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# Single-at-midlife Women and Their Accounts of Their Sexual Lives

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UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

Single-at-midlife Women and Their Accounts of Their Sexual Lives

by

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A THESIS

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## Abstract

Despite the burgeoning research interest in single women's lives, few studies have examined the sexual lives of midlife women who are without a committed sexual partner. What is little understood then is how midlife women who are single understand their sexuality and their sexual relationships. Adopting a social constructionist framework and a discourse analytic perspective, this study explored the accounts of 21 women who identified as "women alone," were in "early midlife" (aged 35-50 years), and lived in cities and towns across Canada. The women were interviewed using a semi-structured format, either in person, by phone, or by Skype, and the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. The analysis examined the varied and contradictory discourses of heterosexuality that the participants used to account for their sexual practices and position themselves as sexual subjects. Study results suggest that cultural changes of recent decades have entailed shifts in the discursive environment beyond the cultural resources identified by Wendy Hollway in the 1980s, i.e., "male sexual drive," "have and hold," and "permissive sex" discourses. Women understood their sexuality in terms of a "compulsory sexuality" that is produced by the permissive sex and "sexological" discourses and constructs sex as integral to women's lives. For single women, this means remaining sexually attractive and youthful according to the standards of the day, a subject position that is at odds with their positioning as "maturing" women. Being positioned as "celibate" or "sexually inactive" was a "troubled" identity, and the participants navigated this tension by drawing on two "emerging" discourses, "caring sex" (i.e., "good" and "fulfilling" sex that includes feelings and practices of care, respect, and reciprocity) and "New Age spirituality" (i.e., compatibility, intimacy, and soul mates). Together, these discourses provided a discursive space for women to account for their sexual subjectivity outside of committed romantic relationships in a way that allowed them to be both "sexual" and "moral women." Women's single and midlife sexual subjectivity is discussed in the context of contemporary "postfeminist discourses" that construct female sexuality as active and empowered.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

### 1.1 Introduction

Changing social norms and demographic trends of recent decades have contributed to a shifting social context for Canadian women's sexual lives, and their living arrangements and family forms are growing evermore diverse. These changes are reflected in increasing divorce rates, single-parent families, sole-occupant households, and de facto relationships (DePaulo & Morris, 2005; Sandfield & Percy, 2003). A combination of demographic, economic, and social changes have enabled a cohort of educated, upwardly mobile women who will live most or all of their lives as singles. Despite ever-single and single-again women who are at midlife and beyond now making up a significant segment of the Canadian population, relatively little is known about their lives. And while researchers have been studying the lives of singles, usually those of single women, since the mid-1970s when this segment of the population began rapidly growing (DePaulo & Morris, 2005), this remains a relatively small field of study. The social scientific interest in single women's lives is not only recent but scarcely any previous studies have attended to "single-at-midlife" women's sexual lives and sexual relationships (e.g., Anderson & Stewart, 1997; Baumbusch, 2001; Byrne, 2008; Lewis, 1994; Trimmerger, 2005) apart from noting that single women at middle and older ages are involved in sexual relationships, are interested in re-partnering after a marriage ends, and sometimes have difficulty finding a new partner (Calasanti & Kiecolt, 2007; King & Scott, 2005; Mahay & Lewin, 2007). Instead, midlife sexuality research focuses on women who are in committed and monogamous relationships (e.g., long-term marriages; Binfu, Robertson, & Ransjö-Arvidson, 2009; Hayfield & Clarke, 2012; McHugh, 2006; Meadows, 1997). Thus, available research does not represent the lives of the many midlife women who are single.

Feminist research, which is generally more cognizant of differences among women, has explored how men and women's constructions of gendered subjectivity reproduce heterosexual relationships (e.g., Gavey 1992; Gilfoyle, Wilson, & Brown 1992; Hollway 1984a, 1984b), but again this work is dull to the social and historical contexts in which single and midlife women make sense of their sexual lives. The rise of singleness raises questions about the centrality of marriage, which presupposes the "ownership" of one individual by another, and challenges men's presumed rights to the sexual, reproductive, and domestic services of a wife (Jackson &

Scott, 2004). At the same time, in spite of the greater sexual freedom of recent decades, the institutionalization of heterosexuality and “coupledom” continues to set expectations for sexual exclusivity and impacts how women construct sexual and intimate relationship practices. These multiple, conflicting discourses constitute resources available for single women to give meaning to their sexual relationships with men. Consequently, single women’s sexual relationships at midlife are likely to be sites of tension and complexity, wherein established discourses of sexuality come into conflict with new ways for women to understand these relationships (Hollway, 1989). An example of a recently identified “new” discourse is the ideal of intimacy founded on emotional disclosure and reciprocity (e.g., Leslie & Morgan, 2011). The aim of this study is to explore the tensions, ambivalences, and contradictions in single-at-midlife women’s accounts of their sexual relationships with men and the absence of such relationships.

In the remainder of this chapter, I give a brief, critical overview of the literatures that provide the broad context for my research, namely those related to women’s sexuality at midlife. I then present a handful of studies that focus on the experiences of sexuality for single-at-midlife women. Finally, I introduce the discursive, constructionist methodology that frames my research and offer a short summary of the remaining chapters.

## **1.2 Situating My Research**

The existing psychology research on women’s sexuality at midlife has drawn extensively on a biomedical framework, but a contrasting literature rests on a psychosocial framework. In this section, I summarize each literature and discuss the possibilities each offers to women in terms of understanding their sexual lives and their sexual subjectivity. Notably, this research largely fails to distinguish among women who are single and those who are partnered, and much of it focuses on women with partners. Nevertheless, I review it because it is intended to apply to all women.

**1.2.1 Women’s sexuality at midlife.** The biomedical framework that dominates psychological research on women’s sexuality at midlife assumes a universal body governed by empirical laws and processes (Tiefer, 2000). This makes possible a scientific, individualized, biologically-based, and disease-oriented approach to sex research (i.e., the “medicalization” of sex; Tiefer, 2000), and has given rise to narratives of midlife sexuality that centre on genital

functioning and sexual behaviour (Tiefer, 1996). For example, the discussion about midlife sexuality is commonly reduced to changing physiology associated with menopause, i.e., dropping oestrogen levels, thinning vaginal walls, decreased vaginal lubrication, and reduced elasticity of the vagina (Etaugh & Bridges, 2001; Leiblum, 1990). It is generally accepted that these physiological changes cause women's sexuality in the middle and post-menopausal years to change, including declines in sexual desire, sexual activity, and sexual satisfaction, and periods of sexual abstinence (Leiblum, 1990; Marshall, 2011). Thus, within the biomedical framework, midlife sexuality is constructed as a problematic biological event (e.g., Lippert, 1997; McHugh, 2006; McQuade, 1998; Tiefer, 1996, 2002), and variations in midlife women's sexual interests, patterns of genital response, and experiences of orgasm are labeled "dysfunctions" (e.g., Hartley & Tiefer, 2003). Moreover, forms of being sexual that do not emphasize genital arousal and orgasm are discredited (Tiefer, 2002).

This biomedical framework has been increasingly emphasized as researchers have explored the pharmaceutical "solutions" to midlife women's sexual "challenges" and as industries of expert assessment and treatments have been developed (Marshall, 2011; Tiefer, 1996, 2002). Mid- and later-life women have been identified as at increased risk of sexual dysfunction, including sexual desire disorders, sexual arousal disorders, orgasmic disorders, and sexual pain disorders (McHugh, 2007). Medicine now extends into the realms of sexual performance and sexual pleasure to such an extent that sexual fulfilment within populations is viewed as a major public health concern (Laumann, Paik & Rosen, 1999). Within this context, any loss of sexual desire or suboptimal performance of sexual intercourse, at any age, is deemed abnormal and in need of medical "treatment" (Tiefer, 1996, 2000).

A growing chorus of researchers, including feminist sexologist Leonore Tiefer (e.g., 1996, 2000, 2001a, 2001b, 2002), have provided in-depth critiques of the biomedical framework as it is applied to sex research. The primary influence of the medical model has been to set the terms for what is to be included and excluded in sex research. Tiefer (2002) has argued that when applied to women's sexuality, including women in midlife and beyond, the medical model makes invisible the various social and political factors that may be affecting women's sexual lives, and that may cause women to be vulnerable to developing sexual problems. As a result, she has worked to promote an alternative, "woman-centered" definition of sexual problems that is based on the insights of feminist clinicians and theorists, i.e., *New View of Women's Sexual Problems*

(Tiefer, 2001a, 2001b). This social constructionist alternative avoids the reliance on the prevailing medical nomenclature and instead incorporates a classification system that locates women's sexual problems primarily in cultural and relational contexts and the power relations implicated in sexual feelings and activities (i.e., gender, ethnicity, race, class, and heterosexual dominance; Binfa, Robertson, & Ransjö-Arvidson, 2009; McHugh, 2006; Tiefer, 2000, 2002b). This challenges the assumption that there is a unitary way in which women experience their sexuality, i.e., "a women's sexuality." It also provides a framework for rethinking the sexological model's restrictions on what is important about sex at midlife, namely bodily change, menopause, and dysfunction (Tiefer, 2000, 2002) and changes across the lifespan (e.g., Brooks-Gunn & Kirsh, 1984; Levinson, 1996) that are limited to women's (failing) reproductive capacities at midlife (e.g., childbirth, child-rearing, and empty nest; Gergen, 1990).

Beyond this critical literature, there is a small amount of research documenting the sexuality of midlife and older women. These studies challenge stereotypical views of older women as "asexual," depictions of older age as involving gradual sexual decline, and the deceptively positive stereotype of the "sexy oldie" (e.g., Hinchliff & Gott, 2008; Marshall, 2012). What such research highlights is the complexity and diversity of older women's sexuality (e.g., Fileborn et al., 2015a, 2015b; Hinchliff & Gott, 2008). These researchers argue that midlife and older women's sexuality is situational and context dependent as well as influenced by the psychological and physical changes associated with ageing (Hinchliff & Gott, 2008). This includes a range of (often intersecting) factors, such as their relationship status, physical health, responsibilities towards others, and the attitudes and health of partners (Fileborn et al., 2015a). According to this line of inquiry, mid- and later life women (aged 50 to 86 years) continue to give importance to sexual relationships in their later adulthood, describing sexual activity as contributing to their quality of life and enhancing their relationships despite factors that interfere with, or prevent, sex from taking place (Gott & Hinchliff, 2003). Moreover, older women reportedly resist being positioned in pejorative ways, i.e., as the "asexual" older woman, by positioning themselves as women who have sexual "needs" and for whom sexual activity is important (Hinchliff & Gott, 2008). In addition, other researchers have reported that some women described improved sexual desire and functioning at midlife and in later-life (e.g., Koch, Mansfield, Thurau, & Carey, 2005; Vares, Potts, Gavey, & Grace, 2007).

In sum, there has been little research contributing to the project of understanding

women's sexuality at midlife beyond studies related to the changes associated with menopause and aging. This may be at least partly a function of the very "ordinariness" of women who live heterosexual lives, a social location that renders them invisible (Meadows, 1997). In particular, there is need for research that takes into account the diversity in women at midlife, specifically women who are single. Single women are an important group to study in relation to researchers' conclusions about changes in relationships and sexuality at midlife. At this point, it is unclear however whether or not the research I have summarized in this section, such as the "sexual decline" narrative, is relevant to single women at midlife.

**1.2.2 Single-at-midlife women and sexuality.** In 1962, Helen Gurley Brown, who may be best known for her 32-year editorship of the well-known women's magazine, *Cosmopolitan*, wrote a best selling self-help manual for single women entitled, *Sex and the Single Girl*. Gurley Brown herself did not marry until she was 37, and she extolled the notion that one's single years are a time of freedom and, conversely, that a husband is meant "for the *worst* years of your life" (Brown, 1962, p. 4). With chapter headings like "How to Be Sexy," and "The Rich Full Life," Gurley Brown counselled readers to avoid the pitfalls of suburban domesticity and instead embrace a philosophy of long-term, enjoyable single life based on the self rather than the family. In so doing, she encouraged a single lifestyle that included seeking professional advancement, becoming financially independent, and experiencing sexual relationships before or even outside of marriage (Scanlon, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c; Whelehan, 2004).

In the decades since, however, much of the empirical work related to being single has sought to discern the relative advantages and disadvantages of marriage versus singlehood (e.g., Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999; Hahn, 1993; Horwitz, White, & Howell-White, 1996), and to determine how gender moderates the relationship between marital status and well-being (e.g., Bernard, 1972; Ross, Mirowsky, & Goldstein, 1990). Furthermore, DePaulo (2006; DePaulo & Morris, 2005) has argued that the "ideology of marriage and family" remains a dominant cultural narrative. What this refers to is the central place of marriage along the normative life path and the concomitant focus on sexual exclusivity with marital partners. She argues further that this ideology assumes a sexual partnership within marriage to be *the* peer relationship of primary importance, making people who have such partnerships happier, less lonely, and more mature than those who do not (DePaulo, 2006; DePaulo & Morris, 2005). Consequently, singleness is

constructed as a “deficit identity,” defined by lack and dysfunction (Reynolds & Wetherell, 2003; Reynolds, Wetherell, & Taylor, 2007; Tiefer, 2000, 2002), and the sexual lives of single women become a problem, while the marital relationship remains the most socially approved context for sexual activity (Christopher & Sprecher, 2000).

The ideology of marriage and family is implicit in much of the psychological research related to singleness and sexuality. For example, survey studies assessing single women’s well-being and life satisfaction have reported that sexual satisfaction within a long-term romantic partnership is a central contributor to midlife women’s overall life satisfaction (e.g., Baruch, Barnett & Rivers, 1983; Lowenstein et al., 1981) and have identified the absence of a sexual partner (and, consequently, the absence of sexual satisfaction) as a problem for single women. This problem has also been identified in women’s accounts of singleness. For example, when older women (i.e., aged 65 to 77) reflected on their lifelong single status, they identified the absence of companionship, emotional intimacy with a spouse, and “physical intimacy” as among the various drawbacks of singleness (Baumbusch, 2001). In addition, Anderson and Stewart (1994), who explored the lives of “successful” midlife single women (i.e., women who “felt good about themselves and their lives,” p. 17), reported that “finding ways to manage the intertwining needs for sexual gratification and physical affection is one of the most difficult challenges faced by single people of either gender” (p. 276). Based on interviews with 90 single-at-midlife women (i.e., never married, divorced, widowed women between 40 and 55 years of age), Anderson and Stewart (1994) concluded that singleness involves enduring times of loneliness and that sexuality is a challenge, a practical “problem” to be managed.

The idea of sexuality and sexual desire as requiring “management,” that is, specific observation and action on the part of the single woman, is echoed in other studies (Lewis, 1994, 2001; Lewis & Moon, 1997). Based on reports from “single again” and “always single” midlife women, Lewis and Moon (1997) suggested that women must complete a series of non-sequential developmental tasks, including the “acknowledgement” of their sexual feelings and management of them when not in a sexual relationship in order to adjust to singlehood in a healthy way (i.e., “taking control” of sexual feelings; Lewis, 2001, p. 101). In the case of Anderson and Stewart’s (1994) participants (see above), the “management” of sexual desire occurred in three (possibly overlapping) ways. First, some women—those for whom sex was not crucial to their life satisfaction and happiness—accepted celibacy as an option. Second, other women “sublimated”

their sexual desires and found other ways of satisfying their need for physical intimacy (e.g., throwing their sexual energies into their work or physical exercise). Finally, for those women whose life satisfaction was intertwined with sexuality, celibacy was not an option, and they turned to casual sex, a strategy that Anderson and Stewart identified as a traditionally “male” attitude toward sex (i.e., “wanting it without emotional involvement,” p. 278). While the women described casual sex as offering the possibility of sex “uncontaminated by the pressures of relationship ties and promises” (p. 281), it also presented particular obstacles, such as the difficulty of remaining emotionally uninvolved. Generally, some of the women reported great success with these solutions, while others were still searching for the best way to deal with their sexual appetites and longings.

The approach taken in these studies not only privileges sexual relationships occurring in marital relationships, it identifies a limited set of possible identities, for example, Anderson and Stewart’s (1994) “celibate woman,” “casual sex woman,” and “sublimating woman,” when greater variety in sexual experience and expression surely is available for women across their differences and within one woman’s life. Indeed, E. Kay Trimberger (2005) conducted a qualitative study of 27 middle-aged (i.e., aged 30 and 60) ever-single and divorced women and detailed the social and personal factors, including sexual relationships, that led to women crafting full and satisfying (or unsatisfying) lives as single women. In this popular text, Trimberger noted the range of participant responses regarding the importance of sex and sexual relationships in single women’s lives, i.e., from sex as “overrated” to sex as “really important” (p. 20). In addition, she reported that one of the risks that single women face is being labeled as “sluts” if they have multiple, or serial, sexual partners, and as “uptight,” “repressed” or “unhealthy” if they are celibate (Trimberger, 2005). Overall, she identified a need for research that recognizes a woman’s sexuality may shift over time, ranging from celibacy to non-live-in monogamous relationships, and sexual relationships that are not based on romantic love.

Importantly, the relationship between women’s sexual satisfaction and life satisfaction is more complex than many studies might suggest. For example, a study of childless and single-at-midlife professional women suggested that being happy with one’s professional life was the single best predictor of life satisfaction, effectively minimizing any lack associated with the absence of a committed sexual partner (Lewis & Borders, 1995). Lewis and Borders (1995) recruited a small sample of professional women who were single, middle-aged, between the ages

of 35 and 65 years, and had no children. The women completed a questionnaire composed of previously established measures and published interview questions adapted to questionnaire format. For the single, middle-aged, childless, professional women, life satisfaction was explained by five factors, i.e., “job satisfaction,” “sexual satisfaction,” “regrets regarding life circumstances,” “internal locus of control,” and “leisure-time activities.” For this group of women, job satisfaction was the best single predictor of life satisfaction. This result has some basis in previous literature that has suggested that job satisfaction is a major component of overall life satisfaction for middle-aged women, including single professional women (e.g., Loewenstein et al., 1981). The factor, sexual satisfaction, added important new information to an understanding of the life satisfaction of single, middle-aged, professional women as previous researchers have rarely considered it. However, positive responses to the sexual satisfaction questions did not necessarily imply enjoyment of, or participation in, sexual activity. Specifically, of the 152 women in Lewis and Border’s study, 68 (45%) responded that their sexual activity was “nonexistent” (p. 97). In addition, more women reported either no sexual activity or less frequent sexual activity than they would like, and they still scored relatively high on the sexual satisfaction scale. This suggests that, in line with Loewenstein et al.’s (1981) conclusions, single women are characterized more by sexual indifference than by sexual frustration or repression. In contrast, this result may instead imply that these women have accepted this aspect of their lives (i.e., lack of sexual activity) so that it does not interfere with their overall life satisfaction.

Finally, in a study of the accounts of 30 single Irish women born in the 1950s and 1960s (i.e., in their 30s and 40s at the time of the study), Byrne (2008) noted that the participants made sense of their single lives in contradictory ways. Employing a discursive framework, Byrne examined Irish women’s accounts of singleness and how they positioned themselves in relation to dominant constructions of womanhood and singlehood. Participants employed varied polarised interpretative repertoires of singleness that have been identified in previous studies of single women, i.e., “singleness as loss” versus “singleness as independence and being in control” (Reynolds & Wetherell, 2003; Reynolds, Wetherell, & Taylor, 2005). Many participants in this study reflected on their sexuality and spoke at length about singleness as absence of intimacy and sexual relationships. Most of the older, single women in Byrne’s study were no longer sexually active with another person, some for ten years or more, while a few have never been sexually



active with another person. Participants constructed singleness in terms of the absence of companionship, and the emotional and physical intimacy of sexual relationships. At the same time, the women constructed singleness as a choice to refuse sexual relationships in favour of independence from men and intimate relationships with them. Intimate and sexual relationships with men were constructed as inhibiting participants' self-development. Participants' refusal of such relationships was constructed as reflecting independence and being in control. For example, one participant observed that she is less dependent and less needy when not sexually involved with another.

In summary, Byrne suggested that women constructed singleness, including their sexual lives, in terms of independence and autonomy, and that these meanings fundamentally structured their personal identities and their relationships with others. Thus, research on the sexual lives of single women at midlife has the potential to challenge prevailing assumptions about the significance of marriage and heterosexuality in women's lives.

### **1.3 Theoretical and Analytic Approach**

Three theoretical frameworks guide this study. Taken together, they allow for the analysis of language use (i.e. interview talk), including how the participants constructed and, together with the interviewer, co-constructed sexuality, aging, and singleness. I provide more details in the following three sections: Social constructionism (Section 1.2.1), discourse analysis (Section 1.2.2), and neoliberalism (Section 1.2.3).

**1.3.1 Social constructionism.** In contrast to an essentialist view of sexuality, the approach I take in this study is social constructionist (Gergen, 1985). On this account, it is impossible to know an objective reality. Rather, all human experience, including perception, is mediated through the inter-subjective influences of language, culture, and history. Foucault, for instance, argued that material existence has no meaning without a system of representation involved in discourse (Foucault, 1978). Since one can only have knowledge of things if they already have meaning, it is discourse—not the things-in-themselves—that produces knowledge. “Objects” like “punishment” and “sexuality” can only exist meaningfully within the discourses about them.

Psychologists who adopt a social constructionist approach to research make four central assumptions (Gergen, 1985). First, how psychologists study the world is constrained by the available concepts, categories, and methods. Concepts incline us toward, or even dictate, certain lines of inquiry while precluding others, making study results the products of our language use rather than of empirical discovery. Second, the concepts and categories we use vary considerably in their meanings across time and across cultures. For example, social constructionist theories treat sexuality as having social and historical meanings that are continually being reshaped by the shifting nature of family, economy, and politics (D'Emilio & Freedman, 1988). Third, the popularity or persistence of a particular concept, category, or method depends on its usefulness. Finally, descriptions and explanations of the world are themselves forms of social action with particular consequences.

Foucault (1978) is an important source for those adopting a social constructionist approach to theorizing the relations between power, the body, and single women's sexuality at midlife. In the initial volume of *The History of Sexuality* (1978), Foucault develops an anti-essentialist account of sexuality and the body, arguing that they are not natural phenomena but cultural constructs. At the heart of Foucault's history of sexuality is an analysis of the production of the category of sex and its function in regimes of power aimed at controlling the sexual body. Foucault argued that the construct of a supposedly "natural" sex functions to disguise the productive operation of power in relation to sexuality: "The notion of sex brought about a fundamental reversal; it made it possible to invert the representation of the relationships of power to sexuality, causing the latter to appear, not in its essential and positive relation to power, but as being rooted in a specific and irreducible urgency which power tries as best it can to dominate" (Foucault, 1978, p. 155). Here, Foucault's argument is that the relationship between power and sexuality is misrepresented when sexuality is understood as a natural force that is opposed, repressed, or constrained (i.e., "the repressive hypothesis"). Rather, he suggests that sexuality must be understood as a social practice that is infused with relations of power and dominant cultural meaning systems (Foucault, 1978), and is thoroughly contingent upon context and enculturation.

Thus, Foucault argued that sexuality is not a biological quality, that is, a natural inner drive or essence, whose character is the same across time and space. Rather, sexuality is a cultural construct that is understood through prevailing systems of meaning, i.e., discourse and

language. Sexualities, he argued, are constantly produced, changed, and modified as sexual discourse changes (Foucault, 1978). Furthermore, sexuality and singleness, like marriage, are not “natural facts” or social arrangements (Tiefer, 1994, 2000). When applied to female sexuality, the primary significance of biological events, such as sexual anatomy, sexual initiation, birth, and so on, is not that they occur, but that they are given social significance through language (Tiefer, 1987, 2000).

Foucault’s treatment of power, and its relation to sexuality and the body, provides useful conceptual tools for analyzing the social construction of sexuality (1978). Tiefer draws on social constructionism to critique the “sexological model” of sexuality that arose from an emphasis on the scientific study of sexuality, an overreliance on extrapolations from animal research, and a modern sensibility regarding the importance of sexuality as a core component of individual identity. Although Tiefer (2000) calls it a model, drawing further from Foucault, I understand the sexological model of sexuality as a discourse. This discourse has so dominated public and professional discussions of human sexuality, and is so ingrained in Western culture, that it is understood as a truth and rendered invisible at the same time. The “sexological” discourse privileges biological and physiological aspects of sexuality over context and individual differences and centers on technical definitions of body parts and bodily functions (e.g., Tiefer, 2000). As a consequence, it associates fundamental physiological processes with sexuality, i.e., a universal sexual experience that is experienced similarly across time, place, and populations (Tiefer, 2000). Moreover, it employs “sexual health” rhetoric that labels sexual thoughts, feelings, and behaviour as either “normal” or “abnormal” (Tiefer, 2000).

Many feminist scholars, including Leonore Tiefer (2000), have been critical of the assumptions underpinning this social and professional discourse as it applies to women’s sexuality. For example, the sexological discourse has been decried as leading to a preoccupation with narrow biological and physiological aspects of women’s sexual functioning. As a consequence, it produces a number of challenges to understanding the diversity of women’s sexuality. Among them is a phallogentric construction of sexuality that privileges genital contact, penile penetration, male pleasure, and female passivity (Tiefer, 2000). Traditionally defined, “having sex” is a heterosexual, relatively brief encounter in which the chief goal is the insertion of a penis into an orifice, the end being ejaculation and subsequent penile flaccidity. Thus, the penis clearly defines the beginning and ending of a sexual event, and it is the frequency of these

kinds of events that typically is assessed in sexuality studies (e.g., “sexual frequency;” Karraker, DeLamaater, & Schwartz, 2011). Within this view, the frequency of sexual contact is prized over duration, and orgasm over intimacy. Indeed, one of the manifestations of the sexological discourse that is most problematic for women is the foregrounding of men’s sexual experience.

Against this view, women’s sexuality is constructed as problematic in its unpredictability. Furthermore, as Tiefer (2000) and others have suggested, the sexological discourse fails to capture women’s experiences adequately because it excludes the cultural and political realities of women’s lives that deeply diversify their sexual experiences. In response to the biological reductionism and the mystification of sexuality that is associated with sexological discourse (and medicalization), feminist clinicians, researchers and theorists who take a social constructionist approach locate women’s sexuality and sexual “problems” primarily in cultural and relational contexts (e.g., Binfa, Robertson, & Ransjö-Arvidson, 2009). What women find attractive, erotic, or revolting varies across time and culture, and similarly, the meanings of specific sexual acts, such as heterosexual intercourse, vary historically (Tiefer, 2000).

In addition to his anti-essentialist view of sexuality, Foucault insists on the material reality of bodies. In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault (1978) explains:

The purpose of the present study is in fact to show how deployments of power are directly connected to the body—to bodies, functions, physiological processes, sensations, and pleasures; far from the body having to be effaced, what is needed is to make it visible through an analysis in which the biological and the historical are not consecutive to one another...but are bound together in an increasingly complex fashion in accordance with the development of the modern technologies of power that take life as their objective. Hence, I do not envisage a “history of mentalities” that would take account of bodies only through the manner in which they have been perceived and given meaning and value; but a “history of bodies” and the manner in which what is most material and most vital in them has been invested (pp. 121-122).

Because Foucault’s anti-essentialist account of the body allows for addressing the materiality of bodies, his work provides a means of addressing the everyday practices through which the female body is transformed and produced as a feminine and sexual body. In the sexual arena, individualized discourses of sexual liberation or “technologies of the self” (Foucault, 1988) shape bodies and identities, activating self-disciplining power. Disciplinary power takes

hold of individuals at the level of their bodies, desires, and everyday sexual practices to produce individuals who “voluntarily” subject themselves to self-regulation (Foucault, 1978, 1988); i.e., self-surveillance and self-normalization. More specifically, Foucault’s work is useful to explain women’s collusion with commonplace standards of femininity. Sandra Bartky (1988) draws on Foucault to address how the female body is made subject to disciplinary practices, such as dieting, exercise, and beauty regimens that together produce a form of embodiment that conforms to prevailing standards of youthful feminine beauty. According to her, these disciplinary practices oppress women, not by taking power away from them, but by producing sets of skills and competencies that depend on the maintenance of a restricted form of feminine identity. Bartky (1988) suggests that women’s apparent acceptance of these various practices relates to the fact that challenging “the patriarchal construction of the female body... may call into question that aspect of personal identity that is tied to the development of a sense of competence” (p. 77).

Treating sexuality as a varying social construction has implications for the focus of study. What is of interest is how single-at-midlife women make sense of who they are and their sexuality to themselves and to others. This leads to my next theoretical framework, discourse analysis.

**1.3.2 Discourse analysis.** Discursive researchers study language based on the assumption that people’s verbal responses are fluid performances or active constructions of accounts (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Although there are several different approaches to discursive research, the particular perspective that I primarily draw on is in the tradition of Potter and Wetherell (1987) and Edwards and Potter (1992). In this approach, language is regarded as performative, that is, through language use (i.e., conversation shared by speakers in particular social contexts), people create meanings of their social experience and construct specific momentary identities (Edley, 2001).

When applied to psychology, discourse analysis is concerned with psychological phenomena, such as memory, attribution processes (i.e., Edwards & Potter, 1992), and, as in the present study, identity. However, discursive psychology (DP) conceptualises these psychological phenomena as discursive actions. Discursive psychologists focus on how concepts such as identity are referenced in talk (e.g., participant interviews) and the various consequences of these

references. Therefore, as an approach to social psychology (Potter & Wetherell, 1987), DP involves understanding the “issues of identity, the nature of mind, constructions of self, other and the world, and the conceptualization of social action and interaction” (p. 81). It provides a framework for examining how people employ language to construct their identities and versions of events in their lives, and the particular cultural resources available to people as they do so (e.g., Edwards & Potter, 1992; Potter & Wetherell, 1987, 1995). As a result, psychological concepts such as identity become something people do rather than something people are (Willig, 2008).

In serving both productive and performative functions, language then is a form of social action (Willig, 2008)—we use language to do something (e.g., to accuse, excuse, justify, rationalise, categorise, persuade, blame, etc.)—and speech is analysed in terms of what it accomplishes within particular social contexts. For example, these achievements can take the form of “doing gender” or more specific identities (e.g., “non-sexual woman,” “midlife woman,” etc.) and constructing accounts of experience and events (e.g., constructing a “good” and “fulfilling” sexual encounter) within a research interview. Furthermore, language use is occasioned, and so the accounts people construct and the meaning of those accounts change across conversational contexts. It is also rhetorical in that, for example, specific accounts construct particular identities and not others (Edwards & Potter, 1992; Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Stake and accountability are also managed in conversations in a fluid process that alerts the DP researcher to changes in the action orientation of the talk (Potter & Wetherell, 1987, 1995).

The management and (re)negotiation of meaning are both enabled and restricted by the situational context and historically- and culturally-available interpretative repertoires (IRs; Potter & Wetherell, 1987). These are defined as “a lexicon or register of terms and metaphors drawn upon to characterise and evaluate actions and events” (p. 138). People employ IRs variously—in whole or in part, through accepting or resisting them—in order to characterise actions or events. An example is the IRs that single women have employed when explaining and justifying their singleness, and give positive meaning to their status, e.g., singleness as “independence and choice,” and “self-actualization and achievement” (Reynolds, 2008). In my study, as I will show in the data analysis chapters, participants’ accounts of their singleness and sexual lives, and how

they constructed their sexual identities, were shaped by these IRs and others that have been identified in the literature.

Here, it is important to clarify some terminology as it applies to my methodological framework. Throughout this study, I employ the terms, “discourse” and “IR,” which arise out of different theoretical positions on discourse analysis. My use of the term discourse follows Edley (2001), who defines it as a broadly available repository of meaning that is employed across various contexts, including personal, interpersonal, institutional (i.e., medicine, the judiciary, family, heterosexuality). Research adopting this term—i.e., the Foucauldian approach to discourse analysis—often addresses concerns of power, ways of organizing and regulating social life, and tends toward a view of people as subjectified (Edley, 2001, p. 202). Furthermore, there is usually a focus upon the availability of discursive resources within a culture (a “discursive economy,” Willig, 2008) and evidence of these resources is sought in local talk and assorted texts, e.g., media, policy documents, political speeches, etc. Within psychology, this approach can involve examining how psychological theories construct social and psychological life, and the objects and subjects that they claim to explain (e.g., “sexuality,” “single women,” “midlife”). In contrast, IRs are associated with DP and more specific contexts, such as single women’s talk about sex. They are also cultural resources in that they are not idiosyncratic constructions of an individual but are socially shared (Edley, 2001; Potter & Wetherell, 1987). I draw on research informed by both approaches and use both terms throughout the thesis. If I am referring to resources that have been identified by researchers employing the language of “discourses,” I use the term discourse. If I am referring to resources that have been identified by researchers employing the language of IRs or by myself through analysis of the interview material, I use the term “interpretative repertoire,” or “IR.”

In effect, I utilize a “synthetic” approach to discourse analysis, which draws on the two approaches just discussed, i.e., DP and the Foucauldian approach (e.g., Seymour-Smith & Wetherell, 2006; Wetherell, 1998). In exploring sexuality among single women at midlife, for example, I show how my participants take up the broader cultural discourses associated with heterosexual sex that were identified in Hollway’s (1984a, 1984b) previous research. However, by assuming that talk entails both a “top-down” process (i.e., talk is constrained by the discursive resources available to participants) and a “bottom-up” process (i.e., participants produce talk by selectively drawing on available discursive resources, and they revise and transform these

resources to do the work in a particular conversational context), my analysis also includes the conversational texture in women's talk of relationships, sexual experiences, and sexual identities. The analysis then identifies single-at-midlife women's ways of talking about sex; the regularity, variability, and contradictions of their talk; and how they managed their identities. In other words, the analysis focuses on how cultural discourses make possible particular subject positions or identities and particular ways of telling the women's life stories (e.g., Wetherell & Edley, 1999).

Finally, an important central concern of DP is subject positioning; that is, how and why speakers position themselves in certain ways within conversation. Positioning, defined as “the discursive process by which selves are located in conversations as observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced storylines” (Davies & Harré, 1990, p. 48), is emphasized at the expense of stable or fixed identities. Rather, people are capable of articulating multiple versions of themselves, or subject positions, that are both fluid and restricted, and defined by specific talk and interactional contexts (Edley, 2001). Drawing upon contradictory subject positions can be strategic in the sense that it is always rhetorical and accomplishes some sort of action in conversation. To address this, DP focuses on action—what speakers are attempting to achieve in their talk; construction—how speakers use language to construct an identity (e.g., a particular type of single-at-midlife woman) or version of events or objects (e.g., constructing a sexual relationship as “friends with benefits,” constructing a “single” sexuality); and variability—how speakers construct various versions of events and position and (re)position their identities and those of others for particular ends (e.g., defending against the “promiscuous woman” subject position). These varied versions of accounts and identity positions serve to rhetorically manage people's stake and accountability in conversation through moment-by-moment enactments. I provide a further description of the analytic approach in the methodology section (Section 1.4: *Overview of the Methodology*), and Chapter 3: *Method*.

**1.3.3 Neoliberalism.** Alongside social constructionism and discourse analysis, neoliberalism became relevant during and after my data analysis.

Neoliberalism refers to a mode of political and economic rationality that is closely linked to the tradition of liberal governments in Western democracies. It is characterized by privatization, deregulation, and the withdrawal of the welfare state from many areas of social



provision (Gill & Scharff, 2011). In recent years, a number of writers have explored neoliberalism, highlighting how it has shifted to a mode of governmentality operating across a range of social spheres (e.g., Rose, 1996). As an ethic, it is increasingly concerned with internalising the government's authority in its citizens, giving rise to rational “autonomized” and “responsibilized” subjects. In neoliberalism, individual citizens are rendered solely responsible for managing aspects of their lives that previously might have been the duty of another—i.e., a state agency—or would not have been recognized as a responsibility at all (Miller, 2008). It is in such a climate that structural inequalities are internalized as individual problems, and individual achievement is believed to be sufficient to overcome social pressures or constraints (Gill & Scharff, 2011; McRobbie, 2009).

Researchers have suggested that in this discursive terrain women's sexual subjectivities are shaped by individualized neoliberal discourses of “choice,” “autonomy,” and “freedom” (Rose & Miller, 1992, p. 201). The individual woman, then, becomes evermore responsible for knowing about, monitoring, and managing her sexuality and sexual health. Healthy female sexuality is reconfigured from a narrow focus on pathology or illness to a broader language of wellness or “well-being.”

Generally, a need for detailed empirical research that connects theoretical claims about neoliberalism to the lived realities of people's everyday lives, i.e., neoliberalism “on the ground” and “in action” has been noted (Gill & Scharff, 2011). For example, Rosalind Gill has argued that the extensive surveillance over spheres of intimate life and conduct is particularly demanding of women, helping to sustain unequal gender relations (Gill, 2009b). Consistent with this, she and her colleagues have produced a body of research that identifies a dramatic increase in women's self-surveillance and self-regulation in recent decades (e.g., Gill, 2007a, 2007b, 2009a, 2009b; Harvey & Gill, 2011). Within the neoliberal context, women are exhorted to transform themselves and their conduct as well as to reconstruct their notions of what it is to be a sexual subject (Gill, 2009b; Harvey & Gill, 2011). Through various analyses of sexual self-help products, e.g., women's glossy magazines such as *Glamour UK*, Gill and colleagues have shown how such popular media call upon women to perform levels of intimate self-surveillance, monitoring, and planning that previously have been undocumented (see Gill, 2009b; Harvey & Gill, 2011). For example, engaging in beautification routines, e.g., getting Brazilian waxes, is constructed as a “personal choice” and a means of “pleasing” oneself, rather than a culturally

defined notion of feminine beauty and sexual appeal (Gill, 2007b). Given the force of neoliberalism as demonstrated in this research, it is perhaps not surprising that I found this work to be relevant as I proceeded to analyze the accounts of the participants in my study.

