequency of the casual sex, and the relationship status after casual sex (Wentland & Reissing, 2011; Wentland & Reissing, 2014).

A distinction has been made between *one-off* (casual) sex, such as one night stand(s) (Campbell, 2008; Cubbins & Tanfer, 2000), having sex with someone once and only once (Baldwin & Baldwin, 1988; Kilmann, Boland, West, & Jonet, 1993), hook-up(s) (Lewis, Atkins, Blayney, Dent, & Kaysen, 2012; Littleton et al., 2009; Manning, Giordano, & Longmore, 2006; Paul & Hayes, 2002), and *longer-term* casual sex arrangements such as friends with benefits (e.g., Bisson & Levine, 2009; Hughes, Morrison, & Asada, 2005), fuck buddies (Heldman & Wade, 2010; Lehmler, VanderDrift, & Kelly, 2010; Wentland & Reissing, 2011) and booty calls (e.g., Jonason, Li, & Cason, 2009), as well as one-off or ongoing sex with an ex-partner (Farvid, 2005; Manning et al., 2006). Casual sex has also recently been referred to as “non-romantic sex” to

capture sex that occurs outside the context of a hegemonic romantic narrative, where it is assumed “that everyone is in, or seeking, a life-long, exclusive, committed and loving relationship, and that sex only occurs in that context” (Moran & Lee, 2014a, p. 221; 2014b). In this paper, we focus on talk in relation to any form of casual sex, as well as general thoughts and impressions of the participants regarding heterosexual casual sex as a broad category of practice and how it compares to sex in longer-term romantic relationships.

Accurate rates of casual sex are quite difficult to pin down and vary considerably across the population cohorts studied (which are rarely representative samples of all adults). Within US and Canadian university samples, reports of coital casual sex range from 15-30% (Maticka-Tyndale, Herold, & Mewhinney, 1998; Paul et al., 2000; Weaver & Herold, 2000), 40% (Fielder, Carey, & Carey, 2013) and 67% (Armstrong, Hamilton, & England, 2010), with recent reviews indicating that between 60% and 80% of college students report some form of (coital or non-coital) casual intimate interaction (Garcia, Reiber, Massey, & Merriwether, 2012). A Canadian study of 1,031 emerging adults (aged 18-24) indicated 54% of participants reported ever having casual sex, with 39% reporting they had engaged in casual sex in the last two years (Lyons et al., 2014). In a representative sample of 642 urban Chicago adults (aged 18-59), 27% reported having sex during “casual dating” and 17% reported sex in non-romantic contexts (e.g., one-off sexual encounters, sex with a friend) (Paik, 2010). Rates of casual sex in Australia and New Zealand vary slightly. In a representative sample of Australian heterosexual adults 8% of men and 5% of women indicated that their most recent heterosexual encounter was casual in nature (de Visser, Smith, Rissel, Richters, & Grulich, 2003). More recently, one large-scale Australian study, focusing on sexual health and involving a representative samples of 9,963 men and 10,131 women (aged 16–69), indicated that 8% of the most recent sexual encounters reported, were with a casual partner (Rissel et al., 2014). Cross-sectional data from a random sample of 5,770 students (aged 17–24), from universities across New Zealand, indicated the last sexual partner was someone the respondents had met for the first time (5%); someone they had recently met (8%); someone known to them but with no steady relationship (20%); with others in steady relationships (52%) or living together/engaged/married (14%) (Psutka, Connor, Cousins, & Kypri, 2012). One qualitative project focused conducting focus groups on sexual health practices in New Zealand reported that of the 58 participants (38 female, 20 male), 75% reported they had engaged in casual sex at least once (Braun, 2013).

Prevalence aside, researchers have been very interested in mapping out the reasons people may engage in casual sex. Previous research has typically identified sexual desire and satisfaction as the primary reasons given for participating in casual sex (Garcia & Reiber, 2008; Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009; Li & Kenrick, 2006; Regan & Dreyer, 1999). Casual sex is often assumed to take place because individuals are seeking “sexual gratification” when they are not in a committed sexual relationship (Grello et al., 2006; Paul et al., 2000). Casual sex is also often linked to a “hook-up” culture on US university campuses (Bogle, 2008) as well as substance use such as alcohol and drugs (Bersamin, Paschall, Saltz, & Zamboanga, 2012; Grello et al., 2006; Owen, Rhoades, Stanley, & Fincham, 2010), is associated with particular contexts such as parties (Bersamin et al., 2012), being on holiday (Ragsdale, Difrancesisco, & Pinkerton, 2006) or breaks from studying (Maticka-Tyndale, Herold, & Oppermann, 2003; Sonmez et al., 2006).

Recently, research has also utilized the concept of ‘emerging adulthood’ (Jeffrey, 2000) to account for young people’s engagement in casual sex (Lyons et al., 2013; Lyons et al., 2014). Emerging adulthood is defined as a period of young adulthood (18-25), in the contemporary Western context, characterized by visible sexual exploration, geographic mobility and employment flexibility. Lyons and colleagues (2013, 2014), identified four life-course specific reasons that a group of Canadian emerging adults provided for engaging in casual sex. These were filling relationship ‘gaps’ in-between having boy/girlfriends, being too busy for a committed and romantic relationship due to work or university commitments, geographic movement of sexual partners, and a sense of being too young to be ‘tied down’ to a serious relationship with too much to ‘see and do’ (Lyons et al., 2013; Lyons et al., 2014). Casual sex was positioned as something that is temporary, rather than a lifelong lifestyle choice (Farvid & Braun, 2013).

Heterosexual casual sex has been repeatedly identified as a gendered practice across many Western countries (Beres & Farvid, 2010; Bogle, 2008; Lyons et al., 2013; Maticka-Tyndale et al., 2003; Paul & Hayes, 2002; Schmitt, 2003). Quantitative research from the US has reported that men are typically more interested in casual sex, report more positive attitudes towards the practice and higher rates of engagement (Grello et al., 2006; Paul et al., 2000). US women are often cited as less interested in casual sex, report less enjoyment, but more guilt (Herold & Mewhinney, 1993), shame (Littleton et al., 2009; Paul et al., 2000), regret (Campbell, 2008; Eshbaugh & Gute, 2008; Littleton et al., 2009; Paul

et al., 2000) and disappointment (Littleton et al., 2009; Paul et al., 2000). Studies often report that women are more interested in the emotional connection and intimate aspects of casual sex, whereas men are reported as interested in the physical aspects of sex (Lehmiller et al., 2010). Such gender difference are linked to an enduring sexual double standard (Farvid, Braun, & Roney, forthcoming; Kalish & Kimmel, 2011; Ronen, 2010) where casual sex is more acceptable for men to engage in, resulting in more positive individual and social outcomes for them (Conley, Ziegler, & Moors, 2013; Conner & Flesch, 2001; Currier, 2013; Garcia & Reiber, 2008; Regan & Dreyer, 1999).

Qualitative and discursive studies delving into heterosexual casual sex are rare but growing, particularly in Australia and New Zealand (Beres & Farvid, 2010; Farvid, 2010, 2011, 2014; Farvid & Braun, 2013; Moran & Lee, 2014a, 2014b; Rosenthal et al., 1998). This research has also addressed gender in relation to casual sex, typically focusing on both men and women or women, but rarely men on their own. Of the research examining men’s and women’s casual sex experiences, an earlier study indicated that both men’s and women’s accounts prioritized emotional bond, intimacy, and closeness as important when it came to (casual) sex (Rosenthal et al., 1998). There was a common conflation of sex/love by the women, where (casual) sex was constructed mainly in terms of (the search for) love and romance. Men also reported engaging in casual sex to find love, but also constructed casual sex as a ‘hunt’ and an ‘ego boost’ (Rosenthal et al., 1998, p. 40). Men articulated *two* discourses when it came to casual sex, whereas women only articulated one, and this had negative implications for women’s ability to negotiate safer sexual practices when engaging in casual sex.

