

"I've never had casual sex, I've had casual partners, but not casual sex"

Insights from researching a 'stigmatised' topic



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Introduction

Researching sensitive topics (e.g., sex) provides particular challenges to qualitative researchers, both in terms of recruitment and within the interview context (e.g., Boynton, 2003). In particular, researching 'casual sex': Taboo, sensitive and stigmatised.

- Recruitment:**
- Limited number willing to be interviewed about 'sex'
 - Even less willing to be interviewed about 'casual sex'

Drawing on insights from two qualitative interview projects concerned with heterosexual casual sex, methodological issues related researching sensitive sexual topics are highlighted.

Aims

To compare and contrast two qualitative projects concerned with heterosexual casual sex and discuss how to best access:

- Accounts around casual sex
- Participants who embody diverse experiences

Questions considered:

- How a study is framed and who 'volunteers' to takes part
- Challenges of interviewing – what stories are *told* and *not told*

• **Both studies interested in heterosexual 'casual sex' – but framed differently.**

Study 1

Young Heterosexual Women's Experiences of 'Casual Sex'

- Casual sex – topic of interest.
- Explicitly framed as 'casual sex' study.

Aim: Explore young women's ideas and experiences related to casual sex.

Method: In-depth semi-structured interviews: 15 women (aged 19-25).

Theory: Social Constructionism, Feminism.

Analysis: Discourse analysis.

CASUAL SEX

Female research participants are required for a thesis project investigating Women's experiences of 'casual sex'

Participants must be heterosexual women aged between 18-25 years, with no prior sexual experience (or experience) that they define as 'casual sex'.

By exploring women's experiences of casual sex, this project is interested in locating stigmatised sex to and what it means to young heterosexual women.

The research participants will be invited to take part in one individual interview which will be carried out by the (female) Masters student. The interview will explore discussion of the participant's ideas about casual sex, as well as their experiences of having casual sex.

If you are interested in participating or would like more information please contact me via email.

Approximately a 30-minute message can be left with my supervisor, Dr Virginia Braun, via 373 7500 ext: 87561.

Interview Questions

Asked directly *about* 'casual sex', for example:

- Explain what you define/consider casual sex?
- Tell me about a salient/poignant experience of casual sex you've had.
- How did the casual sex come about?
- Was there anything positive/negative about it?



Overall

- Study attracted participants who 'identified' self as someone who engages in casual sex.
- Casual sex – framed positively by most: 'good', enjoyable, 'fun'.
- Women gave accounts of 'desire' for (casual) sex.
- Some gave accounts of 'actively' perusing it.
- Familiar stories around what casual sex is and means:
 - Casual sex = 'emotionless' sex
 - Casual sex = sex for sex's sake

However...

Is casual sex always devoid of ALL emotion? (e.g., excitement?)

Is casual sex always just about the 'sex'?

These questions were considered in study 2

Study 2

Let's Talk About Sex...

- Casual sex – still topic of interest, **BUT**
- Study framed more generally – about 'sex'.

Aims: More in-depth analysis of casual sex.

Increase pool of respondents.

Access diverse accounts.

Method: In-depth semi-structured interviews: 11 women, 9 men (aged 19-46).

Theory: Social Constructionism, Feminism.

Analysis: Discourse analysis.

Let's talk about sex...

Participants required for a PhD project exploring heterosexual sex

Are you:

- A heterosexual woman/man?
- Aged 18 years and over?
- Have had some prior sexual experiences?
- And wouldn't mind taking some time to participate in a PhD research project?

I'm looking for people to take part in individual interviews about their ideas and experiences relating to heterosexual sex. If you are interested in participating, or would like more information, please contact me:

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Interview Questions

Asked questions about sex in 'different contexts':

- Sex in longer-term relationships, 'one-off' sexual experiences, long-term casual sex experiences.

Asked questions about casual sex more in-directly:

- Have you ever had a one-off sexual encounter?
- Have you ever had a 'brief' or short-lived sexual encounter/relationship?

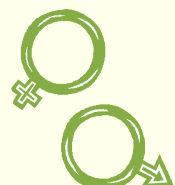
Probed about feelings/thoughts regarding experiences:

- Out of the whole spectrum of possible feelings, what were some of the feelings that went along with it?
- What was going through your mind at the time?



Overall

- Study attracted participants who tended to disclaim a casual sex identity (but still often engaged in casual sex).
- The tendency for participants to distances of self from *casual sex* highlighted its potentially (still) stigmatised position within society.
- Casual sex – framed more ambivalently – often as:
 - Less enjoyable than 'relationship sex'
 - 'Bad' or 'awkward' sex, 'uncomfortable'
 - Risky in terms of 'performance anxiety' (men)
- Also framed as not always about the 'sex' – but human contact, excitement, fun of flirtation, 'thrill of the chase'.



Conclusion

These studies demonstrate how alternative framing of projects can attract different types of participants and yield very different accounts in interviews.

- Explicit advertising allowed often unheard 'positive' accounts of women's casual sex experiences.

BUT, such advertising can be methodologically and theoretically limiting:

- Allowed less space for alternative accounts/diverse experiences to be explored.
- Limited possibilities for critical analysis of casual sex.

Generalised advertising attracted more of a variety of people (who would have been unlikely to take part if the project was explicitly framed as a 'casual sex' study) but who still had much to offer in terms of their ideas/experiences related to casual sex.

This highlights some ways to get beyond only culturally salient stories around heterosexual casual sex, to access alternative/unheard accounts related to it.

References

Boynton, P. (2003). "I'm just a girl who can't say no": Women, consent, and sex research. *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy*, 29, 23-32.

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