

**Abstract** Drawing on Foucault's work on sexuality and ethics we explore young women's accounts of heterosexual casual sex experiences in Canada and New Zealand. We focus on what Foucault calls '*rappport à soi*' (the relationship one has with one's self) to explore reports of implied ethical (and less than ethical) practices of casual sex. To do this we conducted a theoretical thematic analysis of the women's accounts to identify accounts of '*care for the self*', '*self-reflection*', and '*care for the other*'. In our analysis we draw on previous feminist theorizing on heterosexuality to demonstrate how gendered heteronormative discourses are implicated in, and at times impede, an 'ethics of casual sex'. We argue that women's expressions of sexual ethics are particularly constrained considering gendered power relations as they relate to heteronormative sexual practices. We suggest that the cultivation of ethical sexual subjectivities offer radical potential for the subversion of dominant heterosexual discourses.

**Keywords** female sexuality, rape prevention, sexuality education, sexual negotiation

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## Sexual Ethics and Young Women's Accounts of Heterosexual Casual Sex

Recently, Foucault's work on ethics and sexuality has been used to discuss the possibilities for exploring and cultivating an 'ethical erotics' (Carmody, 2003, 2005, 2009). Such a focus not only allows space for the multiplicity and fluidity of sexual relations, but can also offer great possibilities for the primary prevention of sexual violence. Foucault's articulation of ethics has been used by Carmody (2005) to explore the sexual stories of adults of a variety of ages and sexual orientations and she found evidence that many exhibited sexual ethics within their sexual relationships, including their casual sex experiences. In addition, her latest work

(Carmody, 2009) provides a number of examples where young people have successfully learnt and put into practice an ethical approach in their casual and ongoing relationships. In this article we follow and extend such a contention with our analysis of young women's casual sex experiences. We focus on what Foucault calls *rapport à soi* (the relationship one has with one's self) to explore reports of practices of casual sex as they relate to sexual ethics. Our main focus and interest is in showing how dominant gendered discourses of heterosexuality are implicated in and at times impede an ethics of casual sex.

## Foucault and (sexual) ethics

Much of Foucault's work on ethics is part of his later works in *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* and *The History of Sexuality: The Use of Pleasure* (Davidson, 2005). Foucault saw ethics as the component of morality that concerns a person's relationship with the self. In *The History of Sexuality: The Use of Pleasure* Foucault makes a distinction between morality – a set of rules and actions that are 'permitted' in a given society, and ethics – the practice of self-formation (Foucault, 1985). He argues that 'Freedom is the ontological condition of ethics. But ethics is the considered form that freedom takes when it is informed by reflection' (Rabinow, 1997: 284). Furthermore, practices of freedom (or ethics) require a degree of liberation. Foucault recognizes that power plays an important role in the possibilities of a practice of ethics because of constraints of freedom (Rabinow, 1997). Although power relations are negotiated in a dynamic way, it is particularly pertinent to consider the application of ethics to groups whose power, 'freedom' or autonomy have been more constrained by unequal and gendered power relations. Some groups, more than others, are constrained in the practice of ethics, due to, but not dictated by, gender, class and race differentials.

When explaining the practice of ethics Foucault uses the notion of *rapport à soi*, or the care of the self. He defines *rapport à soi* as being the kind of relationship one *ought* to have with oneself – that is how individuals are 'supposed' to constitute themselves as moral subjects of their own actions within any given society (Rabinow, 1997). The relationship that a person has with him or herself requires not only knowledge of the self but 'self-reflection'. This reflection requires that individuals reflect not only on how they feel about a particular act, their desires and pleasures, but also reflect on how dominant cultural representations (or discourses) of sexuality have an impact on their own understanding of sexuality. Alongside such reflections, critiques of dominant constructions of sexuality also indicate a particular reflexive engagement with a person's sexuality that is not only indicative of sexual ethics, but also opens up

space for the subversion of dominant heteronormative discourses of sex. So the 'care for the self' implies ethical behaviour because to care for the self implies complex social relations. In an abuse of power, an individual is imposing his or her appetites or desires onto another, and thus is not acting freely, but is instead a slave to those desires (Rabinow, 1997). Considering that Foucault sees ethics as the practice of freedom, an act of abuse cannot be an act that has also been ethically practiced. To bring Foucault's reasoning into contemporary western heterosexual relations; a man who coerces a woman into participating in sex is acting as a slave to his desires and is therefore lacking in a practice of ethics.