Research examining young heterosexual women’s casual sex experiences in New Zealand identified (counter-narratives) of agentic and pleasurable casual sex (Farvid, 2005, 2014). These women explicitly articulated a “desire” for *casual* sex, and some talked of actively pursuing it. The conflation of sex/love was severed, and the purpose of casual sex was described as “sex for sex’s sake.” There was however, the prevalence of “silence, stigma and the sexual double standard” evident in women’s accounts and reports of “silencing” their casual sex experiences to avoid getting a sexual reputation (Farvid & Braun, forthcoming). Young Canadian and New Zealand women’s experiences of heterosexual casual sex have been identified as subject to heteronormative and gendered discourses of appropriate femininity and masculinity (Beres & Farvid, 2010). Such discourses were theorized as an impediment to more ethical sexual relating (i.e., egalitarian, mutual, consensual)

and the authors argued that gender *difference* and polarity was in serious need of change in order to foster positive and ethical sexual experiences for both women and men.

In recent work on women’s talk about non-romantic sex in Australia, researchers interviewed 15 women (aged 20-48), 14 of whom had deliberately chosen to be single (Moran & Lee, 2014a, 2014b). This unique group of women generally reported positive experiences across a range of casual sex scenarios (e.g., one-night stands, ongoing casual sex relationships, swinging, BDSM, Cybersex) and negotiated a single identity not typical of heteronormative femininity. While the women were able to (at times) achieve sexual agency and various pleasures, they were severely constrained by discourses of gender *difference* in casual sex. For example, “men were assumed to hold the power from initiation to what sexual activities would take place” (Moran & Lee, 2014b, p. 177). Women also told narratives of going along with unwanted or unpleasurable casual sex, which negatively affected their health and wellbeing (Moran & Lee, 2014a).

When it comes to men’s experiences of casual sex, qualitative research is scarce. Two studies using qualitative and mixed-methods approaches have sought to complicate our understanding of men’s casual sex (Epstein, Calzo, Smiler, & Ward, 2009; Olmstead, Billen, Conrad, Pasley, & Fincham, 2013). Rather than approaching casual sex as an unproblematic given that men always benefit from and enjoy, these two studies indicate that men’s experiences of, and approach to, casual sex were quite varied. Interviews with 20 university students (aged 18-23) showed that only a minority of the men reported they had a positive hook-up experience, and five expressed unwillingness to engage in casual sex, with a preference for sex in committed relationships (Epstein et al., 2009). A few of the men who took part in hook-ups reported mixed experiences where there was a tension between traditional scripts of sexually-driven masculinity and their lived experiences of emotional vulnerability. This project also confirmed prior research that indicated men reported a desire for emotional connection in sexual encounters (Paul & Hayes, 2002).

A larger study of 200 university men, identified as emerging adults, used open-ended questions in a survey to examine the meaning of sex and its links to commitment (Olmstead et al., 2013). Three distinct groups were identified: “committers” (46.5%), “flexibles” (41%) and “recreationers” (12%). Somewhat unexpectedly, the largest group was the “committers” who considered the best place for sex to be within a

committed relationship, and as something that should be “meaningful.” The “flexibles” gave dual meanings to sex, where it could be part of a meaningful and committed relationship, but also meaningless, fun and a means of satisfying sexual urges. The final group, the “recreationers,” reported that sex was meaningless and useful primarily for entertainment and fun. These men were by far the minority (Olmstead et al., 2013). The largest group in this study did not conform to traditional discourses or scripts associated with dominant male sexuality. Men’s sexual experiences and ideas related to sex were quite fluid and varied in these two studies, indicating that hegemonic discourses of masculinity do not fully entrench all men’s experiences of casual sex. The meanings associated with casual sex are thus varied and changing – not all men recounted enjoying casual sex and some women reported engaging casual sex for sex’s sake rather than searching for emotional connection or a relationship (Farvid, 2014).

In this paper, we seek to build and extend previous casual sex research by examining the complex, contradictory and varied ways women and men talk about casual sex and how contemporary discourses of heterosexuality shape these accounts. We seek to demonstrate the experiential diversity and the complex psycho-emotional aspects of casual sex experiences as they were relayed in the interview setting. Our aim is to move our understanding of casual sex beyond singular narratives and to dispel taken-for-granted (and gendered) assumptions often associated with this practice. We also seek to promote contextualized investigations that take into consideration the sociocultural framing of heterosexuality and how these shape the experiences of those who engage in casual sex.

Method

Our approach to the study of sexuality is a social constructionist one (Tiefer, 2004; Travis & White, 2000). We see sex, sexuality and gender as socially constructed categories that are ascribed particular social and cultural meanings at specific points in history. We analyze the accounts below from a critical feminist perspective, with a special interest in mapping out the dominant constructions of gender, sexuality, masculinity and femininity – and how these discourses shaped participant accounts of casual sex.

The analysis carried out here draws on interview data gathered in New Zealand for a larger project exploring the social construction of heterosexual casual sex (Farvid, 2011). This larger project was multi-faceted and examined the historical emergence of heterosexual casual sex (Farvid, 2012), its scientific construction (Farvid, 2011), the way the practice is depicted within the media (Farvid & Braun, 2013) and in casual sex advice directed at heterosexual men and women (Farvid & Braun, 2014). The participants quoted here were recruited via advertising posters that were placed on notice boards in health clubs, yoga studios, cafes, health food shops and major Universities in Auckland and Wellington. Thirty participants (15 men and 15 women) were recruited and interviewed by the first author (see Tables 1 and 2). All participants took part in individual interviews with the exception of two women (Dora and Nina) who requested a joint interview. There was no age cap placed on who could participate (as long as participants were over 18) and the participants’ ages ranged from 18-46 (M= 27 for women; 29 for men). Eight of the participants were undergraduate students; seven were older and doing postgraduate study, with others in paid employment as professionals or in other full-time work. Most appeared to be middle-class. Although there is a diverse mix of people living in New Zealand (particularly in Auckland), the research carried out here attracted a more diverse group of participants than expected. The project attracted participants of diverse ethnic backgrounds, ages, education and occupations. This diversity is a strength of the project, departing from the white, young, undergraduate North American sample that is typical of most casual sex research (Heldman & Wade, 2010).

The participants had a diverse range of experiences with casual sex, in terms of numbers and characteristics (see Table 1 and 2). Men reported greater experience with casual sex, in terms of numbers and variety. These numbers were self-reported and no numerical categories were provided for the participants to choose from. No distinct pattern was evident between age and casual sex experience – some young people reported high numbers of casual sex experiences, as did people in their late 20s and early 30s. Those in their 40s reported low to average numbers. Ethical approval was sought and gained from the host university where the research took place.

Participation in the research was voluntary, and no monetary incentive was given to volunteers. Participants were recruited for interviews exploring heterosexual sex in “different” contexts (*including* one-off or casual sexual experiences). Participants were not explicitly told that one of the main foci of the research was “casual sex.” The rationale behind this ambiguity has been discussed in detail elsewhere (Farvid, 2010), but

in brief, this relates to the project’s aims to recruit a wider range of women and men who may have had one-off or brief sexual encounters, but may not volunteer for a study specifically focused on casual sex. These participants were thus not invested in “casual sex” as a topic or practice, in the way that others might be if they were exclusively recruited for a study on casual sex.