#### **1.4 Methodological Considerations**

This study aimed for a sample of women who could best reflect on heterosexuality and being single at midlife. It included women who were living without a romantic partner and self-identified as “women alone.” This inclusive sampling strategy served to avoid my identifying who is “really” single, an approach that would be inconsistent with the theoretical framework of DP. Hence, women from a range of backgrounds who viewed themselves as women alone (i.e., never married, divorced, widowed, and ex-common law or ex-cohabiting) were invited to participate. I was specifically interested in women who were in “early” middle age (35 to 50 years of age) and who had not been married or cohabiting with a romantic partner during the previous five years. I decided to focus on this cohort as they are at a particularly interesting point in relation to the normative expectations for women, that is, they are likely well-established in employment and living independently but are not settled into marriage and family life, although some have been married or otherwise partnered in the past. In other words, they may be positioned as not having met the standard expectations for women at midlife (i.e., marriage, family, and children). As well, while LGBT-identified women were not excluded from participation, the recruitment strategy was aimed at drawing women who had had relationships with men, i.e., “We are interested in learning about midlife women’s perspectives on their intimate relationships with men and their sexuality” (see Appendix A), a criterion that would exclude many LGBT-identified women.

The resulting sample was a group of 21 women with a range of backgrounds and life circumstances. Discourse analytic studies commonly rely on relatively small numbers of participants, as the focus is *language use* rather than *language users*. Thus, the critical issue is the sample of discourses, not the number of people, to be analysed. As the research questions were focused on women’s constructions of sexuality at midlife and the cultural resources women used, the research questions lent themselves to a more “coarse-grained” analysis, i.e., identifying discourses and IRs and how participants employed them, rather than the more detailed features of talk studied in conversation analysis. At the same time, I drew on my previous research

experience—a study of 12 participants (Moore & Radtke, 2015)—and judged that 21 interviews of 90- to 120-minutes would yield abundant and richly detailed data.

### **1.5 Reflexivity**

Following feminist methodological approaches that draw attention to the effects of wider social expectations and power relationships on the interactions between researcher and participant within an interview (e.g., Wilkinson, 1998), I view the interviews as products of interactions that were influenced by the social locations of the interviewees and myself. I do not, therefore, assume that I had a neutral role in the production of these accounts. Taking a discourse analytic approach to research also involves researcher reflexivity insofar as it recognizes, and deliberately reveals, how meanings are produced and reproduced within particular social, cultural, and relational contexts (Taylor, 2001). Reflexivity necessitates making the research process itself a focus of inquiry and becoming aware of situational dynamics in which the researcher and participants are jointly involved in knowledge production. Discourse analysis takes a “radical” approach in moving beyond advocating for reflexivity as a “tool” for more effective research toward a moral project of questioning researchers’ truth claims (Wetherell, 2001).

There are some potential challenges to being reflexive. For example, “reflexivity” has multiple meanings, i.e., what constitutes reflexive practice differs across research communities (Lynch, 2000). However, my approach was to practice reflexivity through ongoing efforts to understand how my presence and actions influenced the research situation and my interpretations of the women’s sexual lives. One consideration has been the relevance of my identity—as a single woman, and as a researcher—for the research design. I had conceived of this research for several related reasons. I was interested in the topic for personal reasons, i.e., I am a midlife woman who is navigating dating and relationships with men. Consequently, I was motivated to confront my limited knowledge about my own experiences, as well as those of the midlife and single women I know. As well, after discussing my interests in midlife singleness and sexuality with friends and colleagues, I was convinced that this avenue of research would be fruitful for the academic community, and for women in similar circumstances. From the outset, my interest in the everyday lives of single women evolved from political interests and a desire to produce knowledge that might make a positive difference for women. This meant that I approached the

project design from a feminist perspective, recognizing that gender is central to identity and a primary means of distributing power, privilege, and status in social situations (Magnusson & Maracek, 2010). These interests drove my choice of discursive psychology (DP) as a theoretical and methodological approach (Magnusson & Maracek, 2010).

I also considered how the data collection context, i.e., research interviews, and the topic areas and questions making up the interview, influenced participants' accounts and impacted their identity work. Study participants were recruited from among various social networks as volunteers for a "psychology study" about "midlife women's perspectives on their intimate relationships with men and their sexuality." This initial description of the study immediately evoked a specific discursive space that privileged certain accounts, and potentially silenced others. That is, I positioned the women as "midlife singles," effectively creating a category of women who presumably shared certain characteristics in common, and were worthy of research attention due to some "problem" in their lives. In positioning the women, as "other," I set them up to defend and justify their singleness throughout the study. In addition, the recruitment strategy and the interview questions called upon participants to consider "intimate relationships with men" (i.e., "How do women meet men?"; "How does sex fit into your relationships with men?"), drawing on constructions of sex as a heterosexual event and potentially excluding women who had had non-heterosexual experiences and limiting talk of sexual experiences other than heterosexual ones.

During the interviews, the participants spoke with me, a woman about whom they had very little prior knowledge, apart from the fact that I was in early midlife and a doctoral student in a Department of Psychology at an academic institution. In order to facilitate their trust in me as researcher, I reported to participants that I was also single and at midlife. Therefore, I emphasized the sameness between my background and that of my participants, and explicitly distanced myself from the view that singleness was problematic. While I do not assume that my gender, singleness, or age *necessarily* provided a shared common ground with participants, my single-at-midlife status was helpful in recruiting participants and generating discussions in the interviews. During the interviewing process, my goals and interests inevitably directed the speakers to some of my interests, and my questions raised some topics and problems that most participants did not spontaneously bring up (e.g., "celibacy," "good sex").

## 1.6 Chapter Overview

The remainder of this thesis is laid out in six chapters. In Chapter Two, I situate my study in the discursive research literature on single women and women's midlife sexuality. In Chapter Three, I present the methodology, including descriptions of the research participants. I describe the interview process and how I analyzed the interview transcripts. Finally, I detail how I ensured the quality, integrity, and rigour of the project throughout each analytic stage and highlight the various decisions I faced as the stages of research unfolded.

Chapters Four through Six contain my analyses, each addressing different aspects of the two research questions. In Chapter Four, *Discourses of Sex*, I explain the six "discourses of sex" that were utilized across the interviews and show how the women drew on them to account for their sexual encounters and relationships with men. I begin with the three discourses of sex that were first named by Wendy Hollway (i.e., "male sexual drive," "have and hold," "permissive sex") and still worked up in my participants' accounts. Next, I identify three discourses that have not been previously identified (i.e., sexological, "caring sex," and "New Age spirituality" discourses). I also illustrate how participants employed these discourses in their accounts of "good" sexual experiences and used them to manage their sexual identities when talking about casual sexual relationships with men.

Chapter Five, *Sex and Sexuality at Midlife*, addresses the central ways midlife women gave meaning to their sexuality—as losses and gains—in the context of aging. The women drew on the "midlife sexuality as physical decline" IR in accounting for their (potential) loss of physical attractiveness and the ability to attract future partners. They also drew on the "midlife as increased sexual knowledge and experience" IR to construct midlife sexuality in terms of greater sexual confidence and position themselves as agentic sexual selves. The final section of the chapter, *Sexual Relationships at Midlife* (Section 5.3) extends the analysis of the constructions of midlife singleness presented in my Masters' thesis. Participants drew on constructions of midlife to position themselves as "comfortably single midlife women" who are open to "casual" sexual relationships.

Finally, Chapter Six, *Celibacy and Being Sexual*, consists of an analysis of women's accounts of their sexual lives and sexual identities when they are without a sexual relationship, and how they worked to position themselves as "sexual women" in this context. I present an analysis of how women resisted being positioned as "celibate" and detail their justifications for

not being in a sexual relationship. Next, I demonstrate the alternative ways in which the women constructed their sexuality in the context of not having sex with a man. Overall, the analysis shows that “not having sex” is a deficit identity defined by lack and a “troubled” subject position.

In the final chapter, the *Discussion*, I explore the implications of the three sets of analyses for research on midlife sexuality and singleness, the relevance of gender, as well as limitations and future research directions. I then provide my overall conclusions. The main contribution of this research lies in the explication of how the women drew on discourses relating to heterosexual relations in talking about sex and sexual relationships and how they positioned themselves as sexual women. I argue that sexual relationships are sites of tension for midlife single women. My results demonstrate how “sexuality,” “midlife,” and “singleness” were constructed from a series of multiple and often contradictory discourses and IRs. Nevertheless, two emerging discourses of sexual and relationship intimacy, caring sex and New Age spirituality, enabled the subject positions, “sexual woman” and “moral woman,” which offer an alternative to those identified in previous research. Through the articulation of these discourses, the women accounted for their intimate sexual encounters as “moral women” having “more than just sex” in casual liaisons and long-term committed relationships. In this way, the women positioned themselves as adapting to the sexual conditions of midlife singleness and challenged the assumed necessity of committed heterosexual relationships in order for women to have sexually active and morally acceptable lives.

## Chapter 2: Women's Singleness and Sexuality

### 2.1 Introduction

With this chapter, I situate my research in the discursive literatures relating to single women and (hetero)sexual relationships. In particular, I highlight some of the constructions of women's sexual subjectivity. First, I consider the discursive research on women's singleness, including the results of my Master's thesis, which gave rise to this study (Section 2.2, *Discursive Constructions of Women's Singleness*). Next, I provide an overview of the discursive research on young women's (hetero)sexual relationships, paying particular attention to research on women's sexual agency, desire, and pleasure (Section 2.3). In section 2.4, I outline how women's sexuality is understood in the context of post-feminism (*Women As 'New' Sexual Subjects*). Finally, I briefly elaborate on the rationale for the study, and my research questions (Section 2.5, *Study Rationale*). As a whole, this chapter describes the possible "discursive worlds" of the women who participated in this study, and potential implications for their ways-of-being (Willig, 2001, p. 120).

### 2.2 Discursive Constructions of Women's Singleness

Given that little is understood about the meanings of singlehood that are available to midlife and older women, I review the few discursive studies that have explored this topic, including my own (Moore & Radtke, 2015). First, though, I summarize the work of Jill Reynolds, who published a series of four articles (Reynolds, 2006; Reynolds & Taylor, 2004; Reynolds & Wetherell, 2003; Reynolds, Wetherell, & Taylor, 2007) and a book (Reynolds, 2008) that have been critical in the development of my research. Her research demonstrated how women construct and negotiate their single identities, account for their single status, narrate their life stories, and construct their relationships with men.

Based on interviews conducted in the late 1990s with women, aged 30 to 60 years, who were living alone (i.e., never married, divorced, or widowed), Reynolds and colleagues identify the discursive landscape of singleness and explore how women deal with this potentially stigmatizing identity. In one of her papers, Reynolds and Wetherell (2003), identifies four polarised and dichotomous IRs used by the participants to construct, explain and evaluate their single lives: "singleness as a personal deficit," "singleness as social exclusion," "singleness as

independence and choice,” and “singleness as self-actualization and achievement.” The participants used the IRs of “independence and choice” and “self-actualization and achievement” to construct and celebrate their single status; however, doing so made it a challenge for them to talk about a desire for moving out of the single category, i.e., marrying or otherwise partnering. On the other hand, women who spoke about their desire for a relationship risked being constructed as flawed (e.g., lonely and unfulfilled) and conspicuous in their failure to be in a romantic relationship. Together, these four IRs constitute contradictory ways of understanding and explaining a single identity that are available in Western culture. Rather than viewing women’s use of these IRs a sign of ambivalence regarding their single status, as other researchers have done (e.g., Lewis & Moon, 1997), Reynolds and Wetherell (2003) suggest that singleness is a category with which it is difficult to be aligned, given its meaning as a personal deficit that involves social exclusion (i.e., it is a “troubled” subject position).

In a subsequent study, Reynolds, Wetherell and Taylor (2007) focused on women’s explanations and justifications for their single status and their use of the cultural resources, “choice” and “chance,” i.e., they sometimes attributed their singleness to chance *and* at other times attributed it to their own choosing. The choice and chance conflict is an ideological dilemma—a woman who claims to be “single by choice” must then explain why she has chosen to deviate from the love-marriage-and-family norm. Alternatively, claiming to be “single by chance” means that she must explain why she is not in control of her own life. In resolving this dilemma, they drew upon four mutually exclusive IRs: “I want to feel chosen,” “I haven’t felt the need,” “I want to be in a relationship,” and “it just hasn’t happened.” The participants employed these four IRs to position themselves as agentic and open to a romantic relationship with a man. However, simultaneously positioning oneself as happily single and desiring a romantic relationship was impossible. For example, the IR, I want to feel chosen, drew on a hetero-normative storyline that positions men as the ones who choose, while the IR, I haven’t felt the need, allowed women to defend themselves against any criticism of their apparent lack of success in achieving the goal of a partnership.

In two papers, the analysis identified the “narrative frames” that the women used to explain the paths they had taken in life and describe the significant relationships they had had with men. Reynolds and Taylor (2004) focused on one case, i.e., Sarah, whose account was characteristic of how participants narrated their single lives and justified their departure from the



“coupledom narrative” (Reynolds, 2008). Each narrative provided unique means of constructing the women’s life histories. For example, the “life events” narrative portrayed life as a series of prominent, specific events that had impacted the development of romantic relationships. The “life cycle” narrative assigned chronological and transitional stages to life events, i.e., life in one’s 20s, 30s, 40s, and 50s, giving an apparent logic to their life story. Finally, using the “life as progress” frame entailed telling their life stories as a progressive narrative. Together, these three frames allowed the women to explain how they came to be where they currently are in their lives, while resisting the happily-ever-after coupledom narrative that commonly structures women’s life stories. In the second article, Reynolds (2006) identified three “self-narratives” that structured women’s accounts of intimate relationships with men. With each one, women sought to position themselves as self-determining and possessing agency, even in relationships that had ended or were limited by the former partner’s availability. The “got it wrong” narrative constructed men from past relationships as deeply flawed, e.g., dishonest or violent, but positioned the women as to blame for their poor judgment and bad choice. The “relationships with unavailable men” narrative constructed previous relationships with men as meeting certain needs, e.g., intellectual companionship, while allowing women to maintain a self-determined and independent life. Finally, “a five-year term of office” constructed relationships with men as variable across time, i.e., as good for a time but then dispensable when they are no longer satisfying or meeting a woman’s needs. In sum, the women’s accounts of singleness reflected the shifting landscape of intimate relationships and featured “new” cultural resources—individualisation, boundaries, and impermanence in relationships—that allowed the women to position themselves as self-determining and agentic single women.

In my Master’s thesis research (Moore & Radtke, 2015), I followed up on Reynolds’ suggestion that further research needed to focus on more specific configurations of single women and address the seemingly common-sense IRs from which they draw to account for their lack of fit with normative aspirations. Consequently, I explored the accounts of 12 single women who, at age 35 to 45 years, could be judged to have failed to achieve lives consistent with the “marriage and family” narrative, i.e., they had reached early midlife, but had never married nor become mothers and had not cohabited with a romantic partner in the last five years. Thus, these women negotiated three overlapping troubled identities that can only be spoken about in terms of what they are *not* (Wetherell, 1998), i.e., “never married,” “non-mother,” and “midlife.” However,

they drew on the “transformative midlife” IR, which constructed midlife as a time of creating a secure, independent life for themselves now, i.e., not waiting but still remaining open to the possibility of a future romantic relationship. Therefore, despite the challenges posed by the three troubled identities, the women successfully negotiated a positive discursive space in which being single was defined by the presence rather than the absence of satisfying activities.

Taken together, these studies demonstrate the utility of employing a discursive approach to studying women alone to illuminate what it means to be a single woman. They point to the complexity of the discursive landscape relating to singleness and the extensive rhetorical work required by single women to navigate a cultural context in which they continue to be judged according to the standards of the ideology of marriage and family (DePaulo & Morris, 2005, p. 57). While women in (early) midlife have access to cultural resources related to aging that sometimes allow for performing an empowered single identity (i.e., “transformative midlife” IR; Moore & Radtke, 2015), as a whole there are few cultural resources available to understand singleness in terms other than as a deficit. While single women may be at the vanguard of social change relating to marriage and family, they continue to have difficulty accounting for their single status and single identities (Reynolds, 2008).

**2.2.1 Sexuality of single women.** Despite the emerging literature on single women, including that which examines the multiple and conflicting meanings of singleness, i.e., discursive psychology, very few previous studies have attended to the subject of single women’s sexual lives and sexual relationships with men (i.e., Anderson & Stewart, 1994; Baumbusch, 2001; Lewis, 2001; Trimberger, 2005). Among these few, women are called upon to “manage” their sexuality and are exhorted to address their feelings of loss, but there has been no in-depth exploration of how single women understand their sexuality. Furthermore, I was unable to identify any discursive studies that explore older, single women’s accounts of their sexual lives and their negotiation of sexual relationships. This gap suggests a need for such research; however, the significance of such a project is further located within the broader discursive literatures that explores cultural discourses of women’s (but not specifically single or at midlife) sexual relationships and subjectivities.

## 2.3 Young Women's (Hetero)sexual Relationships

Research on the discourses of (hetero)sex associated with Western cultures that define customary female and male conduct and set expectations for the “natural and normal” is clearly relevant to my project. In particular, feminist researchers have explored how women navigate the meanings of sexuality in the context of romantic heterosexual relationships. In this section, I focus on how sexual desire and sexual agency have been constructed and understood across the (mostly) discursive literature relating to women's sexuality.

**2.3.1 “Missing” discourse of desire.** In the last 20 years, one significant research agenda has been the question of female sexual agency. Ground breaking ethnographic research from Michelle Fine (1988) highlighted the “missing discourse of female desire” in adolescent women's accounts of sexual activity. She drew attention to the multiple ways in which socio-cultural forces, e.g., secondary school curriculum, operate to undermine, erase or de-legitimize girls' experiences and articulations of sexual agency. Rather than locate spaces within which young women could discuss their sexual desire, Fine (1988) instead identified discourses relating to violence and victimization (e.g., “protection discourse”), which position women as victims of male sexuality rather than as female sexual subjects who can negotiate with men. These same discourses are documented in her work two decades later (Fine & McClelland, 2006; MacPherson & Fine, 1995). The centrality of the protection discourse, and the lack of talk about female sexual agency and desire in young women's school sex education, contrasts with what is offered to young men (Holland et al., 1998). Consistent with this, numerous researchers have repeatedly demonstrated that there is either a muted expression of sexual desire in women's talk about intimate relationships (e.g., Jackson & Cram, 2003) or a complete absence (e.g., Holland, et al., 1998).

Some of this research has explored the discourses of (hetero)sex that construct sexual relations between men and women and their respective sexual subjectivities—how women take up these discourses to give meaning to their sexual relationships with men and position themselves (or not) as sexual women. For example, Wendy Hollway analyzed how discourses of (hetero)sex (i.e., male sexual drive, have and hold, permissive sex) organize men's and women's sexual relations and subjectivities (Hollway, 1984a, 1984b). She argued that these three discourses make possible specific positions for subjects to take up in relation to one another. In

particular, the male sexual drive and have and hold discourses produce a “sexual double standard” in which men are positioned in the role of sexual aggressor, i.e., “active man,” while women are assigned the complementary role of the “passive” sexual object of male sexual desire. In producing a sexual double standard, women are positioned as sexual gatekeepers, requiring them to monitor their partners as well as themselves. The permissive sex discourse, which promotes sexuality as “natural” and challenges the principle of monogamy, positions women as sexual subjects and offers women the possibility of accounting for a sexual drive equal to that of men. However, differences between men and women’s positions in the traditional discourses (i.e., male sexual drive and have and hold) are not eliminated by this permissive sex discourse. Hollway (1984b) argues further that accounts of sexual practices are never the products of just one discourse, and women’s accounts of sexual practices are complicated by the have and hold discourse. While the permissive sex discourse legitimates men engaging in heterosexual practices without emotional connections and is consistent with how their sexual subjectivity is produced within discourse, the liberating effects of the permissive sex discourse are contradictory for women, who understand their sexual subjectivity within the have and hold discourse as tied to relationships. As such, discourses of (hetero)sex are gender differentiated. Consequently, Hollway (1989) argued that there is no collective emancipatory discourse of heterosexual desire through which women can express an active, desiring, and powerful sexual subjectivity. In addition, because women (and men) turn to these discourses of sex to guide their conduct and to understand their sexual and erotic feelings, gendered power relations are perpetuated in women’s (and men’s) sexual practices.

Subsequent research has supported and extended Hollway’s analysis of heterosexual relations as a site of gender inequality, with women being disempowered in heterosexual sex. For example, in analyzing women’s accounts of unwanted sex with men, Gavey (1992, 2005) has shown how discourses of heterosexual sex operate through “technologies of coercion”—and how women attempt to resist and subvert the coercive power of these discourses. In addition, a fourth discourse identified in men’s and women’s talk about sex and sexuality has been named the “pseudo-reciprocal gift” discourse (Gilfoyle, Wilson & Brown, 1992). This discourse constructs men as requiring heterosexual sex to satisfy their urges (in this way, it corresponds to the male sexual drive discourse) and women as “giving” (i.e., relinquishing control of their bodies) themselves to their partners in order to satisfy those urges. In return, however, men “give”

women sexual satisfaction (i.e., an orgasm) and their protection. This discourse reproduces the male active and dominant/female passive subordinate power relations of the sexual double standard, but gives new meanings to men's and women's complementary subject positions, i.e., the man as "sexual technician" and the woman as "sexual object." Thus, it intersects with sexological discourse (Tiefer, 2000) in the emphasis on male sexual prowess and the importance of orgasms as the goal of sexual interactions. These resources clearly reflect men's dominance in a (hetero)sexist society and create sex-specific sexual interests.

Another relevant study that led to similar conclusions (the Women, Risk and AIDS Project; Holland, Ramazanoglu, Sharpe, & Thompson, 1998) examined young women's heterosexual relationships in the UK in the context of safe-sex practices and women's ability to protect themselves against HIV. This feminist collaborative project collected accounts about heterosexual relationships from young men and women (aged 16 to 21 years) from diverse cultural and class backgrounds in London and Manchester between 1989 and 1992. Through the study's theoretical framing—five "layers" comprising heterosexual power (i.e., language and discourse; agency and action; social institutions; embodied practices; and historical and cultural specificity)—the authors provide an analysis of the operation of normative heterosexuality and normative femininity. They detail young men's and women's (hetero)sexual relationships and experiences, i.e., risk-taking, condom use, sex education, first sex, and sexual desire, ultimately arguing that a particular set of masculine meanings, i.e., "masculine heterosexuality," shaped both male and female sexual subjectivities. They identified an active, pleasure seeking, embodied masculine sexuality, and a disembodied female who is constructed as sexually unknowing, and aspiring to a relationship (Holland et al. 1998). Through the privileging of masculine sexuality, e.g., male sexual drive, and the lack of any discursive space for an "autonomous female sexuality," gender inequalities are reproduced to maintain the sexual double standard in sexual practices. They labelled this process "the-male-in-the-head" and noted how this internalization of male standards and values works to disempower young women by organizing their sexual subjectivities around boys' needs, desires, and interests; e.g., sex is finished "when he has finished." Importantly, there was no evidence that young men have a "woman-in-the-head."

These studies suggest that traditional discourses of (hetero)sex construct men's sexuality as an unproblematic biological necessity, i.e., male sexual drive discourse, and women's as

oriented more toward intimacy (i.e., have and hold; Hollway, 1984a, 1984b, 1989). Furthermore, they point to inequalities of power relations in sexual practices and relationships that are organized around boys'/men's needs, desires, and interests in conjunction with an absence of a positive conception of female sexuality. However, there is a growing body of research that places discourses of desire and pleasure at the centre of inquiry and suggests an emerging discourse of sexual emancipation that offers the potential of women's resistance.

Moreover, some researchers have proposed that Hollway's analyses provide a negative and overly monolithic account of women's sexual relationships (1984a, 1984b). They have argued that women may subvert and transform the discourses of heterosexuality through exercising their individual choice and self-expression (even though this is constrained by available discourses). Such studies suggest that women's individual experiences of heterosexuality are not unchanging and are not determined by an assumed power hierarchy of gender/sexuality. In the following section, I summarize research that examines women's micro-practices of heterosexuality, showing the potential for women to resist the discourses of heterosexuality and foregrounding female agency, choice, and self-determination.

**2.3.2 Young women negotiating discourses of (hetero)sex.** Researchers have been primarily concerned with identifying the discourses that position women as sexually passive, or as lacking or missing sexual desire (Fine, 1988; Hollway, 1984a, 1984b). Still others have sought to identify the positive discursive spaces that allow for the construction of a desirous sexuality and sexual agency for women, such that meanings of sexuality and femininity are possible beyond the limiting, repressive boundaries Hollway identified. In this section, I provide a summary of the discursive studies that have explored the discourses of heterosexuality related to young women's sexual "agency," "desire," and "pleasure," and the possibilities of articulating a "positive" sexual subjectivity.

**Constructions of (hetero)sex.** Feminist researchers have given attention to competing discourses of heterosexuality in terms of the significance given to heterosexual intercourse and how they enable and restrict women's constructions of sex. Nicola Gavey and her colleagues have contributed to this literature, and I focus here on a series of articles arising from a project aimed at promoting sex-without-intercourse as a safer sex option (Braun, Gavey, & McPhillips, 2001; Gavey, McPhillips, & Braun, 1999; Gavey, McPhillips, & Doherty, 2001; McPhillips,

Braun, & Gavey, 2001). Across these studies, there were few alternative meanings of sex to challenge the taken-for-granted normality and naturalness of intercourse, and female sexuality was largely constructed as subordinate to a “hegemonic” male sexuality. Men and women constructed intercourse as central to (hetero)sex, prioritized as “real sex” over and above other sexual practices. For example, intercourse was constructed as a natural biological imperative, which served to give intercourse a taken-for-granted status that is difficult to challenge. In addition, through meanings of “acceptance,” “intimacy,” “closeness,” and “love,” intercourse was represented as the ultimate sexual experience. In various ways, then, constructions of sex were understood in terms of the “coital imperative” (Gavey, McPhillips, & Braun, 1999; McPhillips, Braun, & Gavey, 2001).

Nevertheless, a close examination of the features of talk in men and women’s accounts revealed that while the coital imperative was upheld, alternative discursive spaces challenged it, albeit in a limited and less accessible form (McPhillips et al., 2001). Participants’ accounts produced contradictory definitions of sex, i.e., “sex is intercourse” versus “sex is more than intercourse,” suggesting the potential of satisfying sex without intercourse (McPhillips, et al., 2001). Also, women drew on the “sex as pleasure” discourse that constructed intercourse as an option rather than the inevitable goal of sex (Gavey, et al., 1999).

**Accounting for sexual “agency,” “desire,” and “pleasure.”** Within the same overall project, Gavey and colleagues also examined discourses of normative heterosexuality in relation to women’s accounts of safer sex practices, determining that they play a significant role in maintaining unequal power dynamics between men and women (Gavey, McPhillips, & Doherty, 2001). In the context of “safer” sex, the same cultural scripts that serve to legitimize various levels of coercion (e.g., Gavey, 1992, 2005) also limit the ways women may control the course and outcomes of heterosexual encounters. In contrast to the suggestion by public health sex educators that women’s requests for condom use is unproblematic, Gavey and her colleagues have countered that the discourses of (hetero)sex restrict women’s control and safe sex options. The scarcity of discourse relating to women’s desire (see Fine, 1988) in combination with discourses of (hetero)sex, i.e., the coital imperative (Gavey et al., 1999; McPhillips et al., 2001) and the male sexual drive (Hollway, 1984a, 1984b) discourse, enable and constrain how much control women have in determining what sexual activity counts as real sex and the possibility for employing safer sexual practices in their relationships with men (i.e., Gavey, et al., 2001). While

some of the women in the study embraced the sentiments embedded in “safer sex” slogans, e.g., “if it’s not on, it’s not on” (p. 931), and positioned themselves as actively advocating for themselves, this was not the case for all the women. Indeed, the individualism and the notion of assertiveness that is embedded in such slogans conflict with constructions of traditional femininity. This research supports the conclusions of earlier studies arguing that relations of (hetero)sex are premised on a construction of femininity that endangers women (e.g., Holland et al., 1998).

Finally, a discourse of “reciprocity” in accounts of heterosexual encounters, which constructed (hetero)sex as a “two-way thing”—“ ‘giving and receiving ‘pleasure’ ” (p. 240)—produced a discursive space wherein women were positioned as active sexual subjects who could potentially ask for what they wanted and assert their “entitlement” to an orgasm (Braun, Gavey & McPhillips, 2001). However, when considered among other discourses of sex, i.e., have and hold and coital imperative (Gavey et al., 1999), the “reciprocity discourse” was not consistently liberating for women. For example, together they constructed orgasm as something that a woman is *meant* to do—having one makes her “normal”—suggesting a form of coercion. Furthermore, they reaffirmed the conflation of intercourse and orgasm (Gavey et al., 1999), producing entitlements for men and obligations for women that restricted the possibilities for women to say “no” to intercourse. Thus, when compared with men, women have considerably fewer degrees of freedom within the reciprocity discourse. In sum, the discourse may result in reinforcing traditional gender roles, i.e., active man and “passive woman,” and restricting women’s sexual agency.

In a departure from the number of studies that highlight young women’s reproduction of discourses of heterosexuality, Jackson and Cram (2003) examined the possibilities for young women to disrupt the sexual double standard and position themselves as active and knowledgeable in their accounts of sex. The authors drew on focus-group conversations with six groups of adolescent women (aged 16–18 years), analyzing for moments of agency and resistance. The young women resisted the sexual double standard by challenging and subverting derogatory labeling aimed at sexually active women (e.g., “slut”). They also appropriated positive labeling of active male sexuality (e.g., girls being “studly”). In addition, they articulated sexual desire through limited discussion about young women actively seeking and wanting sex. Notably, the young women’s talk did not include a language of sexual desire grounded in bodily



sensation or experiences; furthermore, they did not propose alternatives to sexual pleasure outside of penetrative sex, as in oral sex or masturbation, perhaps drawing on the coital imperative and “naturalness” of penetrative sex. Finally, they negotiated the conflict between “sexual permissiveness” and “sexual danger” by positioning themselves within an adolescent (maturational) discourse (i.e., “readiness”). This deflected the issue of desire altogether.

In their justifications for participating in sex, the participants in Jackson and Cram’s (2003) study found ways to challenge the sexual double standard, and subverted heterosexual discourses, i.e., permissive sex, have and hold, and male sexual drive (Hollway, 1984a, 1984b), by using discourses of “romance” (love makes sex “moral”), “biological need” (resonates with the biological imperative of the male-sex-drive discourse), and “play.” In this way, they accounted for their sexual experiences in ways that allowed for the possibility of mutuality and equality. However, these moments of resistance were individual rather than collective, and muted rather than strident, providing support for the argument that the sexual double standard is still at work. They also offer support for Hollway’s (1989) claim that no socially endorsed and legitimated discourse of sexual desire is available to women. Jackson and Cram (2003) concluded that the young women did not construct themselves or their gender as passive victims, but that their resistance was somewhat tenuous and fragile—a fragment of possibility within the spaces opened up by disrupting discourses of heterosexuality with competing discourses that enabled alternative sexual identities.

Previous studies have demonstrated that girls and young women learn about sex, and make meaning of their sexual experiences, within conflicting cultural discourses of “risk,” “protection,” and “abstinence” (e.g., Fine, 1988). Researchers continue to give empirical attention to girls’ and young women’s sexuality as it develops in the context of discourses of heterosexuality, and the specific sexual subjectivities that are made possible. One such study examined girls’ (aged 12 to 17 years) accounts of first experiences of oral sex (i.e., fellatio) with their long- and short-term boyfriends and casual acquaintances—both what engaging in the practice meant to them and what it accomplished for them (Burns, Futch & Tolman, 2011). Analyses of the interview data indicated that study participants accounted for their sexual experiences by drawing on a discourse of “academic achievement,” framing their activities in terms of academic performance. For example, participants characterized oral sex in terms that likened the activity to homework (a daily chore) and test-taking; i.e., “get it over with,” “just get

through with it” (Burns, et al., 2011). Furthermore, girls placed emphasis on “finishing” and “being done” with it, privileging the outcome of the activity over the experience itself. Moreover, the girls evaluated their performance against an assumed “standard” or expected way of “doing” oral sex, i.e., a girl is “supposed” to do certain things and in a specific order. While this “standardized oral sex” discourse made possible a “sexually competent” subject position, i.e., being sexually “skilled,” it was clear that a girl’s efforts were not in support of her own desires and pleasure, but that of her sexual partner.

The authors reported that for these young women, their knowledge and use of the “achievement” discourse served as a cultural resource with which they could give meaning to their sexual experiences. Constructing first experiences with oral sex within the academic achievement discourse yielded contradictory “results,” serving them in one respect but also discursively backing them into a corner. On one hand, the discourse of academic achievement enabled the possibility for girls to position themselves as sexually competent—one of the few acceptable subject positions girls may take up—and do so in ways that allowed them to discursively skirt traditional morality issues (i.e., sexual double standard) and move toward a morality that was based in effort and success. However, according to the girls’ accounts, oral sex began as and remained a dramatically disembodied experience that failed to fully engage girls’ sexuality. The authors suggest that this disembodied sense of sexual competence reflects a larger cultural emphasis on outcomes and performance over experience and process.

Another study that similarly explored young adult women’s accounts of sexual activity within heterosexual relationships provides further evidence for the emergence of competing discourses that serve to disrupt discourses of heterosexuality and make possible alternative sexual identities for young women. A discourse analysis of young adult women’s talk of sexual activity in their heterosexual relationships indicated that accounts of sexual desire were not “missing” (Fine, 1988; Fine & McClelland, 2006), but rather were channelled or “managed” via multiple inter-connected discourses of health-management and relationship maintenance (Brown-Bowers, Gurevich, Vasilovsky, Cosma & Matti, 2015). The analysis of semi-structured interviews with 39 young women (aged 18 to 26 years) indicated that sexual activity was understood in terms of three inter-related IRs. First, the women employed the IR, “sex as relationship hygiene,” which constructed sex in terms of care for one’s partner’s well-being, and as being centrally important for the maintenance of a healthy romantic relationship. A second IR,

“sex as exercise-esque,” enabled women to account for sex as part of their personal “wellness” plans, and as offering health benefits. Finally, with the IR, “sex as economy exchange,” sex was constructed as a good that could be traded for material or psychological benefits.

Again, these results suggest that the culturally shared discourses and IRs make possible discursive spaces within which women can articulate sexually competent, desirous, and agentic subject positions, circumventing the restrictions that are imposed by the discourses of heterosexuality (i.e., male sex drive, have and hold), and that position women as promiscuous or as passive sexual objects. However, these expressions are being “channeled” through discourses and IRs that construct sexual activity in terms of “performance” and the achievement of particular non-sexual aims (e.g., health and fitness; Brown-Bowers et al., 2015). Essentially, the achievement discourse and the “health-management” IRs place little emphasis on women’s own embodied pleasure and fulfillment and give greater importance to others’ sexual needs and desires.

**Conclusion.** Adolescent and young women must navigate a discursive environment in which they are subject to and draw on multiple contradictory discourses of heterosexuality. They are positioned by and through discourse—in multiple and, sometimes, contradictory ways—as subordinate, vulnerable, and primarily driven by desires for intimacy and love (e.g., Holland et al., 1998), and as active and agentic (e.g., Jackson & Cram, 2003). Although young women challenge discourses that reproduce the sexual double standard, i.e., male sexual drive, they simultaneously endorse the “sexual romance” of the have and hold discourse (e.g., Jackson & Cram, 2003). Despite the popular claims regarding women’s sexual liberation, and the presumed achievement of gender equality, these studies suggest that women’s accounts of sexuality and possibilities for expressing an empowered sexual subjectivity are somewhat restricted. In the following section, I summarize research that further complicates these meanings of “sexual desire,” “sexual agency,” and “sexual empowerment.”

## 2.4 Women as “New” Sexual Subjects

As I have outlined in the previous sections, feminist research has produced a variety of meanings of heterosexuality, particularly as it relates to female sexual desire and sexual practices. Recently, researchers have pointed to the necessity of moving beyond questions of desire and agency to instead analyze girls’ and women’s sexual subjectivities as produced within

“postfeminist discourses” (e.g., Farvid & Braun, 2006, 2014; Gill, 2007a, 2007b, 2009b, 2012; Harvey & Gill, 2011, 2012). “Post-feminism” refers to the incorporation of liberal feminist values into popular culture and political and institutional life in a way that presumes the achievement of gender equality and women’s sexual freedom (McRobbie, 2009). The vocabulary of post-feminism however does not reflect collectivities or the concerns of women in general, but instead turns to “competition,” “ambition,” and “self-help” (McRobbie, 2009). Thus, it is profoundly connected to neoliberalism. Importantly, Gill (2007a) has posited an understanding of post-feminism as a “sensibility” composed of interrelated themes—suggesting that it can be used to analyze contemporary cultural products, such as advertising, magazines, television and film (Gill, 2007a).

The exemplary subject at the heart of this perspective is the enterprising “responsibilized actor” who demonstrates individualism and actively participates in the management of her own life (McRobbie, 2009; Miller, 2008). In terms of women’s (hetero)sexuality, discourses of sexual liberation shape their sexual subjectivities and sexual practices, activating self-disciplinary power through the directive of “choice” (Evans, Riley, & Shankar, 2010; Evans & Riley, 2015). The young, heterosexual postfeminist woman is positioned as a knowing participant in her sexualization. This is illustrated, in part, in the marked shift in the representation of women’s bodies in the hyper-sexualized imagery in advertising, i.e., “midriff advertising” (Gill, 2009a). She is portrayed as an active, desiring sexual subject who freely “chooses” to present herself in a seemingly objectified manner because it pleases her and suits her liberated interests to do so. This active and playful “desiring subject” is not a passive, victimized “object” of the male gaze (Gill, 2007a).