In this article we overlay Foucault's articulation of sexual ethics with a feminist critical analysis of heterosexual practices. For decades feminists have identified heterosexuality as a problematic site for the perpetuation of gendered power relations and in need of serious change (Rich, 1980; Mackinnon, 1989; Richardson, 1996; Jackson, 1999). More recently some feminists have shown, in a more nuanced way, how such differential power relations (within what is considered 'normative' heterosexuality) shape women's experiences negatively, beyond overt forms of sexual violence/rape (West, 2002; Gavey, 2005). In our analysis, we draw on Hollway's (1989) description of heteronormative discourses of sexuality. These include the 'male sexual drive' discourse (which suggests that men have a biologically insatiable desire for sex, are forever in search of sex, and once aroused are seen as *needing* sexual gratification via coitus and orgasm), the 'have/hold' discourse (which positions sex within the context of a monogamous relationship, where women are the subjects of this discourse and are seeking committed relationships through sex) and the 'permissive discourse' (where it becomes possible for both men and women to participate in sex outside of a committed relationship and pursue sexual pleasure, but the version of sex that is upheld is one that is imbedded within the male sex drive discourse). Through these discourses, a restrictive set of subjectivities becomes available to women (and men) with little space for female-centred sexual activity or sexual activity that does not promote phallogentric (male) sexuality (Potts, 2000).

Casual sex in particular is a contested site of gendered relations and those who participate in casual sex are often constructed as irresponsible and reckless. In particular, women's participation in casual sex has been construed as problematic and at times unacceptable. Even in this current 'pro-sex' era (where programmes like *Sex and The City* have somewhat 'mainstreamed' women's participation in casual sex), the prevalence of a 'sexual double standard' (see Crawford and Popp, 2003) means that young women who openly engage in casual sex are often labelled as promiscuous and/or blamed for any associated negative consequences.

In the following analysis we apply Foucault's model of sexual ethics to young women's accounts of heterosexual casual sex. We explore what is represented as appropriate conduct in relation to women's casual sex and how Foucault's understanding of the 'care for the self', 'self-reflection' and 'care for the other' were implicated in the stories we were told.

## Eliciting stories

This article presents the analysis of two data sets collected independently by the authors for two separate and unrelated projects. Both projects focused on an in-depth analysis of young adults' experiences of heterosexual casual sex. One project explored young women's and men's experiences of casual sex and focused on understanding how young adults communicated and interpreted their partners' desire to have sex and how they interpreted consent. Only the interviews with the women were used for the analysis here. This project took place in a small resort community in Canada. In-depth interviews were conducted with 11 women (aged 19–25) in 2005. All but one participant were White, one identified as Black, and all were middle-class. All but one were from English speaking parts of Canada and one woman was from Quebec, the predominantly French province.

The second project, conducted by the second author in New Zealand, explored young heterosexual women's ideas and experiences relating to casual sex. In-depth interviews were conducted with 15 women (aged 19–25) in 2004. Interviews covered a range of topics including definitions of casual sex, the women's experiences of casual sex and societal perceptions of casual sex. Of the 15 participants interviewed, 10 identified as Pākehā New Zealanders,<sup>1</sup> two as Māori, one as Pākehā/Māori, one as Pākehā/Samoan, and one as New Zealand Chinese. Although the participants came from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, most were tertiary educated and middle class.