All interviews were carried out by the first author, a young heterosexual woman (aged 26 at the time of the interviews), over a two month period. The interviewer was younger than some participants, but older than others and matched the gender of the women and the sexual orientation of all participants. These interviews were semi-structured in nature and guided by a carefully designed schedule focused on eliciting in-depth information, and unheard accounts, about sex in a variety of contexts (e.g., longer-term relationships; one-off sexual encounters). The participants were asked to share their sexual histories (i.e., what the participants considered their first ‘intimate’ contact, the experience of losing their virginity, their experiences of sex in their first and subsequent committed relationships), including their experiences of casual sex (i.e., ‘one-off’ sexual experiences with recently met strangers or acquaintances, long-term casual sex relationship, sex with a friend, and sex with an ex). When it came to talk about casual sex, the participants were asked to elaborate on the details of such experiences with questions such as: *How did the sexual contact come about? Can you tell me about the (sexual) experience? Who instigated it? Who ‘lead’ the sex? Was there much dialogue during/about the sex? What were some of the feelings involved during the encounter? What was going through your mind during sex? Was there ‘attraction’ involved? If so, what this attraction entail? Did you enjoy the experience? Why/why not? Was the experience pleasurable? Why/why not? Or How? Do you have any desire for it again? Why/why not? Do you think there is a difference between casual sex and sex in committed relationships? What? Which do you prefer?* Four of the younger participants aged 18-22 (Sienna, Raina, Neema, Teo) reported they did not have any casual sex experiences to reflect on. In these instances, participants were invited to provide their impressions of what casual sex is or means, if they would ever consider engaging in the practice in the future, and what they perceived as the difference between casual sex and sex in committed relationships. Interviews ranged between 40 minutes and 2.5 hours (most being about two hours) and were digitally recorded and transcribed using an orthographic style. The participants did not produce many narratives of longer-term casual sex relationships. The data analyzed in this paper referred mainly to one-off casual sex, and comprised 445 pages of transcribed interview data.

Some participants (Arya, Dawn, Nina, Paulo) talked about one-off sexual encounters within the interviews, but did not indicate these in the self-reported demographic sheet where the data for the tables came from. The interview data from all 30 participants were included in the analysis. When citing data extracts, pseudonyms are used for all participants and the ethnicity and occupations made less specific than what was recorded to maintain anonymity. Any potentially identifiable information has been removed or altered (with the age of participants included at the end of each extract). When the participants’ words are used in-text, double quotation marks are used.

In line with our constructionist framework, we see language as *constitutive* of realities and differing forms of sex and sexuality, rather than merely representing them. Hence, we do not approach people’s accounts, as relayed in these interviews, as evidence of what ‘really’ happened or their internal and stable attitudes about casual sex. Rather, the language people use when crafting these narratives tell us something about the discursive resources available to them within wider culture regarding sex, sexuality and casual sex. However, that is not to say that participants are only limited to such language formations and are *only* subject to discourse (Hall, 2001). It is about what is ‘sayable’ in relation to casual sex in a particular cultural milieu and the context of one-on-one interviews. We see the interview itself as co-constructed (between interviewer and interviewee) and the participants as having the agency to play with, resist and (re)formulate cultural discourses related to heterosexual casual sex (Ryan, 2000).

Analytic Procedure

The data were analyzed using critical thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012) to identify the predominant ways people talked about casual sex. Thematic analysis is primarily concerned with reporting broad patterns of meaning across textual datasets. Using an inductive approach, the themes identified were data-driven (i.e., derived from, and strongly linked to, the data) without attempting to fit the themes into a pre-existing framework or theoretical positioning regarding casual sex (for a theoretical approach to analyzing casual sex experiences thematically, see Beres & Farvid, 2010). All aspects of the data related to casual sex were coded to explore how the experience was constituted within the accounts. The analysis intended to go beyond a surface reading of the data, or a mere description of the accounts, “to identify the

underlying ideals, assumptions...and ideologies...informing the semantic content of the data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 84). The development of the themes went beyond describing the data to doing “interpretation work,” which analyzed aspects of gender and sexuality from a critical feminist approach, paying close attention to the contradictions, contestations and tensions created by dominant and alternative discourses of heterosexuality. This thematic approach fits within a constructionist framework and is closely linked to certain forms of discourse analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The process of analysis included repeated reading of the interview transcripts by the first author. All talk related to casual sex was coded, separated out, and read multiple times. Next, coding of the recurring ways people talked about casual sex was conducted. These sets of coded data were then organized into initial candidate themes. The analytic process was recursive, with a movement between the coded data, candidate themes and the raw data. The rationale for this recursive process was to successfully capture the overarching themes that cohere meaningfully together (i.e., possess *internal homogeneity*) as well as being distinct from each other (i.e., possess *external heterogeneity*), in telling a story about casual sex (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Patton, 1990). Once the candidate themes were reworked, a final set of topics was sketched out, and then illustrative extracts were selected and analyzed in more detail. Analyses of the data were revised many times, in consultation with the second author, to craft the final analysis. Thus, the themes discussed below present the broader patterns we encountered within the data.

Results and Discussion

Regardless of the diversity of participants on many axes, and their varying levels of experience with casual sex, overall discussions of casual sex were quite similar. The experience of casual sex was depicted as exciting and fun, yet fraught with (gendered) anxieties. In line with previous research, casual sex was talked about as a *temporary* part of the participants’ lives (Lyons et al., 2014; Wilkins & Dalessandro, 2013). Casual sex was something interviewees claimed they engaged in while single, in-between longer-term committed relationships, when they were younger, when “experimenting,” and in particular contexts with a lot of newly found freedoms (e.g., university), or in particular points in their lives (e.g., after the dissolution of marriage). Casual sex was rarely talked about as something participants engaged in while in committed relationships.

Monogamous and committed relationships were positioned as the preferred way to have a sexual relationship (Farvid & Braun, 2013) and casual sex was depicted as “a bit of fun” (Sadie, 38) but ultimately a temporary part of one’s “sexual career” (Tristan, 34).

Casual sex inhabited a complex and contradictory discursive terrain within the participants’ talk. Four main themes were identified in the analysis: a) *casual sex as thrill*; b) *casual sex as ego boost*; c) *casual sex as tricky*; d) and *casual sex as deficient*. The first and second theme tended to encapsulate the ‘pleasurable’ aspects of casual sex, and the last two encapsulated the ‘pains’ or difficulties associated with casual sex. All of the themes discussed were linked to (or disrupted) contemporary discourses of male and female sexuality and were at times gendered (i.e., expressed differently by men and women). Talk relating to the ‘risks’ of casual sex were evident and we address this elsewhere (Farvid & Braun, forthcoming). In the analysis that follows, we outline each theme, examining how they constructed casual sex (and sex and sexual relationships in general) as well as masculine and feminine heterosexual identities.

Casual Sex as Thrill

The theme of ‘casual sex as thrill’ encapsulates one of the most commonly articulated aspects of casual sex and included a number of facets: casual sex as exciting, carefree, fun, new/novel, transgressive and naughty. It was the most complex and rich theme when it came to describing casual sex. Here, men tended to bolster sexual variety and women tended to discuss sexual freedom more readily in their talk. Casual sex was often depicted as exciting and a heightened state of experience:

Pani: What were the sorts of feelings that went along with it?

