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# The relationship work of sexual intimacy in long-term heterosexual and LGBTQ partnerships

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## Abstract

Sex is perceived as crucial to relationship success. This article reveals how sexual intimacy is part of the relationship work that couples ordinarily complete to sustain their partnerships over time. It problematizes the binary logics of good/bad sex, female/male desire and homo/heterosexual difference and shows how fluctuations of desire and sexual capacity are managed by couples through intimate knowledge. Findings presented here derive from a multiple methods study with 50 long-term heterosexual and LGBTQ partnerships. The article demonstrates how the absence of normative sexual scripts enables queer couples to more readily manage sexual discrepancies. Gendered differences and inequalities persist within many heterosexual relationships while reflexivity and increased openness characterize queer coupledness. Women and LGBTQ couples are more inclined to deploy humour to diffuse difficult situations and in this context gay men are akin to women more so than heterosexual men.

## Keywords

Ageing, couple relationships, emotion work, gender, relationship work, sexual intimacy, sexuality

Urban myths on sex saturate contemporary society: from every shade of grey to the folklore of enduring bed-death. What counts as sex may mean different things to many different people and be experienced differently within and across different social groups (Attwood and Smith, 2013), but research and popular discourses are in concert: a ‘healthy sex life’ and mutuality of sexual desire are key cornerstones of relationship success

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(Blumstein and Schwartz, 1983; Smith et al., 2011). This article engages with findings from a large scale multiple methods investigation of enduring couple relationships in the UK to examine how couples navigate sexual mores and manage 'sex issues' over life course. Disparities in sexual desire do in many instances persist for women and men but these cannot be reduced to gender. Findings reveal that LGBTQ couples drew upon varied resources (emotional, personal and cultural) to work through sexual problems and establish mutually satisfying solutions that work for both individuals and the overall partnership. Heterosexual couples were far more likely than LGBTQ counterparts to be constrained by social scripts of masculinity and femininity, and these contained their 'practices of intimacy' (Jamieson, 1998). Notwithstanding a supportive partnership, heterosexual men found discrepancies in desire particularly difficult to manage. Women and queer men often diffused emotionally fraught sexual scenarios through humour, while heterosexual men were not able to do so and instead found the experience of sexual dysfunction personally undermining.

The inclusion of a sexually diverse sample thus does more than update existing knowledge by expanding analysis to cover a wider population; it advances nuanced understanding of the ways in which gender and sexuality intersect to shape contemporary experiences of sexual intimacy in long-term partnerships. Using rich qualitative data, this article therefore questions: how does sexuality inform the experience of sexual intimacy and couples' management of sex issues that may emerge in long-term partnerships? How do couples negotiate hetero-gender and the cultural sexual scripts that frame experiences of sexual intimacy? What analytical insights are afforded through the conceptual framework of 'relationship work' in advancing understandings of sexual intimacy?

## Researching sex

There is a significant body of research on the gendered dimensions of sexual frequency in couple relationships and most studies concur that sex declines in frequency over time and markedly so with the onset of parenthood (Call et al., 1995). Studies resoundingly show that marital satisfaction is significantly and positively associated with sexual satisfaction (Blumstein and Schwartz, 1983) and there is a positive correlation between relationship satisfaction and sexual frequency (Smith et al., 2011). The majority of people believe their sex life to be important to relationship quality (Undy et al., 2015) and, conversely, sexual dysfunction and sex issues to adversely impact on the couple dynamic (Mercer et al., 2003). Set against this conjugal functionality, it is argued that hetero-sex replicates broader patterns of gender inequality (Erickson, 1993, 2005). Sex remains 'culturally vaunted as a signifier of love and marital bliss' (Elliott and Umberson, 2008: 394) and as such women are expected to complete emotional labour to sustain intimate relationships and manage sexual dissonance (Duncombe and Marsden, 1993, 1996; Hockey et al., 2010; Lodge and Umberson, 2012).

Potentially disrupting these heteronormative relationship norms, population-level findings from NATSAL (2013) on the patterning of sexual behaviour, attitudes, health and well-being in the UK evidence increasing rates of sexual activity for women alongside growing sexual experimentation (Mercer et al., 2013). These trends are

accompanied by and indicative of wider shifts in social tolerance and sexual liberalism across the UK population more broadly (Duncan and Phillips, 2008). Young people especially are challenging the heteronormative containment of gender and sexualities (Renold and Ivinson, 2015). While comparative studies of same-sex and heterosexual partnerships have demonstrated that close dyadic partnerships predominantly work in similar ways (Kurdek, 2006), sexual differences remain; for example, experiences and attitudes towards sexual fidelity notably diverge (Kurdek, 2003). Same-sex couples are more likely than heterosexual counterparts to aspire to the guiding principles of equality and open-mindedness and more so than previous generations (Heaphy et al., 2013). LGBTQ intimacy is structured through and manifested in relation to a partner rather than gendered differences per se (Umberson et al., 2015) with the expression and experience of feelings being shaped by the specificity of individual circumstances, preferences and interactions more than socially imposed categories – such as gender and sexuality (Goldberg, 2013). Studies of trans experience are small in scale and number but there is evidence that sexual intimacy and romantic attachments ordinarily and reactively shift over the course of transition (Hines, 2006, 2007).