Interviews from both projects were transcribed using an orthographic style of transcription and analysed using theoretical thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The initial part of this analysis involved multiple readings of all the data, undertaken independently by the authors and the coding of sections related to our theoretical focus (sexual ethics). Subsequent coding, identification of themes and selection of illustrative excerpts, were done jointly. In our analysis, we approach the data from a social constructionist perspective (Burr, 2003). While 'information about the social world is achievable through in depth interviews' (Miller and Glassner, 1997: 99) and through this dialogue we can explore how people create meanings around particular social practices, we understand 'experience' itself as socially and culturally produced. Therefore the women's

accounts are not taken as an indicator of what ‘really’ happened, but as a socially constructed exchange within the interview setting. While we are not denying a material reality within which experiences may have occurred, we are not looking to present these stories as ‘truths’ about such a reality (Yardley, 1997). We are more interested in how aspects of sexual ethics played out in the women’s reported experiences and the broader gendered discourses of heterosexuality that shape these accounts. Although there were many similarities between the two studies, there were also some important differences in the recruitment style and interview focus. These differences did not relate to the broad analytic focus of this article (i.e. sexual ethics), thus we do not carry out a direct comparison of stories from the two countries.

In this article we have done an in-depth analysis of the ways in which sexual ethics played out in women’s stories of heterosexual casual sex and the meanings ascribed to such practices. In particular we approached the data looking at how the women talked about ‘care for the self’, how they reflected on past casual sex experiences, and accounts of ‘caring for the other’. We also noted talk that reflected a lack of care for self or that highlighted constraints on women’s abilities to care for themselves in more positive ways. While our focus is on the ways in which participants’ talk about casual sex expresses elements of self-care and *rapport à soi*, it is not our intention to label any experience, behaviour or persons as inherently ethical or unethical. Rather, we use this analysis to explore the issue of sexual ethics within this specific context to offer insight into some of the ways that women express a form of agency and self-reflection around their sexual desires, pleasures and acts that may disrupt and/or reify traditional heteronormative discourses.

## Defining casual sex

In both projects, we allowed the participants to describe what they understood as ‘casual sex’; and were given similar definitions. A variety of scenarios were considered casual sex, ranging from one-time sexual experiences with someone a woman had met that day, to a long-term sexual arrangement outside of a ‘committed’ relationship, to sex with an ex-boyfriend. In line with previous research (Oliver and Sedikides 1992; Paul et al., 2000; Weaver and Herold, 2000), the main element of casual sex was depicted as its ‘uncommitted’ nature. Sexual practices included mainly penis–vagina intercourse, but coitus was not the only ‘act’ that rendered a sexual encounter as ‘casual sex’, oral sex (for both partners), or other forms of sexual play and touching were also usually defined as casual sex.

## Sexual ethics and women's account of heterosexual casual sex

We begin the analysis with a discussion of the ways that women's talk reflected 'care for the self'. Women expressed self-care in different ways throughout different casual sex contexts. Forms of self-care included 'setting limits', accounts of satisfying their own desires, accounts of knowing 'what they want', and differing forms of 'self-preservation'. We discuss these respectively then turn to accounts of self-reflection and care for the other.

### *Self-care*

According to Foucault, 'care for the self' is the fulcrum of ethical sexual behaviour as it implies 'care for the other' (Rabinow, 1997). Self-care was explicitly evident in some women's reports of 'setting limits' in casual sex. This was either in reports of activities they participated in or enforced (such as condom use), or the contexts in which they were willing to participate in casual sex:

*Rachel:* When it's casual I always, I've always used a condom and I get quite I mean I've said no to guys when they're in my bed. In fact, and I couldn't believe this, because most guys they'll you know . . . try it and you say no, I won't have sex without a condom and then they'll say oh okay, but . . . one guy was like well if we have a condom we're not gonna have sex and I was like fine I can go out and get someone else (laughing) I can guarantee you're gonna have more trouble than I am (laughing) so yeah he just slept in my bed and we didn't do anything. (New Zealand)