Aiden: Real nervous tension. But we were just so involved in what we were doing and so, um, I don’t know that whole, there was a real rush because we were in real foreign space, we were in someone else’s room, we’re in somewhere like in a real sort of sketch, ah real um foreign surroundings...and having a whole lot of fun! I was just real excited about it (Aged 25).

In this account, a one-off casual sex encounter is depicted as a fun, intense and exciting experience involving a “rush” of feelings, constructing casual sex as particularly thrilling in nature, perhaps akin to consuming stimulants of some kind. The ‘unfamiliar’ context within which casual sex can occur was depicted as *adding* to the rush or excitement of casual sex.

For women, casual sex was often described as thrilling because it signified a carefree experience. The extract below followed a description of Arya having had a one-night stand in an outdoor setting on one of the volcanic mountains in Auckland city:

- Pani: What were some of the feelings you were feeling?
Arya: Um interesting, fun. (Pani: yeah) Enjoyable I'd say (Pani: hmmm) enjoyable. But um I (sighs) not even the word happy, but enjoyable you know? (Pani: hmmm) But um for him I really felt like that was just sex, not making love, it's just like it's a way for me to have fun
Pani: What makes it fun?
Arya: It's just that you know, I don't really know him as a person but I was doing it with him and you know in such wild setting
Pani: And what's fun about that though?
Arya: It's different from a relationship, 'cause if you, if that's my boyfriend that would be really different and we wouldn't do that you know. It's because I don't know him much and he doesn't know me much, we can do lots of things that I don't normally do
Pani: Hmm why do you think that is?
Arya: Because I don't care what my image is for him. 'Cause he doesn't know [me] so even if he thinks 'oh she's a playgirl' you know, 'she's um horny', I don't care. Because you know it's one-off. I think that's it for me, you know? he won't see me again and I won't contact him again, [it] doesn't matter, I don't care (Aged 24).

‘Unfamiliarity’ with this man whom Arya described having one-off casual sex with, constructs the encounter in positive terms, as enjoyable and fun. The context of this encounter is depicted as providing certain freedoms to act in more sexually adventurous ways that Arya would not typically engage in with a steady partner. This was in contrast to other participants (e.g., Neema, Whina, Amar, Aiden) who described casual sex as limited in terms of sexual diversity and positioned relationship sex as more adventurous. For Arya, particular codes of feminine sexual display were constructed as necessary in relationship sex, but discarded – or discardable – in casual sex. The rebellion of breaking away from traditional feminine sexuality, was part of the ‘thrill’ of casual sex, and relayed here as especially tantalizing. Men did not talk in this manner regarding the transgression of gender norms in pursuits of casual sex. Casual sex has traditionally been constituted as a male domain (Rosenthal et al., 1998) and men’s pursuit of casual relations has been condoned if not encouraged (Ehrenreich, 1983), whereas women’s pursuits have been disparaged (Crawford & Popp, 2003; Farvid et al., forthcoming). Hence, men’s contemporary pursuit of, and engagement in, casual sex was not constituted as rebellious, unlike women’s experience of casual sex.

Within the accounts, casual sex was usually depicted as exciting and fun in contrast to sex in longer-term partnerships. For example, in the following extract Jacob had been asked to elaborate on what he had enjoyed about a particular casual sex experience:

- Jacob: I really like, the feeling of getting with someone new for the first time... (Pani: hmmm), that's like really kind of exciting.
Pani: And why is it exciting?
Jacob: I, maybe 'cause it's new umm I don't know... I mean, I can only imagine that if you had enough sex with the same person, like things would get kinda dull, but you can do the same things you like with different people and it never does (Aged 33).

Jacob's account constructs a scenario where there are (imaginary) limits on how much 'exciting' sex one can have with the same individual. Exciting sex is relayed as the ideal, and familiarity as ultimately leading to monotony. This is within a context where boring has become a common feature of everyday talk regarding relationship sex (Crawford, Kippax, Onyx, Gault, & Benton, 1992; Tunariu & Reavey, 2007), unless that sex is purposefully 'spiced up' by a couple. Paulo relayed a similar story to Jacob:

- Pani: If you can sort've describe some of the things that are good about it [casual sex]?
Paulo: Well I guess it's someone different, okay so that's one, so that's always enjoyable.
Pani: Hmm, why is that enjoyable?
Paulo: Well, I mean, I guess you know, you can come back to repetition become, can become quite boring and stale, (Pani: hmm) you get the same thing every day, of course even if it was your favorite thing you can't have it every day. I mean, you get sick of it (Pani: hmm). So I guess that [it's] the new experience that it [casual sex] offers. And that's why sex starts to evolve in relationships because that excitement tends to fade (Pani: hmm). You know, you've seen them naked all the times before, and (Pani: hmm) you know, you know you become quite blahdy, you know quite blasé around each other (Pani: hmm) whereas the most exciting thing about it um one-night stands, (Pani: hmm) it's just something different, (Pani: hmmm) the stimulations you know, a lot higher (Aged 30).

Like Jacob and Paulo, other men also drew on an everyday discourse of 'variety is the spice of life' (Bell & Hartmann, 2007) to construct casual sex as always ultimately 'good' because it offers something new, novel and different. The 'thrill' of new (casual) sex was depicted as so powerful that even if the *sexual* part of the encounter was described as disappointing or negative, the notion that it was another or *new* (sexual) experience was enough to render the sexual encounter as positive for both men and women. Some participants directly linked the *pleasurable* aspect of casual sex to the excitement offered by having sex with a new partner. For example, towards the end of one interview, Sadie was asked to evaluate her casual sex experiences in terms of pleasure:

- Sadie: Most were pleasurable. (Pani: yeah) ah I think it was the excitement of the first time, you know, of the first time there’s always the special excitement. It’s not always the best time (Pani: hmmm) but it’s got its special-
- Pani: Best time, in terms of what do you mean?
- Sadie: In terms of what you can actually get of it in sexual terms. Like I don’t remember having an orgasm each time I had sex, but I remember the sense of freedom and the sense of no obligation and the sense of, ah not being tagged on for who I was by other people (Aged 38).

Sadie talks about the pleasures of casual sex in terms of things beyond ‘the sex’ (“special excitement”, “no obligation”). Pleasure in casual sex is often conflated with orgasm, reflecting a well-established discourse of orgasmic imperative within the West (Heath, 1982; Potts, 2000) where orgasm is positioned as the “endpoint and high point” of sex (Jackson & Scott, 2001, p. 104), the “peak” of sexual experience (Opperman, Braun, Clarke, & Rogers, 2013). Previous research has identified an asymmetry of orgasmic experience in casual sex for women (Armstrong et al., 2010; Heldman & Wade, 2010), but other aspects of casual sex that are “nonphysical and resulted from attention, affection and, intimacy” (Currier 2013, p. 718) are also starting to be identified as pleasurable. Sadie’s account goes beyond these to tie the pleasurable aspects of casual sex to a “freedom” that is rarely mentioned in casual sex research. Committed relationships seemingly impose limits on one’s behavior, particularly when it comes to sexual contact, and this is something that casual sex is liberated from.

Another component of this theme was the excitement offered by “flirting” or the *promise* of sex, rather than the physical aspects of sex, as *key* to the ‘thrill’ of casual sex:

- Pani: If someone is willing to spend time with you in that way, why is that good?
- Rick: (Overlapping) well I mean, o-o-obviously like you’re getting laid, sex is good and it’s healthy, I think and...the only reason I think of that is that half the time the physical act of actually getting laid, the sex isn’t actually (laughing) isn’t always that good (Pani: right right), and the build up to it is the thing that I enjoy you know, the flirting...it’s the talking about it without talking about it thing, where you hint to each other that you’re gonna go home and have sex (Pani: okay)...that’s often more stimulating than the sex itself (Aged 21).