How couples manage the absence/presence of sexual scripts and the ways in which these scripts and hetero-gendered norms coalesce thus underpins the analytical imperative of this article and its focus on the intersections of gender, sexuality and life course.

## Relationship work and sexual intimacy

This article deploys an interactionist approach to generate an empirically rigorous, situated embodied account of hetero- and LGBTQ couple intimacy and the ways in which women and men sustain sexual relationships over time. Social interactionist approaches to sex and sexuality unpick the cultural fabric that underpins sex studies. Research in this vein shows that whilst sexual desires may be generally perceived and experienced as ‘natural’ they are actually socially ordered (Gagnon and Simon, 1974; Simon and Gagnon, 2003). Sexual encounters can involve active agency; so, for example, women may often enjoy the pursuit and pleasures of female sexuality, but such experiences are nevertheless manifested in predictable patterns (Jackson and Scott, 1997, 2007). Intimate interactions thus remain simultaneously situated in the private sphere of relationships and the public world of heteronormative coupledness. They operate in accordance with wider circuits of power that structure personal meanings and the economies of intimate transaction. This does not refute an individual’s *feelings of desire*, after all ‘even sociologists fall in love’ (Jackson, 1993); instead it locates emotions and relationships in biographical and social contexts (Gabb, 2008). The scaffolding for my argument is therefore indebted to Arlie Hochschild (1979), whose research has shown how gender structures the public–private exchange of intimacies and the value afforded to affective ‘gifts’ (Hochschild, 1983). As intimate gestures filter through cultural prisms they coalesce into sets of ‘feeling rules’ that are afforded gendered meanings. These rules inform how people make sense of feelings and the emotional landscapes that shape interpersonal experience.

The concept of ‘relationship work’ is also particularly helpful in disentangling the ways in which public and private worlds intersect. Whilst work is ordinarily associated with paid employment, ideas of ‘work knowledge’ have been developed in a more

'generous sense' in institutional ethnography as a means to examine what is done, the time and energy required to complete tasks, and the means, tools and conditions under which labour takes place labour (Smith, 2005: 151–154). The concept of relationship work thus knits together theories of labour and capital with feminist critiques of domestic and reproductive labour and I combine these with therapeutic arguments that 'good marriages' require work (Chapman, 2010). This does not support the thesis that the long-term monogamous relationship is so labour intensive and statistically prone to failure that by definition coupledness is not working (Kipnis, 2004: 294). Instead, sexual intimacy is seen as a crucial factor within the *working relationship* rubric. It might even be useful to talk about 'sex work' in long-term relationships if the term were not so heavily imbued with the cultural weight of financial exchange and commodification.

In this article I thus provide novel insight into the ways in which sex functions as one of the relationship maintenance behaviours that couples complete to sustain their partnerships over time. Sexual intimacy takes the form of emotional labour as couples strive to manage the bodily and psychosexual changes that occur over life course. The relationship work of sex is therefore often routine but it is not always or necessarily drab or mundane; it includes negotiating sexual frailties and 'failings' in compassionate and sometimes creative ways and also comprises pleasure, fun and exploration of desires alongside and sometimes in response to ageing bodies.

## Methodology and sample

The *Enduring Love?* qualitative research sample consisted of 50 couples from the UK, comprising women ( $n = 54$ ), men ( $n = 43$ ) and non-binary/queer ( $n = 3$ ). Purposive sampling was used to recruit across three age groups (18–34, 35–54, 55–65+ years), with equal numbers of parental and child-free couples. The sample was demographically diverse: 30% self-identified as LGBQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual and queer) plus an additional four participants identified as trans; 30% were working class (classified through education, employment and self-identification) and it was predominantly white/British (76%). In this article, when experience is typical and/or distinctions between heterosexual and non-heterosexual groups are being explored, the term LGTBQ is used. 'Trans couple' is used when one partner identifies as transgender. For the purposes of analytical clarity, trans and bisexual couples are not included in discussion of heterosexuality and/or hetero-coupledness. Umbrella terms are not used to occlude gender or the particularity of experience of lesbians, gay men, bisexual women and men, trans people and non-binary queers; these dimensions are addressed through focused analysis of distinct differences between sexual minority sample groups and through attention to individual experiences. To consolidate arguments on the intersections of gender, sexuality and age, and add another analytical dimension, summary demographic information is provided for all participants quoted.