*Agnes:* Now I like have this thing where I won't sleep with guys on the first date, just because I don't like the feeling of being used the next day and for me that's a really big thing, and so, but this guy . . . we hooked up one night and then, I wouldn't sleep with him, so the next night, he ended up spending the night and I slept with him and then he never talked to me again. And so now, like even that little theory of mine, is totally like . . . blown out the window. (Canada)

Both Rachel and Agnes talk about setting limits on their casual sex experiences. Rachel's limit setting (situated within discourses of casual sex as 'risky sex') is based around enforcing condom use (and thus engaging in 'safer' casual sex). Her account of *not* giving in to pressures of having sex without a condom demonstrates an assertiveness and sexual confidence that is not typically associated with traditional, feminine (hetero)sexuality. However, her limit-setting can still be seen as a contemporary version of female sexual 'gate-keeping', where such accounts represent women as the enforcers of safer (casual) sex. A few others, like Rachel, reported firmly

refusing sex if a man did not want to use a condom. These accounts were very much situated within the permissive discourse, with condom use often described as a necessary part of *responsible* and ‘safe’ casual sex. However, such depictions still position women as policing men’s ‘risky’ pursuits of casual sex and thus fail to produce an account of casual sex that fully disrupts normative heterosexual discourses, such as the male sex drive discourse.

In the second extract, Agnes reflects on her emotional reaction to some of her other sexual experiences, where being ‘ignored’ after having sex with someone on a first date led to setting certain limits on the context within which she would engage in (casual) sex. Her account is also situated within a traditional heterosexual framework of women as ‘gatekeeper’ of sex, and responsible for managing men’s sexual desires (see O’Sullivan and Byers, 1992; Tolman, 2002; Gavey, 2005). Reports like Agnes’ of setting limits to protect one’s emotional needs in casual sex were often less successful than setting limits to protect health or physical needs. For example, while Agnes reports successfully imposing particular limits on her sexual partners (not engaging in intercourse during the first sexual encounter), this did not have the intended effect. Her account is a good example of how women negotiate competing subject positions within the permissive and have/hold discourses – both of which are embedded in heteronormative practices of sex that have limited capacity for the exercise of power and ‘freedom’ in relation to sexual ethics.

These versions of ‘care for the self’, where women are placing limits on sexual activity, remain embedded in dominant discourses of heterosexuality. While women’s reports of imposing limits can be seen as indicative of ‘care for the self’, and as a useful strategy considering the limited subject positions offered through heteronormative discourses, they offer limited scope for the subversions of such discourses. Some women were able to open up space for subversion by exercising other versions of self-care. This was evident in discussions with some women about pleasure and casual sex:

*Karen:* I don’t mind like, like helping myself get off when I’m having sex cause some guys are good at it, some guys know how to do it and you don’t have to worry about it, but some guys are totally clueless, especially, maybe not so experienced guys and so I don’t have an issue at all with for me it’s for me and I know that I don’t have a problem with [saying] I want to do this I want to do that. (Canada)

In this account, Karen presents herself as knowledgeable about what she finds pleasurable in sex and said she will not hesitate to pleasure herself if she is not getting what she wants from a sexual encounter (although she does not elaborate on what this pleasure is). She labels some

(inexperienced) men as naïve when it comes to providing this pleasure and herself as the agent in such situations where she describes herself as comfortable enough to ask for what she ‘wants’. In a heteronormative context that privileges men’s pleasure it is perhaps not surprising to hear women talk about achieving pleasure as a deliberate act on their (and sometimes their partner’s) part. By taking care of her own pleasure, Karen begins to disrupt heteronormative assumptions about sex and takes up an agentic sexual subject position.

Women’s stories that reflected this type of ‘care for the self’, where they expressed a sense of control over the casual sex situation, were often presented as mutually desired sexual experiences or experiences where the women were seeking casual sex. These women often relayed quite deliberate accounts of pursuing casual sex. Through seeking casual sex in this way the women challenged traditional versions of heterosexuality that depict women as passive recipients of men’s sexual desires. However, in these accounts women still largely drew on a ‘drive’ discourse to account for their desire for casual sex. While such accounts both disrupt and reinforce particular forms of normative heterosexuality, they still offer up disruptions and fissures to traditional constructions of (passive) female sexuality and depict a more agentic sexuality for women who engage in casual sex.