Although sexuality encompasses an array of acts, feelings and interactions, casual sex research has typically focused on physical or coital casual sexual practices. In the interviews, a distinction was often made by the participants between the pleasures ‘leading up’ to casual sex and the pleasure of the ‘sex act’ of casual sex. The stimulation, rush and excitement was often relayed as part of the *prelude* to casual sex rather than the

‘actual’ event of casual sex. The sexual exchange of casual sex was typically portrayed as disappointing (more so by women, but also by men). There was a contradictory way within which casual sex was discussed: it was about ‘the sex’; but the sex was sometimes depicted as not pleasurable or as inadequate, with the pleasures of casual sex tied to things *beyond* the sex. Casual sex was portrayed as more ‘exciting’ than relationship sex; but as ultimately less sexually pleasurable, although unbound by sexual boredom. So, paradoxically, although casual sex was depicted as particularly exciting and thrilling, these positive aspects were not connected to the (physical) pleasure of other sexual acts or experience of orgasm. The pleasure of casual sex was typically in relation to all the things *surrounding* the physical sex (new partner, context) rather than the experience and the outcome of sex acts. Orgasm was not constituted as the high point of casual sex (Jackson & Scott, 2001), but the sex was also deemed deficient because of this (Opperman et al., 2013). This contradictory positioning of pleasure is an aspect of casual sex experience that has rarely been discussed and requires further examination.

Alongside the thrill and carefree elements, the pleasures of casual sex were sometimes described in terms of some form of “transgression”:

Pani: What were some of the feelings involved that first time you had sex?

Liam: For me it was exciting that this was a friend and it’s maybe something that I shouldn’t have been doing (Aged, 24).

Pani: So what was good about the sex?

Corina: What was good about it is that um there was trans- transgression (Pani: hmhhh) because he started touching me in a public place which is something that I had never done before (Pani: hmhhh) touching my sexual parts (Pani: hmhhh), so this part was very exciting (Aged 46).

These two accounts illustrate the varieties of transgressions that participants talked about in relation to casual sex. Liam invokes transgression in terms of crossing a ‘no sex with friends’ boundary and Corina relayed sexual touching in a public place. These transgressions were set up to convey what was enjoyable and exciting about the ‘casual sex.’ They were related to other factors such as the forbidden character of a given sexual relationship or the stimulation leading to casual sex.

As in Liam’s extract above, transgressions were not only positioned as “exciting” but also as “naughty”:

- Zoe: We were in a park and we were like having to kind of, you know run and hide behind a tree ‘cause we didn’t know if we’d get busted. So it was quite exciting I guess, ‘cause it was that degree of naughtiness on many levels. (Pani: hmmm) The naughtiness and kind of an intensity really.
- Pani: Yep um so yeah what did you enjoy about it?
- Zoe: Hmm um I think the other thing is that we were both in quite a foreign context and so we were both, it was kind of more like, often I when I have sex with someone it’s been in their bed or in mine (Pani: hmmm) and that was very much a neutral kind of thing which also kind of added excitement of not really knowing where we were or what was going on (PW14, 29).
- Amar: So literally in the parking lot of the bar we had sex in the minivan (Pani: hmmm) and you know it was fun, ah I had a good time, it was exciting...very spontaneous, probably very naughty, but I think a lot of my um ideas of what’s fun in sex is being somewhat deviant or naughty perhaps (Pani: hmmm) and this was sort fit the bill (Aged 35).

Naughtiness, potential deviance, and spontaneity are relayed above as part of pleasurable and exciting casual sex. Such aspects construct this sex as beyond the boundaries of normative behavior (i.e., transgressive), but also liberatory because of that, as though society’s (moral) standards around sex impede the enjoyment of sex and breaking free of these can be delicious (as long as it is without punishment). Traditionally, the notion of deviant sex has conjured up a particularly ‘abnormal’ or pathological version of heterosex, often historically associated with non-heterosexual sex, sadomasochism and promiscuity (e.g., Rubin, 1984). Recent trends in the ‘sexualisation’ of culture (e.g., Attwood, 2006; Attwood, 2009; McNair, 1996) have meant that these supposedly ‘deviant’ forms of sexual relating are not only becoming increasingly mainstreamed, but inhabit positive points of reference and are positioned as practices individuals *should* be engaging in. In Amar’s account, the term ‘deviant’ is used positively to describe an unexpected and risqué casual sex encounter, which is positioned as not only fun, but desirable. In the interview, Amar described receiving fellatio from, and engaging in penis-vagina intercourse with, this woman (i.e., common heterosexual practices). Thus the ‘naughtiness’ of this particular encounter was not necessarily in the transgressive ‘acts’ that took place, but in the spontaneity and the setting (although sex in a car is not unheard of). It was the *context* rather than the sexual practices that were depicted as titillating. Standard sexual practices, ones that may be deemed ‘boring’ in an on-going sexual relationship, became exciting in (spontaneous) one-off casual sex, because of the newness of the partner as well as the context or setting – working to construct casual sex as more exciting than on-going (relationship) sex.

Sex is typically governed by a coital and orgasmic imperative (Heath, 1982; McPhillips, Braun, & Gavey, 2001; Nicolson, 1993; Potts, 2000) and deemed a private/indoor activity (e.g., Jackson & Scott, 2004). In many of the narratives, a somewhat unusual or outdoor setting for sex with a new sexual partner was relayed as part of the thrill of casual sex. Although casual sex was depicted as particularly exciting and thrilling – these positive aspects were not connected to the (physical) pleasure of coitus or the experience of orgasm. Indeed the pleasure of casual sex was typically relayed in relation to all the things *surrounding* casual sex (new partner, context) rather than the experience and the outcome of sex acts. Another way in which positive aspects of casual sex were talked about was in relation to ‘ego boost.’

Casual Sex as Ego Boost

A boost in self-esteem or self-image was often relayed as one of the positive aspects of casual sex and invoked quite differently depending on gender. For men it was an externalized confirmation of their sexual prowess and in reporting their sexual ‘success’ to other men, whilst for women it was an internalized confirmation of their desirability to men who had selected them for casual sex. For example, in the following extract, Amar was describing the feelings involved with one-off sexual encounters he had experienced during university:

- Amar: Um you know, ah I would say that I was entirely emotionally detached (Pani: hmmm) in every sexual encounter, or most sexual encounters at this time...it was just getting laid...a physical orgasm and really nothing much more.
Pani: And um alongside that, were there any sorts of um feelings of excitement or-
Amar: Yeah yeah sure, obviously exciting, um having fun, um having sex. Um um I’m sure stimulating my ego once again because I’m going to go talk to my friends about this afterwards (Pani: laughs) (Aged 38).