The qualitative research design aimed to facilitate interrogation of the minutiae of relationships, using proven techniques developed to study intimacy and everyday personal life (Gabb, 2008). Over the course of one week individuals completed a diary and emotion map, generating data on routine interactions. To guide the completion of diaries, participants were asked to reflect upon time spent with and apart from their partners and

the emotions experienced during these times/activities. Emotion maps required participants to locate where interactions and activities took place in the household and between whom. The researcher generated a household floor plan that was given to each participant along with a set of emoticon stickers denoting laughter, happiness, indifference, sadness, upset, grumpiness/anger and love/affection. Interactions experienced between the participant and their partner, children, family, friends, pets and so on were then marked onto the floor plan using a set of different coloured stickers for each character. Interviews then explored biographical narratives using the starting question: 'Tell me about your relationship, how does it work?' Diary and emotion map data were probed to extend discussion of everyday experience. Finally, using topic-focused collages, couples were interviewed together to explore the relationship dynamic and their discursive crafting of a shared couple story.

All qualitative data were sorted through NVivo10 data management software using thematic coding that has its roots in grounded theory (Charmaz, 2005). First stage deductive analysis was completed using the guiding theoretical themes in extant literature; this usefully identified patterns of experience across the dataset but it was less successful in picking up the ordinary moments that characterize everyday experience (Gabb and Fink, 2015). Second stage inductive analysis was therefore undertaken through iterative reading of data. This organized nascent themes into clusters using 'free nodes' that were nested under the substantive 'tree codes'. Code validity was achieved through discussion and review at research team meetings, with concepts and the interpretation of behaviours being tested and evaluated throughout the first and second stage of analysis. A coding frame of 25 items was agreed upon once theoretical saturation was reached. To facilitate mixed methods analysis, this coding frame was used for both the survey<sup>1</sup> and qualitative multiple methods datasets. The project team included six researchers in total and included a range of ages, sexualities and class backgrounds; there was also diversity in national and cultural heritage. Researcher standpoints and biographies were tabled during project team discussions including any associated biases. Participant recruitment was driven by a sampling frame that was structured by demographic variables rather than relationship forms or practices. This ensured that relationship behaviours were not mapped onto 'types' of couples and that we could freely explore everyday lived experience.

## Findings

### *Gender and sexuality*

Corroborating previous studies, heterosexual relationships were often structured through gendered inequalities. Here sex was not freely exchanged between partners but was instead part of a transaction that privileged men's desire.

Lillian: [Partner] probably wants to have sex more than I do, um [...] I would accommodate him if he wants to. (18–34, heterosexual woman)

Vinod: So we had good fun in bed twice in the morning [points to emotion map], and I wanted more today but I didn't get it; so I'm not very happy. I told her that. [...] Generally I'm pushing her more [...] she is relatively of low

[sexual] appetite, so it's always an unbalanced situation [...] it's not a big deal but it could be better [...] at most it can be two weeks, but then that's it, at most; then I push. She compromises, possibly [laughs]. (35–54, heterosexual man)

In these heterosexual partnerships, sex required 'compromise' and female partners were expected to adjust their needs and desires for the sake of the relationship. Conventional and highly gendered sexual labour was completed as relationship maintenance behaviour as part of the heterosexual contract that was tacitly agreed upon. These couples, therefore, seem out of step with the contemporary intimacies reported in population-level (Mercer et al., 2013) and social trends (Duncan and Phillips, 2008) surveys, or the mutually disclosing partnership promoted in therapeutic discourses (Chapman, 2010). Differences in desire did not necessarily appear as a source of tension between couples however. Contrasting with majority sex research (Smith et al., 2011), libidinal discrepancies were understood as part and parcel of all long-term relationships (Gabb et al., 2013). Partners had different likes and dislikes, wants and needs, in many areas. Discrepancies in partners' sexual desire were just one difference amongst many.

It is important not to conflate functional and/or unequal sex with low levels of relationship satisfaction. Moreover, disparities like those presented by Lillian and Vinod were in many ways atypical. There was plentiful evidence across the dataset of active female sexual desire and several heterosexual women spoke about having more interest in sex than their male partner. In these instances the influence of gendered norms was nevertheless still present and in their interviews women completed discursive work to explain such contrarities. For example, greater female desire was sometimes described in mischievous terms, as Suzie says in her couple interview: 'I do think I probably pester more than you [partner] [Laughs].' Other couples cited particular personal circumstances and/or cultural scripts which focused on the meanings of sex.

Ruth: I like to have sex more often than I think he does. And that's partly because he's tired and he's on nights [...] it sounds so, kind of, gendered and clichéd, but it's the, it's kind of the intimacy and the, um, you know I do fancy the pants off him so, um, and I want to, kind of, express that and, I think, for me it's probably more closely associated as an expression of how much he might want me or how much I want him. (35–54, heterosexual woman)

The hesitancy in Ruth's account illustrates the awkwardness that she feels in accepting her higher level of sexual desire. The discursive relationship work that she completes on the symbolic meanings of sex endeavours to resituate her 'surplus' of female desire within the realms of heteronormativity wherein the emotionality of sexual feelings belong to women. For heterosexual couples the relationship work that is undertaken to make sense of sexual experiences that run against the cultural grain is typically twofold. Work is initially completed during the experience to manage differences in sexual desire through 'accommodation' and 'compromise'. Sense-making work which justifies and explains women's greater desire through individual character traits or as responses to external circumstances is then undertaken to fit this experience within the realms of

hetero-gendered coupledom. This second layer of work shores up social mores which characterize men as the sexual driver in relationships even when personal experience and sexual practices demonstrate the fallacy of this metanarrative. This post-hoc rationalization aims to secure men's masculinity and situate sexual activity within the repertoires of relationship maintenance behaviours that sustain a long-term heterosexual partnership.