In contrast, some women depicted casual sex as sex that ‘just happened’, with neither partner in control nor instigating the sexual exchange. Evident in such accounts was an expression of a lack of control over the women’s casual sex experiences. These women reported methods of ‘care for the self’ that included forms of ‘self-preservation’. Self-preservation strategies, like other strategies, were often situated with gendered discourses of heterosexuality. However, in such accounts women did not necessarily challenge traditional ideals of heterosex, and their talk and management of casual sex were very much situated within such discourses. For example, a sexual double standard (where men who have many sexual partners are positively deemed as ‘studs’; whilst women are negatively deemed as ‘sluts’, see Lees, 1993; Kitzinger, 1995; Jackson and Cram, 2003), was implicated unreflexively within such accounts. This type of self-care was directed at constructing the women’s identity as a ‘good girl’ and not ‘slutty’. For example:

*Karen:* Before I kind of, used my uncertainty of like, ahh, something to make me feel better. Oh I didn’t go in looking for sex, I . . . not had it forced on me but I was like, I don’t know, I felt a little less of a slut if it wasn’t something I really intended on doing, [if] it just happened. (Canada)

Karen’s reflections resonate strongly with the ‘sex just happened’ version of casual sex. Her account is indicative of a sexual double standard within



casual sex (see Farvid, 2006), where an active and desiring female sexuality is positioned negatively. This account of 'self-preservation' can be seen as strategic in the way it is used in day-to-day interactions for managing Karen's identity as a 'good girl' (and not a slut) and allowing her to present a more 'decent' story of casual sex. Her account is situated within more traditional discourses of 'passive' feminine sexuality (see Gavey and McPhillips, 1999; Gavey, 2005).

Another way a self-preservation version of self-care was expressed was through talk of alcohol consumption. Alcohol was sometimes presented as being used specifically to lower inhibitions and to facilitate the instigation of casual sex:

*Agnes:* And we got really drunk 'cause we were drinking wine and, nothing had happened at all and then after supper we were sitting on the floor talking and then I like confessed to him how long I like had a crush on him for. And then we just started kissing and like making out and that. And that progressed really really fast like. But I don't know if I would have started anything if I would [have] said anything if I wasn't drunk. (Canada)

The depiction of the use of alcohol to facilitate casual sex has been repeatedly cited within casual sex research (see Gold et al., 1992; Herold and Mewhinney, 1993; Desiderato and Crawford, 1995; Paul et al., 2000) and this is a common cultural construction of why young people may engage in casual sex. By depicting alcohol in such a way, Agnes and other women who told similar stories of casual sex, subtly exonerated themselves from the 'responsibility' of having had casual sex, and placed it on 'being drunk'. This can be viewed as a form of self-preservation where women strategically work to protect themselves from any potential negative labelling associated with women's participation in casual sex (based on a sexual double standard; see also Levinson et al., 1995). Using alcohol as the reason for engaging in casual sex can function to make women's casual sex more acceptable. This highlights women's negotiation of casual sex in a cultural context where they are expected to be sexually 'liberated' (and 'technically' able to engage in casual sex *openly*) based on the permissive discourse (see Hollway, 1989) but not be *too* sexual or have too many sexual partners. While this strategy may be useful for women in positioning themselves in contrast to a 'slut', it reinforces the sexual double standard and traditional constructions of masculine and feminine sexuality. In addition, such self-preservation strategies may have other health-related concerns, such as those stemming from excessive alcohol consumption.

Women who adopted a self-preservation approach to 'care for the self' often spoke less positively about their casual sex experiences than women who expressed being in more control during casual sex encounters.