Amar initially provides a dominant Western cultural narrative of casual sex being about sexual gratification and as emotionally detached or devoid (Farvid & Braun, 2013), but further questioning has him interject to talk of the fun/excitement *as well as* the stimulation of his ego. This ‘ego boost’ provided by casual sex is depicted as externally located for him, including discussions with his friends. Men’s accounts of relaying their casual sex conquests to other men exemplified moments of homosociality in relation to casual sex (see also Kalish & Kimmel, 2011) where

men’s sexual relations with women are shaped by heterosexual male bonding practices that seek to give men status among other men (Flood, 2008). Furthermore, for men, positive identity functions were depicted more in terms of the *active* pursuit of casual sex and its ‘conquest’:

- Pani: Um can you think of a one-off sexual experience that kind’ve sticks out in your mind?
Paulo: Oh I I, the most memorable ones [casual sex experiences] come from weird situations like overseas or something different, (Pani: hmmm) or a conquest as opposed to, you don’t really remember the sexual act (Pani: hmmm), and that’s...I guess that’s not part of the story really is it? I mean you probably do at the time but I couldn’t remember now what it was like. But, when I was in America, after university they have this like big great thing in town and I scored this like cheerleader from Alabama University or something. That that was I guess a good one because it was unique and different and a bit of a story, (Pani: hmmm) that’s what made it exciting (Aged 30).

In this account, like those of other men and women above, Paulo underplays the sex part of casual sex, to bolster other aspects (conquest, “the story”) as the things that render casual sex exciting (and pleasurable). Paulo later went on to describe how this particular one-off encounter was actually quite unfulfilling, in physical, sexual terms. However, his overall evaluation of the experiences was positive based on the conquest and *story* about the novelty of the woman he had “scored” (see also Holland, Ramazanoğlu, Sharpe, & Thomson, 1994). Obtaining casual sex, particularly in unusual settings or with foreign/exotic women is a testament to the male conquest of women, sexually, rather than about the sexual exchange per se. Conquest becomes the goal, or it is remembered as such, rather than the enjoyment of the sexual encounter or the pursuit of sexual pleasure (Grello et al., 2006; Paul & Hayes, 2002).

Previous casual sex research in Australia has only identified ego boost in relation to men’s talk (Rosenthal et al., 1998), but in this project women also invoked ego boost, although much less frequently and quite differently to men. For women, ego boost was discussed in terms of an *internal* sense of satisfaction or boost in *self-esteem*:

- Pani: Hmm what were some of the things that were going through your mind, when you guys were at the party, or before the sex sort of happened?
Corina: There was a bit of a...it was a very big ego thing because he is very famous (Pani: hmm) so therefore there was very much, I have got the guy, I’m the girl tonight, I’m the one! (Pani: hmm) You know, very much ego, (Pani: hmm) all about the ego (Aged 46).

Corina’s reiteration of ego is positioned as reflecting back on herself and as making her feel good about herself, privately, rather than something she boasted about to others. The gendered deployment of ego constructed an internally focused (and *passive*) subject position for women (the man ‘chose’ her); and an externally focused (and *active*) subject position for men (the men ‘sought’ casual sex, were successful in garnering casual sex, and later told stories about such encounters).

‘Ego boost’ was also talked about in relation to attraction. In the next extract, Zoe subtly invokes ‘ego boost’ in relation to a one-off sexual encounter with an acquaintance that she knew through a mutual group of friends:

- Pani: Hmmm okay, um so in that um instance, what were some of the feelings involved for you?
Zoe: Um I (pause) I mean mainly it was just really good fun. (Pani: hmmm) Um I think there was a little bit um like he was really good looking and really kind of popular and stuff and so to begin with, I think there was a little bit of fuck how does he come home with me? (Pani: laughs) Like how did this come about? Like um a little bit of kind of out of my league kind of thought I think
Pani: So you were quite happy about that, that he you know, he ended up there?
Zoe: Yeah yeah totally, um I think, um but there were a few like sort of why has he ended up with me kind of questions...just a little bit of oh my God! (Aged 29).

Casual sex with an attractive and desirable man is portrayed as having positive (internal) identity functions for Zoe, who relays disbelief in having attracted this man for casual sex. Her position is very much constructed as passive within the account; as though the man just “ended up” at her place, without her active involvement procuring such an outcome to the evening. This extract resonates with accounts of women going along with casual sex, or displaying a more passive and traditionally feminine role within casual sex initiation and negotiation (Beres & Farvid, 2010).

These constructions enable men to bolster their egos by their own actions, whereas women’s egos were bolstered by the actions of others (men); supporting sociocultural narratives around casual sex where men are depicted as the ones who approach women in the hope of attaining casual sex and women prepare their bodies to look sexually attractive with the goal of attracting the attention of men (see Farvid & Braun, 2014). They are also an articulation of a gendered power imbalance reported in heterosexual casual sex – where men are positioned as more agentic, assertive and powerful than women (Armstrong et al., 2010; Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009; Moran & Lee, 2012, 2014a).

In summary, multiple discourses of casual sex were available through which to report positive meanings of casual sex, even if it was not depicted as always physically sexually pleasurable. This is in contrast to social science (See Farvid, 2011) and sociocultural accounts (Farvid & Braun, 2013, 2014) where ‘sex’ and ‘sexual pleasure’ are often portrayed as the most attractive aspects of casual sex (Regan & Dreyer, 1999) and the reason people may engage in casual sex (Weaver & Herold, 2000). In the personal narratives of these individuals, even if casual sex was ‘sought’ for the sake of sexual gratification, the pleasures of casual sex, as explored in the account above, was not always associated with the ‘sex act’ of casual sex. These accounts extend our understandings of how individuals who have casual sex construct and relay pleasurable aspects of casual sex, challenging commonsense understandings of its practice. Alongside talk of the positive aspects of casual sex, the practice was also talked about in negative terms and as *tricky* and *deficient*. These themes are discussed below.

Casual Sex as Tricky

Talk within this theme positioned casual sex mainly as awkward and uncomfortable and was more evident in men’s accounts:

- Pani: Do you enjoy casual sex?
Gene: Um like one-night stands, no I think they suck. Um I’ve never really had a positive experience with one-night stands. With people that I’m a lot more comfortable with in a sexual sort of situation then yeah casual sex can be good (Pani: hmm) really good.
Pani: Hmm and what are some of the things you don’t like about [casual] sex?
Gene: Um (pause) I guess um, feeling awkward. I hate feeling awkward... I guess um oh I’ve never really had a terrible [casual] sexual experience I mean (Pani: hmmm) but I definitely felt awkward and uncomfortable and the next morning feeling (Pani: hmmm) awkward and uncomfortable (Aged 31).
- Parker: For me personally, it’s [one-night stands] way too much stress (laughs)
Pani: (Laughs) what do you mean?
Parker: You know ‘cause you become more comfortable with someone who you like have sex with several times. The first time’s never very you know, it’s usually a bit more awkward than anything else (Pani: hmmm) not awkward awkward, but...it becomes better if you know someone over a period of time. So with a one-night stand, like I can’t relax and actually enjoy it, like you do with someone you’ve known for longer (Aged 25).

One-night stands or one-off casual sex (particularly with newly-met partners) was often talked about in this way, with the ‘tricky-ness’ depicted in relation to negotiating sexual acts and the awkwardness of the morning after an evening of casual sex (see also Olmstead et al., 2013). Although casual sex in this context was not depicted as terrible – awkwardness, discomfort and unease were often relayed as part of such encounters – portraying the practice as particularly fraught in terms of negative affect. The notion of one-off casual sex as “way too much pressure”, or stressful for men, speaks to the cultural expectation that men embody a “sexpert” (Potts, 2002) persona in sexual encounters. A gendered pressure to *lead* sex was implicated in other men’s talk about uncertainty with casual sex, for example:

- Shawn: Sometimes they’re...just a little bit um (pause) awkward...you don’t necessarily talk much about it and...you’re just sort of feeling your way and um not overly confident and-
- Pani: What about? Not confident about what?
- Shawn: Just whether you’re quite doing the right thing...whether the other person is say happy with [it]. (Pani: hmmm) So y’know like taking their clothes off and you’re sort of feeling your way and you’re not, y’know you’re just not quite [sure] shall I do this or shall I do that (Aged 44).