The inclusion of sexual minority couples within the study sample provides analytical nuance to this gendered characterization of female–male desire. Heteronormative practices of meaning-making become unsettled in and through same-sex relationships (Gabb, 2005). For example, gay men managed 'imbalances' in partner desire in ways that resonated with women's data (such as Ruth, above). Here too, sexual intimacy symbolized emotional closeness.

Matthew: we don't really have any imbalance or it doesn't really feel like we're being unfair or we're using it in a way to control each other, or withholding it, or whatever. It's, I think we're quite good at separating out what sex is from what sex means, um, what it means to us, anyway. (18–34, gay man)

Comparable data from heterosexual and same-sex partnerships stop the meanings afforded to sex being reduced to gender differences. Sexuality is a significant and defining feature that queers bifurcation. In same-sex couples cultural scripts were sometimes invoked to make sense of sexual differences, but these were quite distinctive to those of heterosexual counterparts. Rather than see dissonance in sexual desire through the prism of gender, these differences were typically described through patterns learnt in childhood and/or 'natural' character traits.

Genevieve: naturally there is an imbalance. [Partner] is just not a very demonstrative person, so it's not even just about sex, it's just about physical affection and all that, sort of, thing [...] [We] have a, kind of, structured arrangement when it comes to sex. So, like, once a week is, kind of, our agreement and, obviously, if we have it any more than that, that's great. Sometimes it happens less than that, but that's, kind of, what we aim for, because that's, kind of, a balance [laughing] for us. (35–54, lesbian)

Genevieve's understanding of the couple's sexual discrepancies is shared by her partner who describes herself as 'less affectionate'. She attributes this to family upbringing: her parents were not demonstrative and this, therefore, is her familiar and thus most comfortable emotional register. Both women agree that this does not make her undemonstrative, but her means of emotional expression take different forms, such as loving gestures and tokens of affection rather than physical affection. Such findings corroborate extant research which suggests that women are more inclined than men to engage in relationship work that will ameliorate incongruence in sexual desire and any concomitant distress that may ensue from this, and lesbians more so than heterosexual women (Paine et al., 2019).



In some ways, then, the ‘structured agreement’ reached by Genevieve and her partner resonates with the heterosexual couples previously presented, in that the two women required ‘compromise’ and/or ‘accommodation’ to rebalance the intimate scales. In contrast to heterosexual couples though, the relationship work that was taking place here around the management of sex aimed to reach a mutually satisfying solution for both parties and not simply appease the more sexually-inclined partner. The women’s ‘agreement’ was a consequence of ongoing negotiation and discussion; it drew upon their intimate knowledge of one another and was an outcome of couple reflexivity and emotional attentiveness. Similarly so for Matthew (cited earlier on) and his partner, who refuted the association between sex and power. LGBTQ relationships may thus be similar to heterosexual counterparts in some ways but they were also distinctive. The ways in which gender and sexuality shape LGBTQ and hetero-couples’ management of discrepancies in libido and/or sexual incapacity is explored in more detail later on, under the rubric of relationship longevity and ageing.

### *Reflexivity and the boundaries of intimacy*

Another differentiating feature between LGBTQ and heterosexual relationships was how couples managed the boundaries of sexual intimacy. LGBTQ couples have been characterized as ‘active (and sometimes highly reflexive) scriptors of convention’ (Heaphy et al., 2013: 172) rather than replicating or transgressing traditional coupledness. In the *Enduring Love?* study LGBTQ relationships were far more likely to be epitomized by an ethos of openness and this appeared to enrich the sexual dynamic, as Debs illustrates in her description of her long-term bisexual partnership:

Debs: Sex is something that’s changed a lot in terms of what we do and [...] also feels like something that might continue to change, you know, because there’s an awful lot of sex acts, there’s an awful lot of things one can do and you know – and we don’t seem to run out [...] it’s not just about what you ‘do’, it’s also about identities that you draw on and that feels quite different and has changed quite a lot. (35–54, bisexual woman)

Some of the changes that Debs alludes to were associated with the impact of children on the couple relationship dynamic. Sex was currently contained by the temporality, presence and household dynamic of family life, but she is also talking beyond the materialities of parenthood as she reflected upon the fluidity of sex and sexualities outside the heteronorm. LGBTQ sex is not prescribed but is something to be worked at, and enjoyably so. There was explicit engagement in the interviews with this couple on the ways in which LGBTQ identities involve both ‘doing’ and ‘becoming’. Queer sex, like sexual identities, constitute work in progress. The knowledgeable sexual subjects that are conjured up here were likewise a characteristic feature of trans individuals and their partners. Sexual intimacy for trans couples typically included relationship reconfiguration, alongside the management of particular sets of physical health and/or mental well-being issues. Adjustment factors in many ways distinguish their experience from LGBTQ and heterosexual

counterparts, especially so during transition (see Hines, 2007). Issues associated with sex in trans couples' relationships are too complex to discuss in the context of this article; notwithstanding such distinctiveness there were however also marked similarities between trans and LGBTQ couples in terms of their reflexivity and sexual creativity.