The postfeminist woman works upon herself, her body, and sexual practices through exercising a self-disciplining power that is mediated through choice, “consumerism,” and “authenticity” (Evans et al., 2010). She embodies (hetero)sexuality through body management practices, including the use of makeup, cosmetic surgery, clothing, and “Brazilian” waxes (i.e., the removal of all pubic hair), linking femininity, consumer culture, and heterosexuality (i.e., “technologies of sexiness”; Evans et al., 2010; Evans & Riley, 2015). She also makes the choice to engage in “empowering” practices, such as burlesque and pole dancing classes, activities that are reimagined as aerobic exercise and a means of women pleasing themselves and “feeling good” (e.g., Bahri, 2012; Donaghue, Whitehead, & Kurz, 2011; Whitehead & Kurz, 2009).

Notably, this attention to choice and “empowerment” is related to the ongoing labour—in the form of “self-surveillance” and “self-discipline”—required to achieve normal femininity (Gill, 2007a). The ongoing body management suggests there is also an ever-present threat of failure and loss (i.e., aging bodies, overweight bodies).

Taken together, these various emerging contradictory discourses embedded in the self-help genre, and the heightening of neoliberalism and consumerism, has produced a new “postfeminist” subject position for women—the “sexual entrepreneur” (Harvey & Gill, 2011). The modern (hetero)sexual woman is exhorted to be sexually open and skilled (Harvey & Gill, 2011, 2012), as well as engaging in self-improvement practices that ensure sexual knowledge and competence (Gill, 2009a; Harvey & Gill, 2011, 2012). This includes ongoing labour in the form of “reskilling” and the consumption of sexual aids, such as lingerie, sex toys, and the like (e.g., McCaughey & French, 2001).

Before describing some of this research in more detail, it is important to note that alongside neoliberalism and postfeminist discourse, there has been a growing “sexualization of culture” (Evans, et. al., 2010), marked by a proliferation of interrelated discourses about sex and sexuality across all forms of media in contemporary culture. One element of this is the popularity of sexual self-help products, e.g., self-help books, women’s popular glossy magazines, online blogs, television programming, and the sexual “expert” (Gill, 2007a; Harvey & Gill, 2011, 2012). Within this genre, women’s sexual subjectification is regulated such that it is presented as operating within a heteronormative economy (Gill, 2007b). Central to this is the “reassertion of sexual difference,” which has been fed, in part, by ongoing preoccupation with “the battle of the sexes” in the self-help literature (Gill, 2007a). One example is *Mars and Venus in the Bedroom* (Gray, 2002), a title that is aimed at a female audience, and constructs male and female sexuality and men and women’s relationship desires as inherently different. Thus, there is an interesting contradiction between the new burgeoning access to sex-related information available to the sexually empowered woman and the “old” discourses of sex differences that reproduce her as subordinated to men. This contradiction has also found its way into other popular media. For example, in their analysis of British popular glossy magazines, Farvid and Braun (2006) noted that the magazines positioned women as agentic, sexual subjects who are free to pursue sexual encounters, but the ultimate goal of this “empowered” sexual freedom is to secure a (monogamous) long-term relationship, i.e., finding and keeping “Mr. Right.” This constructs

women's sexuality as unintelligible without a male partner as it is the inextricable "target" of male sexuality. In place of liberation and sexual empowerment, such magazines reiterate traditional notions of sex differences, wherein men's sexuality is constructed as an unproblematic biological necessity, easily aroused and satisfied and women's capacity for sexual pleasure is positioned as oriented towards intimacy. Such accounts are "relentlessly heterosexual" Gill 2007b).

In pursuing this further, Gill (2009b) analysed "expert" sex and relationship advice in *Glamour UK* magazine and identified three IRs that together structure women's (hetero)sexual romantic relationships in ways that privilege men (Gill, 2009b). Using terms that are distinctly feminist in tone, i.e., empowerment, "equality," and "take charge," the "intimate entrepreneurship" IR constructs romantic and sexual relationships as work, requiring women's continual effort. In a challenge to the romantic discourse and the fated arrival of a "soul mate," this IR draws on "professional" discourse to construct finding and maintaining love as requiring strategic planning and goal setting. The "men-ology" IR positions women as studious observers of men so as to better understand and please them, thus placing them in the role of managing the emotional health of the relationship. Finally, the "transforming the self" IR calls on women to structuring their "interior lives" in order to achieve "a desirable subjectivity" (Gill, 2009b). For example, women are to avoid a sexual rut by becoming more sexually open, experimental, and adventurous (e.g., "try something new in the bedroom," p. 360).

Finally, Farvid and Braun (2014) pursued a subsequent analysis of the self-help genre, this time focusing on self-help books and relevant online sites. In contrast to the advice aimed at men, which emphasized how to obtain casual sex, the advice aimed at women was generally framed as a "guide" to casual sex (i.e., how to do it "correctly") or how to "survive" a casual sex encounter without getting emotionally hurt, with an emphasis on personal safety, beauty regimes, and psychological readiness. Four profoundly gendered subject positions were identified in the texts, with few alternative ways of constituting heterosexual identities: the "strategic man," the "performing man," the "sassy woman," and the "vulnerable woman." The sassy woman is assertive, independent, sexually "liberated," (hetero)sexually attractive, and knowledgeable about sex and sexual safety. Farvid and Braun (2014) argue that she constitutes a uniquely feminine subjectivity that combines feminist, postfeminist, and traditional discourses to devise a liberated womanhood that is still pleasingly feminine and "naturally" different to men (Farvid &

Braun, 2014, p. 126). Moreover, she engages in certain sexual practices for men or men's approval because she "wants" to. The sassy woman then makes available to women a desiring female subjectivity that not only mimics a masculine model of heterosexuality, but suits a pleasure-and-variety-focused (male) sexuality. She does not threaten the dominant heterosexual and gender order and instead reinforces gender difference while rearranging some of the boundaries within that difference.

Despite the discourses of choice and empowerment, the hybrid of discourses associated with post-feminism do not necessarily call into question traditional representations of feminine possibility or lack of sexual desire but are deeply connected to anti-feminist ideals (Gill, 2009b). Moreover, the contradictory nature of postfeminist discourses makes empowered heterosexual postfeminist femininity particularly complex and challenging to critique (Gill, 2007a). The new "modern, postfeminist woman" is so positioned that there are no longer the opposites of subject-object, power-pleasure, or discipline-agency (Harvey & Gill, 2011). Thus, one of the consequences of this postfeminist cultural shift is that "objectification," the key term in feminist critique of contemporary cultural products, e.g., advertising and beyond, no longer holds the analytic purchase it once did (Gill, 2007b). Critiquing the postfeminist woman who chooses to be sassy requires a more complicated argument than can be articulated in your average sound bite. In summary, however, these studies suggest that postfeminist discourses articulate distinctively new sensibilities. They also point to the continuing need for research that considers the postfeminist discourses that women are navigating, along with the broader social, political, economic and economic discourses of contemporary life (i.e., neoliberalism), and the particular sexual subjectivities they make possible for women.

## **2.5 Study Rationale**

Previous research on sexual subjectivity has primarily focused on its genesis in adolescent girls and young (i.e., college-age) women. What is little understood, then, is the implication, if any, of these discourses for midlife women's sexuality, particularly women who are single. This neglect may reflect the assumption that at midlife women are no longer constrained by, for example, the sexual double standard that constructs women as passive objects of male sexuality and sexual desire (e.g., Sieg, 2007). It is of interest, then, to explore how the mingling of new and old discourses of heterosexuality are shaping how women who are single at

midlife understand their sexual lives. Considering this from the perspective of singleness research, such a study also adds to existing knowledge about being single. As already noted, there has been little examination of sexuality and sexual intimacy in this body of research. Clearly, however, from the available literature, sexuality is not irrelevant to how women at midlife (including single women) understand themselves and their futures. The plethora of dating websites and other services designed to “match” mature singles are but one sign that the topic remains relevant. Furthermore, if the previous feminist analysis of the “sexualization of culture” has any merit, it is important to explore the implications of this for women as they age (Evans et al., 2010; Gill, 2009a, 2012). The goal of this study then was to provide some understanding of single-at-midlife women’s sexual lives and meanings given to their sexuality and intimate relationships, through an analysis of their accounts of their sexual relationships with men (this includes both the presence and absence of such relationships). I addressed the following research questions: (1) How do single-at-midlife women construct their sexual experiences and relationships with men? and, (2) What cultural resources do single-at-midlife women draw upon in their accounts of sexual relationships?



## Chapter 3: Method

### 3.1 Participants

As the research aim was to interview women in early midlife who were living single lives and who self-identified as women alone (e.g., never married, divorced, widowed), the criteria for inclusion were, (a) born between 1960 and 1975; and, (b) not married or cohabiting with a partner (male or female) within the previous five years.

Twenty-one women agreed to participate in the study. They were recruited through various strategies that included posting study notices in public areas, such as libraries and coffee shops and a local women-friendly sex shop (i.e., “A Little More Interesting,” <http://www.alittlemoreinteresting.com/calgarystore.htm>; see Appendix A: Study Recruitment Poster). I also obtained participants through the University of Calgary, using the Department of Psychology’s SONA research participation system and the Graduate Student Association’s weekly online newsletter. In addition, I recruited participants using a form of snowball sampling through social media by creating a study profile for Facebook, sharing it amongst my personal network, and asking my contacts to disseminate the notice to their networks (i.e., “Single Women at Midlife & Sexuality Study,” [www.facebook.com/singlewomenatmidlife?ref=hl](http://www.facebook.com/singlewomenatmidlife?ref=hl)). I also used the more traditional form of snowball sampling by asking participants to pass along information about the study to anyone they thought might be interested (this occurred at the end of the interview session). Finally, I engaged in networking with leaders of various local grassroots groups (via Meetup.com, Facebook) as well as organizers of non-profit organizations who were hosting or sponsoring educational and social events relating to dating, intimacy and sexuality (e.g., University of Calgary Women’s Association, Sexual Health Centre of Calgary, Calgary Tantra). The participants were successfully recruited in the following ways: snowball sampling (8); Department of Psychology’s SONA research participation system (5); GSA Newsletter (2); Facebook (6). The resulting sample consisted of participants residing in the Calgary region (15), while others were living in cities across Canada, i.e., Ottawa (2), Edmonton (1), Medicine Hat (1), and Vancouver (2).

The sample consisted of participants ranging from 35 to 50 years of age ( $M = 41.6$ ,  $SD = 4.95$ ). Twenty of the women self-identified as heterosexual, and one woman characterised herself as “open,” not claiming a sexual orientation. They were relatively homogenous in terms of

ethnicity, as 15 self-identified as Canadian, English, French, or Australian, while the others self-identified as First Nations (2), Goan-African (1), Lebanese Canadian (1), Iranian Canadian (1), and mixed heritage (i.e., Cree/Danish, 1). They were also relatively well-educated women—all had completed at least a high school education (i.e., 4 high school; 5 in two-year college; 6 undergraduate training; 6 graduate training). At the time of the interviews, five women were enrolled in full-time academic programs (i.e., two graduate, three undergraduate) and four were part-time students (i.e., one graduate, three undergraduate). In terms of employment, one participant was unemployed while 14 were employed in part- or full-time jobs (i.e., one part-time, 13 full-time). Finally, 16 women self-identified as “single,” four reported that they had just begun new relationships, and one woman indicated that she had recently ended a three-year non-cohabiting relationship. Many of the women reported a history of previous involvement in long-term monogamous relationships for several years, including engagement and cohabitation with a romantic partner, but all occurred more than five years prior to the interview. Eight of the women had been married and were divorced (one woman was twice divorced), and five of the women were mothers.

Table 3.1 is a summary of the women’s background information, including their relationship status at the time of the interview and their relationship history. A more detailed summary is not provided in order to protect the women’s confidentiality.

Table 3.1  
Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Age	Relationship Status at Interview	Relationship History
Abby	36	New relationship	Common-law
Alex	38	New relationship	Common-law
Amoony	37	Single	Divorced
Atifeh	35	Single	Divorced
Bianca	35	Single	Ever single
Claire	49	Single	Divorced
Donna	39	Single	Ever single
Eleanor	43	Single	Common-law

Elizabeth	47	Single	Ever single
Emma	50	Single	Divorced
Joanna	39	Single	Ever single
Josie	44	Single	Divorced, Common-law
Katherine	45	Single	Divorced
Lauren	42	Single	Ever single
Lisa	41	Single	Common-law
Maree	36	New relationship	Ever single
Natasha	43	Single	Divorced
Rachel	46	Single	Ever single
Rebecca	45	Single	Ever single
Roxanne	49	Ended 3-year relationship 3 days before interview	Divorced
Sylvie	36	New relationship	Common-law

### 3.2 Procedure

Ethics approval was obtained from the University of Calgary's Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board.

The interviews occurred between July 2012 and April 2013. Participants were interviewed, using a semi-structured interview guide (Appendix B: Participant Interview Guide), at times and in locations that were convenient for both participant and researcher (i.e., an interview room in the Discourse Analysis Lab in the Psychology Department of the University of Calgary, the interviewer's home). In the case of participants in other cities, we communicated via telephone and Skype (i.e., 13 face-to-face, 8 Skype). Conducting and recording the interviews that were not face-to-face did not impact the interview content. There were no notable differences between these and the in-person interviews; the analysis reported in chapters 4 through 6 draws from both types of interviews. Although the women who spoke with me over the phone or by Skype may have felt more comfortable sharing explicit information with me when they were more anonymous, one of the characteristics of the interviews, including face-to-face and over the phone/Skype, is the explicit quality of the content.

Prior to each interview, participants signed a consent form (Appendix C: Consent Form)

that explained: 1) their right to decline to answer questions; 2) their right to terminate the interview at any time; and 3) the methods used to maintain participant anonymity and ensure that personal information would remain confidential. I then secured their permission to have their interviews digitally recorded and used for research purposes.

At the beginning of every interview, I explained that I was interested in exploring the sexual lives of midlife single women (i.e., 35 to 50 years of age), specifically in the context of heterosexual relationships, including what they thought about sex, how sex fit into their lives, and, if they had had relationships with men, how sex fit into their heterosexual relationships. Participants were then interviewed, using a semi-structured interview guide (Appendix B). The interview guide was comprised of two sections: First, background information was collected (i.e., name, age, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, and education); second, interview questions designed to encourage participants to talk about their singleness, relationship histories, sexuality, and sexual lives. All of the interviews began with the question, “How do you usually meet men?” Beginning in this way allowed the participants to direct the conversation in ways that were meaningful to them. Thereafter, I followed the semi-structured interview guide to inquire about subjects not already discussed by the participants. They were invited to provide accounts of how they commonly met men, how their relationships developed, and how sex fit into those relationships. I then explored their experiences of sex at their current stage of life. At the close of each interview, participants were given a debriefing letter (Appendix D: Debriefing Letter), and the opportunity to be placed on a mailing list so that they may receive copies of the study results. In return for their engagement in the study, all participants received a gift card amounting to 15 dollars.

With permission from all participants, the interviews, which lasted between approximately 90 and 120 minutes, were first audio-recorded (using an Olympus DS-50 digital voice recorder) and subsequently transcribed, using transcription conventions set out by Potter and Wetherell (1987). I transcribed the interview material with sufficient detail to allow for a thorough analysis and reporting of the interactional nature of the interviews, including some of the features of the talk (e.g., interview questions and prompts, conversational interaction, timed pauses in speech, etc.; see Table 3.2). As the project entailed analysis of interview data, the primary risk for participants was a breach of anonymity. This was managed through the use of pseudonyms and I ensured that excerpts did not include details that might be used to identify

participants. All identifying information, e.g., people’s names, place names, were stripped from the transcripts to maximise the protection of the women’s identities. The conversations were later analysed using discourse analysis (Edwards & Potter, 1992; Potter & Wetherell, 1987, 1994, 1995; Wetherell, Taylor, & Yates, 2001; Wood & Kroger, 2000).

Table 3.2

Transcription Notation

Notation	Description of Notation
.	Short pause of less than 1 second (1.0)
(1.0)	Timed pause (in seconds)
...	Material deliberately omitted
(text)	Clarifying information and behavioural observations
<b>text</b>	Word(s) emphasized
“text”	Quoting themselves or others
[ ]	Overlapping utterances
?	Upward intonation

### 3.3 Data Analysis

The analysis of the transcribed interviews proceeded in the following four steps (Potter & Wetherell, 1987): “Reading,” “coding,” “analysis,” and “writing.”

First, I repeatedly read the interview transcripts carefully from beginning to end to become familiar with the interview structure and content.

The second stage of analysis involved coding—selecting and classifying segments of text related to the research questions (Potter & Wetherell, 1987), that is, all of the sections of the interview transcripts in which participants discussed topics relevant to their construction of singleness, midlife, and sexuality (i.e., discussing meeting and dating men, sexual encounters, romantic and sexual relationships, and aging bodies). At this preliminary stage, the coding was meant to be as inclusive as possible. I used qualitative data management software, “HyperRESEARCH,” to help with this sorting and coding process.

In the third step, I analysed the excerpts that were identified as relevant in the coding

process, and analysed them in terms of patterns (i.e., both variability and consistency) in the constructions of accounts and subject positions as well as the action orientation (i.e., what was accomplished in the talk). For example, this involved identifying the regularities in the women's talk about midlife sexuality and then exploring their related identity management. This required identifying the features of the text that were shared across the participants' accounts, as well as examining the instances of variability within and across the accounts. In other words, the focus was placed on *what* participants said and *how* they said it in light of what their talk accomplished; I was particularly interested in the cultural resources (i.e., discourses) relating to sexuality that participants employed and how they employed them.

The final phase involved writing and situating and interpreting the analysis within the available published literature. The analysis and writing stage went hand in hand in that the analysis was clarified in the writing process and in returning to the published literature to interpret the discursive patterns. Thus, the content of the written analysis is connected to and grounded in the specific interview data (hence the inclusion and continual orienting to excerpts from the transcribed interviews in the written analysis).

### **3.4 Ensuring Quality**

To ensure the quality of my research from data collection to analysis, I adopted a number of strategies.

In choosing to use interviews, I considered recent criticisms regarding interview data collection methods in DA research that focus on active researcher involvement in the research event and the production of data for the benefit and consumption of the interviewer/researcher. These have led some researchers to argue for the use of “naturalistic materials” instead (e.g., Potter & Hepburn, 2005, 2011). For example, Potter and Hepburn have pointed out “necessary” problems in interview-based studies that make data analysis particularly difficult, such as the variable footing positions of the interviewer and interviewee (i.e., how the interviewee speaks on behalf of their recruitment category is complicated), and the stake and interest they have to the topic at hand (Smith, Hollway & Mischler, 2005). They have argued that such facets of the interview relationship are directly consequential for the research “event” and what is said.

I take the position that no talk—including that which is “unobserved”—is “natural” as it is always shaped by the discursive resources participants draw upon and the context in which the

conversation occurs (Taylor, 2001). Therefore, when the context of the interview is adequately considered, interviews are simply another context in which discursive interactions unfold and in which people account for themselves as members of various social categories. Indeed, the researcher presence in the event being studied can be seen to have a potential benefit. The differing and perhaps conflicting discursive resources drawn on by the interviewer and the participant are subject to analysis through exploring the interaction between the interviewer and the participant. Thus, interviews can be understood as conversations where identities and versions of the world are negotiated. Consequently, the entire research design, and the production of data need to be considered in relation to the outcome of the research, and the active researcher involvement must be located in the research event (as an example, see Wigginton & Lee, 2014). This was accomplished through exploring the positioning of the participants and the interviewer, myself, who also participated as a single-at-midlife woman, as well as the cultural resources that we took up. In this way, participant interviews are understood as conversations wherein identities and versions of the world are negotiated. It is through reflexivity that researchers can acknowledge the discursive resources that they introduced and consider the impact on the participants' responses.

At each of the four steps of the analysis, I aimed to ensure the quality, integrity and rigour of the project (Antaki et al., 2003; Willig, 2008). To this end, I employed four analytic techniques suggested by Potter and Wetherell (1987): "coherence," "participants' orientations," "new problems," and "fruitfulness" (pp. 169-172). During the initial reading, coding, and analysis, I avoided applying pre-conceived analytic categories to the interview data, and instead sought to focus on participant-defined issues and meanings that were most prominent for the participants, attending to the language used by the women rather than turning them into my concepts. Thus, my aim at the early stages was to allow the analysis to develop as inductively as possible and not impose analytic conclusions too early. This kept me attending to participants' orientations. Coherence can be achieved when the data analysis addresses both the broad patterns in the interview data, as well as the apparent exceptions to these patterns. Central to the notion of coherence are the participants' orientations in giving their accounts. Therefore, during the initial reading and subsequent analysis of the interview data, I focused on issues that were most prominent for the participants, as well as how they attended to apparent inconsistencies in their accounts, and how they attempted to resolve these inconsistencies. An example of this is my

analysis of how participants explained their years-long sexual inactivity while resisting being positioned as “non-sexual.” To do so, they rejected the term celibate and justified their inactivity by explaining they were waiting for sex with “connection” (see women’s accounts of not having sex; Chapter 6, *Celibacy and Being Sexual*).

The generation of new problems is another method of determining the quality of data analysis. One of the main goals of discourse analysis is to identify the various cultural and linguistic resources that speakers employ in conversation and the purposes for which they use them. An example from this study is the women’s use of the have and hold discourse to explain their preference for sex in committed relationships. However, a speaker’s use of this resource in conjunction with another contradictory resource, e.g., sexological discourse, gives rise to new problems that, in turn, must be worked out. For example, while the sexological discourse enabled women to account for their “need” to have sex, women who had casual sexual encounters risked being positioned as immoral. To avoid being positioned as immoral, they drew on the New Age spirituality discourse to further justify their casual sexual encounters as only happening when there is connection. Thus, identifying the new problem of justifying sex outside of marriage is evidence of quality in my analysis.

My analysis also contains examples of fruitfulness. In the case of a discourse analytic study, this entails identifying new discourses. In my analysis, I identified two “emerging” discourses, i.e., caring sex and New Age spirituality.

Throughout the stages of analysis, I attempted to be reflexive by being aware of the topics raised in the interviews. My analytic thinking actually began during the interviews as I took notes on each session and noticed patterns in the talk (e.g., women’s attention to men’s bodies). When I noted a particular topic not covered by the interview guide, I raised it with subsequent participants, in effect inviting them to be a part of the analysis. However, it was often not until I reviewed the transcripts that I saw connections across the interviews. I subsequently moved my thinking along during the transcription process by making notes on notable themes and stories within and across the interviews. It was during transcribing, and in first reviewing transcripts, that I paid attention to my personal reactions to the interview data. Indeed, as a single woman at midlife, I have my own “story” of singleness, aging, and sexuality. I tried not to let my personal history interfere with my sensitivity to the research participants’ talk, although I could not help noticing differences and similarities between their stories and my own. One exception to



this is my positioning as a feminist, which sensitized me to talk about gender and power, and arguably proved to be an asset in analysing the interviews.

Ongoing reflexivity during the data analysis phase of the project was challenging in some ways, as I recognized that my reading of the texts was likely influenced by the analysis and conclusions in my Masters' thesis. In making this challenge explicit, I decided to first involve myself in the participants' talk about sex and sexuality, as this was less familiar to me. I then analyzed the talk related to singleness and women's aging. This entailed an analytic process of remaining open to the discourses of sexuality already established in the literature and focusing on unfamiliar meanings produced in the interviews. Nevertheless, reflexivity became a strength and a challenge. While I needed to resist and challenge interpretations that neatly fit with previous work, my past research helped guide the present work in a productive way. Most importantly, despite my previous research (Moore & Radtke, 2015), I successfully identified novel patterns in the women's talk.

Furthermore, between October 2013 and March 2015, I attended a number of educational and social events related to my research topic in an effort to educate myself about the discursive worlds of my participants. These included a lecture given by 'sex positive' educator, Dr. Charlie Glickman ("Sex, Shame & Love"), sex education workshops (e.g., "Asking for What You Want," "Deep Desire 101"), workshops and social events aimed at learning more about intimacy, touch, boundaries, and communication (e.g., "Tantra 101," "Cuddle Parties"), dating workshops, and a "Sacred Cacao Ceremony" meant for celebrating the "sacred feminine." I also volunteered for two LGBT-friendly "Slow Dance Parties" held in Calgary. Through these events, I became familiar with some of the discourses of gender, sexuality, intimacy, and relationships that circulate outside of academic texts and might provide resources for my participants. While these activities informed my analysis in that I was able to recognize relevant talk in the interviews, I tried to avoid imposing what I learned through these activities on my participants' accounts. To further safeguard against this, I reviewed and discussed the transcripts with my supervisor (an "outsider" to the research, who is in later midlife and married, but also positions herself as a feminist). Our discussions provided opportunities for critical reflection, brought new insights, and helped draw my attention to what had become familiar or what I might be taking for granted.

During the analysis and writing stages, I also attended to any unusual cases that challenged my developing analysis and worked to include them. Finally, I selected excerpts from

the interview transcripts that would enable the reader to evaluate the quality of the analysis. In order to support readers' assessments of the legitimacy of my arguments, I have cited from the participant interviews frequently and at length and I ensured that the connections between the data analysis and specific elements of the interview talk were made explicit (i.e., use of excerpts and line numbering).

## **Chapter 4: Discourses of Sex and Sexuality**

In this chapter, I introduce the various discourses of sex that were utilized across the interviews and show how participants drew on these discourses in their accounts of sexual encounters. Beginning with Section 4.1 *Hollway's Discourses of Sex*, I identify the discourses of sex that were first named by Wendy Hollway (1984a, 1984b): male sexual drive, have and hold, and permissive sex discourses. I then provide evidence for emerging discourses that have not been identified in previous discursive scholarship on midlife women's sexuality, i.e., *Sexological Discourse* (Section 4.2), *Caring Sex Discourse* (Section 4.3), and *New Age spirituality Discourse* (Section 4.4). This analysis is intended to establish connections to previous discursive research on women's sexuality, romantic relationships, and the broader discourses that shape women's accounts of their lives and their identities. The second part of the chapter (Sections 4.5 and 4.6) presents an analysis of how these discourses served as resources for the participants to construct accounts of sexual relationships in which they (a) held men accountable for "good sex" (Section 4.5) and (b) positioned themselves as moral women when engaged in casual sexual relationships with men (Section 4.6).

### **4.1 Hollway's Discourses of Sex**

The women drew on a group of three distinct but inter-related discourses of heterosexual relations that have been previously identified by Wendy Hollway (1984a, 1984b): male sexual drive, have and hold, and permissive sex discourses. The male sexual drive discourse is reflected in the socio-biological approach to sexuality, and its central tenet is that men's sexuality is produced by a natural, biologically-based drive, the purpose of which is to ensure the continuation of the species (Hollway, 1984a, 1984b). Consequently, male sexuality is understood as a drive for the "pursuit and penetration" of women, which necessitates assertiveness, an "element that is both recognized by women and to which they yield and submit" (p. 230). Whereas men's sexuality is seen as active and desiring within this discourse of sex, women are constructed implicitly as without desire, existing only as the object of male desire.

According to Hollway (1984a, 1984b), the male sexual drive discourse works together with the have and hold discourse to construct men and women's sexualities and prescribe particular forms of heterosexual sex and relationships. Hollway suggested that the have and hold discourse is consistent with traditional religious beliefs and doctrine and rests on the principle of

the primacy of the monogamous relationship and family life. This discourse produces the expectation that women be in a heterosexual relationship in order to be sexually active. While women are the subject of this discourse, men are designated the object because it is their acquisition as husbands and lovers that is required before women can enter into sexual relationships.

Finally, within the permissive sex discourse the principle of monogamy is challenged. It promotes sexuality as a natural component of human experience that is deserving of free expression, making it consistent with an uncomplicated sexual pleasure ethos that emerged during the 1960s and 1970s (Hollway, 1984a). Like the male sexual drive discourse, this is a goal-oriented discourse in which sex is equated with coitus and orgasm. Unlike the male sexual drive discourse, which positions women as the sexual object, the permissive sex discourse assumes women's natural sexual drive is equal to that of men and positions women as sexual subjects acting in the service of their own sexual self-interests.

In the analysis of the following four interview excerpts, I illustrate how participants negotiated and sometimes resisted these three discourses in their accounts of sex. The male sexual drive discourse was often used in the context of the women describing how their sexual liaisons began, how they unfolded, and what made them satisfactory or not. For example, Bianca (Excerpt 1) drew on the male sexual drive discourse to describe the "rules" she follows when going to bars with the intention of meeting men with whom to have "casual sex," one of which is to allow men to pursue her. Here, she positioned herself as the object of the male sexual drive, albeit a knowing one.

**Excerpt 1 (Bianca, 35, single, never married)**

- 615 Bianca: I make sure that I'm not too, uhm, obvious about my intentions, especially if I,  
616 I-. I do spy, like, uhm, meet somebody that I like. You don't want to be too, uhm,  
617 a:h, too obvious, too pushy.  
618 Interviewer: How come?  
619 Bianca: You have to-. Well, I feel they, like-. Well, men like, uh, a bit of a challenge.  
620 (laugh)  
621 Interviewer: Oh, yeah?  
622 Bianca: They like-. They-. I feel like they need, like, a little bit of a chase and if you're  
623 too available, uhm, it's just not a (.) a victory for them, you know? (laugh)  
624 Interviewer: Mm. Mm hm. I've heard of that before. Why do you think they like this  
625 chase?

626 Bianca: I dunno-. Well, like I said, they like to feel that they've a-, kind of,  
627 accomplished something or won something, uhm, so, if you're-. If right away  
628 you're, like, "Yeah, I'll-. You know, let's do this." You know? They-. It's just not,  
629 it's not challenging enough for them.

At the beginning of the excerpt, Bianca positioned herself as having a sexual interest in a man ("intentions," line 615), an account that drew on the permissive sex discourse. She drew on the male sexual drive discourse, which enabled her understanding of the rules for meeting men. Namely, she initially withholds her "intentions" (line 615), ensuring she is not leading the interaction despite her own sexual interest (i.e., being "too obvious," line 615, 617); "too pushy," line 617). The rule here is to be the sexual object attracting male attention rather than making her sexual interests known. Bianca positioned herself as the object of desire that rewards men's pursuit, i.e., "the challenge" (line 619), and the "victory" (line 623). In this way, she positioned men as normatively pursuing women and initiating sexual activity. She was also careful to state that this is men's preference: "men like" challenge (line 619), "they need" the chase (line 622), and so on.

While women were positioned as passive rather than active subjects, Bianca's account nevertheless positioned her as a desirous woman who plays along with the rules set out by the male sexual drive to ensure the interaction is successful; i.e., "you have to" (line 619); "they need [...] a chase" (line 622). Her ready availability would render his pursuit redundant, ensuring no real achievement for him ("victory," line 623). If she makes her desire and immediate availability known ("right away," 627), there is no accomplishment: "won something," "not challenging" (line 629). Thus, while Bianca took up male sexual drive discourse, she also resisted it by positioning herself as knowingly complicit in the service of her own ends, a construction consistent with the permissive sex discourse, which allows for women's sexual desire. In the end, however, she reproduced the double standard that is the hallmark of heterosexual romance and sex.

In the following excerpt, Eleanor (Excerpt 2) employed the male sexual drive discourse to construct good sex in terms of her partner's pursuit of her and his confidence and assertiveness.

**Excerpt 2 (Eleanor, 43, single, never married)**

557 Eleanor: I think there has to be a certain comfort level with your sexuality for it to be  
558 good. If a guy's not comfortable with that-. Well, I don't think he'd ever approach

559 me anyway, you know?  
560 Jennifer: You mean a guy has to be comfortable with your sexuality, or you have to  
561 be-?  
562 Eleanor: [And his. Both.  
563 Jennifer: Yeah.  
564 Eleanor: Both. He has to be comfortable with his own, too, right?  
565 Jennifer: [Yeah, (inaudible).  
566 Eleanor: Because if he's unsure with himself and, you know-. I don't want a guy  
567 that's, "Can I do this? Can I kiss you?" "Well, you coulda before you asked!"  
568 (laugh) You know? Like, you want a guy to be a guy. Still be a little bit aggressive,  
569 a little bit assertive, and passionate. And I think most women want that, actually. I  
570 don't think most women want some guy that's a little too tender. Like, maybe they  
571 do, but not my friends.

Drawing on the permissive sex discourse, which assumes women's natural sexual drive as equal to that of men, Eleanor initially confirmed the need for "both" partners to be "comfortable" with their own and their partner's sexuality (lines 557, 558, 562). This suggests a kind of parity between partners that offers the possibility for Eleanor to play a part in making the sexual relationship successful. However, she also drew on the male sexual drive discourse to position the "guy" in the role of pursuer ("approach me," line 558) and then at line 566 to focus on her dislike of a man's uncertainty ("unsure with himself," "I don't want a guy," line 566). This placed emphasis on the man's characteristics and her preferences. Within the male sexual drive discourse, men's sexual urges are constructed as natural, compelling, and stronger than those of women. Here, Eleanor equated masculine sexuality with not requiring clarification or seeking permission: "I don't want a guy that's, 'Can I do this? Can I kiss you?'," "Well, you coulda before you asked!" (line 567). Notably, good sex was not equated with seeking or giving consent. Rather, within this discourse, masculine sexuality is constructed as already knowing about women's bodies and what actions to take. Further to this, masculine men ("want a guy to be a guy," line 568) were positioned as "assertive," "aggressive" and "passionate" (line 569). Note, however, her minimizing language ("a little bit"), which normalized men's aggressiveness and implicitly distinguished it from sexual assault or abuse. She positioned women in general, drawing on social consensus to buttress her argument, as receptive to this ("I think most women want that," line 566; "I don't think most women...a little too tender," line 570). Thus, men are to dominate, but not too much, and to be tender, but not too much. In drawing on the male sexual drive discourse, Eleanor also oriented to traditional versions of masculinity, positioning men as dominant but chivalrous. Like Bianca, she reproduced the sexual double standard of men as

dominant and women as passive and wanting a sexually dominant man.

Roxanne (Excerpt 3) provided an example of the use of the have and hold discourse to construct sexual relationships. The excerpt below followed a discussion about the meaning of “healthy sexuality” and illustrates how participants commonly spoke about their preference for sex within a romantic/committed relationship.

**Excerpt 3 (Roxanne, 49, single, divorced)**

- 796 Roxanne: I like to have sex not just for sex. I like to have sex in a, within the (.) within  
797 a, a loving relationship. Like, I like to feel love while I’m hav-, while I’m making  
798 love. I like to-. It’s not really just a, an act for me. I want to feel that emotions that  
799 go along with it. And to me, for me, that’s a healthy sexual  
800 Jennifer: [Right.  
801 Roxanne: relationship. Like, I don’t-. I would never just go out and have sex for the  
802 sake of having sex.  
803 Jennifer: Yeah. Why not? You’ve just told me why not, but why not?  
804 Roxanne: Because I::I, I don’t get any gratification from it.

At the outset, Roxanne articulated her enjoyment of sex, i.e., “I like to have sex,” pointing to the permissive sex discourse. She then drew on the have and hold discourse, within which women are traditionally positioned as “giving themselves” (e.g., their virginity, their bodies) to men for their sexual satisfaction in return for men’s love, commitment, and emotional investment. Here, Roxanne drew on it to position herself as preferring sex within a “loving relationship” (line 797). Within the have and hold discourse, participants like Roxanne constructed the rewards of sex as not primarily sexual but as the “secondary gains” (Hollway, 1984a, 1984b) that come with romantic relationships, such as the “love” (line 797) and emotional intimacy that Roxanne mentioned: “I want to feel that emotions that go along with it” (line 798). Beginning at line 796, and then repeated throughout the excerpt, Roxanne explicitly stated that she does not want sex for its own sake (i.e., “just sex,” lines 796, 798, 801), and rejected sex that is merely physical (i.e., “not really just a, an act for me,” line 798). Rather, her preference is for having sex when it is paired with love, i.e., “have sex within a, a loving relationship” (line 796). She ended with the strong claim that without this, she does not experience sexual “gratification” (line 804). This privileging of romantic/committed relationships over just sex was a commonly occurring pattern across the interviews.

Finally, Claire answered my question (“Do you have any do’s and don’ts about sex and relationships with men now?”) by drawing on the permissive sex discourse to construct sex as

“adventure.”

**Excerpt 4 (Claire, 49, single, divorced)**

- 1109 Claire: Uhm, I don't know. I really think that sex is kind of an organic outcropping of,  
1110 of, you know, uhm, how you're relating to each other. So it's-. To me, it's more of  
1111 a, like, there's no-. I don't have any hard and fast rules. I mean, I'm pretty, and I'm  
1112 really was with people who-. I'll, I'll go to that crazy place you wanna go to. I'm  
1113 not-. You know, because, because it's always a question of accommodation and  
1114 sharing, right? And in both, in both ways, obviously. But, uhm, but I think there's,  
1115 uhm-. I really think that people are really hung up about stuff and I think, I think if  
1116 you find somebody that's more adventuresome and that's willing to, to explore  
1117 their own sexuality and feel comfortable with it, then, then there's a huge  
1118 likelihood that it's gonna be a fun ride no matter what you do. You know.  
1119 Jennifer: Oh, yeah. (laugh) Yeah.  
1120 Claire: (laugh)  
1121 Jennifer: That's a good way to put it.  
1122 Claire: Yeah. Whereas, whereas if, if somebody is really hung up about it and is not  
1123 comfortable within their own sexuality, then I don't know how dealing with  
1124 another person (laugh) and this whole context is gonna be fun. Or, you know, you  
1125 know, not coming from a place of inquiry and openness. So.