Accounts where women talk of changing their behaviour to better care for themselves demonstrate an ethic of care and concern for the self, even if their accounts were heavily situated within and negotiated gendered discourses of heterosexuality.

### *Self-reflection*

Some women we interviewed often implemented self-care strategies as a result of reflecting on their previous casual sex experiences. For example, it was after reflecting on the emotional cost of having sex with someone on a first 'date' that Agnes decided to place limits on when she would have sex with someone for the first time. Some women went beyond a reflection on specific casual sex experiences and reflected on their desire for engaging in casual sex more broadly:

*Anna:* I think every experience you have you sort of grow or develop or have, you know, start forming your opinions about things like now I know that I mean what is the point of having sex? Is it for physical or is it for, you know, for something else? So I start questioning my, my intentions for things (Int: yep) so I think just maturity-wise I think you sort of do grow a bit and you start just are you actually doing things for yourself? Or are you doing things for, you know, because this is what you think you should be doing? (New Zealand)

Anna talks of questioning where her 'desire' for casual sex came from, and if it was physical (which is depicted as 'ideal') or if she engaged in casual sex for 'other' reasons. She questions whether it is something she 'really' wants to do for herself, or something that she feels she *should* be doing. Here Anna demonstrates that 'caring for the self' implies more than attention to immediate physical and/or emotional needs associated with casual sex. Anna's account was unique in questioning the notion that 'sexually liberated' young women *should* now be engaging in (casual) sex.

While 'care for the self' implies an understanding of one's intentions and desires for casual sex including the physical and emotional consequences of sex, in order to produce an ethical sexuality women also must reflect on how such acts are situated within a broader cultural context and informed by heteronormative discourses of sexuality (Carmody, 2005). Many participants in both countries demonstrated this type of self-reflection by questioning the sexual double standard. For example:

*Melissa:* Guys can have sex with however many [girls] they want and they're y'know, they're perceived to be a stud or y'know like a, a great chick magnet or whatever, whereas girls can't do the same, and they just get labelled as like as slut, or y'know like a whore or anything like that so, you must've heard of Christina Aguilera's and 'Lil Kim's song um, 'Can't Hold Us Down?' The lyrics they just talk about this exact

thing, and it is one of my favourite songs because it is um, y'know I think it is quite disgusting how we get, um females get different labels from guys, and I think it's, I think it's very wrong! (New Zealand)

Like Melissa, many of the women problematized the sexual double standard, depicting it as inaccurate and unjust. Unlike the women who gave accounts of 'sex just happened' these women positioned themselves as culturally aware of such double standards, and some unapologetically talked of pursuing casual sex and expressing desire for it, in spite of such a double standard. Such reflections on the sexual double standard represent moments of *rappport à soi*, where the women knowingly and actively problematized such cultural definitions. By questioning the sexual double standard, the women opened up discursive space for the disruption and resistance of such cultural imperatives.

Other women challenged gendered social expectations more broadly. For example, one woman reflected on the role of casual sex in her life and not only challenged gendered assumptions about sexuality, but also challenged broader cultural assumptions about women's priorities in life:

*Cathy:* I guess it's just becoming a bit more acceptable that girls nowadays they've got different priorities. Like relationships aren't always the first priority. Like for me . . . I'm more interested in the way I'm going with my career, so I sort of wanna head that way before I get into a relationship. Whereas in the old days, I think it was sort of get into a relationship then get into a career or not even have a career . . . Like you can get different things from different people. You can get your emotional stuff from your closest friends, the physical stuff obviously from your casual sex. (New Zealand)

Here Cathy is actively reflecting on the life choices she's made. She portrays a romantic relationship as a potential impediment to the pursuit of her career. Her account disrupts the traditional notion of romantic relationships (with men) as the main focus of women's lives (articulated through the have/hold discourse) and rejects the cultural idea that a woman needs a relationship with a man to be complete. Cathy is deliberate in her account of how she gets a variety of perceived needs met, and describes using casual sex to meet her 'physical' needs, while her relational needs are met through relationships with her friends. While other women also reported engaging in casual sex to meet their 'sexual needs', this was often while they were in-between relationships. Many talked of not wanting a relationship – but still wanting to have sex. Cathy's account is fairly unique in that she was one of the few who articulated the role of casual sex in relation to other parts of her life, not limited to her sexual/relational desires.