Jessica: there are facilitators for having sex, like, I have fetishes like routines or role-play or things like that. When we've spoken about those things, it's led to really interesting times in our sex life [...] talking about it just tends to lead to a better sex life. [...] we tend to work at it a bit harder, I think. (18–34, trans woman)

Embodied changes, emerging sexual identities, exploration of hitherto latent desires, and a sense of self-actualization meant that trans couples did not have an established script for desire and sexual fulfilment. The absence of taken-for-granted norms meant that dialogue and compromise were defining features in trans couples' sex lives. Relationship work was individualized and centred on the stage of transition, post-operative sensitivity, and absence/presence of desire, for example. Insofar as LGBTQ relationships were about being and doing, trans sexual partnerships were often about becoming and working at it.

Many of the LGBTQ couples identified the exploration of sexual fantasies as core to the success of their partnerships and it was not uncommon for non-monogamy to be identified as another dimension of this sexual creativity. The inclusion of extra-marital sex did not threaten the primary couple relationships but was instead another component of it. For Debs and her partner, for example, third party involvements were perceived as the 'icing on the cake'. For others they reinforced the specialness of couple emotional intimacy. For Theo and Emmie, their partnership represented a safe space where barriers between self and other were lowered and vulnerabilities revealed. Their couple relationship thus facilitated both their BDSM desires and also provided time for emotional intimacy. Here sex and intimacy are quite starkly differentiated, so too depth of feelings between partners, lovers, friends and sexual encounters.

Theo: friends with benefits is a delineated space [...] we'd approach them in a contractual manner and put emotional limits early on [...] there's a wall here, we let little bits go over like displays of affection and slightly higher level of care towards general wellbeing and things like this. (18–34, bisexual man)

Emmie: I think emotional intimacy is more important to us than physical intimacy. Physical intimacy I think – (18–34, bisexual woman)

Theo: – Is, is mechanical. [...] Emmie is the only person I have normal vanilla missionary sex with because it is of no particular interest or pleasure to me at all.

Emmie: But it demonstrates the emotional intimacy we have.

The private connection between primary partners was crucial to Emmie and Theo's sense of self and emotional security. The extent of their intimate knowledge and shared appreciation of the meanings of sex and intimacy is evident as the couple finish one another's train of thought. The 'agreement' which they have reached is their 'normal' vanilla sex practice: an agreement that requires sexual labour to be completed by Theo rather than his female partner.

The key commonality of non-monogamous relationships was trust, something that typically manifested through depth of couple knowledge. The inclusion of additional sexual partners was not tacit or concealed. Managing open arrangements required additional relationship work to be completed as logistics and the establishment of rules around third party sexual encounters were agreed upon. For some, like Theo and Emmie, this meant protecting certain meaningful forms of couple intimacy, for others it was about setting personal boundaries:

Grace: [Partner] will tend to have people over for sex when I'm out [because] I really don't want to hear anything [...] it's just one of those principle things where whatever's happening is fine, but that's my rule. [...] It can be negotiated – according to who it is. So if it's a woman, these rules apply; if it's a guy, these rules apply [laughing]. (18–34, trans, gender-queer)

Crucially, therefore, gender may be present in some shape or form in LGBTQ partnerships, as the structuring architecture in relationships, but it did not define relationship rules or sexual practices and these partnerships were thus largely immune to the inequalities that beset heterosexual couples. LGBTQ relationships were not free from cultural stereotypes though, in fact to the contrary. Urban myths that equate gay men with hyper-sexual behaviours and women's long-term same-sex partnerships with 'lesbian bed-death' were engaged with and parodied by LGBTQ couples as they worked to counter such reductive hetero-gendered narratives, as evident in the findings below on intimacy and ageing.

## Relationship longevity: Intimacy and ageing

The sex lives of older couples have been pathologized and marginalized, and research predominantly starts with the assumption that sexual deterioration is an inevitable accompaniment to ageing (Ménard et al., 2015). Whilst studies of sexual experience amongst older populations are scarce, there is some evidence that ageing couples work together to find mutually supportive solutions to overcome late onset barriers to sex (Hinchliff and Gott, 2004).

The *Enduring Love?* study found that couples were well aware of the cultural myths of ageing coupledom. Findings indicate that as couples grow older together their levels of desire and/or bodily capabilities may change but the adage 'less is more' is salient here. Familiarity did not inexorably collapse into boredom; instead many couples embraced adaptation and change, with partners often being more open to the other person. The exigencies of parenthood that might have formerly delimited couples' sex lives no longer had purchase and/or structured the household. Sex could happen wherever and whenever partners desired.