Claire began by characterising sex as naturally developing out of a couple's relationship (“organic outcropping of...how you're relating,” lines 1109-1110), implicitly taking up the have and hold discourse. However, she shifted to constructing sex within the permissive sex discourse, beginning with the statement that she does not “have any hard and fast rules” (line 1111). She also characterised sex as free exploration, “I'll go to that crazy place” (line 1112), and in doing so positioned herself as a sexual subject equal to her male partner and as open to adventure. Furthermore, her account of sex involved mutuality (“accommodation and sharing,” line 1113) and a reciprocal relationship between partners, such that each partner accommodates the other (i.e., “in both ways,” line 1114). In this way, she constructed women's sexuality as obviously equal to that of men.

Claire emphasized a recreational approach to sex—it is meant to be playful and enjoyable for its own sake; i.e., “fun ride” (line 1118), “fun” (line 1124). In addition, she positioned the imagined partner here as “adventuresome” (line 1116), exploratory (i.e., “explore,” line 1116), and “coming from a place of inquiry and openness” (1125). Such a person is not only “willing” (line 1116), they—Claire used the ambiguous pronoun “their”—are “comfortable with their own sexuality (line 1123). This necessity of comfort demands a particular self-knowledge that comes with experience, which implies a certain sexual maturity. They must not be “hung up about



stuff” (lines 1115, 1122). Within this discourse, good sex is not about “what you do” (line 1118), it depends on having a partner with the right predisposition toward sex. Throughout this excerpt, Claire used language that potentially generalized her claims to herself (e.g., “people,” line 1115; “no matter what you do,” line 1118), implying that she is the kind of person who is adventurous and comfortable with her own sexuality. Thus, enjoyment of sex depends on the kind of people you and your partners are, a move that individualizes sex.

**4.1.1 Summary.** In constructing the meanings of sexuality and heterosexual interactions, and working up their identities as sexual women, the participants drew on three complementary discourses of sex. The complementarity of the have and hold and male sexual drive discourses produces the sex-differentiated practices of heterosexual relationships and make available subject positions that are commonly understood as the sexual double standard of the active male and the passive female. In other words, the practices that these discourses reproduce are not neutral and, across all the interviews, women and men are placed in relation to each other. While the male sexual drive discourse constructs men’s entitlement to a heterosexual practice without emotional investment or responsibility, the have and hold discourse positions women as acting in response to male initiatives, rather than their own self-defined needs and desires. The goal-oriented discourse, permissive sex, offers an alternative as it constructs sexuality as a natural component of human experience that is deserving of free expression; however, when taken up along with the other discourses, it does not necessarily produce sexually liberated women as they also turn to the dominant male/passive female construction of sex to make sense of their sexual lives and experiences.

Further analysis of the interviews indicated that the participants drew upon alternative discourses of sex that have emerged since Hollway conducted her research in the mid-1980s. These three discourses offer different meanings of sexual relationships and different subject positions. They are identified and described in the following three sections.

## **4.2 Sexological Discourse**

In accounts of their sexual encounters and sexual relationships with men, participants also drew on sexological discourse. Leonore Tiefer (2000) has named commonplace understandings of sexuality that come from a scientific approach to sex research and education

the sexological model of sexuality. Understanding this model as a discourse allows for recognizing that it does not reflect nature but offers a distinctive way of talking about sex and sexuality that actively promotes particular constructions to the exclusion of alternatives (Edley, 2001). According to Tiefer, the sexological model of sexuality privileges biological and psychological factors while making universal claims about sexuality. The emphasis on these factors is evident in constructions of the purpose of sex (e.g., procreation, pleasure, health), the types of sexual activity (e.g., normal and abnormal), and who is deemed an expert on sexuality (e.g., sex researchers, medical professionals). Privileging biological and psychological factors also deemphasizes, or excludes altogether, culture in determining meanings of sex. Consequently, this makes the perspective ill suited to addressing women's experiences of sex, as it leaves out the impact of gendered power relations (Tiefer, 2000).

In my analysis, I noted clear similarities between the understandings of sexuality that Tiefer (1994, 2000) associates with the sexological model and one of the ways in which the participants commonly narrated their sexual lives, constructing sex as a physical event largely divorced from psychological, emotional, and relational dimensions. The sexological discourse then constructs sex as coitus (i.e., penile-vaginal sex) with achievement of orgasm as the goal of sexual activity. Within this discourse, sex becomes fragmented and, given an appropriate partner, the sexual components of desire, arousal, and orgasm are understood to be sufficient for the performance of normal sexuality. Consistent with this, participants constructed the site of erotic pleasure as the genitals, and specific bodily fragments as necessary for successful sexual functioning, i.e., penile erection. For example, in the following excerpt, Alex answered the question, "Why wasn't it good? What made it not great?"

**Excerpt 5 (Alex, 38, single, never married)**

- 688 Alex: So (laugh), uhm, it, ah, ah, he was pretty, ah, basic, in his approach. Let's go  
689 with that. Like, where it was, it just, it didn't seem to have, he didn't seem to have  
690 a lot of understanding of, of what was what was going on for me. Uhm, and, ah,  
691 ah, you know, a little jack-rabbit-ish (laugh)  
692 Jennifer: Oh no::o! Oh, God! Okay. (laugh) No!  
693 Alex: Like, that's the worst picture of, but you know just not, just not an, it was like  
694 that. It wasn't great. Uhm  
695 Jennifer: Yeah.  
696 Alex: and, ah, ah, and he wasn't-. He wasn't as, he wasn't as big as I thought he would  
697 be. And, so that was also-. And I was like, "Mm" (disappointed tone). Hm. Uhm,

698 but it's interesting because I'm, I'm, I'm, I don't see it as deficits now. Uhm, but I,  
699 that definitely was my first impression.

Alex positioned her boyfriend within sexological discourse as responsible for her sexual pleasure. Sex with him was not great due to his lacking in his “approach” (“pretty...basic”; line 688), and his inability to understand her experience: “He didn't seem to have a lot of understanding...of what was what was going on for me” (line 690). Her complaint points to an alternative practice that is not articulated, but implies that it is the man's responsibility to know what to do and to be sensitive to the woman. The language used is rather vague in identifying problems with his “approach” and “understanding” as she is not explicit about what would have made the sexual relationship better. As she continued with her critique, she became more precise: “a little jack-rabbit-ish” (line 691). Her minimizing language (“a little”) softened the critique, perhaps anticipating criticism for having a boyfriend-girlfriend relationship without a satisfying sexual relationship—her later claiming that this was the “worst picture” supports this interpretation (line 693). I, however, also drawing on sexological discourse, supported her construction of the problem of the man's technique and skill level as legitimate: “Oh no::o! Oh, God!” (line 692), and “No!” (line 694). What is meant by “jack-rabbit-ish” is never explained, although mutual understanding is evident, as I endorsed her response (“okay”) and did not ask for clarification. After some false starts, Alex summed up the problem: “It wasn't great” (line 694). Through the sexological discourse, men are held responsible but at the same time maintain their sexual privilege and women remain invisible. While Alex positioned her partner as not knowing her experience, she does not mention expressing herself or declaring her needs.

After some hesitations, i.e., “ah,” “he wasn't” (line 696), Alex again drew on sexological discourse in identifying the specific problem as the penis: “He wasn't as big as I thought he would be” (line 696). The focus on the male genitals and their size constructs normal sex as penis-in-vagina, but she did not articulate how size made her sexual experience with this boyfriend disappointing. The sexological discourse allows women to position men as inadequate or as failed bodies, techniques, and sexual activities, but it seemingly does not allow them to talk about their own bodies and responsibility in sexual relationships. Finally, at the end of the excerpt Alex positioned herself as changing her mind: “I don't see it as deficits now” (line 698). The difference is not articulated, but the “now” suggests that it is associated with the progression of the relationship.

Consistent with the sexological model (e.g., Tiefer, 2000), across all the interviews coitus

was constructed as the main form of sexual activity and everything else was constructed as “foreplay,” “afterplay,” or “special needs.” Participants constructed sex as a staged event beginning with physiological arousal (“good kissing,” line 780; “foreplay,” line 785), warming up the partners to the main event of intercourse and ending in orgasm:

**Excerpt 6 (Bianca, 35, single, never married)**

- 780 Bianca: [...] You have to have good kissing, and not a lot of-. I don't, I don't like a lot  
781 of that, a lot of tongue action, I suppose. I'm sorry (laugh).  
782 Jennifer: That's okay (laughter).  
783 Bianca: A little bit is okay but too much is, is just too much. Foreplay. If you're into  
784 foreplay. Uhm, I mean, it doesn't have to be lots but, you know, a good amount to  
785 get your-, yourself warmed up, I guess. Penis size. Hardness. How hard it is. It has  
786 to be nice and hard. Uhm, and-. And like this guy last night lasted only, I guess  
787 (laughter), three minutes  
788 Jennifer: (loud gasp)  
789 Bianca: which is ridiculous. Yeah. So it was a waste of time. I feel like it's such a  
790 waste of time when those things happen. So, they have to last-. I mean, it has to be  
791 something that you engage in. It's-. I mean, it's-. It's supposed to be a fun,  
792 engaging activity.

Drawing on the sexological discourse, participants, such as Bianca, constructed their partners and their bodies as objects, and the penis as the phallus or sexual tool. Further, they constructed sexual pleasure as primarily deriving from coitus and satisfactory sex and achievement of a sexual goal as dependent on the duration of penile rigidity. Erections were constructed as understandable in and of themselves, disconnected from the person or the relationship. Thus, the male body is emphasized along with the expectation of the good enough penis and erection—the centrepiece of sexuality: “Penis size. Hardness. How hard it is. It has to be nice and hard” (line 786). Notably, there is no mention here, or in any of the interviews, of women’s sexual bodies or the adequacy of her sex organs. Implicit is the understanding that women are satisfied with intra-vaginal intercourse and that the site of women’s erotic pleasure is centred in the vagina.

Within the sexological discourse, men are positioned as technicians, with capacity to yield their partners’ orgasms, whereby the demonstration of sexual skill, self-control, and mastery of the female body confers pride and status. In this way, men are constructed as accountable for good sex. Women’s sexuality, on the other hand, is constructed as passive and her sexual satisfaction as arising from her partner’s actions. With the focus being on men’s

performance and competence, men are positioned as the source of a woman's sexual pleasure. His success as a lover is based, in part, on his ability to gauge the activity that will please her, i.e., "a little bit" and not "too much" tongue (line 783). Bianca, like other participants, also focused on men's endurance: "And like this guy last night lasted only, I guess, three minutes... which is ridiculous" (line 787). She constructed the achievement of certain body ideals, such as a good enough penis, and the man's ability to maintain an erection as what makes sex good and not a "waste of time" (lines 789-790). The failure to produce orgasms renders men as failed technicians (i.e., failing in their responsibility), and makes sexual activity pointless. In describing how sex should be, however, Bianca drew on the permissive sex discourse ("fun," "engaging," lines 791-792). This highlights the limits of what can be said within sexual discourse; that is, the meaning of sex is restricted to the body and physical performance.

#### **4.3 "Caring Sex" Discourse**

The women's accounts of sexual relationships were also framed within a discourse of caring. Within this discourse, they constructed good and fulfilling sex as distinct from the physical act itself and as including both feelings and practices of care, respect, and reciprocity. The discourse of caring sex is distinct from discourses related to heterosexual romance and monogamous relationships, i.e., have and hold discourse. The focus of the have and hold discourse is the Christian ideal of monogamy and the proposition that sex should take place within enduring relationships. In principle, this discourse is gender-blind, but in practice it is applied more stringently to women, distinguishing between the wife/mistress and virgin/whore (i.e. moral women only have sex in relationship). In contrast, the discourse of caring sex constructs morality in terms of a sexual ethics that guides partners' actions, central to which are the principles of care and respect. Underlying this is the recognition of the unconditional value of lovers as *persons*. Within this discourse, good sexual partners—men and women included—have a genuine moral duty to treat one another with respect. The next excerpt from Emma's interview followed my question, "What makes for a good sexual experience? (.) What's good sex?" (line 1056). Emma responded by explaining that people are good lovers when they listen to their partners. She elaborated further, explaining the importance of considering and respecting a sexual partner's basic humanity:

**Excerpt 7 (Emma, 50, single, divorced)**

- 1126 Emma: You know, so it's hearing what the other person is saying. It's not just all  
1127 about the sex. It's still respecting that person enough that you're having sex with to  
1128 hear them. So there is that, that mutual respect, I believe, too, right? Respecting as  
1129 a human being  
1130 Jennifer: [As a human being, yeah.  
1131 Emma: as another individual.  
1132 Jennifer: That's right.  
1133 Emma: Not as a lover, not as a partner, not as-. But as a human being with, you know,  
1134 physical needs, and emotions, and feelings, and-. Just as a human being.

Emma distinguished the practices of care and respect from the physical encounter and physical pleasure: "It's not just all about the sex" (lines 1126-1127). The "just" here made it clear that more is possible. Attending to one's sexual partner in this way comes down to respect, i.e., "respecting that person" (line 1127), "mutual respect" (line 1128), "respecting as a human being" (lines 1128-1129). This respect amounts to displaying a genuine interest in what one's partner is saying: "hearing what the other person is saying" (line 1126), "hear them" (line 1128). Emma further clarified that this respect comes from acknowledging one's partner's basic humanity: "as another individual" (line 1131), "as a human being" (lines 1133, 1134).

Emma also distinguished among three categories of person—"another individual" (line 1131), "a lover," and "a partner" (line 1133). This made clear that she was not drawing on a discourse of 'romance' or the have and hold discourse. She also referred to the "person ... that you're having sex with" (line 1127), a generalizing phrase that made no connection with a particular type of relationship and might well include anonymous sex. Similarly, her use of "human being" suggested a commonality among persons, i.e., that one's fundamental humanity makes people automatically worthy of good treatment. Notably, she defined being human as having "physical needs," "emotions," and "feelings" (line 1134).

In *Excerpt 8*, Donna drew on the discourse of caring sex to explain that sex is fulfilling when she is "treated like a lady" (line 867), and when her partners are being "considerate" (line 870) and "really respectful." In the following excerpt, Donna elaborated further:

**Excerpt 8 (Donna, 39, single, never married)**

- 881 Jennifer: But does it make actual the encounter, the sexual encounter, good or bad?  
882 Donna: [Oh,  
883 you can totally relax. Like-. Oh, my gosh, you can totally relax, right? And the  
884 way you remember the whole thing has this wonderful glow. Like, I mean, I've

885 had some, you know, great experiences where I kind of feel like the guy wasn't  
 886 that great. Like, had poor geography, and-. You know what I mean? (laugh) But  
 887 was so-. Treated me so well, and wanted to hold my hand, and-. And that kind of  
 888 thing and, you know, and-. It just sort of felt like they were really, liked you, and  
 889 were thinking about you, and just treated with such kindness, and respect, and  
 890 stuff. That it's a really big deal for me even if (laugh) the sex wasn't that great.  
 891 You kind of feel like it was still a very intimate experience, you know?  
 892 Jennifer: Right.  
 893 Donna: But, oh, gosh, it's so nice when the sex is good too but it's-. What's really  
 894 awful is when the sex is really great, and hot, and awesome, and all the proportions  
 895 are right, the geography's right on, and then after y-. They just don't-. The follow-  
 896 up is bad or they-. Afterwards they just don't treat you as well as you feel like you  
 897 deserve. It's just, like, it just ruins the whole thing. For me, anyway.

The excerpt began with my question about whether the caring practices referred to in the previous lines impact the sex (“it,” line 881). Donna elaborated by emphasising “you can totally relax,” a phrase she repeated twice (line 883). The repetition of this phrase was expressed as a question (“right?”) that invited me to inquire about the meaning of her response. I did not follow up but, in hindsight, it is interesting to consider why a woman would not be relaxed if her sexual partner were not treating her with respect and consideration. In other words, not knowing what to expect may contribute to anxieties or tensions about possible rough treatment, especially within the context of relatively casual or short-term relationships. Donna continued by elaborating on what sex is like when you are treated well. First of all, your memory is very positive (“has this wonderful glow,” line 884). She also used a three-part list to sum-up what it means for a partner to act in this way: “treated with such kindness, and respect, and stuff” (lines 889-890). The example she recalled included the details that he “wanted to hold my hand,” and “it just sort of felt like they were really, liked you, and were thinking about you” (lines 888-889)—actions that establish some intimacy between the partners, a claim that Donna made explicit (line 891). As well, “thinking about you” is very similar to Emma’s emphasis on being heard. The marker of good sexual experience is not the sex, i.e., “even if...the sex wasn’t that great” (line 890) and the “geography” is “poor” (line 886); rather, it is the good treatment leading up to sex and after sex that distinguishes good sex from bad. Consistent with this, ill treatment makes for bad sex: “just don’t treat you as well as you feel like you deserve,” “ruins the whole thing” (line 896-897). Donna used maximizing language to emphasise the difference between good and bad sex being about the care and not the sexual interaction per se: “the sex is really great, and hot, and awesome, and all the proportions are right, the geography’s right on” (lines 894-895). Thus, she

privileged sex as understood within caring sex discourse over sex as understood within sexological discourse.

#### 4.4 “New Age Spirituality” Discourse

Finally, participants also drew on New Age spirituality discourse, which included the idea of connectedness. Similar to the caring sex discourse, this distinguished ‘good’ sex from the physical acts of sex, and privileged mutuality and reciprocity over achieving an orgasm. As an alternative to romantic love, an emerging New Age spirituality discourse has been identified in men and women’s accounts of relationship satisfaction, which emphasizes “compatibility,” “intimacy,” and “soul mates” (Leslie & Morgan, 2011). What I have identified in my analysis is an extension of this discourse to sexual relationships specifically. The following interview excerpts illustrate some of the main features of the New Age spirituality discourse. The first of these (Excerpt 9) began with a discussion about fulfilling sex being more than reaching orgasm, which led to the topic “how you connect with your partner” (line 1143). In line 1153, I asked: “What does it mean to connect [...] with your partner?”

##### **Excerpt 9 (Sylvie, 36, single, never married)**

- 1157 Sylvie: That’s one of those ‘New Age’ thingy, I guess (laugh). It’s, it’s, it’s how the  
1158 energy flows where (.) when things just unfold naturally and it’s not like, forced or  
1159 there’s no, like, you know, ah, like, the guy’s thinking on how he’s looking. You  
1160 know? We-. Like, you’re actually here, like, both people are here, and, and it’s  
1161 meaningful. ‘Cause if both people are not here and, you know, it’s about, oh,  
1162 “How do I look when I do that move?” and type thing. Then it’s not fulfilling, I  
1163 guess.  
1164 Jennifer: Yeah. When you say ‘here’, it’s, you’re making this gesture that  
1165 Sylvie: [Well, it’s  
1166 Jennifer: brings two people together so there’s a-  
1167 Sylvie: it’s, like, here, in the moment.

Sylvie oriented to the New Age spirituality discourse and named it (line 1157). She went on to define it as: “how the energy flows” (line 1158). Sexual experience was characterised as effortless: “things just unfold naturally” and “not...forced” (line 1158). She further constructed the experience of connection as the couple being “here” (line 1161) and “in the moment” (line 1167), which she then contrasted with being “not here” (line 1161) where one or both sexual partners are portrayed as being conscious of how they look (lines 1159, 1162). Her construction of “fulfilling” (line 1162) sex is reminiscent of mindfulness, a way of paying attention to the



present experience that is an essential element of Eastern meditation practices popularized in the West by Jon Kabat-Zinn (e.g., 1979). Thus, within the New Age spirituality discourse, sex is constructed as an enterprise in which people fully involve themselves.

The understanding that good sex involves a spiritual and mindful approach is also illustrated in this final excerpt from Josie's interview. I asked her, "What makes for a good sexual experience?" Josie responded by explaining that her favourite way of having sex involved "Tantra," a formal practice that she explained.

**Excerpt 10 (Josie, 44, single, divorced)**

- 454 Jennifer: You may be thinking you've already answered it, but what makes for a good  
455 sexual experience?
- 456 Josie: Uhm, time. I think I, I like things a little less rushed. Uhm, and being able to, ah,  
457 you know, sort of, ah, where people are, you know, comfortable in the light and,  
458 and not self-conscious about their bodies. Uhm, and, you know, sort of being able  
459 to talk to somebody. Uhm, I think for me also it's, ehm (.) what is it? (.) I dunno, I  
460 probably am quite a, a sensual person. I mean I, I used to do an awful lot of tantric  
461 sex so I think a lot of it's to do with that. So it involves, ehm, massage and  
462 breathing, and ehm, you know, sort of, connecting in that kind of way. So I'm I  
463 tend to be more orientated towards people who enjoy that kind of sex, and I  
464 invariably find that that works well because there's, there's not so much of a  
465 pressure to perform. So it's not always about ejaculation. It's more about, you  
466 know, ah, exploring a range of different sensations and sexuality.

In this excerpt, Josie drew on sexological, and New Age spirituality discourses to construct her preferred type of sex. At the outset, Josie drew on the New Age spirituality discourse to construct good sex as a process that takes time, and occurs at a slower pace: "less rushed" (line 456). Adding to this, she constructed both sexual partners, "people," as being free to expose their bodies ("comfortable in the light," "not self-conscious"), and openly express themselves to one another, i.e., "talk to somebody" (line 459). In line 460, she positioned herself in the New Age spirituality discourse as "a sensual person," who engages in "tantric sex." Her account of this—the partners engage in "massage," "breathing," and "connecting" (line 462)—suggested deliberate coordinated and cooperative action. She contrasted this version of sex with the alternative made available within sexological discourse, where the end product, the achievement of orgasm ("ejaculation," line 465), is constructed as the purpose of sex, creating a "pressure to perform" in order to reach this objective (line 465). Finally, she returned to the understanding of sex within New Age spirituality discourse in talking about having an

exploratory approach to sex: “exploring a range of different sensations and sexuality” (line 466). Thus, within New Age spirituality discourse, sexual practices are to focus on the experience itself.

The next two sections of this chapter, *Holding Men Accountable for “Good Sex”* (Section 4.5) and *Negotiating a “Moral” Subject Position When Having “Just Sex”* (Section 4.6), illustrate how participants drew on the various discourses of sex to do two things: First, they held men accountable for the quality of their sexual experiences and positioned themselves as responders rather than doers in a way that reproduced active man and passive woman subject positions. Second, participants worked to position themselves as both sexual women and moral women—sex outside of long-term relationships is still a sensitive topic and single women must carefully negotiate these meanings.

#### **4.5. Holding Men Accountable for “Good Sex”**

In the examples provided in this section, the women drew on the male sexual drive and sexological discourses in their accounts of sexual encounters outside of long-term relationships. They held men and men’s bodies accountable for their sexual pleasure and the quality of the sexual experience and never their own. In the first excerpt, Joanna answered my question about her rules guiding her decision regarding sexual activity (“Are there any, sort of, do’s or don’ts that you somehow relate to sex in these relationships?”), and explained how she determined whether or not to have sex with a potential partner:

##### **Excerpt 11 (Joanna, 39, single, never married)**

- 690 Joanna: I see if it’s worth my time.  
691 Jennifer: How do you know if-?  
692 Joanna: [Like, when you cop a feel (laugh), you know.  
693 Both: (laugh)  
694 Jennifer: Yeah.  
695 Joanna: You know, there’s certain things that, you know, it’s not gonna-. It’s just  
696 gonna waste your time or-. You know.  
697 Jennifer: So what you’re saying is-. I’m gonna get explicit. If he has a big enough  
698 penis, if it’s a small peni-? Is that what you mean? Like  
699 Joanna: [Yeah.  
700 Jennifer: You can put your hands in his pants, or on his pants, and if it’s- (laugh). If  
701 it’s too small, if it’s-.  
702 Joanna: Too small then it’s just not even worth-.  
703 Jennifer: Yeah?

704 Joanna: Yeah. I think. (laugh)

Joanna stated one of her rules is to determine whether or not the sexual encounter will be “worth” investing her “time” (line 690). In so doing, she (and I) drew on sexological discourse to construct sex as a goal-oriented event that is centered on the achievement of (her) orgasm. In response to my questioning (line 691), she constructed penis size as the critical factor for success (i.e., “cop a feel,” line 692). Notably, I made this meaning explicit at line 697, but she agreed at line 699. Together then, we constructed the penis as a tool (i.e., the phallus) that is necessary for a worthwhile sexual experience. Neither she nor I referred to her body or genitals. Our laughter, and my agreement and elaborations (lines 693, 694, 697-698, 700-701, 703, 704), demonstrated a shared understanding about this making for a satisfying sexual encounter. However, Joanna was the one “copping a feel,” and deciding what is or is not a waste of time. In this respect, she positioned herself as an “active woman,” even though she holds the man responsible for good sex.

In the next passage (Excerpt 12), Eleanor answered my question, “So what is good sex?” Drawing on the sexological and male sexual drive discourses, she explained the qualities she expects from a sexual partner.

**Excerpt 12 (Eleanor, 43, single, never married)**

504 Eleanor: U::hm, well, it’s not just sex then. They gotta be good with their hands, like-.  
505 (laugh) A guy that’s good with his hands makes good sex. I like dirtier sex, not  
506 kinky sex. You know, a little bit raunchier. I don’t want some guy being like,  
507 “There, there,” and being all gentle and  
508 Jennifer: [Tender with you?  
509 Eleanor: Ew. Yeah, no. That would be like-. Yeah, I don’t like that.  
510 Jennifer: [So, when they’re-. When they’re good  
511 with their hands, what does that mean?  
512 Eleanor: Well, because it makes ‘em hit your G-spot. (laugh)  
513 Jennifer: Oh, yeah. Okay. So, there w-. Yeah.  
514 Eleanor: Yeah.  
515 Jennifer: I don’t know how to say this. They’re stimulating you manually.  
516 Eleanor: That’s right. Yes. Yeah, yeah. ‘Cause that would be my preference of, you  
517 know, way to get off. So, like, a guy is good with his hands and, just, also, too,  
518 just-. You know, basically, uses their hands, right? As opposed to that cyclist who  
519 was just a humper. Ugh.  
520 Jennifer: Oh. Yeah, that’s [inaudible].  
521 Eleanor: [Nothing worse than some guy just on top of you-. Ugh.  
522 Jennifer: Just-

523 Eleanor: [And then, yeah, and could you take the weight off of me? Use your  
 524 elbows at least, for God's sake. (laugh) You know?  
 525 Jennifer: Yeah. Oh, no!  
 526 Eleanor: (laugh) Ugh. Yeah. Yeah, no good looks, you know, replaces that, you know?  
 527 Like, those-. Yeah, the guy gets ugly pretty quick. (laugh)

Eleanor began by constructing good sex as involving more than coitus (“not just sex”) and including a broader sexual repertoire: “good with their hands,” “good with his hands” (lines 505-506). Eleanor’s definition of good sex focused attention on her partner’s sexual skills and not her own. She went on to describe the quality of good sex, drawing on the permissive sex discourse to construct it in terms of adventure and exploration, i.e., “dirtier,” “raunchier,” but within certain limits: “not kinky sex” (line 506). As explanation, she drew on the male sexual drive discourse to construct her ideal partner as assertive rather than solicitous (i.e., “all gentle”), which she constructed as repellent (“Ew”): “I don’t want some guy being, like, ‘There, there’ ” (line 507).

Shifting the conversation, I asked her to clarify what she meant by “good with their hands” (line 511), and her explanation centred on her body and sex organs, “G-spot” (line 512), which was a rare occurrence across the interviews. When I sought clarification (line 515), she explained this was her way to achieve orgasm (“way to get off”; line 517), further moving away from the penis as the centrepiece of sex. However, she continued to hold her partner accountable for her satisfaction, focusing on her partner’s hands (“uses their hands”) and his skills (“good with his hands”) rather than her own. She explained good sex by detailing the “bad” and became particular with her critique by drawing on her previous experience with “a humper” (line 522). She constructed bad sex as coitus, i.e., “some guy just on top of you” (line 521), involving men who lack finesse and are inattentive to her needs: “Use your elbows at least, for God’s sake” (lines 523-524). Here, and at earlier moments of the exchange (line 520), I also drew on sexological discourse and legitimated her construction of the problem of the man’s poor technique: “Yeah. Oh, no!” (line 525). She finished by explaining, humorously, that physical appearance (“good looks”) does not make for a successful sexual interaction: “the guy gets ugly pretty quick.” Again, the man is held responsible for the quality of the sex.

Despite having only one brief romantic relationship and never engaging in coitus, Rachel drew on the sexological discourse in the same way that other participants did—to account for the quality of her sexual experience:

### Excerpt 13 (Rachel, 46, single, never married)

- 1098 Jennifer: So, uhm, have you had a bad experience-? Like, when that's been good, what  
1099 makes it good? When it's been bad, what makes it bad? Do you know what I  
1100 mean?  
1101 Rachel: Yeah. Uhm, I just get-. I think sometimes the guys get carried away and, uhm,  
1102 they're really thinking about, ah, their side of things, and, and not really enough  
1103 touching, and caressing, and all that stuff. So, ah, sometimes he's, he's already  
1104 done, and (laugh) I'm, like, "Was that all?" (laugh)

Rachel drew on the male sexual drive discourse in her brief account. Given her limited sexual experience, her use of these discourses highlights the ubiquity of both. First, she drew on the male sexual drive discourse, positioning her partner as the sexual subject (i.e., active man) and herself as the sexual object, who is the recipient of his actions detailed in line 1103 (i.e., passive woman). She constructed her partners' sexual drives as so compelling (i.e., "carried away," line 1101) that they neglect her and her pleasure: "they're really thinking about...their side of things" (line 1102). Using a three-part list, i.e., "touching," "caressing," "all that stuff" (line 1103), she accounted for men's insufficiencies. This criticism made men responsible for her erotic pleasure or its absence ("he's already done"; "Was that all?"; lines 1103-1104). While this positioned men as unenlightened and focused on their own needs, it also conferred them with sexual privilege, i.e., as responsible for, but also capable of producing, sexual gratification for both parties. In short, the emphasis on men's accountability within a sexual encounter served to reproduce the gendered subject positions associated with the male sexual drive and have and hold discourses, namely, the active male and the passive female. The women's complaints about men implied that they were actively seeking certain kinds of sexual experience, but they did not position themselves as responsible persons in this endeavor, save for finding the right man. Still, highlighting the contradictory discursive space in which sexual practices and identities are produced, the women oriented to other concerns where they positioned themselves as actors in creating a sexual space for themselves.

#### 4.6 Negotiating a "Moral" Subject Position When Having "Just Sex"

This last section demonstrates that accounting for sex outside of long-term relationships remains a sensitive topic and that single-at-midlife women must carefully negotiate the various discourses of sex when talking about their sexual experiences. There are evident tensions between accounting for sex in long-term relationships, which are "natural locations" for women

and men to have a sexual relationship, compared to alternative sexual relationships, where women's participation in sexual activities may be judged immoral or excessive. The women drew particularly on the New Age spirituality and caring sex discourses in their accounts, positioning themselves as both sexual and moral women.

The first excerpt from Lisa's interview (Excerpt 14) is one example of how these tensions were navigated in the research conversations. In this passage, she was responding to my statement about her previous use of the term "old-fashioned" to describe herself: "It's interesting 'cause you used the word old-fashioned, uhm, earlier."

**Excerpt 14 (Lisa, 41, single, never married)**

- 527 Jennifer: I'm just interested in the fact that you used that w-, term.  
528 Lisa: Well, I guess it's just because when I look at friends nowadays, it's like, you  
529 know, you don't have to have a relationship with someone to have sex with them.  
530 You don't even have to know their name. Uhm, but I do? I don't know. Uhm, it is  
531 kind of weird that way, 'cause I, I get that I don't make a lot of sense 'cause I'm  
532 not traditional in the fact that I have the need to get married or babies. Yet I guess  
533 I'm somewhat old-fashioned, or traditional, or whatever kind of word you wanna  
534 use, in the fact that I: I don't know-. I wanna feel a connection with an individual  
535 as opposed to just sex.  
536 Jennifer: Yeah.  
537 Lisa: I think part of the other problem is, and this is where we can get really nitty-  
538 gritty is, uhm, my theory on one-night stands, or not being in a relationship with  
539 someone that I'm sleeping with, is that I don't necessarily get anything out of it.  
540 And because with the guy they almost always, uhm, can get off having sex. I think  
541 it's a rare instance when they struggle. Uhm, with some women, you have to work  
542 harder, and I'm one of those women. So, again, like, if I were just to bring any slug  
543 home then he'd probably get his rocks off and I'd be left going, "Well, what is the  
544 point of that?"

Lisa used the descriptor "old-fashioned" and differentiated herself from her contemporaries ("friends"), whom she constructed as representatives of current and commonplace sexual practices, such as having sex outside of relationships (line 529): "you don't even have to know their name" (permissive sex discourse). She further set herself apart from her peers ("but I do"), resisting the promiscuous woman subject position. Notably, she said this in the form of a question, suggesting hesitation, and followed it up with more uncertainty, "I don't know," "it is kind of weird," "I don't make a lot of sense" (line 531). Negotiating the meaning of "traditional," she drew on the permissive sex discourse and the coupledom narrative, i.e., courtship, marriage, family (Reynolds & Taylor, 2005) to position herself as rejecting a

“traditional” life that centered on being “married” and having “babies” (line 532), and resisting the have and hold discourse. However, at the same time she drew on the New Age spirituality discourse to construct the desire for wanting “a connection” as opposed to just sex and positioning herself as both a sexual woman with sexual desires but also a moral woman who is selective about the conditions under which she is willing to take up a sexual relationship outside of traditional arrangements (lines 534-535). She navigated this contradiction by qualifying her positioning as “somewhat old-fashioned” (line 533) or possibly better described in other terms (“whatever kind of word you wanna use,” lines 533-534). Thus, her concern here is with the quality of the relationship with her sexual partners—she need not be positioned within a long-term, committed relationship but she also did not position herself within the permissive sex discourse.

At lines 534-535, she drew on the sexological and New Age spirituality discourses to construct the two categories of sex: “just sex” (line 535) was constructed as a physiological phenomenon devoid of emotional dimensions (sexological discourse), and “connection” (line 534) included an emotional and relational dimension (“feel a connection”; New Age spirituality discourse). In this way, she privileged sexual experiences that include emotional and physiological components over those that do not and positioned herself as a woman interested in sex (i.e., sexual woman). In addition, in wanting more than just sex she positioned herself as a moral woman who did not need to wait for love or a committed relationship to be sexual (i.e. have and hold discourse), but who chose to have sex that included intimacy (i.e., “connection”). She then drew on the sexological discourse to further explain and justify only having sex when there is a connection—the “nitty gritty” of “one-night stands” (lines 537-538) focused attention on the practical, biological details of sexual encounters and made clear her resistance to sexual practices defined within the constraints of sexological discourse. Unlike her male partners, whose sexuality is understood to be straightforward (“can get off having sex”) and easy (“it’s a rare instance when they struggle”), she constructed her own sexual response as a challenge and her sexual pleasure (i.e., orgasm) as demanding effort: “you have to work harder” (line 542). Here, then, she also drew on male sex drive discourse to construct men’s sexual experience as natural with an inevitable outcome. In the final sentence, she positioned her imaginary partners in casual sex in evocative terms that made the connection to biology even clearer (“any slug,” line 543) and reiterated the inevitability of his sexual satisfaction regardless of the conditions

(“he’d probably get his rocks off”). Finally, she focused on her imaginary partners’ lack of attention to her needs and held them accountable for her dissatisfaction (lines 543-544). Using passive verb tense, she positioned herself as the object of their inattentiveness and her partners as the responsible parties. In this account then, sexual relationships understood within New Age spirituality discourse are proposed as a possibility for sexual relationships outside of a long-term, committed relationship and as alternative to the just sex understanding drawn from Hollway’s three discourses. This shift also makes available the sexual woman and moral woman subject positions, opening up the possibility of women being more than sexual objects of male desire.

The following passage from Claire’s interview was in response to my question, “So for you, when sex is good, what makes it good?” She constructed “connection” as an important ingredient of good sex, which can occur in both casual and “long-term” relationships. Claire’s excerpt began with her explaining what is missing in a bad sexual experience.

**Excerpt 15 (Claire, 49, single, divorced)**

- 1082 Claire: It’s the, the, you know, kind of not having that, that sense of connection and,  
1083 like miscommunication. You know, you’re trying to do something but it’s  
1084 misfiring. It’s not pleasing the other person, and the other person’s not pleasing  
1085 you. Sense of frustration is growing, and-. So there’s like a-. You know, you’re  
1086 trying to do what you think is right and it’s not working. So-. And, and, you know.  
1087 And I think a lot of that is really, uhm, having an emotional connection. If you  
1088 don’t have an emotional connection then, you know-. Unless you’re drunk and  
1089 you’re dragging somebody home, and you’re having drunk sex. Then, then the  
1090 other part is really awkward, and doesn’t ever get-. It, it can’t get there.  
1091 Jennifer: Yeah. That’s what I was just gonna say. I mean, if this is your vision of good  
1092 sex and bad sex, it makes sense, then, why you wouldn’t be, uhm, dating the way  
1093 you were, or whatever you wanna call it, dating the way you were in your 20s.  
1094 Because it’s hard-. Is it harder to have that happen when you’re just, uhm, you  
1095 know, taking somebody home or you date them a couple of times and that’s it?  
1096 Claire: Yeah, absolutely. I don’t connect. It takes me a long time. I mean, it doesn’t  
1097 take a long time. Sometimes, I’ll connect with somebody pretty quickly, but, but I  
1098 really think that that connection has to be there for me to really be engaged in it  
1099 ‘Cause otherwise, it just feels like you’re turning knobs, and you’re pushing  
1100 buttons, and it’s really not doing anything.