'Self-reflection' played an important role in women's accounts of casual sex and was integral to the production of a sexual ethic within these accounts. Not all women contemplated the meaning of casual sex in relation to their broader life and career goals as did Cathy, but their contemplation at least allowed for the negotiation of casual sex experiences in ways to better 'care for the self' and negotiate their needs and desires.

### *Care for the other*

The final important part of an ethics of sex is 'care for the other'. This was the sparsest area for demonstrations of an ethics of casual sex within our interview data. There were only a couple of women who talked quite deliberately about caring for the other. For example, Siena, a hepatitis B carrier, talked about the importance of ensuring her long-term casual sex partner wore condoms to protect himself from contracting the virus. Similarly, Julie would disclose her history of genital warts to her partners. While these women were focused on forms of 'care' related to physical health, other women demonstrated 'care for the other' differently. For example, Karen and Stacy reported concerns for their partners' emotional well-being and willingness to engage in casual sex.

*Karen:* I know I wanted to have sex, like that was something that was going to happen for me. But I did ask him because I kinda felt . . . just because I was so forward with it all the time, I just wanted to make sure he was along for the, like was there as well . . . cause yeah, cause a lot of times I probably haven't been with the guy, and it just happened anyways, you just kind of follow along with the progression of things . . . Like I asked him before we had sex, are you sure you're okay with this? And he was like, yeah! Like what the fuck, like why are you asking that question? (Canada)

*Stacy:* Often what I'll do too is I'll just kind of play with the underwear a bit just with the, with the uh . . .

*Int:* With the waistband . . .

*Stacy:* With the waistband. Just kind of like play with it a little bit and put you know just a finger underneath and kind of just play with his stomach and move my hand back up and see how comfortable he is with me playing with his underwear at all. You know? And then maybe move down and kind of touch the side of his thighs a little bit you know, before I kind of go in front.

*Int:* Yeah. And so then you can kind of gauge like his comfort?

*Stacy:* Well cause if, if, if I put his hand, you know my fingertip under his waistband and he kind of like, moves away and or just changes his behaviour, you know, or acts rigid or something or tenses up, you know that's all very obvious when you're in close quarters. (Canada)

In these accounts Karen and Stacy express concern for their partner's willingness to engage in casual sex. After reflecting on some of her experiences of going along with casual sex, Karen reports asking her partner if he wanted to have sex, to ensure that he was ready. Similarly, Stacy talks of a concern for her partner's comfort. These unique accounts demonstrate 'care for the other' in heterosexual casual sex encounters. These two women subtly disrupt the male sexual drive discourse by engaging in this type of checking. This disruption is quite evident in Karen's account of her male partner's shocked response. No other women questioned their partner's desire or readiness for casual sex in this way. Considering the prevalence of the male sexual drive discourse, it is not surprising that there were relatively few accounts of this type of 'care for the other' in the women's casual sex stories. Foucault argued that caring for the self implies a care ethic for the other, through a constant and dynamic process of active self-reflection. However, in our analysis 'care for the self' was not necessarily reflective of 'care for the other'. We argue that gendered power relations and traditional discourse of heterosexuality constrained a more fluid negotiation of care for the other by the women in our studies.

Foucault has argued that certain groups (in particular people who have more limited access to dominant forms of power) are constrained in the way they enact ethical conduct. Our research demonstrates that it is crucial to analyse 'care for self' and 'care for the other' within broader cultural constructs of gendered power relations that make only certain forms and practices of ethics available to most women. In considering dominant heterosexual discourses that privilege male sexual needs and desires, it is not surprising that women's stories focused on caring for the self and subverting such discourses, leaving little room for effective means of 'caring for the other'. We argue that the lack of overt expressions of 'care for the other' does not necessarily reflect a lack of ethical engagement with sexuality by the women. Instead it is most likely indicative of the constraints on ethical relations resulting from gendered discourses and power relations.