- Joseph: I think that we discovered that what works for us is less often, but when we do we put more time and emotion into it [...] so it might not be that frequent, but it's more meaningful when we do it. (18–34, heterosexual man)
- Nina: I think it [sex] has got better and better [...] I think as we've matured [...] the more, in a way, autonomous an individual you are, the more the coming together can be, and it's rich and deep, and actually, I think it keeps us going. (35–54, heterosexual woman)

This sense of 'quality over quantity' was something repeated by many couples, heterosexual and LGBTQ alike; so too the sense that the sum of parts (the couple) was enhanced through (individual) self-awareness. Sex was no longer something that needed to be fitted into otherwise busy schedules: it was unfettered. Successful sexual intimacy was accomplished through a threefold combination of factors – personal *self-awareness*, couples' depth of knowledge of *each other* and their *partnership*.

When relationship longevity was accompanied by ill-health and/or the ageing body failed to keep pace with sexual desire, hetero-gendered differences did nevertheless resurface. Heterosexual men's descriptions of their impotency and its effects on the couple's sex life were framed through the discourse of stigma and this weighed heavily on individuals. The relationship work required to overcome 'performance issues' was difficult and often distressing. Impotency was something that was not simply experienced, it was admitted and endured.

- Ted: Since I had my health problem, erm, I have to admit to being impotent [...] we did sleep in the same bed for some time but then agreed I went into the smaller bed because we were more comfortable. (55–65+, heterosexual man)

A sense of shame was attached to men's lack of sexual prowess. Cultural scripts conflate masculinity with virility and as a consequence heterosexual men who experienced sexual incapacity typically presented deeply vulnerable personae. Even with a supportive partner, being impotent disrupts the norms of coupledness in which a sexual relationship is central and the inability to fulfil this social contract resulted in feelings of personal failure. Heterosexual women wrestled with an analogous cultural spectre which associates femininity with being a readily available sexual partner, as well as having a physically attractive and alluring body. In cases of diminished female desire, heterosexual women often continued to be sexual through functional 'accommodation' (as described by Lillian earlier on). For others, however, laughter seemed to shift the impasse and work to sweeten the sexual occasion. Levity in otherwise emotionally and/or embodied painful contexts was perhaps more akin to rueful sanguinity than an expression of fun, but there was no sense that it masked coercion or made palatable an otherwise unpleasant sexual experience.

- Martha: it's probably down to once a week or every two weeks now, so not that onerous, and it's not very adventurous because of my soreness. I try to make the

best of it, because [partner] obviously needs it and he finds it satisfying, and what is 20–30 mins once every so often in the big scheme of things. We have a good laugh – sex is more funny than passionate these days. [...] I find not having a sex drive very liberating – like being a child again, totally unencumbered by hormonal distractions. (55–65+, heterosexual woman)

The sentiments expressed by Martha were repeated in the couple interview. She and her husband had worked on this dimension of their relationship together and had reached this mutually satisfying solution. Satisfaction in this context was quite distinctive for each party. For Martha, her diminished sex drive was experienced as ‘very liberating’ as it enabled her to rekindle a sense of her former autonomous self. This resonates – albeit to different ends – with the sentiments of Nina (cited earlier on) who experienced self-awareness as a facilitator for ‘good sex’. The ‘compromise’ that Martha and her partner reached was thus notably marked by difference but it was not asymmetrical. It illustrates the complexity of emotion work that surrounds sex and ageing, and the relationship work that women and men complete to manage changes that occur over the life course.

Whilst ageing bodies are equally experienced by both women and men there are, then, notable inter- and intra-gender differences in how individuals experience the consequences of ageing and sexuality. While the cultural stigma associated with impotency seems to shut down working strategies such as recourse to humour for heterosexual men, for gay men this did not appear to be the case, as Clive beautifully illustrates:

Clive: We don’t feel the need to have sex all the time because I think after 13 years; it’s just an extension of the way we are with each other. It’s not a pressure, even then you can find a comedy element sort of creep in because you can find you’re trying to be intimate but you’re having a battle with the bedclothes, which is kind of like there’s three of us in this relationship – me, you and the duvet – and it’s like we might as well give up. (35–54, gay man)

The intersections of gender, sexuality and age thus seem to be a defining feature in how couples manage sex issues. Queer couples’ sense of comfort in their partnership and with each other combines with the absence of gendered sexual scripts and this combination of factors enables them to more readily accommodate bodily changes which impact on the sexual dynamic.

Matthew: That’s slow dancing [points to emotion map] [...] I think [partner] was just for spooning. [...] Sex is not an important part of our relationship [...] I think we both see it as if it’s available and it’s okay, then we’ll do it [...] sometimes I’m not in the mood for having sex, and sometimes [partner] isn’t, or sometimes one of us really will be and the other person won’t. But that doesn’t matter. (35–54, gay man)

For gay men, therefore, as Matthew and Clive illustrate, sex was identified as a form and symbol of the reciprocity and connection that sustains a partnership over time. These

gay men, like women, overcame challenges brought about by ageing bodies, by embracing the *emotional quality* of the intimate moment – playful, passionate or sexual.