Claire drew on the New Age spirituality discourse to construct bad sexual experiences as stemming from a failure to “connect” and “communicate” with one’s partner (line 1082). She elaborated, explaining that bad sex also means one’s actions (i.e., “trying to do something”) do not successfully result in pleasure or orgasm, “misfiring” (line 1084). Furthermore, there is a



lack of mutuality: “not pleasing the other person,” “other person’s not pleasing you.” Claire constructed bad sex as failed action, i.e., “trying” but “not working” (line 1086), suggesting that sex is a goal-oriented activity, a construction shaped by sexological discourse. In her view, the emotional and relational aspects of sex, i.e., “connection,” serve the physical aspects of sex and make it natural, effortless, and easy. She contrasted this with sex that is physical, i.e., just sex, such as when people are having “drunk sex,” and when partners are strangers to each other (“dragging somebody home”). In such situations, i.e., casual sex, the lack of “connection” is expected. But the lack of “connection” results in the failure of the physical side of sex, “doesn’t ever...get there” (line 1090), the “there” being the natural end-point of sex, i.e., orgasm. Therefore, “connection” is constructed as necessary for physical pleasure (the “other part”).

At line 1091, I acknowledged her “vision” and how that shaped her sexual relationships. Claire then drew on the New Age spirituality discourse to argue first that “connection” requires “time” to develop and then the opposite: “it doesn’t take a long time” (lines 1096-1097). However the “connection” arises—either over time, or as immediately present—she constructed it as a key and necessary component of a fulfilling sexual experience that enables her engagement: “has to be there for me” (line 1098). Without it, sex is not a process-oriented activity but is merely a physical experience, described here in mechanistic terms (i.e., “turning knobs,” “pushing buttons,” line 1101), that does not produce a wished-for result (e.g., orgasm): “not doing anything.” In constructing these two categories of sex, and privileging more than just sex over just sex, Claire positioned herself as a moral woman who prefers sex with “connection” but also as a sexual woman who can be engaged under the right circumstances.

Abby also drew on multiple discourses of sex to construct an account of good sex occurring in both casual and long-term relationships. The excerpt began as a response to my question about satisfying sexual experiences: “What makes for a good sexual experience? What is good sex?”

**Excerpt 16 (Abby, 36, single, never married)**

1279 Abby: Uhm (.) I think good sex is when both partners are being considerate, and  
1280 conscious, and present. So, uhm, where you’re maybe more invested in pleasuring  
1281 the other person. Uhm, which in turn gives you pleasure than just kind of  
1282 pleasuring yourself, so. So, so, like, you’re not masturbating on another person.  
1283 Uhm, but that you’re actually, ah, really engaged in the moment, and in what’s  
1284 happening. I would say that’s, that kind of qualifies good sex. Yeah, and then just

1285 being willing to try things, to try anything, and being able to, uhm, converse with  
 1286 the person while it's happening. So-. Yeah. I, I-. But I think overall, like, being  
 1287 present is key 'cause if you're present, then, you kind of know what's, what's  
 1288 going on, uhm, with that other person.

1289 Jennifer: Yeah. And so bad sex is the opposite of all that then, I guess

1290 Abby: [Yeah

1291 Jennifer: with the absence of-

1292 Abby: [Can I add one thing

1293 Jennifer: [Yeah

1294 Abby: to the good sex, which may sound really cheesy. But I think, love. Like, if you  
 1295 love someone, if you really love someone, uhm, then all of that is coming in-. Then  
 1296 all of that is coming into it too. And I think that's-. I think that makes a huge  
 1297 difference in the kind of sex that you're having. Uhm-. Yeah. And, again, like, not  
 1298 to judge that you can't-. You could love someone, hav-, after having just met them,  
 1299 you know. You could have a one-night stand and, like, ah, I'm, I'm sure have  
 1300 some kind of emotional investment in it. But, uhm-. But, yeah, and that, and that's  
 1301 also just for me. Like, I think if I don't feel emotion and connected to that person  
 1302 in any way then it's hard for me to understand what I'm doing.

1303 Jennifer: Yeah. What do you mean understand what you're doing?

1304 Abby: Like, if it becomes completely me-, like, without any kind of emotional  
 1305 connection, and it's just sort of mechanical. 'Cause my bad sex experiences have  
 1306 been where I realize that's what's happening for the other person. That the guy is  
 1307 not connected at all, or not present. Uhm, and that it is kind of mechanical and-.

1308 Yeah, and it just sort of makes me feel, ugh, like, wha-? What's going on here?

1309 Why are we doing this?

Throughout the excerpt, Abby constructed two categories of sex: just sex and more than just sex, privileging the latter. At the beginning of the excerpt, Abby drew on New Age spirituality and caring sex discourses and, using a three-part list, defined good sex as being “considerate,” “conscious,” and “present.” These attributes lead to sex that is based on mutuality and a selfless investment in one’s partner: “more invested in pleasuring the other person” (line 1281). In this way, she constructed good sex as being more than a physical and physiological phenomenon, i.e., just sex (“you’re not masturbating,” line 1282). She continued with the New Age spirituality discourse to construct good sex as involving mindfulness and presence: “engaged,” “in the moment” (line 1283). She then drew on the permissive sex discourse to suggest that good sex also involves openness to exploration (“willing to try,” “try anything”), and communication between partners: “converse with the other” (line 1286). Finally, she again drew on the New Age spirituality discourse to suggest that mindfulness and being in the moment is central, “being present,” leading to an intuitive mutual understanding between partners: “know

what's... going on... with that other person" (line 1288). Together, we constructed bad sex as lacking these aspects.

At line 1289, I clarified the meaning of bad sex, confirming that this misses all the above ingredients. However, at line 1294, she shifted the conversation, and redefined good sex in terms of "love." This is one of the very few examples where love is mentioned in the interviews. Notably, she prefaced this with a disclaimer, "may sound really cheesy" (line 1294) but she suggested that when love is involved, all the aspects of good sex are automatically present (line 1296). Importantly, Abby was not talking about committed, long-term relationships exclusively. Rather, she referred to "emotional investment," "emotion," and "connection" as possibly arising in sexual encounters outside a relationship, i.e., "one-night stand" (1299). She argued further that the lack of "emotion" and connection (line 1301) renders sex meaningless ("hard for me to understand what I'm doing," line 1302). Sex without "emotional connection" (i.e., just sex) is reduced to the physical: "mechanical" (line 1305, 1307). In her construction of "bad sex" she positioned her partners as not being "connected" or "present." And this causes her to question her involvement: "What's going on here? Why are we doing this?" (line 1309).

The final excerpt from Emma's interview (Excerpt 17) is a response to my questions: "But what made it good? You've sort of said something about that but what made it great?" Emma's account of a good sexual encounter provided the possibility of positioning herself as a sexual woman and a moral woman when engaged in sex outside a long-term relationship.

**Excerpt 17 (Emma, 50, single, never married)**

- 712 Emma: I was in the moment. So that's what made the sex so good.  
713 Jennifer: Yeah. How did you get to be in the moment? How do you get to be in the  
714 moment? That's-. That's, maybe, hard to-.  
715 Emma: Just let it happen. Just let it happen, right? It's, uhm, again there-. You know,  
716 with the no thoughts, no preconceived notions, no nothing. Just, just let it, allow it  
717 to happen.  
718 Jennifer: Mm hm. Yeah, you weren't thinking, "What does this mean? What-?"  
719 (laugh)  
720 Emma: [Yeah.  
721 Jennifer: Yeah.  
722 Emma: and I wasn't thinking, "Oh, will he be around tomorrow or-?"  
723 Jennifer: [Yeah.  
724 Emma: you know, "The son of a bitch didn't pick up milk on the way home," or, or  
725 anything. You know, there was nothing. It was just sex. (laugh) You know? And,  
726 you know, we weren't worrying about how, you know, the mortgage is gonna get

727           paid or whatever, right? You know, there was nothing.

As in the previous excerpts, Emma's account drew on the New Age spirituality discourse, which encompasses mindfulness as a practice. Therefore, for Emma good sex was defined as requiring a certain presence: "I was in the moment" (line 712). She explained this further as "no thoughts, no preconceived notions, no nothing" (line 716), and gave a number of examples of the kinds of thoughts and worries that were absent (lines 722, 724, 726-726). Emma emphasized lack of effort: "just let it happen" (line 715), "just let it, allow it to happen" (lines 716-717). Emma's account was also shaped by the permissive sex discourse. The issues and concerns that she did not think about when she was "in the moment" are those that come with married and family life, such as the expectation of relationship longevity (i.e., "be around tomorrow," line 722), domestic duties (i.e., "pick up milk on the way home," line 724), and shared financial commitments (i.e., "mortgage," line 726). As with the male sexual drive discourse, within the permissive sex discourse, sex is constructed as a matter of individual desire and satisfaction: "it was just sex" (line 725).

#### **4.7 Chapter Summary**

The aim of this chapter was to analyse the discourses of sex that are used in the participants' accounts of sexual relationships, and the practices and meanings that reproduce single-at-midlife women's sexuality. The results demonstrate that participants drew upon discourses that have previously been identified in the discursive literature on (hetero)sexual relations, specifically those identified by Wendy Hollway (i.e., male sexual drive, have and hold, and permissive sex discourses; 1984a). The analyses also illustrate that since Hollway completed her work there has been an expansion of the permissive sex discourse, and new discourses have emerged to include sexological, caring sex, and New Age spirituality. These results point to the shifting nature of the discourses of sex and demonstrate that these emerging discourses were available to the women in their accounts of their sexual lives.

In their accounts of good and fulfilling sex outside of long-term relationships, the women drew on the male sexual drive and sexological discourses. In doing so, the women constructed men's sexual urges as natural and compelling, and stated a preference for men who actively pursue them. Finally, they held their partners and their partners' bodies (i.e., genitals) accountable for the quality of the sexual experience (i.e., men as sexual technicians). This

emphasis on men's accountability within a sexual encounter served to reproduce gendered subject positions, i.e., the active male and the passive female, and positioned women as not responsible for the success of the encounter.

Single-at-midlife women constructed two categories of sex. First, just sex was constructed as a physiological phenomenon devoid of emotional dimensions (sexological discourse) beyond a physical act. Except for Emma, women referred to just sex to signal the kind of interaction they were not interested in. The category, more than just sex, was constructed as having both physical and emotional/relational dimensions, such as connection, care, mutuality, and respect that were conspicuously absent in the just sex category (New Age spirituality and caring sex discourses). Constructing sex in this way allowed women to give accounts of good and fulfilling sex that were defined in terms of sexual intimacy and managed accountability for having sex outside long-term relationships. They could claim the subject positions sexual woman and moral woman within the emerging discourses.

## **Chapter 5: Sex and Sexuality at Midlife**

All participant interviews included discussion about sexual relationships as they related to aging, and the analysis explores how women negotiated appropriate sexual relationships for women at midlife, and constructed the relationships they want at this age. Participants drew on constructions of midlife to position themselves as comfortably single midlife women and as women who are open to casual sexual relationships. This extended the analysis of constructions of midlife singleness presented in my Masters' thesis, and therefore, the chapter begins with constructions of midlife singleness in the current research, followed by constructions of midlife sexuality and finally sexual relationships at midlife.

### **5.1 Constructing Midlife Singleness—Comparison to Moore and Radtke (2015)**

In previous research with single-at-midlife women, I identified two interpretative repertoires (IRs) of midlife (Moore & Radtke, 2015): “standard midlife” and transformative midlife IRs. In the present study, some of the women who, like the participants in my Masters' thesis research, were positioned as never married also drew on these IRs when talking about their romantic relationships with men more generally (e.g., how they met men) when constructing their identities as single women. Some examples are provided below to show the link to this previous research.

**5.1.1 “Standard midlife” IR.** This IR constructs midlife as a time when a romantic relationship leading to marriage and a family life has been achieved. In the present study, all participants, regardless of relationship history, positioned themselves as open to marriage and family in the future. However, those who positioned themselves as never married used the standard midlife IR to construct singleness as a “deficit identity” (Reynolds, 2008) and to position themselves as waiting for an opportunity to achieve what their similarly-aged peers have accomplished at this stage of life. They of course could not claim to have been positioned as “married with family” at any point in their lives so far. An example of how the standard midlife IR was employed is taken from Rachel's interview, when she addressed a question about how she would like a romantic relationship to begin and unfold (line 424): “If somebody special came into your life, how would you like it to happen, if you could design it?” She explained that some of her friends were offering to help her meet men, an arrangement that caused her discomfort.

**Excerpt 1 (Rachel: 46, single, never married)**

- 452 Rachel: I'm-. I'm very uncomfortable with the demand of my friend.  
453 Jennifer: Oh, okay. Yeah.  
454 Rachel: I'm just thinking I have a, a, a more natural timetable. And, ah, the demand of  
455 my friend is, "You're single, you're single. Meet this guy, meet this guy, meet this  
456 guy." Ah, they're well meaning. Ah, I, I cannot, ah, say. But I have to have that  
457 feeling, that spark in me to say, "You know, I did really like this person and, uhm,  
458 what I know about this person-." I would like to meet on a level where there  
459 wasn't any, ah, relationship or anything and, and, uhm, ah, is just, uh, a, chance to,  
460 uhm, get to know this person somehow.  
461 Jennifer: Yeah. Yeah.  
462 Rachel: And then for me to process that, "Oh, you know, I really like this person. I  
463 would like to see this person sometime."  
464 Jennifer: Yeah. (.) Yeah. So, yeah, your own agenda, your own-  
465 Rachel: [Timetable].  
466 Jennifer: you're doing it on your own time. Yeah.  
467 Rachel: Yeah. How about-. But I'm also-. I'm old, so (laugh), uhm, cognisant of the  
468 fact that the clock is ticking.  
469 Jennifer: O:h.  
470 Rachel: Yeah.  
471 Jennifer: The clock is tick-. Okay. I want to ask you about that but first I just wanna  
472 say-.  
473 Rachel: [Ah, I would have thought I would be in a relationship by my late 20s and  
474 early 30s.  
475 Jennifer: Okay.  
476 Rachel: And, ah, right now, it's 46, and I'm working on it.

Rachel constructed two approaches to meeting and beginning a romantic relationship with a man; the first was through friends who sought to set her up on dates, and the second was by "chance," through the "natural" course of life. She characterised the first scenario as unsatisfactory, as her friends' efforts were constructed as commands, i.e., "demand of my friend" (lines 452, 455), causing her discomfort: "very uncomfortable" (line 452). She acknowledged her friends' good intentions, "well meaning" (line 456), but she constructed their actions as pushy, and characterised them as rushing her. The language Rachel used, and the flow of her talk, mimicked her friends' emphasis on speed and urgency and further problematized her singleness (i.e., "single as deficit identity"; Reynolds, 2008): "You're single, you're single" (line 455); "Meet this guy, meet this guy, meet this guy" (line 455).

In comparison, the alternative involved meeting a man through the natural course of life ("chance" IR; Reynolds, 2008). She drew on the New Age spirituality discourse to construct her

preference for meeting men through a superior and naturally unfolding schedule of her own devising: “I have a more natural timetable” (line 454). She further drew on the New Age spirituality discourse to construct connection (“that feeling, that spark,” line 457) as a necessary prerequisite (“I have to have,” line 456) before getting to know a man. Rachel elaborated, constructing her ideal romantic relationship as beginning by meeting a stranger (“there wasn’t any...relationship,” line 458) and then coming to know them (“chance to...get to know,” line 459) so that she might be able to evaluate her feelings about the person (“to process that,” line 463). At lines 464 to 466, Rachel and the interviewer together co-construct this as occurring in a way that reflects Rachel’s aims and needs, i.e., “your own agenda,” and her desire for an unhurried unfolding (“timetable,” line 465; “on your own time,” line 466). However, she used a metaphor, the ticking clock, to clarify that the timetable is not entirely her own. Referring explicitly to her age (“I’m old,” line 467), she positioned herself as aware of the passage of time (line 467) and her failure to achieve a relationship in the normal time of life, i.e., late 20s and early 30s (line 473). Indeed, at line 473, she interrupted me to explain that life had unfolded in a way she did not expect. Here, she drew on the standard midlife IR and took up the singleness as a deficit identity subject position, which has been previously identified by Reynolds (2008). She immediately re-positioned herself, however, as “working on it” (line 476), a discursive move that reflects how the deficit identity is a troubled subject position. It must be explained or resisted in some way. Her explicit mention of her age, 46, underscored her persistence in continuing to aspire to a romantic relationship even though she is “old.”

Abby drew on the standard midlife IR to position herself as out of step with her similarly aged peers who had marriages, children, and economically stable lives. The following excerpt followed her description of the years of dating that led to meeting her current partner. Here, she described her singleness at midlife as unexpected and problematic, arising from chance:

**Excerpt 2 (Abby, 36, new relationship, never married)**

- 556 Abby: I was so lonely and really, and felt really hopeless, and really felt, like, uhm, ah,  
 557 I didn’t know-. It made me question, like, the choices that I have made in doing  
 558 this graduate degree.=  
 559 Jennifer: =Oh.  
 560 Abby: Uhm-.  
 561 Jennifer: How, how so?



562 Abby: Because, uhm, most of my friends who are my age are already kind of like in  
563 their careers. A lot of my older close friends are married, uhm, most of them are  
564 either pregnant, or they've had a baby.  
565 Jennifer: Yeah.  
566 Abby: So they're sort of well into that kind of expected part of your life. And then  
567 being in graduate school, uhm, it's strange to be this age in graduate school.

Abby positioned herself as having a deficit identity prior to meeting her boyfriend (single as deficit identity; Reynolds, 2008), describing herself as “lonely” and “hopeless” (line 556). Like Rachel, she engaged in considerable discursive work in managing this troubled subject position. She described herself as questioning her “choices,” namely “doing this graduate degree” (line 557), which implied that the pursuit of academic achievement was insufficient to fill the lack. When asked to elaborate (line 561), she drew on the standard midlife IR to compare herself to her same-age peers (“most of my friends who are my age,” line 562). Her peers (“most,” line 562; “a lot,” line 563) have an established “career,” “are married,” and either have “a baby” or are “pregnant” (line 564). The three-part list marked career-marriage-motherhood as the main features of midlife. Although she positioned herself outside this norm, she implied that she is not the only exception (“most of my friends,” “a lot of,” “most”; lines 562-563). At the excerpt’s end, however, Abby summed up (“So,” line 566) by describing her life situation as “strange” (line 567), i.e., pursuing graduate studies does not make up for the lack of marriage and children.

**5.1.2 “Transformative midlife” IR.** This IR (Moore & Radtke, 2015) constructs midlife as a time of transition toward achieving a stable and secure life as a single woman following a period of re-evaluation of one’s life in relation to similarly-aged peers. Only one participant in this study drew on this IR to justify her single status as a valid alternative to partnership and position herself as comfortably single at midlife. Lauren constructed midlife in this way in the context of explaining why she broke off a previous relationship in which, as she described it, sex was the only thing she had in common with her partner.

**Excerpt 3 (Lauren, 42, single, never married)**

328 Lauren: I think because at that time I wanted more than just sex, so-. Uhm, I think  
329 that’s where the disconnect came. So I had to do some work on myself. Uhm (..)  
330 So, I took some time to just kind of do the things I’d like to do on my own, and get  
331 to a place where I felt happy doing that and predominantly, I am. Like, I am quite

332 happily single. That being said, I would love to have someone, like, to share my  
 333 life with. Like to go travelling with, to just-. And, you know? Share things with,  
 334 but-. It's okay.  
 335 Jennifer: Yeah.  
 336 Lauren: I'm kinda-. I say, "It's okay." I mean, there's a little part of me that's, like,  
 337 "Well, I'll be sad." (laugh) But it would be okay. Like, you know.  
 338 Jennifer: [Yeah. You mean if you  
 339 were just-. This is [inaudible].  
 340 Lauren: [If, if I ended up being single the rest of my life. I, I think I might be a  
 341 little sad at times but it wouldn't be the end of the world, which it might've been  
 342 more, to me, ten years ago even. I probably would've been much more  
 343 catastrophizing about it.

Lauren oriented to contemporary self-help psychological discourse, based on choice, autonomy and freedom, to describe herself doing "some work on myself." This involved pursuing her own interests ("do the things") and engaging in them alone ("on my own"), in order to "get to a place where I felt happy doing that" (lines 330-331). In her case, she "wanted more than just sex" (line 328), and was not prepared to continue with a relationship for the sake of sex. Her self-work is akin to the kind of self-development reported in Moore and Radtke (2015), leading to being "quite happily single" (line 331). Like the participants in the previous research, Lauren moved back and forth between the comfortably single at midlife and the singleness as deficit identity subject positions. That is, she moved from being "happily single" to "I would love to have someone, like, to share my life with" (line 332-333); from "It's okay" (line 334) to "I'll be sad" (line 337); from "it would be okay" to "I might be a little sad at times" (line 341), and then back to "it wouldn't be the end of the world" (line 341). She also formulated this as a "before-and-after" story: "ten years ago even," she "would've been much more catastrophizing about it" (lines 342-343).

**5.1.3 Summary.** Among the participants who positioned themselves as never-married women, a few drew on the meanings of midlife evident in previous research with single, never-married women at midlife (i.e., Moore & Radtke, 2015) and showed similar patterns of negotiating their identities as single women. Overall, however, these patterns were less prominent than in Moore and Radtke (2015), likely due to the different conversational contexts across the two studies, i.e., a general exploration of the meanings of being single vs. a specific exploration of sexuality and sexual relationships. In the latter context (i.e., the current study),

other meanings of midlife were worked up, and these will be discussed in the following two sections.

## 5.2 Constructing Midlife Sexuality—Losses and Gains

The research design and interview questions positioned the participants as “sexual,” “aging,” and “midlife” women. Consequently, they were called upon to provide accounts of themselves as members of these categories. Two examples of research questions where this is most evident are, “How do your sexual experiences at this point in life compare with those at other times in your life?” and “Are there any issues relating to relationships and sexuality that relate specifically to single women at midlife?” The participants responded to such questions by constructing their sexuality, and sex as a practice, in terms of gains and losses coinciding with midlife. On one hand, they drew on the “midlife sexuality as decline” IR in talking about losing their youthful, physical beauty and their bodies as threatening to fail them. This talk coincided with a concern about the challenges of attracting male attention and starting relationships. Within this IR, they were positioned as “sexually unattractive.” On the other hand, they drew on the “midlife sexuality as increased sexual knowledge and experience” IR to construct their sexual experiences as improved with time and position themselves as “sexually sophisticated.”

**5.2.1 “Midlife sexuality as physical decline” IR.** In response to my question, “Are you interested in dating now? Like, you’ve been on your own for a bit,” Amoony drew on the midlife sexuality as decline IR and provided a before-and-after story about dating now in early midlife compared with dating in her 20s.

### Excerpt 4 (Amoony, 39, single, divorced)

- 223 Amoony: I’m worried about, uhm, dating and-. I’d stopped dating ten years ago,  
224 almost, right? And dating today, what’s the differences? Can I manage? Do I  
225 know? Those are worries that I have.  
226 Jennifer: Mm hm. Differences-. Ten years. So that would have put you at around 26 or  
227 something like that.  
228 Amoony: Twenty-, twenty-seven, twenty-eight. Yeah.  
229 Jennifer: Yeah. Oh, yeah, right. Twenty-seven to twenty-eight. Hm.  
230 Amoony: You know, before that I had this really active sex life, and I was hot, and  
231 everybody wanted me. Men, women, it didn’t matter. I was, like, so awesome. Or  
232 at least in my head, I felt that. So to go from feeling like I was the cat’s meow-. I

233 don't feel like I'm not the cat's meow but I know I'm not the cat's meow now.  
234 Like, I'm overweight now, I've had three kids, I come with baggage, and I  
235 understand that.

Amoony began by describing a series of “worries” that she has about dating at her current age versus ten years earlier: “the differences,” managing, and knowing (lines 225-226). Later, she elaborated her concerns as a three-part list of reasons for no longer having an “active sex life” (line 231): “I’m overweight now, I’ve had three kids, I come with baggage” (line 235). Positioning herself within the standard midlife IR—she has achieved marriage and family—the dissolution of her marriage and the responsibility for children constitute “baggage” in the context of dating. She contrasted this with her single 20s when she had a “really active sex life, and I was hot, and everybody wanted me” (lines 231-232), another three-part list formulated in maximizing language. At this point, she also implicitly drew on the male sexual drive discourse, in which men are positioned as the pursuers and women as sexual objects whose physical appearances and personal qualities draw “men” (line 231) and facilitate their desire of her (i.e., “everybody wanted me”). Using extreme case formulation, she extended this claim to “women” as a form of exaggeration to emphasize her “hotness” (line 230) and “awesomeness” (line 231). Throughout the excerpt, Amoony’s characteristics were constructed as the lure that attracted male attention, their decline in midlife threatening possibilities for sexual relationships.

Finally, she distinguished between how she felt in her youth, “the cat’s meow” (line 232), and the way she felt at the time of the interview (i.e., midlife): “not the cat’s meow” (line 233). Notably, the language she used to describe her youthful hotness was muted, “at least in my head” (line 232). In that way, she allowed that others might not necessarily share her “feeling” of attractiveness. Amoony’s language emphasized logic over feeling, and she corrected herself as “knowing” rather than feeling to appeal to the basic truth of her declining sexual attractiveness: “I don’t feel like I’m not the cat’s meow but I know I’m not the cat’s meow” (line 233-234). Feeling, of course, is subjective and open to questioning. Amoony, however, offered tangible evidence of her decline in the eyes of potential lovers (line 234) and positioned herself as sexually unattractive.

Throughout the excerpt, Amoony kept the focus on herself and how she feels about herself, e.g., “I don’t feel like I’m not the cat’s meow” (line 233), an example of “self-esteem” talk. With the knowing talk, she held herself accountable for her life circumstances (i.e., the “overweight,” “three kids,” the “baggage”). She also positioned herself as accepting this

responsibility and did not engage in blame or self-pity: “I know I'm not” (line 233), “I understand that” (line 235). Thus, she constructed her declining attractiveness as resulting not just from natural aging but due, in part, to her own decisions.

The following excerpt from Lauren’s interview began with a question about the possible connections among single-at-midlife women, “relationships,” and “sex”:

**Excerpt 5 (Lauren, 42, single, never married)**

- 1280 Jennifer: Is there something relating specifically to single women at midlife that have  
1281 to do with relationships, that have to do with sex? Do you know what I mean?  
1282 Lauren: Ah, personally, I think, I, I worry about becoming less-. Like, my heart, ah,  
1283 when I start to menopause=  
1284 Jennifer: =Yeah.  
1285 Lauren: I worry that my pheromones are going to decrease, that my hormones, you  
1286 know, that the hormones stuff will make me less attractive to men.  
1287 Jennifer: Yeah.  
1288 Lauren: Uhm (.) In the sense of those, n-, invisible things. Not, not necessarily-.  
1289 Although, there’s gonna be visible things, too. Like, you get hairier as you get  
1290 older.  
1291 Jennifer: (laugh)  
1292 Lauren: It’s just a fact. And I’ve told some people. Like-.  
1293 Jennifer: Get ready. (laugh)  
1294 Lauren: Yeah, like, it’s actually true. You do, you get-. ‘Cause I’ve talked to quite few  
1295 females. I won’t ask you ‘cause, obviously, I don’t know you very well but a lot of  
1296 girls my age, close friends, I’m, like, “So you have hair here?” “Mm hm.”

Throughout the excerpt, Lauren discussed bodily changes with aging. She drew on the “aging as physical decline” IR (Radtke, Young, & van Mens-Verhulst, 2016) to construct aging as negatively impacting her health and, after hesitating with her response, i.e., “my heart” (line 1282), identifies menopause as a critical moment, “when I start to menopause” (line 1283). Further, she constructed menopause as commencing a period of declining “pheromones” and “hormones,” specifically emphasizing biological changes (line 1285).

Lauren then focused on the ways aging will render her less attractive. In moving to the topic of attractiveness and sex and drawing on the midlife sexuality as decline IR, she constructed the body as having two “parts.” The first includes the inner, biological workings that are mysterious and out of her control, i.e., “invisible things” (line 1288), including “pheromones” and “hormones stuff.” The second is the external biology, which constitutes the outward signs of aging, “visible things” (line 1289) that can be controlled to some extent, such as body hair (line 1289). Therefore, both the inner and outer bodily changes pose a threat with the decline being

inevitable: “my pheromones are going to decrease” (line 1285) and “you get hairier as you get older” (lines 1289). Lauren interpreted my laughter as questioning the truth of increased hair growth, bolstering her claim by asserting it is “just a fact” (line 1292), “it’s actually true” (line 1294), and a reality amongst her “close friends” (line 1296). Thus, the inevitable bodily changes, which can sometimes be managed but never completely controlled, and not her own actions (e.g., choosing to be single) constitute Lauren’s worries.

In Excerpt 6, I explicitly raised the subject of bodily “change” over “twenty years” (i.e., from youth to Joanna’s current age of 39 years). Initially, Joanna formulated her answer in terms of “fitness” (line 1297), and weight (1298).

**Excerpt 6 (Joanna, 39, single, never married)**

- 1296 Jennifer: Has your body changed at all? [Inaudible] over twenty years?  
 1297 Joanna: [Yeah, it’s definitely harder to keep fit  
 1298 ‘cause I like to eat. And, uhm, yeah, it’s harder to lose that twen-, ten, twenty  
 1299 pounds. Yeah.  
 1300 Jennifer: But that does affect sex?  
 1301 Joanna: It doesn’t affect sex but it affects who you attract.  
 1302 Jennifer: Oh (.) Tell me  
 1303 Joanna: [Yeah. ‘Cause you wan-, ‘cause you wanna look good,  
 1304 right? And when you look good, you feel good. When you, when you, when you  
 1305 like your body, and you’re happy with your body, then you feel good, and you  
 1306 Jennifer: [Yeah.  
 1307 Joanna: kind of, uhm (.) It shows, right?  
 1308 Jennifer: Yeah.  
 1309 Joanna: So, you’re not, like, oh-. You know, feeling down or that about yourself.  
 1310 Jennifer: [Yeah.  
 1311 Joanna: So, I think, yeah-. But when you’re younger you feel good all the time ‘cause  
 1312 you know you look good, right? You see how your body-. And you’re just, like,  
 1313 out there, right? Compared to when you’re older. ‘Cause I found, like, I did meet a  
 1314 lot more people when I was younger. Like, I had a lot more boyfriends compared  
 1315 to now. But maybe that’s why. ‘Cause when you’re younger you feel good about  
 1316 your body, and you’re out there, and you’re having good time.

Joanna constructed her bodily changes as related to fitness, which might well be understood as a concern for weight, an interpretation that she then makes explicit, i.e., “harder to lose that twen-, ten, twenty pounds,” suggesting that she regards herself as overweight. She constructed this as partially a problem of aging but also partially a problem of her habits: “I like to eat” (line 1298). So, like Amoonny, she held herself accountable for her situation.

Following this, I asked whether this affects sex (line 1300). At this point, Joanna refocused the conversation to the topic of “attraction” (line 1301) and drew on the male sexual drive discourse to construct women’s bodies as enticing male attention, facilitating their sexual interest and even determining who shows a sexual interest (“it affects who you attract”). When prompted, Joanna continued with her explanation in the form of a truism, “you wanna look good” (line 1303). She then formulated a link between satisfaction with one’s physical appearance and feeling “good” about oneself rather than “feeling down” (1309): “when you like your body, and you’re happy with your body, then you feel good” (1304-1305). This objectified women, Joanna plus the others included in “you,” and made their psychological well-being dependent on their physical appearance. Joanna put forward this claim as something to be taken for granted and normal. The claim itself, however, is open to critical interrogation as it implies that women are responsible for producing themselves as the ideal objects of men’s sexual desire.

In the second half of the excerpt, Joanna constructed two contrasting periods of life, “younger” and “older,” a comparison she made explicit at line 1314. She moved back and forth between the ambiguous pronoun “you” and the first person “I,” indicating that she included herself in statements referring to “you.” In contrast to how she feels now, she described youth as a time when women feel “good all the time” (line 1311), and when “you know you look good” (line 1312). Using a three-part list, she elaborated on this by linking physical appearance with self-satisfaction: “feel good about your body” (line 1315). However, she stated that she was also in circulation more, “you’re out there,” “you’re having good time” (lines 1315-1316), and constructed this as a possible cause for her greater number of social contacts as a young woman: “I did meet a lot more people,” “I had a lot more boyfriends compared to now” (lines 1313-1314). While she implicitly drew on the male sexual drive discourse to construct women’s physical appearance as attracting men and facilitating meeting “boyfriends” (line 1314), she also connected feeling good about herself with a more active social life. Thus, she drew on the midlife sexuality as decline IR in constructing the declining body at midlife as a problem not only of fading sexual attractiveness but also a problem of how she felt, which then deterred her from being socially active. Like Lauren, she did not position herself as sexually unattractive, but this potential problem was implied in her comparisons of then and now.

The excerpt from Katherine’s interview, which she raised as an afterthought at the close of the interview, is explicitly about the importance of maintaining a youthful physical appearance

in the context of dating. Interestingly, she was the only participant to talk about cosmetic surgery and other beautification practices to achieve this:

**Excerpt 7 (Katherine, 45, single, divorced)**

- 1232 Katherine: I have done invasive surgery while I've been single to kind of maintain a  
1233 youthful look (laugh).  
1234 Jennifer: You did?  
1235 Katherine: I spend a lot of money on cosmetics to maintain a youthful look. Like, to be  
1236 attractive, to look after myself  
1237 Jennifer: [Oh, okay.  
1238 Katherine: physically so that I am attractive during the dating process.  
1239 Jennifer: You did? You mean cosmetic surgery, you had?  
1240 Katherine: Yeah.  
1241 Jennifer: Invasive. What did you have done?  
1242 Katherine: Well, I started to develop bags under my eyes so I went in and got the,  
1243 uhm, surgery to have the bags removed. Las-. Last year. And then, like, I spend  
1244 money on cosmetics to, like, that will clear out wrinkles and, and, I whiten my  
1245 teeth, and I dye my hair, and I wear the makeup, and so I'm, you know, so I'm  
1246 purposefully doing those things to be attractive for dating.

Katherine worked up her account of the practices she adopts “to maintain a youthful look” (line 1235) as extreme measures: “invasive surgery” (line 1232), “spend a lot of money” (line 1235). Implicitly, then, she oriented to the midlife sexuality as decline IR and positioned herself as taking practical steps to avoid being positioned as “sexually unattractive.” She constructed her resistance as hygiene and self-care: “look after myself” (line 1236). She provided a comprehensive list of procedures and practices that included surgery to remove bags under her eyes, anti-wrinkle cosmetics, teeth whitening, dying her hair, and makeup (lines 1242-1245). Importantly, she emphasized that these were intentional practices (“I’m purposefully doing these things,” line 1245). In this passage, Katherine accounted for adoption of these practices as her response to the pressures, anxieties, and aspirations of intimate life. She accounted for her adoption of these practices as routine management in aid of her being permanently prepared for “the dating process” (line 1238). This reliance on beautification practices effectively makes women responsible for ensuring that they continue to be attractive “sexual objects” even as they age.

**5.2.2 “Midlife as increased sexual knowledge and experience” IR.** This IR allowed participants to position themselves as sexually sophisticated women. Beginning with Excerpt 8,



the following four interview excerpts illustrate how participants employed this IR to construct midlife as a period of experience gained, increased sexual knowledge and self-awareness, and increased sexual confidence. In two cases, these positive accounts of sexuality at midlife occurred alongside those constructed within the “midlife as decline” IR. One of these cases, taken from Rebecca’s interview, demonstrates how participants’ accounts included constructions of women’s losses and gains in early midlife. Rebecca was responding to my question: “Are there any issues relating to, you know, relationships and sexuality that relate specifically to single women at midlife?”

**Excerpt 8 (Rebecca, 45, single, never married)**

- 391 Rebecca: Well, I think body image issues, uhm, they’re always there. But as you get  
392 older and your breasts sag and, ah, you’re not considered as close to the cultural  
393 ideal then that may play into, play into things. But at the other side the older  
394 women tend to be a bit more confident. So, you know, like, I think the fact that I  
395 am comfortable initiating both con-, initial contact, and, and sex, are because I’m  
396 quite confident in who I am. So, uhm, but I’m not as confident about my body  
397 being, you know, exactly as attractive as it used to be.  
398 Jennifer: Mm hm. Okay.  
399 Rebecca: Uhm. What else? Ah, just being more experienced means you tend to know  
400 much more what you want, what you don’t want. You’re not as, uhm, open to  
401 persuasion, I think.  
402 Jennifer: Okay (.) Or maybe you’re the persuader.  
403 Rebecca: Uhm-.  
404 Jennifer: (laugh)  
405 Rebecca: Maybe but generally it’s, you know, it’s-. Like, I say it’s not that  
406 experimental, the sex so I think that might also be ‘cause I’m older and, and  
407 they’re older too.

From the beginning, Rebecca defined the “issues” of midlife sexuality as being about “body image” (line 391). Here, she drew on the midlife as physical decline IR, to construct midlife as a time of bodily loss (“breasts sag,” line 392). She constructed the early midlife woman as failing to meet the “cultural ideal” of youthful feminine beauty (lines 392-393) and immediately contrasted this with an account of gains that women enjoy in early midlife: “more confident” (line 394). Here, Rebecca drew on the IR, midlife as increased sexual knowledge and experience. She elaborated on this and suggested that with this increased confidence comes a “comfort” in her sexual relationships with men. She is both “comfortable” with being the one to start a relationship with men (“initiating both con-, initial contact,” line 395) as well as being the one to initiate “sex” (line 395)—this is in spite of her lack of confidence in her body not being

“exactly as attractive as it used to be” (line 397). Thus, within one turn of the conversation, Rebecca moved from the IR, midlife as physical decline, to the midlife as increased sexual knowledge and experience IR (line 399), and back to the midlife as physical decline IR.

In the next portion of the excerpt, Rebecca again drew on the midlife as increased sexual knowledge and experience IR to position herself as sexually sophisticated in her current stage of life (“being more experienced,” line 399) and as having increased knowledge about one’s sexual desires (“what you want,” “what you don’t want,” line 400). She then positioned women as being able to define and assert boundaries with a sexual partner: “You’re not as, uhm open to persuasion” (line 400). However, when I positioned her as a potential “persuader,” she halfheartedly agreed (“maybe”) but then drew on the midlife as decline IR, noting that the sex “it’s not experimental” (lines 405-406) and pointing to age as a reason. Therefore, while her account constructed midlife as a period of transition, shifting from past ignorance and uncertainty toward greater wisdom and confidence, it also constructed people in “early midlife” as sexually conservative due to their aging (“I’m older,” “they’re older,” line 406).