## Conclusions

In this article, we analysed young women's stories of heterosexual casual sex using Foucault's notion of sexual ethics. We demonstrated some of the ways in which the young women engaged in moments of 'care for the self', 'self-reflection', and (to a much lesser extent) 'care for the other' – all components of sexual ethics and *rappport à soi*. The main thread running through our analysis of women's negotiation of casual sex and sexual ethics is the way in which the accounts were heavily situated within, (re)produced, and at times disrupted, gendered heterosexual discourses.

We demonstrated how young women successfully negotiated ‘care for the self’ within the confines of such gendered discourses. Women who expressed forms of ‘care for the self’ that emphasized their own desires generally gave more positive accounts of casual sex than women who expressed a lack of agency and control over their casual sex experiences.

While some women were successful in negotiating sexual ethics, our main contention is that dominant heteronormative discourses of sex impede women’s negotiation of more positive forms of sexual ethics (e.g. as demonstrated by accounts of the role of alcohol in women’s self-care). The women were at times limited in the types of self-care they engaged in, because their accounts often remained embedded within gendered constructions of sexuality. In spite of this, we did identify many varied ways that the women cleverly negotiated gendered (and at times contradictory) discourses of heterosex to deploy strategies of self-care in casual sex. This was evident in accounts of ‘setting limits’, agency and control, satisfying their own desires, and ‘self-preservation’, as well as reflections on the influences of broader sociocultural expectations on their experience of casual sex.

Considering the constraints on women to develop sexual ethics within a gendered cultural system, the cultivation of sexual ethics and *rappport à soi* may offer space for radical subversion of dominant forms of heterosexuality. This can be done by promoting new forms of intimacy that encourage women and men to work outside and beyond a gendered binary of sexuality, towards mutually negotiated and pleasurable sexual encounters. The cultivation of an ethical subjectivity for both women and men has the potential to destabilize the current power systems. It is our contention that this requires that both women and men reflect on their sexual desires and practices, adopt a more diverse and ethically informed approach to sex, in order to subvert dominant heterosexual discourses.

Carmody (2005) has argued that sexual violence prevention education may benefit from a turn to a sexual ethics approach (rather than a risk reduction approach). We further this argument by articulating a variety of ways that women used self-care in a range of casual sex experiences, and by demonstrating how dominant heteronormative discourses may hinder more positive expressions of sexual ethics. In addition, our findings can then be used to discuss issues related to ‘care for the self’ in (casual) sexual encounters with other young adults. For example, educators may discuss how using alcohol can sometimes be a method of ‘care for the self’, why this might be so, and potential problems with using alcohol in such a way. Educational efforts aimed at fostering more mutual forms of heterosex can also draw on the finding that women who initiate casual sex, or describe some agency and involvement in the instigation and process of casual sex, tended to utilize more positive forms of self-care. Other

methods of reflection and self-care may be discussed to disrupt heterosexual discourses of sexuality and present alternative subject positions for women (and men). Women may be encouraged to more reflexively explore ideas about sex, sexual desires, and to think about where those desires may stem from, and then to discuss or think about how they may satiate those desires within a sexual ethics framework.

Following on from our discussion of young heterosexual women's negotiations of sexual ethics, an investigation into men's accounts of such practices seems imperative. Future research needs to look at how men negotiate sexual ethics in such contexts as casual sex, but also beyond. If we take Carmody's argument that a turn to more ethical sexual relations is key to reducing sexual violence, then a focus on cultivations of such ethical discourses and behaviour *must* not only include men, but position them as a primary focus of such intervention strategies.

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### Endnote

1 Pākehā refers to non-Māori New Zealanders of European descent.

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