## Discussion

### *Sustaining positive lifelong intimacy*

It has been argued that the neoliberalist agenda which frames contemporary sexual cultures in the West requires individuals to continually work on themselves and their relationships (Giddens, 1992), with couples being cajoled, perhaps even compelled, to attend to their sex lives and manage any sexual problems (Furedi, 2004). This positioning of ‘good sex’ as foundational to a healthy relationship alongside the sexualization of lives more generally puts considerable pressure on contemporary partnerships (Hawkes, 2004). Findings from the *Enduring Love?* study demonstrate some of the ways that couples are working at their relationships to sustain positive lifelong intimacy in the context of these external pressures and internal (embodied) changes. There are indications that as couples grow older together, openness to the other person may increase and this can facilitate reflexive learning in all partnerships (Lodge and Umberson, 2013; Paine et al., 2019) and in these circumstances mutually rewarding sexual intimacy is more likely to be accomplished.

Sex in long-term relationships is not, however, all about ‘good sex’. Couples’ sexual repertoires range from hot sex, kink, vanilla intimacy, perfunctory and functional sex, sensuality and fond affection – to cite but a few shades of the erotic rainbow. What makes sex successful – in relationship terms – is that it works for each individual and the couple, something that builds upon intimate knowledge accumulated over the partnership duration. For some couples uneasy compromises can be reached; for others mutually satisfying sexual novelty. For most couples the reality is somewhere in-between. Here age and relationship duration simultaneously intersect and stand apart. Some older couples who commented upon their improving sex lives drew upon insights gained through ‘time served’ together (relationship longevity). Other couples looked to ‘life lessons’ from past relationships and deployed these to enhance their current relationship. In this sense relationship duration is less significant than adaptability and an openness to learn. What works in one relationship or at one stage in life may not hold fast for another period of time or person. As such, intimate knowledge accrued over time and which helps to foster a positive sex life is as much if not more about *cognizance of the self* than couple awareness.

While intimate knowledge is valued by and valuable to all couples, there are nevertheless evident differences in the experiences of women and men, and between LGBTQ and heterosexual partners. Prevalent cultural narratives which privilege men’s sexual prowess over and above female sexual desire adversely impact on the ways in which heterosexual couples make sense of changes in their sex lives and these are exacerbated by ageing. In this sense the intersections of gender, sexuality and age are crucial (Lodge and Umberson, 2013; Paine et al., 2019); however, findings also indicate that some degree of caution should be exercised before sex issues are mapped onto gendered sexual experience. The discursive framings that characterize ‘sexual stories’ (Plummer, 1995)

evidence the rhetorical work that women and men do to explain their sex lives as much as they represent experience. Crucially, then, the capacity to work through sex issues is not personal: it requires individuals to wrestle with the cultural norms associated with hetero-masculinity. Couples' recourse to humorous sexual solutions is a highly effective form of relationship work when the sources of issues are diminished female desire or bodily changes experienced by women or gay men. For heterosexual men, the personal sense of failure bestowed by impotency or sexual incapacity is hard to overcome. In this sense gay/bi/trans men are more similar to women (lesbian, bisexual, trans and heterosexual) in their ability to manage sexual problems.

In queer partnerships the absence of difference and/or the wider range of available sexual scripts appear to be decisive. Study findings suggest that because lesbian and gay partnerships start from a shared socio-cultural base, that is to say gender sameness, they may be more readily able to satisfactorily manage discrepancies in sexual capacity and desire. This does not occlude imbalances in power and gender-identified differences that may be present in queer relationships, such as those found in butch–femme relationships, for example. Power remains a dominant and structuring feature in sexual interactions and can shape both the sexual dynamic and who determines when something is working and when it is not. Socio-economic inequalities or differences in social status all too readily translate into emotional hierarchies. Lesbian and gay partnerships, however, are more likely to seek out mutually fulfilling resolutions than their heterosexual counterparts, demonstrating a greater degree of openness and reflexivity within these relationships. When bisexual and heterosexual partners demonstrate similar strategies of relationship work, then these partnerships are equally inclined to be resourceful in moderating their sexual scripts and thus managing fluctuations and discrepancies in desire. While the absence of cultural scripts which differentiate sexual experience by hetero-gender facilitates more sustainable and fulfilling sexual experience for LGBTQ women and men, it is likely therefore that it is *reflexivity* which is the ultimate factor in sustaining positive lifelong intimacy.


Overall, then, findings demonstrate the need to include both heterosexual and LGBTQ participants in the study of sexual intimacy. Sample diversity not only reflects 21st-century intimacies, it also debars reductive readings of sex and gender by requiring researchers to drill down into the lived experience of intimacy in partnerships, within and beyond hetero-gender. Drawing on rich in-depth empirical data, this article shows why the conceptual framework of 'relationship work' enables us to more fully understand couples' experience of lifelong sexual intimacy. Situating sex within the broader rubric of relationship maintenance behaviour highlights that it is one component in the relationship dynamic and not something that necessarily makes or breaks a partnership. In many ways 'sex work' that couples thus complete operates to hold at bay the cultural myths and social norms that inform how people perceive ageing bodies and shifts in desire more so than managing these changes within the relationship itself. The use of multiple qualitative methods, especially emotion maps and daily diaries, is especially useful here in that they focus attention onto everyday experience. They shed light on what happens 'at home' when the researcher is not there to probe and/or events that are seemingly inconsequential (Gabb and Fink, 2015) and this opens up understanding of the ways in which couples ordinarily invest in and maintain their relationships.