In the following excerpt, Lauren responded to my question that invited a comparison of her current sexual experience with that of her youth: “How does your sexual experience now, or the lack thereof, compare to other times in your life?”

**Excerpt 9 (Lauren, 42, single, never married)**

- 1878 Lauren: What’s changed is that I think, ah, what we talked about a bit before is that  
1879 I’m just a lot more confident in what I want, what I don’t want. What I’m willing  
1880 to accept, and what I’m not willing to accept.  
1881 Jennifer: Yeah.  
1882 Lauren: And, uhm, what I’m willing to ask for or not. You know, uhm, and not do or  
1883 be requested of-. I-. You know, I: I am just a lot more confident that way.  
1884 Jennifer: Yeah.  
1885 Lauren: Yeah. I think that’s the biggest thing. Uhm (..) That’s really all.

Lauren described herself as “more confident” (lines 1879, 1883). She elaborated with a list of ways in which she is more confident: “what I want,” “what I don’t want,” “What I’m willing to accept,” and “what I’m not willing to accept,” lines 1879-1880; “what I’m willing to ask for or not...not do or be requested of,” lines 1882-1883. As a sexually sophisticated woman, she knows what she wants but also sets limits on what is acceptable within a sexual relationship. Thus, she too constructed midlife as a time of positive changes in sexuality.

The following excerpt from Abby's interview followed discussion about the challenges of dating in one's 30s and began with my question about the relationships among aging, singleness, relationships, and sexuality: "Is there any other way that being at this age affects, and, single, affects, uhm, you know, relates to relationships and sexuality?"

**Excerpt 10 (Abby, 36, new relationship, never married)**

- 992 Abby: One thing I think of is that at this age, ah, when I have sex, I know what I  
993 want.=
- 994 Jennifer: =Yeah.
- 995 Abby: And so, in-. Like, when I think about myself when I was, like, 21, and having  
996 sex and, like, so-. Still-. Like, I had a boyfriend. We were together for quite a long  
997 time. Like, we were actually engaged.
- 998 Jennifer: Okay.
- 999 Abby: Uhm, but, uhm, I broke up with him when I moved to [City] shortly after. So I  
1000 was about 29. But, yeah, like, you know, we had, like, we were figuring out what  
1001 sex was with each other. But even though he was my committed, uhm, partner, it  
1002 was, you know, I'd still be nervous about things or-. I was talking to my girlfriend  
1003 yesterday 'cause, ah, yeah, I was, I was saying, like, the idea of faking an orgasm  
1004 now seems ridiculous because I don't need to do that. And why would I-?
- 1005 Jennifer: Yeah.
- 1006 Abby: Like, why would I do that, especially given the fact that, like, my-? Like, I  
1007 wouldn't do that with David. Like, I just wouldn't need to.
- 1008 Jennifer: Yeah, yeah.
- 1009 Abby: Uhm, but I definitely did with this boyfriend. Like, just sometimes, you know  
1010 (.) For whatever reason, like, I didn't feel like saying that I wasn't having one or-.  
1011 Uhm. So, that's a-, I think that's a big difference. Is that even if you're having  
1012 casual sex, you know what you like and what you want. Or, at least, I do so, I was  
1013 always confident in myself when I was having, uhm, casual sex with men.

As in the previous excerpts, Abby drew on the IR, midlife as increased sexual knowledge and experience, to construct a before-and-after story and position herself as a "sexual sophisticate." She began by asserting: "I know what I want" (line 992). This contrasted with her early twenties when she was exploring sex with her boyfriend, i.e., "we were figuring out what sex was" (line 999). She emphasized her current knowledge by describing how, within her previous, youthful relationship with a "committed partner" (line 1002), she would "still be nervous about things." Further, she implied that she would fake having an orgasm, something she described as "ridiculous" from her current perspective (lines 1052-1054) and unnecessary with her current boyfriend (lines 1056-1057). She ended by claiming that "even" when having casual sex, she knows her likes and desires and is "confident" in herself (lines 1011-1013). This

provided a final contrast with the long-term, committed relationship of her youth when she failed to tell her boyfriend that she did not have an orgasm.

In the following excerpt from Bianca, I asked about aging and sex:

**Excerpt 11 (Bianca, 35, single, never married)**

- 918 Jennifer: How does your sexual experience now compare to when you were younger?  
919 Like in you're in 20s or-?  
920 Bianca: Uhm. When I was in my twent-? Yeah.  
921 Jennifer: Or some other time.  
922 Bianca: Uhm, I didn't really know my, ah-. Back then-. Back the-. Now I know, uhm,  
923 more about my, my body.  
924 Jennifer: Yeah.  
925 Bianca: And what I like. And I'm, I'm much more, uhm, comfortable with, with  
926 expressing myself in, in a sexual way whereas in my-. When I was in my 20s, I  
927 was really (laugh) not comfortable. A::nd I didn't-. I wasn't comfortable, not only  
928 with my own body but also asking for what I wanted.  
929 Jennifer: Right.  
930 Bianca: Back then. (clears throat)  
931 Jennifer: Yeah.  
932 Bianca: And I didn't know-. (.) Or, yeah. I just lacked experience back then. I didn't  
933 really know what, what I liked and what felt good. You know what I mean? Hm.  
934 Jennifer: Yeah. And so, what has been the change? Is it just experience?  
935 Bianca: I think, it's just-. Yeah. It's just experience.

Bianca interpreted my question about “sexual experience” in physical terms and centred her initial response on her body, particularly the lack of awareness of her body “back then” compared to now: “I didn't really know” (lines 922-923). Using terms that are very similar to the three previous excerpts, she also talked about now knowing “what I like” (line 925), and being more “comfortable” (line 925), and “experienced” (lines 932-935).

**5.2.3 Summary.** The women drew on two contradictory constructions of midlife sexuality. The midlife as increased sexual knowledge and experience IR constructs midlife as a period of asserting their sexual strengths, including sexual experience, knowledge, and confidence and allowed the women to position themselves as sexually sophisticated. The midlife as decline IR constructs aging as a natural and inevitable deterioration of the body and one's sexuality (e.g., Tretheway, 2001; Ussher, Perz, & Parton, 2015). In drawing on this resource, the women focused on the loss of their youthful physical appearance and demeanour, with consequences for their abilities to attract men and start new sexual relationships. That is,

participants positioned themselves as ready for a sexual relationship but also as actual or potentially sexually unattractive women. While aging and sexuality were understood in contradictory terms as “gains and losses,” both gains and losses were constructed as a matter of the individual women’s characteristics or actions, thereby making the women responsible for their current sexual sophistication and for mitigating the challenges to their sexual attractiveness.

### 5.3 Sexual Relationships at Midlife

The participants constructed two categories of sexual relationships that run through all the interviews: (1) casual sexual relationships; and, (2) sex within a long-term relationship. They also drew on the transformative midlife IR, which characterised midlife as a time of transition when—following a period of re-evaluation—one aims to create a satisfying life as a single and sexual woman, while holding out hope for a future partnership. This gives rise to the accompanying subject position comfortably single midlife woman, and this identity centred on making a single sexuality acceptable (i.e., moral). The following analysis will examine both in turn.

Participants drew on the transformative midlife IR to explain and justify a contradictory choice, having sex outside “connected relationships.” Two study participants gave meaning to aging by drawing on the transformative midlife IR to discuss their understanding of sex and relationships at this current stage of life. In the following excerpt (Excerpt 14), Emma (age 50 yrs.) addressed the question, “What makes it possible for you to ask for what you want-? First of all, for you to initiate sex?” Emma provided an account of her changed approach to sexual relationships since a life-threatening car accident eight years prior.

#### Excerpt 12 (Emma, 50, single, divorced)

- 941 Emma: I want to embrace life and embrace the moments in life that, that are possibly  
942 valuable, right? To me and to another individual, to another human being. You  
943 know, like-. And if it’s, means having sex with him, I mean, that’s okay. It doesn’t  
944 mean that I’m allowing myself to just meet guys online and have sex with them but  
945 it also doesn’t mean that I’m not going to stop myself any longer until there’s a  
946 ring on my finger or  
947 Jennifer: [Yeah.  
948 Emma: something like that. You know, I’m, I’m over that (laugh).  
949 Jennifer: Right, okay.  
950 Emma: The white picket fence and all that crap is gone (laugh).  
951 Jennifer: O::k::ay.

952 Emma: You know, so.  
953 Jennifer: Yeah.  
954 Emma: Uhm, I'm not deluding myself anymore about what, what is, or what isn't.  
955 You know, I, I like to think I live in the real world now.

In this passage, Emma drew on the transformative midlife IR to characterise midlife as a time of transition when she aims to create a satisfying life as a single woman, which includes being open to “the moments in life,” and relationships with others (“to another individual,” “another human being,” line 942). She drew on the permissive sex IR to construct “having sex” (line 943) as being included in these, “the moments in life.” Thus, she constructed sex as something that ought to be “embraced” rather than repressed and positioned herself as a ‘sexual agent’ who is “allowing” herself sex under these conditions. Notably, she immediately defended against the ‘promiscuous woman’ subject position by explaining that she does not anticipate “just” having sex with near strangers (i.e., “guys online,” line 944). Here, the “just” implies that this is sex that does not involve any caring or emotional commitment on the part of either partner. Thus, she positioned herself as the ‘moral woman’ who is sharing with “another individual,” “another human being” (line 942).

She again drew on the transformative midlife IR to explain that she will no longer wait for the “right” circumstances before having sex. She drew on the have and hold discourse, which constructs sex as occurring inside a romantic relationship leading to marriage, i.e., “ring on my finger” (line 946) or a similar committed relationship (“something like that,” line 948). However, she ironized this discourse, as well as the coupledness narrative structure. Her footing is as explicitly rejecting the dominant “courtship-love-marriage-and- family” storyline of adult life: “white picket fence and all that crap” (line 950). While rejecting this dominant understanding of sexual relationships, i.e., “I’m over that,” line 948; “all that...is gone,” line 950), she aligned with the permissive sex IR and constructed sex as occurring outside of a relationship as acceptable.

Throughout the excerpt, Emma implicitly drew on the transformative midlife IR and positioned herself as a woman who is no longer deluded: “I’m not deluding myself anymore,” line 954. She contrasted the coupledness narrative with living “in the real world” (line 955) at midlife. Within this before-and-after story, Emma positioned herself as moving from delusion to being in “real life” and no longer waiting for the romantic relationship before getting on with her life, including enjoying her sexual life, while remaining open to a romantic relationship. That is,

she can now distinguish between “just sex” and “love.” Therefore, she positioned herself similarly to the women in my previous research on midlife single women—as comfortably single at midlife (Moore & Radtke, 2015).

In this final excerpt taken from Eleanor’s interview, she answered the question (line 1436): “How do your sexual experiences at this point in life compare with those other times in your life?” Eleanor drew on the transformative midlife IR, and constructed a before-and-after story of how her approach to her sexual and romantic relationships have shifted from youth to now in midlife.

**Excerpt 13 (Eleanor, 43, single, never married)**

1500 Eleanor: When I was younger, I think, again, every guy you have sex with, you have  
1501 that such hopes for it. That it is gonna be the one and that he’s gonna be the Prince  
1502 Charming that sweeps you off your feet, and-. You know, and I think, of course,  
1503 we still think that to a certain degree as we get older but, in a little bit more  
1504 realistic way. So, in that sense, uhm, it’s different. And there’s a little bit more  
1505 realism in the sex than the, than the fantasy. In that-. If that makes sense. Yeah.  
1506 Jennifer: [Yeah, it does makes sense.  
1507 Eleanor: Yeah.  
1508 Jennifer: That’s interesting.  
1509 Eleanor: ‘Cause it’s, ah-.  
1510 Jennifer: Well, because I’m thinking if you can, sort of-. Not give up hope. That  
1511 sounds bleak.  
1512 Eleanor: Yeah.  
1513 Jennifer: I mean it in the best possible way. You can be present to whatever is  
1514 happening.  
1515 Eleanor: I still think-.  
1516 Jennifer: Is that what you mean?  
1517 Eleanor: I still think we always-. Yeah. Like, I still think we always have that dream  
1518 that this is the one.  
1519 Jennifer: Yeah.  
1520 Eleanor: We always want to meet-. You know, I mean-. My one friend, more than any,  
1521 that every guy-. Like, she’s-. The second she’s-. She’s, she’s, like, “Oh-.” And she  
1522 hasn’t even dated the guy yet. She’s [inaudible] texting a guy, “I’m taking my  
1523 profile off.” And it’s, like, “Well, you might go on a date first.” You know?  
1524 Jennifer: Yeah, yeah.  
1525 Eleanor: And two dates in, of course, that’s the end of it. And it’s like-.  
1526 Jennifer: Yeah.  
1527 Eleanor: But she throws herself in thinking he’s the one every single time. Every  
1528 single time she goes head over heels for him. And she’ll lie and say, “I’m takin’ it  
1529 easy” (laugh). You know? But, you know she’s not. You know? And, so-. But it’s,  
1530 like-. I guess so-. I get how she’s feeling because I did that more so when I was

1531 younger. And I still do feel that way. I do feel that way. Just not to that extreme.  
 1532 Jennifer: Right.  
 1533 Eleanor: It's, like, of course I hope that I, that this guy's gonna be my soul mate. The  
 1534 next one you meet. Right? But it's jus-. There's a little bit more realism in it. And I  
 1535 know when sex is sex, and I-. I don't know. I, I used to think it meant more to  
 1536 them, I guess. I'm not sure how to explain it. But, yeah, there's a little bit more  
 1537 realism that this is what it is. And trying to, like you say, be present with that and  
 1538 enjoy that because I think, y-, you know, nobody wants to have those deep talks  
 1539 and, you know, tell me you love me. And, are we getting married? And when are  
 1540 we having kids? And, you know, like, yeah, like, just enjoy that moment.

First, she drew on romance discourse to construct her early years as a period of having higher expectations (“high hopes) for love and romance. She positioned herself as expecting “Prince Charming” who will come along and sweep “you off your feet” (line 1502). She drew on the coupledness narrative structure, a storyline of love, courtship, marriage, and family, which remains the dominant narrative of adult life in Western society. She also drew on the transformative midlife IR to characterize midlife as a time for creating a satisfying life as a single woman, which includes being more “realistic” about relationships and being open to sex outside of relationships: “more realism in the sex” (line 1505). Notably, she still positioned herself as holding the door open to love: “still think that to a certain degree as we get older” (line 1503). Being at midlife is what enables her to distinguish the reality from “the fantasy” (line 1505). This is in contrast with the actions of her friend who continues to be hopeful about her romantic relationships despite being at midlife: “throws herself in thinking he’s the one” (line 1527). Eleanor positioned herself as having done the same thing earlier in her life (“when I was younger”) but as now more mature and so less romantic: “I do feel that way. Just not to that extreme” (line 1531). Subsequently, Eleanor drew on the New Age spirituality IR and suggested that she is still open to love: “of course I hope that I, that this guy’s gonna be my soul mate” (line 1534). However, this was balanced with expectations that are more “realistic”; i.e., “There’s a little bit more realism in it” (line 1534). So aging and being at midlife is about balancing one’s hopes with “realistic” expectations.

With the transformative midlife IR of aging, she positioned herself as a sexual sophisticate who knows what’s happening, and what is reasonable for her to expect in sex. With this IR, she constructed “sex for sex” as acceptable, and suggesting that hoping for more is a sign of immaturity: “know when sex is sex” (line 1535). Notably, she also drew on the male sexual drive discourse and positioned men as the problem: “I used to think it meant more to them” (line



1536). So, here she did not position herself as so in control. However, she again drew on romance discourse and ‘coupledom’ narrative (i.e., “tell me you love me,” “getting married,” “having kids”) to ridicule expecting more: “nobody wants to have those deep talks” (line 1540). What is left is “enjoying the moment” (line 1540).

This excerpt is an example of a before-and-after story of maturing and changing expectations, and shifting from the “sexual naïf” subject position to sexual sophisticate. This reflects the results of the midlife single woman study (Moore & Radtke, 2015) in which women drew on the transformative midlife IR with its accompanying subject position, comfortably single midlife woman, because this identity centred on accepting singleness as a viable way of life. Similarly, some participants in the present study constructed midlife sex in a manner that afforded them a positive identity (i.e., not a deficit identity) as sexual single women at midlife while still remaining open to love.

#### **5.4 Chapter Summary**

The women’s constructions of midlife are consistent with theorising about midlife and aging in the literature on psychological development. Specifically, the central discourse of aging is that of “decline” (Radtke, Young, & van Mens-Verhulst, 2016), coinciding with a loss of youth, health, and beauty (e.g., Banister, 1999; Woods & Mitchell, 1997), as well as a loss of interest in, and the ability to have, sex as women age. The women drew on the aging as physical decline IR and gave accounts of bodily changes that diminish their attractiveness to men. At the same time, the present findings challenge the Western cultural narrative of aging as decline as it applies to sexuality. The women took up a kind of “anti-decline” narrative of progress in describing their sexuality as getting better over time. They constructed before-and-after accounts of greater confidence and a shift from a less experienced and knowing sexual naïf to that of a sexual sophisticate. Their accounts included claims of increased knowledge of their bodies and how to achieve sexual pleasure, feeling more comfortable with partners, and their changing sexual practices with partners. The changes in sexuality the women articulated offer challenges to sexual discourses that privilege the construction of sexual control and knowledge as “male” (see Hollway, 1984a, 1984b; Tiefer, 2000). What is more significant is that the women’s use of the midlife as increased sexual knowledge and experience IR disrupts discourses that frame men as active and initiating and women as passive and responsive. Central to these accounts was the

women's articulation of an active and desirous female sexuality in early midlife, leading to initiating sexual contact.

Finally, the accounts centred on the transformative midlife IR wherein participants reflected upon past sexual experiences at the same time as constructing changing expectations regarding their romantic and sexual relationships. The participants talked about re-evaluating their lives and priorities and accounted for their desire for relationships that were based on deep emotional connection. Participants drew on discourses of aging and midlife to construct their shifting choices about sexual relationships that incorporated their personal principles. The women defined casual sexual encounters as no longer appropriate or acceptable to them and gave more value to long-term relationships of emotional depth.

## Chapter 6: Celibacy and Being Sexual

In this chapter, I present an analysis of the interview material in which the women talked about their reasons for not being in sexual relationships. I also focus on how they accounted for their sexual lives and sexual identities in periods when they are without a sexual partner. The analysis shows that a woman who is not having sex is routinely understood to have a deficit identity defined by lack (e.g., Reynolds, 2008). A woman without a sexual partner, who identifies as “not having sex,” is positioned in a troubled subject position, that is, she cannot simply be spoken about in terms of who she is, but must also answer to who she is not (Wetherell, 1998).

The chapter will unfold as follows. In the first section, 6.1 *Accounting for Not Having Sex*, I illustrate how women resisted being positioned as celibate and detail their explanations and justifications for not being in a sexual relationship. In the second part, 6.2 *Sexual Practices When Alone*, I demonstrate the alternative ways in which the women constructed their sexuality and positioned themselves as sexual women when without a sexual partner.

### 6.1 Accounting for Not Having Sex

At various moments in the interviews, participants themselves introduced the topic of not having sex; however, I also asked them about this explicitly with the following interview questions: “Do you consider yourself to be celibate?,” “When you don’t have a sexual partner how do you think about or experience your sexuality?” and “How do you express your sexuality?” They constructed the lack of sex and sexual relationships as problematic, which is illustrated in the first two excerpts below. Early in Donna’s interview (Excerpt 1), I asked about her sexual history, and I confirmed that the last time Donna was engaged in a sexual relationship had been five years prior.

#### Excerpt 1 (Donna, 39, single, never married)

- 405 Jennifer: So, okay, so the last-. What I’m thinking is the last time you had a sexual  
406 encounter, or relationship, was about five years ago.
- 407 Donna: [Yeah. That was a long time ago. I’m  
408 losing my mind, I swear to God. It’s way too long. Yeah, I-. Like, there’s not  
409 enough chocolate in the world.

My statement drew attention to the length of time since Donna was engaged in a sexual relationship (“sexual encounter,” lines 405-406) and positioned her as a sexually inactive woman. Although I did not make this a problem, Donna constructed it this way. She described her last sexual encounter as happening “a long time ago” (line 407; “way too long,” line 408), and drew on ‘sexological’ discourse to construct the lack of sex as problematic (“losing my mind,” line 407) and irreplaceable (“there’s not enough chocolate in the world,” lines 408-409). Sexological discourse constructs sex as something that is a necessary biological requirement. Donna’s humorous response emphasized the psychological consequences of not having sex and the absence of any suitable substitute. Her reference to “chocolate,” a common comfort food associated with women, made a clear connection to distress, the abnormality of not having sex and being positioned as a “sexually inactive woman.” This implied that having a sexual partner and/or regular sexual encounters is normal; their lack over a period of five years is a strongly felt absence but also something to be judged negatively by others (i.e., Donna could joke about this with me rather than explain herself in some other way because of a common understanding that five years constituted a long time).

Prior to Excerpt 2, I had asked Josie, “Are there any issues relating to relationships and sexuality that, that, that are related specifically to single women at midlife? Does that make sense?” She answered by talking about her sexual life at her age, 44 years, and how she envisioned her sexual life in the future, after five years of being without a sexual relationship.

**Excerpt 2 (Josie, 44, single, divorced)**

652 Josie: I do think it’s liberating and I think that i-. Especially being so independent, I  
653 think my sexuality could be much more liberated now. There’s no reason why I  
654 shouldn’t go have, you know, quite a few more-. Like, I sh-, I should be able to  
655 just go, and get a lover, or have casual relationships, and sometimes I think I  
656 should just plunge into it. There’s no-. I’m not scarred in any way that I am  
657 reluctant to do that. Uhm, I mean, I’ve-. I think I’m up to 8 sexual partners in my  
658 life, so not a huge number for my age. But, uhm, you know, intellectually I think  
659 that it’s perfectly feasible that I do it but, I’m actually-. When it actually comes  
660 down to it, I don’t actually find people attractive unless I know them. So it’s kind  
661 of (laugh)-. I, I think I’m

662 Jennifer: [Yeah.

663 Josie: just, uhm-. Yeah I, I, I haven’t quite resolved that yet, uhm, as to how my  
664 sexuality’s gonna be from now on in. And I think that’s, that’s an interesting thing  
665 for me to kind of think about intellectually ‘cause I’ve thought I’m in danger of

666 being celibate for the rest of my life (laugh) at the rate that I'm going at. So I need  
667 to rectify that.

Drawing on the transformative midlife IR, Josie described her sexuality now as possibly freer (“it’s liberating,” line 652; “liberated,” line 653) and positioned herself as “independent.” Drawing on the permissive sex discourse, Josie identified “casual relationships” as something she “should be able” to do (“get a lover,” “have casual relationships”; lines 653-656). The “should be able” and “should just” (lines 655, 656) constructed this as normative and expected but, maybe in her case, not entirely desirable. Furthermore, she constructed casual sex as something to be done without hesitation or concern about the long-term consequences, i.e., “plunge into” (line 656), but again the “should” implied there was something holding her back. She then offered two possible reasons for not engaging in casual sex, discounting each one of them. This included psychological damage from previous relationships (“not scarred in any way,” line 657) and having so many previous sexual partners that her reputation might be at stake (“up to 8 sexual partners in my life,” line 658). Here, she defended herself against being positioned as the promiscuous woman: “not a huge number for my age” (line 658). She then argued that having casual sexual relationships is “perfectly feasible” (line 659) and logical (“intellectually,” line 659). However, positioning herself within the New Age spirituality discourse, she argued that for her casual sexual relationships are unworkable in reality: “actually comes down to it” (line 660). She is not attracted to someone without connection: “I don’t actually find people attractive unless I know them” (line 661). Thus, she attributed her aversion to casual sexual relationships to something about her personal preferences, rather than some pathology or social constraints.

Beginning at line 663, she constructed her future sexual life as a problem for which she has yet to find a solution: “I haven’t quite resolved that yet” (line 663), i.e., casual sexual relationships are allowed but her need to first have a ‘connection’ hinders her engaging in such relationships. Again, she drew on the transformative midlife IR to construct her sexuality as taking a new shape in early midlife and as something to be chosen and decided upon: “how my sexuality’s gonna be from now on” (line 664). This apparently requires reflection and rational consideration, “think about intellectually” (line 665). She identified the potential problem as celibacy: “I’m in danger of being celibate for the rest of my life” (line 665), something that demands a solution: “I need to rectify that” (line 668). Thus, she clearly resisted the subject

position sexually inactive woman as more than a temporary identify, but offered no explicit strategies for change.

In most of the interviews, I raised the topic of celibacy and introduced the term into the conversations—Josie serves as an exception in using the word before I did. The next three excerpts illustrate how women responded to my use of that term, by taking it up, redefining it, or rejecting it. Nevertheless, like Josie, they all constructed celibacy as undesirable as a permanent condition. In the following excerpt, Lisa positioned herself as a “celibate woman.”

**Excerpt 3 (Lisa, 41, single, common-law)**

- 1260 Jennifer: Do you consider yourself to be celibate?  
1261 Lisa: Yeah, pretty much.  
1262 Jennifer: (laugh) Yeah?  
1263 Lisa: Well (.) Yeah, I guess, if I have to stop and think about it, yeah. Uhm (.) Yeah, I  
1264 guess I never really looked at the definition, but-. I'm actually surprised that-. This  
1265 conversation came up with some friends a couple of months ago and I thought  
1266 when I told them how long it'd been since I'd last been with somebody their jaws  
1267 were gonna drop. But I actually had a couple 'em were, like, “Yeah. About the  
1268 same.” I was, like, “What?” I was really surprised.  
1269 Jennifer: Yeah.  
1270 Lisa: 'Cause I guess I just hear so much about the ones that are doing it all the time  
1271 that I didn't realize that there's actually some people like me who can go a year  
1272 without it.  
1273 Jennifer: Yeah. Or more (.) Yeah.  
1274 Lisa: Yeah, more. Exactly. I totally had two-year stints.  
1275 Jennifer: Yeah.  
1276 Lisa: Uhm (.) So, yeah.  
1277 Jennifer: Do-? Why do-?  
1278 Lisa: I guess I'm. I'm, like, [practically] born again (laugh).  
1279 Jennifer: (laugh) Why do you think that is so surprising for you? (.) To learn-.  
1280 Lisa: Surprising  
1281 Jennifer: To learn this? That there are other people out there who-. You know, why do  
1282 you think that surprises you?  
1283 Lisa: Uhm, I guess it's just I feel that, uhm, everyone else is more-. Or less [inaudible].  
1284 Everyone is less frigid than me, more open, more receptive to, mm, connections  
1285 without, uhm (.) or, or sex without connection.

After I raised the question of celibacy, Lisa agreed (“Yeah”), though she did so tentatively. Cautiously positioning herself as celibate (“pretty much,” line 1261) she left the door open for not being celibate. When I asked, “Yeah?,” she again responded tentatively: “Yeah, I guess” (line 1263). Her agreement, “if I have to stop and think about it,” implied a certain amount of mental labour was required for her to position herself in this way; that is, it was not

natural or routine. In addition, she declared a certain ignorance of what celibacy means, as “she never really looked at the definition” (line 1264). Clearly, being celibate or a sexually inactive woman is a troubled subject position. She followed this up with a story about a conversation with her friends in which she told them “how long it’d been” (line 1266) since her last sexual relationship. She used a contrast structure in which she positioned herself as anticipating a shocked reaction from her friends (“I thought [...] their jaws were gonna drop,” line 1265-1267), but instead “a couple” of them reported the same experience. This constructed her lack of a sexual relationship as outside the norm, on the one hand, but as not unique to her. Thus, Lisa managed this troubled subject position by describing a “surprising” consensus among other women within her circle of friends who positioned themselves as sexually inactive women. This both repositioned her as not so abnormal and made her account more believable, i.e., even she was surprised. In elaborating, she distinguished between two kinds of women, “the ones that are doing it all the time” that she “hears so much about” (line 1270), i.e., the most common type of woman, and those “like me who can go for a year without it” (lines 1271-1272). When I suggested that “more” than a year was a possibility, Lisa offered a bolder reply: “Exactly. I totally had two-year stints” (line 1274). At line 1278, she responded to my “why” question (line 1277) with a joke about her lack of sexual relationship having a religious connection, i.e., “born again” (line 1278).

Later in the excerpt, I asked her to clarify her surprise (lines 1279-1281), and she drew on sexological discourse to construct her lack of sex as a rarity. Using a three-part list, she set herself apart from “everyone else” (line 1283), who are “less frigid,” “more open,” and “more receptive” (line 1284) than she. Within sexological discourse, women’s sexual desire is understood to be biological and not acting on this desire is abnormal. Thus, Lisa positioned herself as pathological and as having a medical or psychological problem, i.e., being “frigid” (line 1284). However, she then positioned herself within ‘New Age spirituality’ discourse as wanting sex with “connection” (line 1285). So, despite there being others like her who have not had sex for some time, being celibate or sexually inactive remained a ‘troubled’ subject position. Nevertheless, New Age spirituality discourse allowed her to position herself as a “moral woman,” who is not suffering from some pathology but is less willing than others to engage in “sex without connection” (line 1285).

In the following excerpt, Natasha (age 43 years) accounted for her lack of sexual relationship, while rejecting the celibate subject position:

**Excerpt 4 (Natasha, 43, single, divorced)**

- 1557 Jennifer: So if you're in a period of no sex, do you consider yourself to be celibate? I  
1558 don't know if you've-. Have you had sex since your four-? The 4-year guy?  
1559 Natasha: Yeah, yeah.  
1560 Jennifer: Okay.  
1561 Natasha: Uhm, I call it drought. (laugh)  
1562 Jennifer: Drought, yeah.  
1563 Natasha: Uh, no. I wouldn't say I was celibate because given the opportunity, I would  
1564 uncelibitize myself. That's not even a worry but (laughs)  
1565 Jennifer: [Yeah.  
1566 Natasha: like, yeah, the option is always there. The door is always open for me to  
1567 engage. I will let myself. So, no, I wouldn't consider myself celibate.  
1568 Jennifer: Yeah. And when you used the word 'drought' it sounds like that's something  
1569 that happens to you, right? You don't decide it's gonna be a 'drought' for right  
1570 now.  
1571 Natasha: Yeah. No, no, I don't think that is a, a deciding-. Like-. I've never decided  
1572 that. That, "Oh, I will never-." Like, "I'm purposefully not having sex." No, I've  
1573 never decided that.

In clarifying Natasha's sexual history, I constructed her lack of a sexual relationship as a temporary circumstance and positioned her as possibly "celibate" ("in a period of no sex," line 1557). In confirming the lack of a sexual relationship, Natasha constructed this as the result of events beyond her control, likening this time in her life to an unfortunate phenomenon of nature that has been visited upon her: "I call it a drought" (line 1561). However, she rejected the celibate subject position, declaring that "given the opportunity," she would have sex ("uncelibatize" herself, lines 1562-1563). In constructing her lack of sex as arising from chance, Natasha positioned herself as a "normal sexual woman" who is interested in having sex. However, she also positioned herself as a passive woman, who is not in control of her life circumstances. Using a three-part list ("option is always there," "door is always open," and, "I will let myself," lines 1566-1567), she pointed out the absence of obstacles to having sex. Her availability was constructed as passive, implying that she is simply waiting for a man to come along and there are no psychological barriers.

Between lines 1569-1571, I questioned her use of the term "drought" and its meaning, affirming that such events are beyond one's control (i.e., "happens to you," "don't decide"), and co-constructing her lack of sexual relationship as a temporary state ("for right now," line 1570)



that did not result from a “decision.” Here, Natasha repeatedly denied having made a choice to not have sex: “I don’t think that is a, a deciding” (lines 1572), “never decided” (lines 1573, 1574). In this way, she defended against being positioned as a celibate woman or sexually inactive woman, and took up the “normal sexual woman” subject position instead.

In the final excerpt, Alex defined celibacy as a condition of some permanence, which was problematic. This excerpt began as a response to my question (line 1194): “Do you consider yourself to be celibate?”

**Excerpt 5 (Alex, 38, single, common-law)**

1201 Alex: What there tends to be is there’s, there’s, there’s a breakup, there’s a sad time,  
1202 there’s a little, like, hop back out into, to, what one-night stand world. And then I  
1203 go back into recluse world. Or not quite recluse but it’s just sort of like, “Yeah,  
1204 yeah. I could do that if I want but I don’t. I don’t really want.” And then, and then,  
1205 uhm, so, so there’s definitely a celibate stage that comes post-breakup but then  
1206 there’s a one-night stand that kind of puts me back into the world.  
1207 Jennifer: Mm hm. Mm hm. You get-. Yeah. Okay. Well  
1208 Alex: [It’s  
1209 Jennifer: that’s interesting. ‘Cause I think (.) Yeah, I guess I’m asking these questions  
1210 about celibacy, about expressing your sexuality when you’re, you know, not in a  
1211 relationship, it, it, it’s-. I’m thinking, you know, what is sex when you’re by  
1212 yourself? You know? Is, is sex only in relationship?  
1213 Alex: (.)  
1214 Jennifer: You know?  
1215 Alex: Well, I mean, I, I, I mean, I have vibrators again (laugh).  
1216 Jennifer: Oh, yeah. That’s good (laugh).  
1217 Alex: Uhm, you know, and, and, I, I, I’ve been known to, to change a shower to make  
1218 sure it’s a detachable shower head. Like, it’s, it’s, you know, there’s, there’s, it’s  
1219 not like I’m, you know-. But I, I guess, a::h, there is something to the physical  
1220 touch of another person that, that it, that, when that craving appears it’s, ah, there’s  
1221 not a lot you can-. I mean, [you can get] touch from other people, right? Like,  
1222 that’s-. So, am I-? I, I guess-. The word celibate sounds too final. Like, like, I’m (.)  
1223 Like it’s not going to end (laugh). Uhm, and so I can’t say I’ve defined myself like  
1224 that. It’s just more that I’m, I’m not in a sexual space. I’m not interested at that  
1225 time. But I, but celibate sounds like too heavy a word.

Alex constructed her lack of sex as a temporary state that is linked to a period of mourning following a relationship’s end (“a breakup,” “a sad time,” line 1201). Thus, she positioned herself as a normal sexual woman who is putting her sexual life on hold for a period of healing. At line 1202, using a geographic metaphor, she constructed this period as a kind of retreat from the world, “recluse world,” that is interrupted by a sexual encounter (“one-night

stand world,” line 1202). She positioned herself as choosing among the options, i.e., to be in the world having sex or to retreat and not have sex (“I could do that if I want,” “I don’t really want,” line 1204). She constructed celibacy as temporary, “celibate stage” (line 1205) and coming to an end with casual sex (“one-night stand,” line 1206). Again, she drew on the geographic metaphor to construct her shifting sexual interests as a move from one world (“recluse world”), to another, (“the world”), which presumably includes a sexual life and the possibility of sexual relationships (“puts me back into the world,” line 1206).

When I changed the subject and questioned her about how she expresses her “sexuality” (“What is sex when you’re by yourself?”, (lines 1211-1212), she hesitated (line 1215) and described the available technologies for self-stimulation (“I have vibrators,” line 1215; “a detachable shower head,” line 1218). However, her turn was marked by a good deal of hedging (e.g., “you know”; “I, I, I’ve”; line 1217), and she resisted positioning herself as satisfied with this arrangement: “there is something to the physical touch of another person” (lines 1219-1220) and “when that craving appears [...] not a lot you can [...] touch other people” (lines 1220-1221).

After some hesitation (line 1222) that marked the coming contradiction (i.e., she had already positioned herself as celibate during her time as a recluse), she explicitly rejected celibate as an inadequate descriptor for who she is as it suggests permanence (“too final,” “like it’s not going to end,” “too heavy a word,” lines 1223-1225). Further, she minimized the issue of not having sex (“just more that,” line 1224) and drew on another geographic metaphor to position herself as a normal sexual woman who is temporarily not sexually interested (i.e., not inhabiting “a sexual space”): “I’m not interested at that time” (line 1224).

## **6.2 Sexual Practices When “Alone”**

This section includes an analysis of how the women constructed their sexuality and positioned themselves as normal sexual women when they were without a sexual partner. Given that the sexually inactive woman subject position is a troubled identity, it is not surprising that their accounts included descriptions of sexual practices, such as masturbation and various forms of bodily display and performance, i.e., beautification routines, burlesque, and forms of dress. Such accounts allowed them to position themselves as still sexual, despite the absence of a sexual relationship. I discuss each of these constructions, in turn, using six excerpts.

The women sometimes positioned themselves as normal sexual women by providing an account of their masturbation practices (see Excerpt 5, for example). However, in the following excerpt from my conversation with Rebecca, she also constructed certain beautification routines as part of women's sexual practices.