Here, awkwardness is linked to a lack of confidence about ‘getting sex right’ when it comes to the progression of casual sex and gauging a woman’s comfort, desire and pleasure in relation to erotic practices. Shawn articulates a contradictory position in this account: he’s the agent but unsure about leading the way – constructing casual sex as inherently tricky for him. The cultural expectation that men *lead* sexual activities during casual sex (Moran & Lee, 2014b), ironically produced accounts of vulnerability, awkwardness and a hesitant subject position for men within the interviews (Epstein et al., 2009). Men portrayed themselves as anything but culturally expected ‘sexperts’ and relayed a tenuous position about their sexual technique and performance (Kalish & Kimmel, 2011). In this extract, casual sex is also depicted as non-communicative, where on-the-spot negotiations of sexual practices are unlikely to occur with comfort (Braun, 2013) and sexual progression is expected to occur spontaneously and naturally, without any discussion (Farvid & Braun, 2006), albeit uncomfortably.

Casual Sex as Deficient

Casual sex was also often described as disappointing and unfulfilling. Talk of disappointment tended to relate to the quality of the physical

activity where casual sex was sexually disappointing. As in previous research from the US (Littleton et al., 2009; Paul et al., 2000) this was more typical of women’s accounts:

- Pani: In terms of...your experience with the African American (Sadie: guy) yeah what was that like?
Sadie: It was just very disappointing (laughs), he just had a big penis, but that’s it! And he was a big baby basically (Pani: [laughs] right), and ah um I didn’t have anything to talk to him about he wasn’t you know, my type
Pani: That wasn’t um very pleasurable?
Sadie: No no, it was just another whatever [makes sounds with mouth: ppfft] (Pani: hmmm) whatever, next (laughs) (Aged 38).

Many of the women talked about disappointing casual sex in a similarly blasé manner – it was not a highly distressing occurrence; rather something to move on from that can easily be forgotten about. Casual sex was supposedly *about* the sex, but if the quality of the sex was poor, this was not depicted as a big dilemma because one can easily have casual sex with another partner. Although research indicates that some women report negative affect following casual sex (Fisher, Worth, Garcia, & Meredith, 2011), Armstrong and colleagues (2010) have noted that experiences of bad casual sex can be isolated and unimportant events that do not lead to negative long-term outcomes. The latter is largely what we encountered in our data. The expectations of sexual quality in a casual sexual context were often much lower than those expected in committed relationships (Tunariu & Reavey, 2007).

Similarly, in a joint interview with her close friend Nina, Dora described a casual sex encounter with a man she had met recently:

- Pani: So what was going through your mind when you guys were having sex? What were you thinking about?
Dora: I was thinking this is, this is [a] one-night stand! (laughs)
Nina: (laughs)
Pani: Yep
Dora: Okay yeah and this is not really good (laughs)
Pani: And so what was not good about it...was the sex pleasurable at all or good?
Dora: Ummm no
Pani: And how come?
Dora: It was three minutes and he he he didn’t do any foreplay so (Pani: right) yeah not do none but just wasn’t enough
Pani: Would you do it again? (laughs)
Dora: No! (Laughs) well like the one-night stand thing, no (Pani: No). That was enough, that was good enough (laughing) for my life (Dora: Aged 21; Nina: Aged 20).

Casual sex, in this extract, is represented as inadequate and *sexually* disappointing. Three minutes of (presumably) penis-vagina-intercourse with little foreplay is depicted as inadequate, according to Dora, to which Nina displayed agreement. This negative encounter is subtly denoted as a ‘learning curve’ for Dora and a deterrent to future one-night stands. Dora’s position within this account is one of passivity. This instance of unpleasant and unpleasurable casual sex is depicted as something that happened *to* her, which she endured to the end. This passivity, a position of traditional femininity within sex (Gavey & McPhillips, 1999; Holland, Ramazanoğlu, Sharpe, & Thomson, 1998), is something that continues to be documented in casual sex research, and has very negative implications when it comes to women’s (sexual) health (Moran & Lee, 2014b) as well as gendered power relations within heterosex (Gavey, 2005).

Describing a more passive role within casual sex was the case in some women’s narratives, whereas other women expressed a more assertive and agentic subject position. This often reflected the amount of sexual experience women reported, as well as how sexually knowledgeable and confident in their sexual preferences they positioned themselves (see also Farvid, 2010, 2014). The more sexually experienced, the more sexually assertive the woman reported being.

Another aspect of casual sex as deficient was specifically in relation to one-night stands. One-night stand sex with a stranger – one form of casual sex – was explicitly depicted by one participant as not at all pleasurable. In the following extract the negative evaluation of one-off casual sex was heavily tied to the lack of familiarly or emotional connection with the sexual partner (along with intoxication and awkwardness):

- Pani: With one night stands generally, the sex has been, how would you rate [it]?
- Whina: One night stands? With people I didn’t know, below average.
- Pani: Hmm what made it below average?
- Whina: Drunken, alcohol, um not knowing them, awkward, not knowing their body... um like they (outbreath) probably don’t put y’know they don’t care as much y’know, so its there’s no emotion, it’s kind of mechanical
- Pani: What’s wrong with that?
- Whina: I can’t get, I can’t get off on that. I need, I mean even though I would have sex with lots of different people, normally it was because I knew them, y’know? Like that was normally it, so you just got a connection like on a on a different level, other than the complete stranger. Like there’s just nothing there (Aged 23).

Women’s interest in sex has conventionally been situated as the emotional or romantic side of sex (Duncombe & Marsden, 1993; Roberts, Kippax, Waldby, & Crawford, 1995; Rosenthal et al., 1998). For Whina, mechanical sex (sex ‘without’ emotions), with a stranger, is depicted as deficient (and empty) when it comes to stimulating her *sexually* (“I can’t get off on that”) and emotionally. Men’s lack of “care” or effort in one-off casual sex was something that was reported in a few of the women’s accounts. Some men confirmed such a claim; displaying themselves as more “selfish” in one-off casual sex (e.g., Rick, Nicoli), whereas others relayed concerns about “giving a good performance” (e.g., Tristan, Deon).

Casual sex was described as an *unfulfilling* experience, by both men and women. For example, Amar talked about sex during his university years as involving a “pack mentality” where he and his friends went out in search of hook-ups, but that the experiences were not very positive:

Amar: They weren’t positive experiences in the sense that um (pause) they were just sex. I mean I was just out looking for a shag that night and you know, at some point I guess you become adept enough at picking out where that shag might come...it was just um (pause) unfulfilling. I know that sounds very cliché as well but you know, there was nothing very fulfilling about these situations and these scenarios, they were just sort of [what happened on] Friday night and you know...nothing beyond that really (Aged 38).

The accounts of Amar and Whina construct casual sex in ambivalent terms and as particularly empty, only about sex, and meaningless because of that. Amar also hints at a contextual sexual script that guided his casual sex (“just...Friday night”) – speaking to a hook-up culture that may have been evident in the US when he was at university in the late 1980s. Both accounts bolster the notion that sex is better when it means something more than “just sex” (Farvid & Braun, 2013). Casual sex was often constructed as lacking through not providing a *whole* (sexual or erotic) experience:

Jacob: I mean it’s it’s nice to have sex with someone you have a genuine depth of feeling about...I mean it’s, in some ways it’s actually nice to even just spend close comfortable time with someone you really care about, than it is to have sex with someone you don’t (Pani: hmmm) you know? I mean I think I don’t want to be really crass but I think I a lot of ways sex fulfils a kind of function almost in the same way that eating or going to the toilet does, (Pani: hmmm) on a biological level. But it’s (pause) I mean it’s definitely a vastly different experience when you care about the person that you’re with (Pani: hmmm) that’s for certain.