Studying everyday sexual experience in heterosexual and LGBTQ partnerships problematizes the binary logics that are mapped onto gender, sexuality and sex. Methodological novelty and analytical insights have already proven useful in the development of family and couple relationship support (Gabb and Singh, 2015). Future analysis can usefully extend breadth of understanding using meta-level survey data on the character, prevalence and typicality of sexual intimacy as relationship labour. Focusing the analytical lens onto lived experience and qualitative accounts of couples' emotional and embodied relationship work contributes significantly to knowledge of how changing circumstances are managed over the life course and the ways in which gender, sexuality and ageing intersect in couples' lived experience of sexual intimacy. It demonstrates how the absence of sexual scripts is liberating for LGBTQ couples and this can enable them to change and sustain their relationships over time. The presence of normative scripts is conversely burdensome for heterosexual couples. This indicates that heterosexual couples could therefore benefit from 'lessons learned' from LGBTQ couples and the greater discursive sexual freedoms which they enjoy.

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### Note

1. Research findings derive from a mixed methods UK study, *Enduring Love? Couple Relationships in the 21st Century*. Fieldwork was completed between 2011 and 2014 and the dataset includes qualitative ( $N = 50$  couples) and survey ( $N = 5445$ ) materials. This article does not however draw on survey data and statistical analysis completed because sexual intimacy was only one component amongst sets of wider relationship survey statements. All data are archived with the Economic and Social Data Service.

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### Author biography

Jacqui Gabb is a sociologist and holds a PhD in Women's Studies, University of York, UK. Her interests centre on researching and theorizing intimacy, sexuality and family life. Investigations include projects on lesbian motherhood, families and intimacy, LGBTQ youth and mental health, and an award-winning study on long-term partnerships [www.EnduringLove.co.uk](http://www.EnduringLove.co.uk). Dr Gabb's publications include *Couple Relationships in the 21st Century* (Palgrave, 2015) and *Researching Intimacy in Families* (Palgrave, 2008).

## Résumé

Le sexe est perçu comme un élément crucial de la réussite d'une relation. Dans cet article, je montre en quoi l'intimité sexuelle fait partie du travail relationnel que les couples accomplissent habituellement pour maintenir leur partenariat dans la durée. Je problématise les logiques binaires du bon sexe/mauvais sexe, du désir masculin/désir féminin et la différence entre homosexuels et hétérosexuels, et montre comment les fluctuations du désir et/ou de la capacité sexuelle sont gérées par les couples grâce à une connaissance intime. Les résultats présentés ici proviennent d'une étude à méthodes multiples menée auprès de 50 partenaires de longue date hétérosexuels et LGBTQ. Je démontre comment l'absence de scripts sexuels normatifs permet aux couples *queer* de gérer plus facilement les différences sexuelles. Les différences et les inégalités liées au genre persistent dans de nombreuses relations hétérosexuelles, tandis que la réflexivité et une plus grande ouverture caractérisent le couple *queer*. Les femmes et les couples LGBTQ sont plus enclins à faire preuve d'humour pour désamorcer des situations difficiles et, à cet égard, les hommes homosexuels s'apparentent davantage aux femmes qu'aux hommes hétérosexuels.

## Mots-clés

Genre, intimité sexuelle, relations de couple, sexualité, travail émotionnel, vieillissement

## Resumen

El sexo es percibido como algo crucial para el éxito de una relación. Este artículo revela cómo la intimidad sexual es parte del trabajo relacional que las parejas suelen llevar a cabo habitualmente para mantener sus relaciones a lo largo del tiempo. El artículo problematiza las lógicas binarias del sexo bueno/sexo malo, del deseo femenino/masculino y la diferencia entre homosexual y heterosexual y muestra cómo las parejas manejan las fluctuaciones del deseo y/o la capacidad sexual a través del conocimiento íntimo. Los hallazgos presentados aquí se derivan de un estudio con métodos múltiples de 50 parejas heterosexuales y LGBTQ de larga duración. Se demuestra cómo la ausencia de guiones sexuales normativos permite a las parejas *queer* manejar más fácilmente las discrepancias sexuales. Las diferencias y las desigualdades de género persisten en muchas relaciones heterosexuales, mientras que la reflexividad y una mayor apertura caracterizan el emparejamiento *queer*. Las mujeres y las parejas LGBTQ están más inclinadas a desplegar el humor para resolver situaciones difíciles y, en este contexto, los hombres homosexuales son más parecidos a las mujeres que a los hombres heterosexuales.

## Palabras clave

Envejecimiento, género, intimidad sexual, relaciones de pareja, sexualidad, trabajo de las emociones