**Excerpt 6 (Rebecca, 45, single, never married)**

- 779 Jennifer: How do you think about your sexuality when you're not, uhm, in a  
780 partnership because, I mean, is sex just something that you do with somebody?  
781 Rebecca: Yeah.  
782 Jennifer: You know, it begs the question, 'What is sex?', in a way.  
783 Rebecca: Well, I think you can satisfy some of your sexual needs when you're alone  
784 but I think there's some that you can't. That need or that, uhm, want to be desired.  
785 Uhm, you know, I think very few people desire themselves. As such. You might,  
786 you know, use masturbation. Like, I'll use it as a way to get to sleep. You know, so  
787 it becomes a bit functional.  
788 Jennifer: Right.  
789 Rebecca: Uhm, and being overweight I find that the sexuality of just dressing up and  
790 feeling really good about your body, I don't have easy access to that now. So,  
791 things like-. You know, like, I don't shave my legs, and I think that's kind of for a  
792 lot for women that's a, uhm, a way to feel really feminine.  
793 Jennifer: Mm hm. Yeah. Shaving your legs or getting a bikini wax.  
794 Rebecca: Exactly.  
795 Jennifer: Yeah. So you're not doing those things right now?  
796 Rebecca: No.  
797 Jennifer: Yeah.  
798 Rebecca: So-. And that's what I consider, there's very few advantages to being, uhm,  
799 alone and that's one of them (laugh). My comfort. I'm comfortable with my own  
800 body even when it's not primped and preened.  
801 Jennifer: Yeah. That's good. And so, uhm, so it sounds like you're not, you're not,  
802 really thinking-. I mean, would you say you're not thinking about sex these days?  
803 Rebecca: Uhm, no, I think I feel I've left over, uhm (.) I do think about it a lot but I  
804 definitely don't desire it as much as I used to.  
805 Jennifer: Yeah. Okay.  
806 Rebecca: So I think I think about it, too, in terms of companionship and, you know, I  
807 don't have that now and I'm very aware of that. That in terms of actually thinking  
808 about sex all the time, and wanting, being horny, I don't have that now.  
809 Jennifer: Mm hm. Hm. And you miss it though.  
810 Rebecca: Yeah, I miss it. I think it's part of being alive.

With my question, I introduced sex as possibly restricted to two people. In response, Rebecca drew on 'sexological' discourse and constructed sexuality in terms of biological drives, i.e., "sexual needs," which she categorised into two types. First, there are needs that a woman

can meet when she is not in a sexual relationship, “when you’re alone” (line 783), and there are other needs that require a partner, i.e., “some that you can’t” (line 784). She drew on the male sexual drive discourse to construct sex as part of a relationship in which the ‘need’ is to be the sexual object of her partner’s desire: “want to be desired” (line 784). Being without a sexual partner is problematized because there are particular needs that cannot be met when alone: “very few people desire themselves” (line 785).

At line 786, Rebecca identified masturbation as an option for women who are without a sexual relationship; however, she constructed this option as also serving biological needs that are not generally associated with sex, such as falling asleep (line 786), which she labelled a “functional” use of masturbation (line 787). This elaborated on her distinction between the two kinds of needs. In her next turn, she positioned herself as “overweight” and therefore limited in how she can express her sexuality and what makes her feel good about her body (line 790). She provided two explicit examples of body practices that other women could use—“dressing up” (line 789) and shaving their legs (line 791). In addition, she linked feeling feminine with the topic of sexuality, implying that the physical appearance associated with women’s sexuality could be equated with feeling “really feminine” (line 792). Nevertheless, Rebecca also articulated “comfort” as an advantage of being a single woman without a sexual partner as she can be comfortable with her own body without attending to her appearance: i.e., without the need to “primp” and “preen” (lines 798-800). This clarified that the “feeling good” she talked about at line 790 was in relation to sexual relationships with men and being positioned as the sexual object within male sexual drive discourse. As an overweight, single woman, she is exempt from the pressures of this objectification. Being comfortable versus feeling good about one’s body, or feeling really feminine are produced as opposing options that are available depending on whether or not she engages in the body modifications required to make herself physically attractive to men.

At lines 801-802, I offered an interpretation of Rebecca’s prior turns, and asked a question that positioned her as not “thinking about sex.” Rebecca resisted this position and positioned herself as thinking “about it,” but not desiring sex “as much as I used to” (lines 803-804). Her next turn clarified this: she claimed to be thinking about the absence of companionship at this point in her life (“I don’t have that now,” line 806), while not “thinking of sex all the time, wanting and being horny” (line 808). Thus, she took up the deficit identity associated with the

standard midlife IR (the absence of marriage and family) and explicitly resisted a ‘sexually promiscuous’ subject position, something she implicitly attributed to a younger age (“now”). This prioritized having a committed relationship with someone over having a sexual relationship that satisfied biological urges. At my prompting, “you miss it though” (line 809), she agreed and constructed sexual desire as central to life, “part of being alive” (line 810), once again positioning herself within sexological discourse as a normal sexual woman. Like the examples in the first section (6.1), Rebecca’s talk shows that the sexually inactive woman is a troubled subject position that requires explanation, and at the very least, a profession of interest in sexual relationships. Simultaneously, being sexual outside of relationships is also problematic—a committed, long-term relationship remained the primary goal, for Rebecca.

In the following excerpt, Sylvie described her sexual experience during an earlier period in her life when she was without a sexual relationship and without her current partner. In response to being positioned as a sexually inactive woman, she drew on sexological discourse to position herself as a normal sexual woman, and the transformative midlife IR to position herself as comfortably single.

**Excerpt 7 (Sylvie, 36, single, common law)**

- 1399 Jennifer: So when that’s the case, how do you think about your own sexuality? Or how  
1400 did you? Or how do you experience your sexuality? When you’re alone, and not in  
1401 relationship?  
1402 Sylvie: When I’m alone?  
1403 Jennifer: When you’re not in a relationship  
1404 Sylvie: [ (laugh)  
1405 Jennifer: at all.  
1406 Sylvie: Well, I did-. Uhm, I probably still-. Yeah, I did have, uhm-. I used a dildo and,  
1407 and masturbate, and things like that. But it was probably was-. It was just in my  
1408 head and not with someone. But, yeah, after a while it gets, ah, it’s frustrating.  
1409 Uhm, but part of me, I didn’t, I really didn’t miss it. I, I was happy just to be alone  
1410 and, and, yeah, sometimes, I guess, it would’ve been nice but (.) you, you don’t  
1411 really need a guy to pleasure yourself.  
1412 Jennifer: [Yeah.  
1413 Sylvie: so. (laugh)  
1414 Jennifer: So-. And you, it sounds like, yeah, you just said you weren’t missing it. I  
1415 don’t think. At least, not generally, you weren’t missing sex at the time.  
1416 Sylvie: No.  
1417 Jennifer: So you weren’t-. There was no lack.  
1418 Sylvie: No. And I was-. Like, I was happy with all the other things that I had going on  
1419 in my life, uhm, ‘cause that’s the time when I started to do yoga, and, and was

1420 going hiking again, and, uhm, yeah, and with work, ah, like, study for my MBA  
1421 and such. So, I had, like, a social life and things like that, so I didn't feel like I was,  
1422 uhm-. It was the first time in my life where I've had, like, I'm not in a relationship  
1423 and this is awesome.

After some hesitation, Sylvie used a three-part list to construct her sexual experience when she was not in a relationship in terms of masturbation: "I used a dildo," "masturbate," "things like that" (line 1407). She then distinguished this kind of sexual experience from sex with a partner ("just in my head," "not with someone," line 1408). She also constructed masturbation as an insufficient replacement for sex with a partner ("it's frustrating") that grows over time ("after a while," line 1408). On the other hand, she minimized the significance of her frustration ("I didn't really miss it") and positioned herself as "comfortably single" ("I was happy just to be alone," line 1409). She then used a disclaimer ("it would've been nice") to reposition herself as a normal sexual woman and drew on sexological discourse to construct sexual pleasure as achievable through self-stimulation (lines 1410-1411, "you don't really need a guy to pleasure yourself"). Thus, like Rebecca, Sylvie constructed solo sex as inferior to sex with a partner. This, however, positioned her as having a deficit identity. Sylvie's response to this was to position herself as comfortably single and a normal sexual woman.

When I positioned her as not "missing sex" (lines 1414-1415), she confirmed that there had been no "lack" in her life (line 1418). In so doing, she negotiated a more positive identity than the deficit identity of the sexually inactive woman who is lacking relationship and sex. This entailed accounting for the various ways in which she had created a "happy" life outside of a romantic or sexual relationship: "yoga," "going hiking again," "work" and "study for my MBA" (line 1419-1420). This talk resembles Reynolds' positive IRs of singleness as "independence and choice" and "self-development and achievement" (Reynolds & Wetherell, 2003; Reynolds, 2008). According to Reynolds (2008), the "independence and choice" IR constructs singleness as a positive decision and celebrates independence and the freedom to live as one wishes to. The "self-development and achievement" IR constructs singleness as self-actualisation and ambition. Sylvie also clarified that she "had [...] a social life," emphasizing that she was not socially isolated (line 1421). Finally, in the latter part of the excerpt she constructed her singleness as a novel experience ("first time in my life"), which implied that she has otherwise been partnered, and then again positioned herself as comfortably single ("I'm not in a relationship and this is

awesome”; line 1423). Thus, Sylvie worked up being single and not in a sexual relationship as a temporary condition with advantages.

Rachel, a woman who has not yet had sexual intercourse, constructed sexuality as expressed in partnership and accounted for the importance of having a romantic relationship with a man before engaging sexually. Despite being positioned as a sexually inactive woman, she also positioned herself as a normal sexual woman.

**Excerpt 8 (Rachel, 46, single, never married)**

- 1302 Jennifer: Uhm, when you don't have a sexual partner, how do you think about your  
1303 sexual experience (.) or your sexuality?  
1304 Rachel: I just think it's unfulfilled and, uhm, I want to be in a place where I can  
1305 release that tiger.  
1306 Both: (laugh)  
1307 Jennifer: Yeah?  
1308 Rachel: So, I, I have to find out what it takes for me to do that.  
1309 Jennifer: Uh huh. I like that expression, that 'release your tiger'.  
1310 Rachel: Yeah. It's one area of the life, of life that, ah, I'm not experiencing yet. And,  
1311 ah, I think I'm losing out on it.  
1312 Jennifer: Mm hm, yeah.  
1313 Rachel: It's just the guy is not there.  
1314 Jennifer: Yeah. Hm. So, it's-. So sex-?  
1315 Rachel: [But it has to be connected to, ah, depth in the  
1316 relationship. For me.

Rachel drew on 'sexological' discourse to construct her sexuality as a natural force that is innate and wild ("tiger," line 1305). She positioned herself as a sexually inactive woman with a potential waiting to be realized in "a place" where she can let it out ("unfulfilled," lines 1304-1305). Thus, Rachel positioned herself as a normal sexual woman who is sexually interested and has a natural desire for a sexual relationship ("I want to be," line 1304). Although she described herself as uncertain about how to release this energy, i.e., the "tiger," she also asserted a willingness to take action ("I have to find out what it takes," line 1308).

When I commented on the phrase, "release your tiger," she elaborated and explained that sex ("it's," line 1310) is something that has not yet happened ("I'm not experiencing yet," line 1310). Positioning herself as a normal sexual woman (she has the tiger within), she claimed that she is ready and willing but as yet unable to realize her desire ("I think I'm losing out on it," line 1311). In this way, she positioned herself as having a deficit identity, i.e., the sexually inactive woman, and constructed sex in terms of heterosexual partnered sex ("the guy is not there," line

1313). Drawing on the New Age spirituality discourse, she constructed her need for connection (i.e., “more than sex”)—“connected to [...] depth in the relationship” (lines 1315-1316)—as a precondition for a sexual relationship. Like the others, Rachel resisted being positioned as “nonsexual” and worked up her sexual inactivity as a temporary condition.

While Eleanor also constructed her sexuality as something to be expressed, she did so in the context of doing burlesque. There are several burlesque dance troupes in Calgary, some of which are semi-professional and perform regularly (e.g., The Garter Girls), and others—the type of group in which Eleanor participates—are designed as dance and fitness classes, in which public performance is not a requirement to join, e.g., Burlesque Burn, Burlesquercise, Burlesque Boom, and Strut Fitness and Dance.

**Excerpt 9 (Eleanor, 43, single, common law)**

- 1727 Jennifer: If you're not having sex with a person  
1728 Eleanor: [Mm hm.  
1729 Interviewer: another person, then what does it mean to be sexual, and what does sex  
1730 mean?  
1731 Eleanor: Mm hm.  
1732 Interviewer: Do you know what I mean?  
1733 Eleanor: Yeah, I do burlesque, so  
1734 Interviewer: [Oh, yeah.  
1735 Eleanor: I mean, I celebrate it that way too, right?  
1736 Interviewer: Yeah.  
1737 Eleanor: I mean, I get to dress up in sexy outfits and, you know.  
1738 Interviewer: Yeah.  
1739 Eleanor: Yeah.  
1740 Interviewer: You wear sexy underwear, or pretty underwear  
1741 Eleanor: [Oh, hundred percent. Yeah, yeah.  
1742 Interviewer: when you're by yourself?  
1743 Eleanor: Yeah.

In response to my question (line 1729), “What does it mean to be sexual, and what does sex mean?,” Eleanor constructed her sexuality in terms of dance and striptease (“I do burlesque,” line 1733) and emphasized that she acknowledges it publicly (“I celebrate it that way,” line 1735). This constructed sexuality as a performance, a formulation that reproduced permissive sex discourse. Further extending the theatrical metaphor, she specified, “I get to dress up in sexy outfits” (line 1737), which focussed attention on physical appearance and forms of dress. My questions from lines 1738-1742 served to confirm that the dress included underwear, and that she practiced this when alone. Again, then, sexuality is understood within sexological discourse as



something belonging to the individual that in this case can be displayed through “sexy” clothing (line 1737) and public performance.

Later in the interview with Eleanor (Excerpt 10), she provided an elaborated account of performing burlesque, and constructed this as a positive sexual practice for women.

**Excerpt 10 (Eleanor, 43, single, common law)**

- 1960 Eleanor: And I think it’s a really good thing to recommend to women. Uhm, I just  
1961 know the reason I say ours is different than some of them because-. Some of them  
1962 are a little younger and a little bit more, uhm, a, a little bit more expectation of, of,  
1963 of-. Where there’s no expect-. Like I said, there’s some really overweight women.  
1964 Jennifer: Okay.  
1965 Eleanor: Like, I showed you the picture of that one overweight girl there. She’s in  
1966 burlesque. And she’s heavily overweight. And, uhm, you know, it’s a  
1967 Jennifer: [It’s not about  
1968 taking your clothes off necessarily.  
1969 Eleanor: No. No.  
1970 Jennifer: It’s about something else, yeah.  
1971 Eleanor: It’s about being sexy, and, and I mean, granted, I’m gonna be honest. I don’t  
1972 find it that attractive to have, you know, to be that overweight, uhm, in the outfits.  
1973 But, yeah, I think it’s a good thing for them you know, to feel-. So it’s good for  
1974 them to, to feel that way.  
1975 Jennifer: [Hot. Yeah.  
1976 Eleanor: Yeah. And there’s a lot of women of different shapes and sizes and whatnot,  
1977 so it’s good.

Eleanor began by arguing that burlesque is “a really good thing” to recommend to women. At line 1963, after some hesitation, she identified some of the women in her group as “really overweight” (line 1963), and referred to “one overweight girl” in particular (line 1965-1966). Her hedging around talking about burlesque when the performer is overweight highlighted that this is not the normal situation. It also pointed to cultural norms of ideal femininity (i.e., thin bodies) and the expectation that women who bare their bodies as part of a performance will have bodies that reflect these norms. Thus, Eleanor’s comments about the overweight women could be interpreted as a criticism of them for not having the appropriate bodies for burlesque. When I inserted myself in the conversation, co-constructing the purpose of burlesque as unrelated to stripping and nakedness, “not about taking your clothes off” (line 1968); “about something else” (line 1970). Eleanor agreed and clarified that the purpose is “being sexy” (line 1971), which turned out to mean how the women feel about themselves. She positioned herself as a reliable informant, taking the position that burlesque is good for women

even though she does not “find it that attractive to have” overweight women wearing the sexy outfits (line 1972). Eleanor’s claims individualized the experience of burlesque as an expression of sexuality and positioned the women as performing for the purpose of pleasing themselves. Her choice of example, someone who is “heavily overweight” (line 1966), emphasized the generalizability of the benefits of burlesque to all women, something she explicitly claimed in her final turn: “there’s a lot of women of different shapes and sizes” (line 1976). Thus, Eleanor made a case for herself and other women to be positioned as normal sexual women outside of a relationship.

In the following excerpt, Donna described sexual practices related to appearance, forms of dress, and beautification routines.

**Excerpt 11 (Donna, 39, single, never married)**

- 1297 Jennifer: And then the other question was, how do you express your sexuality? And  
1298 you’ve already said something about that. You were talking about just dressing for  
1299 yourself.  
1300 Donna: Yeah.  
1301 Jennifer: Flirting with somebody.  
1302 Donna: Yeah.  
1303 Jennifer: Reading books.  
1304 Donna: And then you know what else? There is one more thing. Nice underwear. I  
1305 don’t care if I’m not getting laid, I’m still wearing stuff from ‘La Senza’. Not the  
1306 bras, obviously, ‘cause they don’t work. But-. No, I always-. I buy all my  
1307 underwear from ‘La Senza’. Really nice stuff. Like, that has got bows, and lace,  
1308 and all that kind of frilly stuff. ‘Cause I’m, like, “No, I may be single but I’m not  
1309 friggin’ dead.” So, I-. If I have to look at underwear it better be nice.  
1310 Jennifer: Right.  
1311 Donna: So, I’m not-. I threw out all the ‘Jockeys’ and all the-. You know. Oh, I-  
1312 Won’t even-. Even, even on, like, the five days a month they’re like really nice  
1313 black, hard to stain, you know. But I’m like no, damn it, I’m wearing really nice  
1314 freakin’-. And I-. And I sometimes I think painting my toenails red or something  
1315 like that is sexy. Like-. And I think the fact that I’m, I try to look nice, and you  
1316 know, I, I’m not like giving up or letting-. I’m, like, “No.” I mean, even if I’m not  
1317 getting laid I’m going to still look like someone you’d want to fuck. So, there you  
1318 go.  
1319 Jennifer: Mm hm. Right.  
1320 Donna: You know, its, like, “Eat your heart out, you know? Too bad you’re married.  
1321 Boy, too bad for you.” Like (laugh), you know-. I’m like-. Or like, no, I just don’t  
1322 want to feel like it’s not a part of who I am. ‘Cause it is. So, that’s it.

After posing a question about expressing her sexuality, I summarized how Donna had earlier defined her sexuality when without a partner, i.e., “flirting” (line 1301), and reading romance novels (“reading books,” line 1303). Donna then constructed sexuality in terms of looking “nice” and dressing in lingerie (“Nice underwear,” line 1304). She constructed dressing in lingerie as an alternative to having a sexual relationship (“if I’m not getting laid,” line 1305), which produced sexuality as associated with an individual’s body. In a three-part list, she described this in terms of decorative lingerie that is characteristic of feminine attire: “bows,” “lace,” “frilly stuff” (line 1308). Further, she constructed the practice as not dependent on being in a relationship: “I may be single but I’m not friggin’ dead” (line 1308). She then emphasized that this is a means of pleasing herself: “If I have to look at underwear” (line 1309). Starting at line 1311, she contrasted the feminine lingerie with the functional but non-sexy option (i.e., “Jockeys”) and emphasized that she threw out the functional ones and always wears the nice lingerie, “even” when she is menstruating (lines 1312-1313). This produced sexuality as something that can be continually on display.

At line 1314, she described another way of beautifying her body, “painting my toenails red” (line 1314), a colour commonly associated with love, passion and sex, and pointed to other available practices (“or something like that”). The importance of physical appearance (“I try to look nice,” line 1315) was clarified when she stated, “I’m not like giving up” on finding a partner (line 1316). Indeed, she positioned herself as always prepared and waiting for a sexual partner: “I’m going to still look like someone you’d want to fuck” (line 1317). This positioned her within male sexual drive discourse as the ‘sexual object’ to her potential partner’s desire. However, in doing so, she also positioned herself as an active participant who has deliberately made this choice and is temporarily positioned as a sexually inactive woman.

While Donna began her account as seemingly focussed on what she considers “nice” (line 1304), at the end she qualified her focus on appearance as about being sexually attractive to men. Here, she spoke to her imagined audience of married men: “Eat your heart out” (line 1320). She then positioned herself as a normal sexual woman whose sexuality is part of her identity: “I just don’t want to feel like it’s not a part of who I am. ‘Cause it is” (line 1322).

### **6.3 Chapter Summary**

Taken together, the excerpts illustrate how the single-at-midlife women constructed their

sexuality through the sexological, permissive sex, and male sexual drive discourses. Across the interviews, sex was largely understood to be a partnered event. The women's preferred means of expressing their sexuality was within a committed heterosexual relationship. Indeed, singleness and sexual inactivity were largely constructed as temporary conditions. In comparison, masturbation was deemed a feeble substitute for sex with a partner, serving only a woman's basic "biological" and "functional" needs.

As the interview excerpts illustrate, not having sex is a problem, and the subject positions celibate woman and sexually inactive woman are troubled, even for women who are positioned as single and without a sexual partner at midlife (Wetherell, 1998). When the topic of conversation was the absence of sexual relationships, the women constructed the absence as a problem and accounted for it, positioning themselves as open to having sex. Extending Reynolds' (2008) notion of singleness as a deficit identity, the identity sexually inactive woman can be understood as a deficit identity, defined by lack. This points to the power of the permissive sex discourse, which constructs sex as natural, pivotal to the human experience, and desired by the women. When positioned within this discourse, women are expected to have frequent sex or at least want to have it (i.e., sex is "compulsory"). Consequently, women are placed in a troubled subject position when they position themselves as "not sexually active." The sexually inactive woman is a marginalised "other" who must account for her sexuality.

The women resisted being positioned as celibate or sexually inactive women and positioned themselves as normal sexual women in a variety of ways. They drew on the New Age spirituality discourse to justify a preference for sex when first having a connection with their partner. This justified being sexually inactive otherwise. In addition, they drew on cultural resources previously identified in Jill Reynolds' study on single women (Reynolds, 2008; Reynolds, Wetherell & Taylor, 2007). The resources of "choice" and "chance" allowed for fluidity in women's accounts as they used these to justify and explain their not having sex and their lack of sexual relationship as arising from both their own choosing *and* chance (see Reynolds, Wetherell & Taylor, 2007). They constructed their lack of sex as a choice in contexts where they positioned themselves as only having sex with connection, i.e., they limited the types of sexual relationships that they would engage in and, in a sense, resisted the permissive sex discourse. They used chance to explain their lack of sex as resulting from outside circumstances, and position themselves as open to all kinds of sexual relationships.

Finally, the participants' responses to my questions about celibacy demonstrate that, regardless of their reaction to the term (i.e., outright rejection, lack of clarity about the meaning, tentative or ambiguous acceptance), they were clear about the temporary nature of not having sex. Celibacy was not a term that the women readily employed in their accounts without prompting, and with the exception of a few participants, most rejected the term as a description of their lives.

In drawing on the male sexual drive discourse the women positioned themselves as sexual objects who are actively choosing to position themselves as such. In addition, they took up the permissive sex discourse in artful ways to construct sexuality as a bodily-based phenomenon that is best understood as acts and experiences, including engaging in various forms of sexual bodily display and performance (i.e., dressing up, appearance, burlesque). Beyond positioning themselves as sexual objects and normal sexual women, the women's accounts were limited in terms of producing meanings of sexuality in the context of singleness.

## Chapter 7: Discussion

### 7.1 Introduction

Few studies have examined the complexity and diversity of midlife women's sexual lives as it is experienced in singleness (i.e., Anderson & Stewart, 1997; Baumbusch, 2001; Lewis, 1994; Trimberger, 2005), and one of the goals of this research was to add to this literature. This study began as an exploration of the sexual lives of Canadian women who are single at midlife, and the way they constructed their sexuality in relation to aging and singleness. More specifically, the study examined the culturally-bound discourses of (hetero)sexuality that were available to the women as they accounted for their sexual experiences while "alone" and explained and justified their sexual identities. The project drew on individual semi-structured interviews conducted with 21 women in early midlife, i.e., between 35 and 50 years of age. Limiting the participant group to women alone in early midlife allowed common understandings of women's sexuality in the context of singleness and aging to be addressed. Doing so also set the participant group apart from the samples of adolescent and young adult women in previous discursive research on women's (hetero)sexuality (e.g., Allen, 2003; Burns, Futch, & Tolman, 2011; Fine, 1988; Fine & McLelland, 2006; Gilfoyle, Wilson, & Brown, 1992; Hird & Jackson, 2001; Holland, Ramazanoglu, Sharpe, & Thomson, 1998; Holland, et al., 2004; Hollway, 1984a, 1984b; Jackson & Cram, 2003; Sieg, 2007).

The study results suggest that the demographic and socio-cultural changes relating to marital and family relationships of recent decades have entailed shifts in the discursive environment beyond the cultural resources identified by Wendy Hollway (1984a, 1984b, 1995) more than three decades ago (i.e., male sexual drive, have and hold, permissive sex discourses). The male sexual drive and have and hold discourses position men as "needing" sex, and women as the object that precipitates men's natural sexual urges. However, they also produce heterosexual marriage relationships or their proxies as the spaces where women are to be sexually active. As well, women's (hetero)sexuality is understood to be "compulsory." Drawing inspiration from Adrienne Rich's (1980) landmark essay exposing the regime of power underlying and sustaining "compulsory heterosexuality" as the sexual norm, Hilary Radner (2008) has argued that sexuality is compulsory. The recent attention to "asexuality" that highlights how all people are defined by some category of sexuality and are assumed to

experience sexual desire bears this out (e.g., Chasin, 2013; Gupta, 2013, 2015). Consistent with this analysis, the participants in my study oriented to the demand of compulsory sexuality (Radner, 2008), which constructs sex as integral to women's lives and is produced by the permissive sex and sexological discourses. For single women, this means remaining sexually attractive and youthful according to the standards of the day, a subject position that is at odds with their positioning as "mature" women. Single women at midlife navigate this tension by drawing on two emerging discourses, caring sex and New Age spirituality, which provide a "sexual ethics" for giving accounts of sex outside of heterosexual marriage and long-term relationships, enabling the maintenance of a moral woman subject position.

I discuss the results of the data analysis in two parts: *Women's Sexuality is Compulsory* (Section 7.2), and *Emerging Discourses: Ethical Sex Outside Marriage* (Section 7.3). In each section, I contextualise and interpret the results and their implications within the broader research literatures on sexuality and singleness. The chapter concludes with an overview of the contributions of this research, its limits and implications for future research (7.4 *Study Contributions, Limitations and Future Research*), and finally conclusions regarding the significance of this study (Section 7.5 *Conclusion*).

## **7.2 Women's Sexuality is "Compulsory"**

The permissive sex and sexological discourses recognize female sexual desire in ways that counter its denial in earlier discourses (i.e., male sexual drive, have and hold; Hollway, 1984a, 1984b, 1989). They construct sexuality as innate and pivotal to the human experience, but also as enjoyable for its own sake and deserving free expression (e.g., Claire calling it "a fun ride"; Chapter 4, p. 52). Women's sexual drives and needs were commonly constructed as best released within a romantic partnership however. Also, the kind of sexual activity that women constructed generally excluded alternatives to coitus, i.e., they adhered to the coital imperative (Gavey, McPhillips, & Braun, 1999; McPhillips, Braun, & Gavey, 2001; Tiefer, 2000). Indeed, the women's accounts were consistent with the claim that the coital imperative makes it "unthinkable that mature heterosexuals could have sex without having intercourse" (McPhillips, et al., 2001, p. 229). Moreover, the women understood their male partners' contributions in mechanistic terms, i.e., men were positioned as "sexual technicians" (Gilfoyle et al., 1992), emphasizing the importance of male sexual performance and men's responsibility for

(un)pleasant sex. Yet there were no constructions of female bodies as active, desiring, and responsible for sexual pleasure. In the entire corpus, there were only three references to women's sex organs (i.e., "vagina"), which admittedly might reflect the line of questioning that I adopted, but still seems noteworthy in the context of their criticisms of men (for further discussion of this point see Section 7.3, *Study Contributions, Limitations, and Future Research*). Also missing were constructions of masturbation or "solo sex" (Dodson, 1996) as a legitimate means of "doing sex." When I raised the topic, the women described masturbation as serving a "functional" role that addressed only a few needs, e.g., "a way to get to sleep" (see Chapter 6, p. 103). Other research with an older (aged 55 to 81 years) sample of single women reported something similar, i.e., masturbation was described as a "lesser" sexual act (Fileborn, Thorpe, Hawkes, Minichello, & Pitts, 2015). Thus, compulsory sexuality means sexual intercourse, at least within the context of this study.

The permissive sex and sexological discourses are also linked to discourses of health (e.g., Potts, Gavey, Grace, & Vares, 2003; Tiefer, 1996, 2000), which makes frequent sex and the desire for frequent sex (of a socially approved kind) a matter of physical and psychological health. This adds force to the discursive pull toward compulsory sexuality (Radner, 2008). In my study, none of the participants positioned themselves outside the discourses of heterosexuality (i.e., permissive sex and sexological discourses), and being positioned as celibate or sexually inactive was clearly trouble (Wetherell, 1998). Indeed, the participants employed various discursive strategies to explain and justify their sexuality and position themselves as normal sexual women who were sexually interested and available should the "right" circumstances present themselves (in particular, a suitable male partner). In effect, they offered detailed accounts that responded to the required "need-to-have-sex" that is produced by discourses of (hetero)sex. Despite this, they also positioned themselves as passive participants in the process and as having to acquire something—or in this case someone—in order to act on their sexuality and achieve sexual satisfaction. This suggests that women sometimes, at least, continue to understand their sexuality as a practice enacted only through engagement with men (e.g., Holland et al., 2004). So, again, an interest in sex with men is critical and points to a discourse of compulsory sexuality (Radner, 2008).

Other research, particularly critical analyses of biomedicine and sex research, also points to the privileging of (hetero)sex practices and the importance of being sexually active as long as



possible across the life span. For example, feminist researchers have argued that the promotion of Viagra has contributed to a proliferation of discourses of (hetero)sex that pressure women (and men) to be sexually active into later life (e.g., Marshall 2002, 2006, 2010; Potts et al. 2003; Tiefer, 2006). Feminist scholars have also produced a rich body of scholarship problematizing the construction of “female sexual dysfunction” as a disorder (e.g., Tiefer, 2002, 2006). According to these critics, variations in women’s sexual interest and activity are unnecessarily pathologised, and the relational, social, and political aspects of sexuality are ignored.

Another line of research that is pertinent to compulsory sexuality is the exploration of unwanted sex (Gupta, 2015). This is exemplified by Nicola Gavey’s research, which highlighted how women may acquiesce to participate in unwanted (hetero)sex (Gavey, 1992, 2005). Gavey argued that the “cultural scaffolding of rape,” through discourses such as male sexual drive discourse, positions women in ways that make it challenging for them to say “no” or resist even nonviolent pressure from men, such as wheedling or begging. Women may also engage in unwanted sex out of a sense of duty often fuelled by the notion that women are responsible for pleasing their partners, i.e., sexual compliance (Impett & Peplau, 2003), and meeting male sexual “needs.” Moreover, women are concerned to do the normal thing, which brings into consideration matters like how frequently (hetero)sex should occur, whether they can say “no” to someone with whom they have had (hetero)sex on a previous occasion, and avoiding negative judgments and name calling if they refuse (hetero)sex (Gavey, 2005). While Gavey’s research did not focus on women who are single at midlife, her participants’ use of the “social technologies of sexual coercion” to explain why they had engaged in unwanted sex, underscores how the available meanings of (hetero)sex encourage a concern with being sexually available whenever men desire it. Single women at midlife are by no means exempt.

The participants in my study positioned themselves as sexually open and available, i.e., as normal sexual women, but also as aspiring to youthful femininity. They did this through their talk of purchasing “sexy” commodities like lingerie (e.g., “nice underwear”), bodily display (e.g., “sexy outfits”), and public performance (e.g., “I do burlesque”). They also spoke of beauty practices, such as the use of cosmetics, the removal of body hair (e.g., “shaving legs”), and efforts to appear youthful using cosmetic surgery (e.g., Katherine). Notably, the women’s version of sexiness emphasized thin, youthful bodies. For example, Rebecca positioned herself as outside the accepted standard of youthful feminine beauty (“being overweight...I don’t have

easy access to that now”; Chapter 6, p. 103). While there were exceptions, e.g., Eleanor’s inclusion of overweight women among those who could benefit from participating in burlesque, this was rare. More commonly, the women drew on the midlife sexuality as decline IR (see Chapter 5, Section 5.2.1) to construct their aging bodies as betraying cultural standards of beauty (e.g., “wrinkles,” “not the cat’s meow,” “hairier”), threatening their sexual appeal, and endangering the potential for securing sexual and romantic relationships.

It is clear, then, that the women positioned themselves as both sexually liberal and agentic, but at the same time constructed their sexuality in relation to a male partner and his imagined preferences. Similar findings were captured in Farvid and Braun’s analysis of popular women’s magazines (2006), wherein female (hetero)sexuality was regulated such that young women were positioned as sexually liberal, agentic, and free to be sexually desirous and to pursue “casual” sexual encounters with men; however, the end goal of this sexual freedom was ultimately cast as finding and keeping “Mr. Right.” Indeed, a sexually desirous subjectivity that was not centered on a search for Mr. Right was excluded from the magazines. We might similarly conclude that “female sexuality always exists in relation to its ‘target’—male sexuality” (Farvid & Braun, 2006, p. 6).

To be desirable heterosexual subjects in the eyes of men requires ongoing body management—in the form of self-surveillance, self-monitoring, and self-discipline—that is required to achieve feminine sexiness (Gill, 2007a). While women have long been required to perform the requirements of successful femininity, the heightened intensity of self-surveillance has increased to include new spheres of intimate conduct (e.g., body shape, size, muscle tone, and attire; Gill, 2007a). All the while, this ongoing monitoring and labour is constructed as “fun,” “self-indulgence,” and “pampering” (Gill, 2007a, p. 155). Therefore, the postfeminist heterosexual woman is valued for her ability to adopt the innumerable “technologies of sexiness” (Radner, 2008) that demonstrate her sexual desirability as well as her sexual interest and availability. These discourses call on the midlife single woman to be continually sexually prepared and proficient. However, the mid- and later-life woman with her wrinkles, added weight, and cellulite can merely aspire to resemble the post-feminist sexualized woman depicted in popular media (e.g., Gill, 2007a, 2009a). The older woman is clearly at risk of being positioned as sexually unattractive and without an autonomous sexual subjectivity (Gill, 2007a, 2007b). Rather, she is more commonly employed in popular media as a warning or threat and as

representing what women do not wish to become (Gill, 2007a). In general, there is an absence of images of sexually active middle-aged and older women in popular culture (Weitz, 2010) and no discourse that constructs midlife and older bodies as sexual bodies (Daniluk, 1998). Hence, single women at midlife must pursue a youthful image in order to position themselves as still sexual and available for a heterosexual partnership.

On the other hand, the participants in my study also positioned themselves as sexual sophisticates who, having reached midlife, were sexually experienced, self-aware, and confident (i.e., midlife as increased sexual knowledge and experience IR). This anti-decline narrative of progress in sexual knowledge and skill offers an alternative assessment of their value that competes with post-feminist femininity, positioning them as wise women who are more than objects of male desire. Although this may seem like a discourse of resistance, the women simultaneously positioned themselves in contradictory ways within the male sexual drive discourse as sexual objects enticing male attention and generating sexual interest through their physical appearance. This reproduces traditional gender relations of (hetero)sex, i.e., the active man and the passive woman (i.e., Hollway, 1984a, 1984b). However, the women justified their body practices as not entirely in the service of men but also in individualistic terms, as a matter of “feeling good,” “pleasing themselves,” and “choice”; in effect, they positioned themselves within the neoliberal discourse of post-feminist femininity (Gill, 2007a). A clear example was Donna’s claim that even though she is a woman alone, she chooses to dress like “someone you’d want to fuck” (Chapter 6, p. 110). Although claiming to be an active, autonomous, and desiring sexual subject, Donna nevertheless “chooses” to objectify herself, because it suits her interests (e.g., Gill, 2007a, 2007b, 2008b, 2009a). Thus, when women who are single at midlife take up a post-feminist sensibility, power shifts from an external male gaze to an internalized, self-policing gaze with a “new” disciplinary regime that is remarkably familiar but cannot be challenged without being critiqued as “anti-sex” (Gill, 2007a, p. 152). Consequently, the emancipatory potential of the agency enabled by post-feminist femininity remains dubious.

This study draws attention to culture and the proliferation of discourses of sex and sexuality, or the sexualization of culture, as Gill (2009a) calls it, which demand that women be responsible for having and maintaining a sexually desirable subjectivity and maintain an obsessive preoccupation with their bodies (Gill, 2007a). As has been noted by Gill and her colleagues, the visibility of sexuality and its importance has increased in a number of

contemporary media domains, including advertising, women's magazines, and television (Gill, 2007b, 2008b, 2009a; Harvey & Gill, 2011a, 2012). Furthermore, television programs such as *Sex in the City* and *Queer as Folk* have somewhat mainstreamed women's participation in casual sex (e.g., Cramer, 2007); and, more generally, sex is repeatedly equated with health, happiness, and well-being (e.g., Tiefer, 1996). Hence, it is perhaps not surprising that the participants' accounts drew on discourses that have emerged in this new discursive world.

### **7.3 “Emerging” Discourses: Ethical Sex Outside Marriage**

The analysis presented in Chapter 4, Discourses of Sex and Sexuality, demonstrated that on one hand, women who are single at midlife are accountable to the permissive sex and sexological discourses that compel them to position themselves as sexual women, who must negotiate this subject position in the absence of a committed relationship. On the other hand, the have and hold discourse, together with the ideology of marriage and family (DePaulo & Morris, 2005), position the sexually moral woman in a sexual relationship with her long-term partner. This sets up a classic ideological dilemma (Billig, 1991; Edley, 2001). A woman who positions herself as waiting for, or working on, finding a suitable partner for marriage cannot simultaneously position herself as actively sexual unless she practices (hetero)sex in casual relationships; (hetero)sex within casual relationships positions her as immoral however. The participants in this study employed the emerging discourses, caring sex, and New Age spirituality in negotiating an alternative subject position—the woman who practices (hetero)sex outside of marriage in an ethical way.