Pani: Umm like in what way?

Jacob: Umm I think it’s just (pause) man I think it’s more umm (pause) it feels like more of a...maybe more of a complete experience (Aged 33).

Initially, Jacob draws on a well-established “male sex drive discourse” (Hollway, 1989), typical of traditional constructions of male sexuality, to construct sex *alone* as a biological need of the body. He then disrupts this gendered discourse by bringing in emotionality as important during sex (a traditionally feminized discourse of sex), to depict sex without emotions as perfunctory and lacking (Paul & Hayes, 2002). A binary is set up between casual sex (which does not include a ‘depth’ of feeling) and other forms of sex that *may* include this emotional bond: these two are separate and divergent forms of heterosex. Although casual sex may be a thrill (as explored above), it always necessarily falls short in comparison to types of sex that include an emotional intimacy or bond. Sexual relationships that include emotional intimacy were privileged over casual sex and the anxieties associated with casual sex positioned it as much less of a desirable (long-term) option.

The themes identified above co-occurred in accounts and constructed casual sex as inferior to relationship sex. Accounts of casual sex as exciting and deficient often simultaneously occurred in narratives where participants were asked to evaluate their preferences between casual sex and relationship sex. Almost all participants talked about the positive/negative aspects of casual sex and relationship sex, but ultimately claimed a preference for relationship sex as more pleasurable, more meaningful and better than casual sex. For example, in the following extract I had just asked Will to evaluate whether there was a difference between sex in relationships and casual sex:

Will: Well initially I think it [relationship sex] all starts off as sort of [in] that honeymoon phase, I mean y’know, that great sex in the beginning because it’s unknown (Pani: hmm yep). But that usually dies off depending on your partner, and your own knowledge, and experiences and so forth, it can die off quite rapidly (Pani: hmmm). Um, but then for me, in long-term relationships that I’ve had, it comes back again through just being open and being honest and um expressing your desires and your fantasies with your partner. Um and it can come back, (Pani: hmmm) and it can ultimately lead to, from my experience, the intensely pleasurable sex, much more so than any casual sex that I’ve had. Um yeah, whereas the casual sex, as I said before, it can be extremely pleasurable, but not at the same level. It’s that unknown sort of adventure excitement, ah risk taking sort of pleasure. Breaking the rules kind of pleasure (pause). Um y’know ooh somebody might catch us, that’ll be great y’know kind of pleasure. (Pani: hmmm) Um that sort of yeah, that thrill (Aged 30).

This extract demonstrates the different components of the casual sex as thrill (e.g., new, novel, exciting, transgression) working in conjunction to position casual sex as *extremely* pleasurable (but not as pleasurable as relationship sex). Will’s account maneuvers back and forth between

descriptions of relationship sex as exciting at first, but generally known to eventually lose excitement (e.g., Tunariu & Reavey, 2007). He positions his experience of relationship sex differently to this supposed norm and *his* experience of relationship sex as more pleasurable than any casual sex he has ever had. The superiority of relationship sex is located in honesty and communication (“expressing your desires and your fantasies”), which are by default constructed as missing in casual sex. All participants relayed similar narratives, positioning emotional intimacy as vital for a complete sexual experience – and depicting casual sex as lacking in that arena. This was not surprising given that previous research has identified a hierarchy of respectability or desirability when it comes to (casual) sexual relationships in popular culture discourse (Farvid & Braun, 2013). At the pinnacle of this hierarchy (the most ideal) was monogamous relationships with ‘The One,’ followed by monogamous relationships, then dating in search of ‘The One,’ long-term casual sex relationships, one-night stands, and finally, at the bottom, were booty calls. The authors stated that: “Notably, in this hierarchy of sex/relationships, the more emotionally involved or committed a sexual relationship, the higher its status” (Farvid & Braun, 2013, p. 370). Hence, the ‘emotional’ involvement, the involvement beyond sex, increased the status and meaning of a sexual relationship. This is an assertion that was supported in the talk of men and women interviewed. Sex that involves an emotional connection was always depicted as ultimately more pleasurable and desirable.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have sought to unravel the multifaceted experiential dimensions of heterosexual casual sex, to analytically ‘complicate’ the understanding associated with the practice. To do so, we drew attention to the complex, contradictory, and at times unexpected ways a diverse range of men and women spoke about their casual sex experiences. In this talk, traditional notions of male sexuality, female sexuality, heterosexuality and sexual pleasure were evoked but also unsettled. As noted in recent research, men did not always display fondness for casual sex (Epstein et al., 2009; Olmstead et al., 2013) and women reported engaging casual sex for sex’s sake rather than searching for emotional connection or a relationship (Farvid, 2014). The pleasures associated with casual sex were quite varied and identified as things beyond the

physical components of sex. Such pleasures involved great psychological, experiential and affective complexity when relayed in the interview setting. However, no matter how fun, free or exciting the participants depicted casual sex, they all reported an overall preference for sex in relationships, and in the long-term. This was not surprising, given that our participants had not chosen casual sex as a lifestyle, and the current cultural emphasis on intimacy, love and romance *combined* with (satisfying) sex in a (committed) relationship as the pinnacle of sexual relating (Finn, 2012; Rosenbury & Rothman, 2010). None of the participants talked about an overlapping of their casual sex experiences with their committed relationships and this would make interesting avenue for future research. Our work supports other emerging research (Fielder et al., 2013) arguing that casual sex is unlikely to be replacing monogamy or conventional relational practices within heterosexuality. For that to happen, individuals would need to do more than just ‘dabble’ in casual sex, possibly requiring them to actively choose a casual sexual lifestyle over conventional relationships or monogamy (Moran & Lee, 2012).

As with most qualitative research, we do not claim these accounts to be representative of a larger New Zealand population. Our critical approach to thematic analysis, couched within a social constructionist perspective, sought to highlight the popular, readily available, and alternative discursive resources that participants use when talking about heterosexual casual sex. Drawing on certain discourses of heterosexuality, over others, to talk about casual sex tells us a great deal about the dominant (and alternative) constructions of such a practice. Furthermore, it points to various discourses that enable or limit particular ways of being, acting or remembering for men and women who engage in casual sex. We hope that this work has highlighted the importance of the social and cultural context (including discourses) when it comes to shaping men’s and women’s accounts (and experiences) of heterosexual casual sex. Based on these research outcomes we would argue against approaches that do not consider the importance of any sociocultural context (and larger narratives of sexuality) for shaping the experience of those who engage in casual sex.

In this study, a creative sampling approach supported by in-depth questioning allowed space to access some novel and rarely-voiced experiences associated with heterosexual casual sex. Additional research is needed to further examine the intricacies of men’s and women’s experiences of casual sex, particularly when it comes to the diverse pleasures articulated here. In addition, the casual sex experiences of older

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adults, those living in non-Western regions, those within the West but outside North America, and those who have deliberately *chosen* casual sex as a lifestyle over committed-sex or monogamy require further examination. Lastly, the social construction of emotional *intimacy* within sexual relations needs further examination – not only to better understand heterosexual casual sex, but to better understand the constitution of contemporary heterosexuality at large.

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