The alternative meanings of heterosexuality realized in these emerging discourses construct sexual intimacy in terms of relational processes (Jamieson, 1999)—as a kind of *doing*—that privilege practices of care, respect, reciprocity, and mutuality between sexual partners. Consequently, in theory anyone can be one's “intimate” because it is the relational processes that matter (Gabb, 2001). Such an understanding of heterosexuality is congruent with late-modern notions of selfhood based on ideals of democracy and equality (including gender equality), characterizing what Giddens (1992) termed the “pure relationship.” These discourses also feature in popular texts on sex, such as Eason and Liszt's (1997) *The Ethical Slut*, a how-to guide to intimacy and sexuality outside committed, long-term monogamy. They reclaim “sluthood” as a moral identity by advocating a set of practices that are clearly grounded in the

caring sex discourse. These include concerns with risk avoidance and consent (i.e., “active collaboration for the benefit, well-being and pleasure of all persons,” p. 21), as well as “honesty” and “respect for others’ feelings” (p. 22). This version of moral sexuality outside of marriage includes avoiding harm, having fun, learning, personal growth and even making the world a better place. The accounts of the participants in this study can be situated within this larger conversation that has been unfolding for some time.

In making sense of these results, I found it useful to consider research that drew on Foucault’s third volume of *The History of Sexuality* (1986). In this final work, Foucault examines the understandings of sexual pleasure in ancient Greece and Rome and uncovers the primary ethical obligations for sexual conduct in both epochs. Moreover, he reveals the growing anxiety over sexual activity and its consequences that emerged in later centuries. It is in this final volume that he began to articulate the subject of sexual ethics and the ethical obligation to care for oneself (Foucault, 1986). Foucault made a distinction between “morality,” a mode of subjection in the form of obedience to a set of rules and normative actions that are permitted in a given society (e.g., sex finds its natural fulfillment in marriage), and “ethics,” the ways individuals ought to constitute themselves as moral subjects of their own actions. Foucault’s central argument about sexuality and ethics involves what he termed “rapport à soi”—literally, self-understanding, or the relationship one ought to have with oneself. Applying this to my study, the relationship that a woman has with herself would be constituted through her self-knowledge regarding how she feels about a particular sexual act, her desires and pleasures, but also her reflection on how cultural discourses of sex shape her understanding of sexuality. To be ethical, then, is to be reflective and inquiring of the “right relations” to have with oneself, i.e., care for the self, requiring active attention to sexual practice and to its effect on the individual. Furthermore, the care of the self is ethical in itself; however, it implies complex relationships with others insofar as this ethos of freedom is also a way of caring for others—those with whom we share communal life (Rabinow, 1997, p. 287). As Foucault explained, “I think the postulate of this whole morality was that a person who took proper care of himself would, by the same token, be able to conduct himself properly in relation to others and for others” (Rabinow, 1997, p. 287). Therefore, focusing only on oneself constitutes exploitative sexual relations such that the individual is at risk of imposing “fantasies, appetites, and desires on others,” which constitutes “an abuse of power” (Rabinow, 1997, p. 288). In their accounts, participants constituted

themselves as moral subjects in positioning themselves as having control over their sexual experience, constructing their sexual experiences as mutually desired, and positioning themselves as seeking (casual) sex. Thus, their accounts of sexual relationships and good sex realize a sexual ethics that is less focused on restricting sex to an appropriate relationship, i.e., monogamous and committed, and is instead anchored in how women and men engage with their partners.

The caring sex and New Age spirituality discourses enabled participants to account for their sexual encounters in positive terms (rather than in terms of a lack) at a time when, according to the coupledness narrative, they are to be married and have a family (DePaulo & Morris, 2005), i.e., as moral women having more than just sex. My study however is not the first to connect women's accounts of their sexual lives with Foucault's 'sexual ethics. Beres and Farvid (2010) used thematic analysis in exploring young women's accounts of heterosexual casual sex. The young women in their study engaged in moments of care for the self, self-reflection, and care for the other (though to a much lesser extent), which are all components of sexual ethics and *rapport à soi*. Here, care for the self refers to women setting limits in casual sex (i.e., activities they participated in or enforced, such as condom use), and care for the other meant women expressing concern for their partner's physical and emotional well-being and assessing his willingness to engage in casual sex. With this type of checking, the young women subtly disrupted the male sexual drive discourse which positions them as passive women who "just kind of follow along with the progression of things" (Beres & Farvid, p. 388). Thus, the results of this study carried out with a sample of young women mirror the way the women at midlife in my study placed importance on the practices of care, respect, reciprocity, and intimacy with their sexual partners (i.e., caring sex, New Age spirituality). Interestingly, the young 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 (Beres & Farvid, 2010), and while their accounts of casual sex were situated within gendered heterosexual discourses—as is the case with the accounts of the midlife single women in my study—sexual ethics enabled these moments of disruption (i.e., their positive accounts of casual sex). Beres and Farvid (2010) suggest that the cultivation of sexual ethics and *rapport à soi* may offer space for radical subversion of dominant discourses of heterosexuality. Extending this to my study, the caring sex and New Age spirituality discourses

may do likewise, because they challenge the assumed necessity of committed heterosexual relationships as the moral space for (hetero)sex.

In addition, Carmody (2003, 2005) has argued that sexual violence prevention education may benefit from a shift from a risk reduction approach, which has primarily focused on women managing the risk and danger of unethical behaviour of men, to a sexual ethics approach, i.e., “an erotics of consent.” My study furthers this argument by addressing how the emerging discourses (i.e., caring sex, New Age spirituality) constitute an expansion of the cultural resources with which single-at-midlife women may challenge heteronormative discourses and articulate a sexual identity that is not defined in relation to constructions of men’s sexuality (Daniluk, 1998; Hollway, 1984a, 1984b, 1989). Sexual relationships constructed around the discourses of caring sex and New Age spirituality incorporate a democratic morality that judges sexual acts based on how partners treat one another. This may serve to produce an alignment of women and men’s interests such that they may explore sexual pleasure in ways that are ethical, non-violent, and where danger is reduced.

Notably, however, the participants did not *explicitly* produce accounts that challenged monogamy (e.g., by actively promoting casual sex or polyamory) as the most desirable relationship form. Indeed, throughout the interviews, the women positioned themselves as wanting, and being open to, committed romantic relationships. Unsurprisingly, at times the women took up a deficit identity (Reynolds, 2008), constructing their identities in terms of what they do not yet have (e.g., committed, monogamous relationships) and demonstrating that the available cultural discourses supporting the ideology of marriage and family continue to place constraints on how single women at midlife understand themselves and their lives (i.e., deficit identity; Moore & Radtke, 2015; Reynolds, 2008). As is typical with ideological dilemmas then, the participants were drawn back into the argument that at midlife, the ideal life situation is marriage and family.

**7.3.1 Conclusion.** In previous eras, sex and marriage may have been understood to be synonymous, but with the detachment of female sexual experience from marital and familial conventions and the association of sex with liberation, personal fulfilment, and empowerment (i.e., permissive sex discourse), terms like “spinster” have become outmoded in everyday conversation. However, in equating sexual experience with personal freedom—the somewhat

conflicted legacy of both the Second Wave feminist movement and the so-called sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s—the mature woman with little sexual experience, in particular (hetero)sex experience, is pitied and demeaned in new ways. The expectation that she have a sexual relationship (i.e., compulsory sexuality) has become a new way to police and coerce women’s sexuality, with unique implications for the woman who is single at midlife (Gupta, 2015).

At the same time, the male sexual drive and have and hold discourses produce a particular sexual moralizing that is still potent in Canada, as it is in many parts of the world. Engaging in (hetero)sex outside of marriage puts the midlife single woman at risk of being positioned as a promiscuous woman (i.e., any such sex is “too much” sex). She can however defer sex, saving it up for the “right man” (i.e., sex with connection), an ethical practice that might allow her to avoid being positioned as a promiscuous woman even if that sex happens within a casual relationship. However, deferring sex indefinitely or positioning herself as sexually inactive requires justification as she must answer to the force of compulsory sexuality.

## **7.4 Study Contributions, Limitations, and Future Research**

**7.4.1 Study contributions.** This study explores the contemporary sexual landscape in Canada, including the available cultural discourses that single-at-midlife women employ to take up particular sexual identities and account for their sexual practices and themselves as desiring sexual subjects. In this regard, it adds to the extant literature on singleness, including an elaboration of the discursive research related to single womanhood (e.g., Reynolds, 2008) and singleness at midlife in particular (i.e., Moore & Radtke, 2015). My focus is on the shared, but limiting, meanings of (hetero)sex that hold single women accountable for their lack of fit with normative expectations of midlife, e.g., coupledness narrative (Reynolds & Taylor, 2005). The analysis also supported my previous research in showing that the women drew on the standard midlife and transformative midlife IRs in constructing singleness at midlife (Moore & Radtke, 2015).

Beyond this, the women’s accounts were limited in terms of producing varied meanings of sexuality in the context of singleness. There were only two emerging discourses, i.e., caring sex and New Age spirituality, which points to the paucity of cultural resources for understanding



women's sexuality and sexual practises beyond those that position them as sexual objects. The emerging discourses, characterized by care, respect, mutuality and connection offer a new ideal of good sex (i.e., more than just sex) against which women's sexual relationships may be compared. They also enabled the women to position themselves as both sexual and moral women when practicing sex outside of committed relationships. Further to this, few sex researchers have identified sexual ethics as a framework that might challenge the discourses of heterosexuality and the constraints they impose on women's sexual subjectivities (e.g., Beres & Farvid, 2010). Potentially, Foucault's work on ethics provides an alternative analytic category as well as a new direction for future research. In addition, women's midlife sexuality has tended to be researched in the context of abnormality or ill health (Tiefer, 2000, 2006), and academic studies have not adequately addressed midlife women's sexual lives beyond long-term relationship. Viewing the present results through the lens of sexual ethics allowed for an enriched understanding of women's midlife sexuality, moving beyond the narratives of "midlife asexuality" and the midlife sexual decline and anti-decline (progress) narratives that are commonly constructed in the literature (e.g., Hinchliff & Gott, 2008; Trethewey, 2001). The women's accounts were complex and contradictory in constructing their sexual lives both in terms of decline but also in terms of "wisdom and experience." This provides a richer and more nuanced portrayal of women's sexuality at midlife.

Furthermore, previous to this study, I expected that women at midlife (and older) would no longer be required to negotiate the male sexual drive and have and hold discourses and would not risk being positioned as the promiscuous woman. However, the women's accounts suggest that aging does not protect women from the discourses of heterosexuality. Even at midlife in contemporary times, women must justify engaging in (hetero)sex outside of marriage (i.e., they still anticipate being positioned as "sluts" if they do not offer a convincing story). An ethical subjectivity offered by discourses of sexual ethics has the potential to subvert or destabilize the discourses of heterosexuality that restrict midlife women's sexual possibilities. Future studies might explore this further by focusing on the ways women (and men) draw on the discourses of sexual ethics in their accounts of sex, and how they position themselves as ethical subjects in accounting for their sexual practices, both in and out of marriage relationships.

A few sex researchers have suggested that compulsory sexuality can serve as an analytic category beyond compulsory heterosexuality (e.g., Gupta, 2013, 2015). The uptake of this in the

research literature broadly has been minimal, although in my research I have found it to be a useful analytic frame. In employing discourse analysis as a theoretical and methodological approach, I have been able to illustrate how compulsory sexuality can be understood as a discourse that is both productive and regulatory; that is, it contributes to the production of sexualities and non-sexualities and simultaneously privileges some forms of sexuality while marginalizing other forms of non-sexuality (Gupta, 2013), including the sexual inactivity of single-at-midlife women. Importantly, this means that compulsory sexuality regulates the accounting practices of *everyone*, not just those who identify as asexual (Chasin, 2013).

Compulsory sexuality is reflected in the scientific and popular literatures that, in recent decades, have documented the supposed health-promoting benefits of sex (Gupta, 2011). For example, published articles have claimed that sexual activity may add to one's lifespan, reduce heart attack risk, lower blood pressure, reduce cancer risk, strengthen immune function, promote pain relief, and encourage weight loss (Gupta, 2011, p. 130). In these literatures, a "sex for health" discourse relies on the authority of science and medicine to provide justification and cultural legitimacy for sex-positivity, countering prevalent negative messages about sexual activity. However, while the sex for health discourse may serve to de-stigmatize sexual activity for some, Gupta argues that it also contributes to an increased pressure on others to be and remain sexually active, pathologizing those who engage in sex infrequently or abstain altogether (Gupta, 2011).

This healthicization of sex is also captured in contemporary North American sex manuals, which promote the importance of "sex work" as a fundamental aspect of heterosexual relationships (Gupta & Cacchioni, 2013). In particular, sex manuals encourage their readers to devote time and energy to improving their sex lives through "performance work," defined as pretending to conform to a standard heterosexual role through acting, including faking the enjoyment of (hetero)sex (see also Cacchioni, 2007). While contemporary sex manuals call for both men and women to perform disciplinary work, some of the sex manuals explicitly or implicitly encourage men and women to perform different types of sex work. For example, women's sexual desire is constructed as tied to emotional processes and taking longer to ignite, thereby suggesting that a woman's sexuality may require more effort on her part. Furthermore, given that women are the primary consumers of sexual advice literature they may be more likely to be the audience for such messages (e.g., Evans et al., 2010; Gill, 2009a, 2009b; Jackson &

Scott, 2004), potentially increasing the pressure on women to engage in sex work, including those women without partners (i.e., single women).

In summary, in setting up universals, the sex for health discourse increases pressure on individuals to conform to normative expectations and contributes to the further marginalization of those individuals who cannot or will not live up to these norms. In contrast, we may wish to promote the idea that different activities—including abstaining from sex—can be healthy for different people, and that some types of sexual activity, depending on the context, can promote health. This might serve to open up more space for different types of sexual expression, while simultaneously decreasing societal pressure to have sex. However, compulsory sexuality works together with the ideology of marriage and family and hetero(sex) to normalize sex within marital relationships (or their proxies). Thus, the woman who is single at midlife faces a dilemma in answering to these discourses—she must be both sexual and moral outside of marriage. Drawing on the emerging discourses of sex is one strategy for negotiating this dilemma.

Thus, in exploring the case of single women in Canada with a discourse analytic approach, I conclude that the lives of single women challenge some of the most dearly held common-sense assumptions about sex and sexuality (e.g., assumptions of sexual liberation outside of marriage). The rhetoric of sexual liberation that is implicit in the sexuality and psychology research and that is steeped in pro-sex / sex-positive popular literature (see, for example, *The Ethical Slut*) needs to be reconsidered. The discourse of compulsory sexuality draws attention to how the meanings of sexuality intersecting with discourses of gender and singleness are ever-present, both enabling and constraining women's understandings and practices. The pursuit of women's empowerment takes place in a context of discursive negotiations, which moves this theoretical and activist project beyond a binary anti-sex and pro-sex debate.

This research may encourage other scholars to further examine how the discourses of (hetero)sex are taken up by single and midlife women who are living alone, but also to explore the discourses taken up by people who are positioned as non-sexual, e.g., asexual men and women, as well as sexual people who do not position themselves within the discourse of (hetero)sex.

**7.4.2 Study Limitations.** As is widely accepted in qualitative inquiry, the outcome of my analysis was shaped and limited by my research design and interview agenda. I begin with limitations associated with the participant sample.

**Sample restrictions.** My research aim was to shed light on women's accounts of singleness, sexuality, and aging. Given the complexity of defining singleness, I did not wish to fix the category too narrowly or restrict the range to women who were "really" single according to my own definition, which would be inconsistent with the theoretical framework of discursive psychology. The inclusive sampling strategy, which called for women who had not been married or living in a common-law relationship for the previous five years, resulted in a heterogeneous sample of women in early midlife who were in differing circumstances and from a range of relationship histories. This allowed a range of meanings of sexuality and sexual relationships to be identified.

As a qualitative research project, my study was never intended to represent a broader population of women. However, a further broadening of the range of views and experiences beyond what I was able to include can only produce richer understandings of the issue(s) at hand. Although my recruiting methods fit well with the 35- to 50-year-old age inclusion requirement, they also limited who participated in some ways. Most obviously, the participants were well-educated, middle-class, and professional women, which could restrict the range of culturally shared discourses and IRs. Thus, while it is likely that the discursive resources employed by the participants in this study are available to women who are differently positioned, there is certainly room for further exploration of the discursive worlds of women who are single at midlife.

As volunteers, the participants self-selected to participate in the study, which might suggest that only women who were particularly oriented to topics related to singleness and sex would wish to be involved. Again, women not wanting to come forward in this way might have provided different accounts of their sexual lives. While the women who participated shared a range of accounts and recommended the study to friends who were potentially interested, the participants shared a social location similar to mine, and therefore in future it might be wise to collaborate on projects with a research colleague who is connected to different communities of women that might offer varied accounts. For example, while one participant claimed no specific sexual orientation (i.e., "don't define myself as hetero or, uhm, bisexual or, or gay"), no self-identified bisexual or lesbian women participated in the study. In addition, no participants I

interviewed identified as having relationship arrangements other than traditional monogamy (e.g., polyamory) or marginalized sexual practices, such as BDSM. This contributes to a paucity of research on women who are queer or lesbian (e.g., Gergen, 1990) and sexual practices that may not be mainstream.

**Missing accounts.** The women's interviews included accounts about very private matters, and the interviews were richly detailed. They shared with me their sexual practices, the rules they follow when having casual sex or sex with strangers (e.g., no anal sex in an initial encounter), and painful experiences of sexual violence. This speaks to their comfort with the subject matter and with me. No participant commented on the sensitive nature of the questions, or spoke about feeling uncomfortable with some of the questions, nor did they demonstrate strong adverse emotional reactions. Perhaps the most important index of the participants' reactions to the interview was their willingness to recommend the study to their friends. The majority of the women referred friends and acquaintances and shared the study notice among their networks.

Nevertheless, there were notable omissions from women's accounts, and women's sexual subjectivities were restricted in particular ways. Despite the women's talk about the importance of being sexually open and exploratory, women's accounts of good sex were framed in resolutely heteronormative terms. They focused on the male body, and a very specific understanding of real sex as penis-in-vagina intercourse. Also, their accounts centred on a finite menu of skills and the pursuit of a particular goal—the achievement and exchange of orgasm. They said little about their own bodies, and women's genitalia were essentially rendered invisible in the conversation about sex, i.e., across all the interviews the word vagina was mentioned only three times. Furthermore, rarely did they position themselves as responsible for the success of their good sexual encounters.

There are a few possible explanations for this. First, I did not inquire about the women's bodies or challenge them about their role in creating a successful sexual encounter. I designed the interview guide to be open-ended and allow the participants to raise topics. I adopted a similar approach in asking questions during the interview; my aim was to be responsive to my participants and facilitate their constructions of sexual experience. Nevertheless, these omissions point to the force of the sexological and male sexual drive discourses in shaping participants' understandings of sex as well as my own. Second, these sorts of omissions may be in accordance

with social convention and the “unspeakability” of certain subjects, that is, the challenge of discussing bodily and sexual pleasures in everyday conversation, including in research interviews with a stranger.

A final limitation of this study was the absence of conversation related to women’s accounts of sexual violence. In total, five of the participants—roughly a quarter of the sample—raised the topic of past sexual abuse and intimate partner violence, including sexual, physical, and emotional abuse. In particular, two of the women described having survived multiple rapes in their youth and early adulthood. These findings are not unusual given the pervasiveness of coercive and sexual violence aimed at Canadian women (e.g., Benoit, Shumka, Phillips, Kennedy, & Belle-Isle, 2014). While the women raised these topics in the interviews, elaborated accounts were absent. This was a consequence of my following the advice of the University of Calgary Conjoint Ethics Review Board to not include questions on this topic in the interview and to not inquire into such matters during the interview. Only one question in the interview guide left open the possibility for participants to raise the subject themselves, “Have you ever had a sexual experience that you considered unfulfilling or unpleasant? Please tell me about it” (see Appendix B). Thus, the unspeakability of certain topics in research interviews about women’s everyday sexual lives was produced through a discourse of ethics that is formalised in institutional practices.

Nevertheless, each of the five women volunteered the information, and did so at various points of the conversation. Most employed these accounts as brief points of explanation in relation to other matters, such as explaining the reasons for leaving previous relationships. In the case of the two women who were survivors of rape, they mentioned these to explain how sex is different in midlife compared to earlier in life. For example, Emma stated, “I was very rigid with sex, and I was very ashamed of my body, and I was-. I detested it. [...] I’m in total comfort with my body now” (lines 700-703). The other participant, Elizabeth, drew on her history of sexual violence to account for her disinterest in pursuing a romantic and sexual relationship at this stage of her life (i.e., “Because people, I think, they don’t get why I don’t care,” line 1451-1452). Only one of the participants became visibly upset during these exchanges. In this case, as well as the others, I took my cues from the participants, empathized, and allowed her to direct the conversation without my interruption. She did not require assistance from me in the moment, nor did I receive emails subsequent to the interview. In the debriefing letter given to participants at

the close of the interview, I provided information about public counselling services centers in their respective cities where women would be able to receive speak to a professional about relationship problem or a problem of a sexual nature (see Appendix D).

**Data collection.** Conducting focus groups with a few women may have provided a different kind of talk and hence different conclusions. Focus groups are appropriate for discourse analysis and have been under-used in psychology research. They are particularly useful in providing in-depth explorations of a topic about which little is known and serve to elicit various, often conflicting, cultural discourses relating to a topic. As well, they provide a conversational context for exploring how these discourses are utilized and negotiated by participants, as well as how consensus may be achieved through discussion in the group context (Crossley, 2002; Willig, 2008). Through group interaction, the interviewees and the moderator co-construct meaning as they comment on one another's contributions and consider their own views in the context of the views of others (Crossley, 2002; Wilkinson, 1998). It is also possible to analyse the ways in which participants justify their positions, and how they may be persuaded by others to change their views. Study participants are considered to be performing particular social actions in the course of the interview and not simply recalling information or experiences that they already have had (Crossley, 2002). Focus groups have been successfully employed in studies that have explored sensitive and "high-involvement" topics in the areas of health (e.g., breast cancer; Wilkinson, 1998), romantic relationships, the body and sexuality (Crossley, 2002; Hyde, Howlett, Brady, & Drennan, 2005; Wight, 1994). The group setting of focus groups might also set the stage for consciousness-raising and information sharing opportunities among the women. Thus, although the one-on-one interviews in this study provided rich data, focus groups might have produced even richer data.

**7.4.3 Future research.** As already noted, studies of this kind are inevitably limited by the researcher's interests, e.g., the specific questions asked. In hindsight, i.e., from the vantage point of having analysed the interviews, I can now see a number of topics that I did not address that might be useful avenues for future research in the Canadian context. I mention this, not to criticise my interviewing technique—after all, the interviews were lengthy, richly detailed, and covered interesting ground. Also, as is common in qualitative approaches, I wanted to give the participants the opportunity to speak about their concerns and to encourage them to challenge

and resist my constructions and positioning of them. Thus, the resulting omissions can be understood as opportunities to ask new questions about the sexual lives of single women.

The present study represents one exploration of midlife single women's constructions of their sexual lives, and there is need for expanding upon the research. Many of the conclusions about women's sexuality in midlife have been based on women who fit a rather narrow profile (e.g., women who are White, heterosexual) resulting in a paucity of studies of women at midlife who are lesbian, for example. It is not clear whether same-sex attracted women construct accounts of sex and relationships in the same way. In addition, the research has yielded developmental theories that focus on women's biology (i.e., childbirth, child-rearing, empty nest, etc.). As such, there is an ongoing need for research that considers women's varying circumstances at midlife, as with the women in the present study. Thus, a future direction that would extend my research could be to intentionally recruit more diverse women (i.e., cis- and transgender), who are at later-midlife and older ages (i.e., single women older than 50 years), have diverse sexual orientations (e.g., bisexual, lesbian), and are living in a variety of relationship arrangements. Extending the study in this way would allow for tracking how discourses of sex and sexual relationships are taken up across diverse groups, but also the variety of concerns about sexuality that are produced in different social locations. Also, now that same-sex relationships are growing evermore accepted in Canada, a study of "sex talk" among single women at midlife who identify as lesbian, for example, could explore how they position themselves in relation to discourses of (hetero)sex and marriage and family.

A second area for future study could be to explore single-at-midlife women's experience of sexual coercion. Previous research has documented the sexual double standard that shapes men's and women's sexual relationships and positions women as passive objects of male sexual desire (e.g., Bogle, 2008; Glenn & Marquardt 2001; Sieg, 2007). Indeed, prior research has identified possible "dangers" for women that are associated with these heterosexual discourses. For example, Sue Jackson (2001) has argued that the focus on women's passivity and submissiveness within the traditional heterosexual romance discourse can result in adolescent and young women's vulnerability to abuse. As well, a growing body of research has established a link between the discourse of "normal heterosexuality" and the pervasive experience of sexual compliance (i.e., willingly engaging in unwanted sexual activity; Impett & Peplau, 2003) and sexual coercion (i.e., non-violent pressure to engage in sexual activity, interpersonal violence,



and date rape; Hird & Jackson, 2001; Jackson et al., 2000; McHugh, 2006). There has been little research attending to midlife and older single women's accounts of sexual coercion, perhaps reflecting an assumption that they do not face such problems at this stage of their lives. A qualitative approach to this research, and a discourse analytic approach specifically, would be sensitive to the social and cultural context that shapes the meanings of sexuality and sexual practices.

Finally, throughout the interviews, the participants commonly adopted a “female gaze” in evaluating and constructing men as commodities to the exclusion of their own bodies. As I previously described, I did not ask questions related to the women's bodies or challenge them about their role in creating a successful sexual encounter. Given that the women rarely positioned themselves as responsible for the success of their good sexual encounters, it would be interesting to explore women's “sexual bodies.” These sorts of omissions have been mentioned in the literature on young women—adolescent and young women have repeatedly been described in the psychology literature as not regarding their bodies as sites of pleasure (e.g., Holland, et al., 2004). The midlife women who participated in my study only talked about their bodies in the context of making them sexually attractive to men. Thus, it seems that there is room for fruitful exploration of women's bodies as sites of sexual pleasure and as producing sexual pleasure.

## **7.5 Conclusion**

In this study, I set out to explore the culturally-bound discourses of (hetero)sexuality that were available to midlife, single Canadian women as they accounted for their sexual experiences while alone. Given the lack of existing work on this topic, this research provides important insights into the sexual subjectivities of this cohort. It reinforces recent research on the sexual subjectivities of midlife and older women, which has highlighted the diversity and complexity of women's experiences while challenging simplistic representations of sex in midlife life (e.g., Fileborn et al., 2015; Hinchliff & Gott, 2008). The main contribution of this research lies in the explication of how the women drew on discourses relating to (hetero)sex in their accounts of sexual practices and relationships. My participants both challenged and reproduced a range of discourses relating to (hetero)sex, gender, and aging, showing how midlife single women negotiate and respond to these discourses in complex, and often contradictory, ways. Sexual relationships are sites of tension for midlife single women, as they are both required to be sexual

(i.e., compulsory sexuality applies) and justify engaging in sexual practices outside committed relationships to avoid being positioned as promiscuous women. They drew on two emerging discourses, caring sex and New Age spirituality, that positioned them as sexual women, but importantly as moral women, who only engage in (hetero)sex when there is connection, mutuality, and a feeling of intimacy with their sexual partners.

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# Volunteers Needed for Psychology Study

## Single Women at Midlife & Sexuality



Department of Psychology, University of Calgary

We are interested in learning about midlife women's perspectives on their intimate relationships with men and their sexuality. Your involvement in this study will help us to better understand the lives and everyday experience of the midlife single woman in Canada.

### **Eligibility**

To participate in the study you must be:

- Between the ages of 35 & 50
- Have not been married or living in a common-law relationship for the previous five years

If you want to know more about the study or if you want to participate, please contact us:

Phone: [Phone number]

E-mail: [Email]

All interviews will be kept confidential.

This study has been approved by the  
University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board



## Appendix B: Participant Interview Guide

This study explores the sexual lives of single, midlife women. I am interested in what you, as a single, midlife woman, think about sex, specifically in the context of heterosexual relationships. I am interested in how sex fits into your life, and, if you have had relationships with men, how sex fits into your heterosexual relationships. I thought we could begin by talking about relationships with men, how they start, how they develop, and how sex fits into those relationships. Then, I'd like to move to questions about the experience of sex at midlife. Let's begin then by talking about how you usually meet men and the kinds of relationships women like you have with men.

### *Meeting Men & Forming Relationships*

- How do you usually meet men?
- Tell me about the last time you met someone?
- Is this usually the way it happens?
- Are you comfortable doing it this way?

### *'Rules' for Sexual Relationships*

- How does sex fit into your relationships with men?
- How has the sex been initiated? How did it compare to what you expected/desired it to be?
- Are there any dos & don'ts about sex in these relationships?
- What makes it possible for you to initiate sex? What makes it possible for you to ask for what you want in a sexual relationship?

### *Women's Sexual Experience*

- Are there any issues relating to relationships and sexuality that relate specifically to single women at midlife? [Prompt: How do they compare to non-single women or to women who are not at midlife?]
- What makes a sexual experience fulfilling or unfulfilling?
- What makes for a good sexual experience? [Prompts: When sex is good, what makes it good? When sex is bad, what makes it bad?]
- When you are in a sexual relationship, how comfortable do you feel asking for what you want or what you like?

### *Potential Variability in Sexual Experiences*

- How do your sexual experiences at this point in life compare with those at other times in your life? [Prompts: Has anything changed?]
- How does being in a long-term relationship or not change your experience of sex?
- How do changing bodies (yours and your sexual partners) affect your sexual experience?

### *Sex & Singleness*

- *Sex and the City* was a popular sit-com that portrayed the sexuality of single women in particular ways that single women may or may not identify with. What assumptions do you think other people (i.e., friends, relatives, acquaintances, strangers) make about your sex life as a single woman?
- When you don't have a sexual partner, how do you think about or experience your sexuality?
- Do you consider yourself to be celibate?
- How do you express your sexuality?

### *Healthy & Safe Sex*

- What about "safe sex"? How does that affect sexual relationships for single women?
- Have you ever had a sexual experience that you considered unfulfilling or unpleasant? Please tell me about it.
- When you think about sexual health, what comes to mind?
- Are there things that you (or other single, midlife women you know) do to stay sexually healthy?

## Appendix C: Consent Form



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### Informed Consent

Project: Single at midlife women and their accounts of their sexual lives

Date: [Date]

---

Researcher:

[Name]

Contact: [Phone number]; [E-mail address]

Supervisor:

[Name]

Contact: [Phone number]; [E-mail address]

---

This consent form, a copy of which has been given to you, is only part of the process of informed consent. If you want more details about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

The *University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board* has approved this research study.

#### *Purpose of this study*

We are interested in learning about midlife single women's dating and sexual relationships with men. This project arose because even though single women make up a growing segment of the population, there has been little research focusing on the unique lives and experiences of single women, particularly as they mature and grow into middle and older ages. In particular, very little research relating to women's experience and perceptions of singleness has addressed their sexual relationships and sexual health. As a result, we know relatively little about this topic, particularly in Canada where there have been few prior studies. The goal of this study is to explore how single women at mid-life understand their relationships with men and their sexual lives.

#### *What will I be asked to do?*

Participation in this study will involve answering interview questions over a one- to two-hour period. The interview will consist of two parts: 1) background questions about yourself, including your age, ethnicity, and education; and 2) questions regarding your sexual life as a single woman and your perspectives on your sexual relationships at this point of your life. I will ask questions about how you and other women like you commonly meet and form relationships with men, do's and don'ts of sexual relationships, issues relating to sexual relationships of single women (e.g., good versus bad experiences), aging and sex, and sexual health. I will begin with an opening question, i.e., 'How do you usually meet men?', and I will ask follow up questions. The interview will be recorded so that we have a reliable record of your conversation. The interview will be recorded so that we have a reliable record of your answers to the questions.

*Are there risks or benefits if I participate?*

There are no known risks to you associated with your participation in this study, although the interview questions ask about your personal life and intimate relationships. However, you can refrain from answering any questions that you prefer not to answer. If at any time during the interview you become upset, you can stop the interview. At the end of our interview, I will give you a list of community services that offer free and confidential information and assistance regarding relationship problems and issues of sexual nature.

*Will I benefit if I take part?*

Your participation in this study will help us to better understand the lives of women who are living as singles, particularly as they move into their middle years, and when we make this knowledge publicly available, you may find it useful as well. Furthermore, most people enjoy participating in interviews about their lives as it gives them an opportunity to reflect on the past, present and future. You may find your participation beneficial in this way.

If you were recruited through the Department of Psychology's Research Participant System (RPS), you will receive course credits in appreciation of your participation in this study. According to the Department's policy, you will receive 0.5 credits for every 30 minutes of participation.

Alternatively, if you were recruited from the community and are not a student in the Department of Psychology, you will receive a \$10 gift card (i.e., Starbucks) in appreciation of your time.

*Do I have to participate?*

You are not required to take part in the study—your participation is completely voluntary—and you have the right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Furthermore, you are free to not answer any question you do not want to answer. If you decide to withdraw from the study, the sound file will be deleted and your data will not be used in the analysis.

*What happens to the information I provide?*

In order to ensure your privacy, the investigator will ask you to choose a pseudonym (false name). As well, the sound files from the interview will be stored in a password-protected computer, and in password-protected computer folders. The interview will be transcribed by a researcher or a research assistant/transcriptionist, and the transcribed document will be stored as

a locked password-protected computer file. In the transcriptions, we will replace any references to names or places (and will of course use your pseudonym to refer to you) so anyone reading the transcript will not be able to identify you or the people you may mention. The transcripts and sound files will be kept for five years after the project is closed. After this five-year period, the sound files and transcripts will be destroyed. Only myself, the transcriptionist, and my supervisor, [Name], will have access to the sound files and the complete transcripts.

Mainly, your background information and the transcript from the interview will be used in my doctoral research project, which I must complete to satisfy the requirements of a PhD in Social Psychology. Secondly, I will also report on this research at scientific conferences and publish one or more articles in scientific journals. In the research reports and presentations that result from this research, background information will be presented in the form of a summary of all the participants' responses. In the research reports and presentations that result from this research, background information will be presented in the form of a summary of all the participants' responses. We will use quotes from individual interviews as well, but if we draw from your interview, we will use your pseudonym and omit or change anything that might allow others to identify you.

*If I suffer a research-related injury, will I be compensated?*

Not applicable.

#### Questions/Concerns

If you have any further questions or want clarification regarding this research and/or your participation please contact:

[Name]  
Department of Psychology  
University of Calgary  
Tel: [Phone number]  
E-mail: [E-mail address]

#### *For RPS Participants Only*

In signing this form you fully understand that you are participating in this study as part of your educational experience in the Department of Psychology. If you feel that you have not gained sufficient educational benefit, or have other concerns regarding this experience, you may register your concerns with Dr. Tavis Campbell (Chair, Department of Psychology REB – [Phone number], [E-mail address]) and he will ensure that your comments are acted upon with no fear that you will be identified personally.

#### *For All Participants*

If you have any concerns about the way you have been treated as a participant, please contact: Russell Burrows, Senior Ethics Resource Officer at [Phone number] or [E-mail address].

A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference. The investigator has kept a copy of the consent form.

## Written Consent

Your signature on this form indicates that you: 1) understand to your satisfaction the information provided to you about your participation in this research project; and, 2) agree to participate as a research subject.

In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the investigators, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from this research project at any time. You should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

Participant's Name (print): \_\_\_\_\_

Participant's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Name (print): \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix D: Debriefing Letter



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### Study Information

Project: Single at mid-life: A discourse analysis

Date: [DATE]

---

Researcher:

[Name]

Contact: [Phone number]; [E-mail address]

Supervisor:

[Name]

Contact: [Phone number]; [E-mail address]

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I am interested in learning about the lives of women who are single at midlife, and their dating and sexual relationships with men.

This project arose because since the 1970s, the number of single women—i.e., women who have never married or are widowed, divorced, and living alone—has grown dramatically in Canada, the United States, and in other industrialized countries. Various changing social norms and demographic trends of recent decades have contributed to the rising numbers of single women, e.g., women's massive incorporation into the workforce, delayed first marriages, the increase in cohabitation, rising divorce rates, and women's age of death compared with that of men (World Health Organisation, 2003). Now, probably for the first time, more women are living without a partner than with one.

At the same time, women's assertion of control over their own bodies has also changed modern relationships. Today, neither breaking up with a spouse, nor remaining single necessarily means settling for a life of unwanted sexual abstinence. Rather than settling down, great numbers of young women can delay marriage and indulge in the opportunities afforded by easy access to contraception and freedom from family supervision. The same freedom is given to midlife and older women who need not marry or remarry after a divorce or loss of a spouse. This permissiveness around sexual experimentation is an important feature of single life and living

alone. Single life yields the time and space to explore various relationship forms and a diverse sexual life.

However, even though single women make up a growing segment of the North American population, there has been little research focusing on the unique lives and experiences of single women, particularly as they mature and grow into middle and older ages. Also, very little of the current social science research relating to women's experience and perceptions of singleness have addressed their sexual relationships and their sexual health. Because of this we know relatively little about this particular segment of society, particularly in Canada where there have been few prior studies on this group.

Some of the popular media have picked up on the growing number of single women, and there is now a small collection of articles regarding singleness and single women's lives. Eric Klinenberg's book, *Going Solo: The Extraordinary Rise and Surprising Appeal of Living Alone* presents the rise of singleness and solo living as representing the most significant demographic change since the "Baby Boom." In addition, people have been writing about single women specifically. For example, Kate Bolick wrote, *All the Single Ladies for The Atlantic Monthly* (2012). Lori Gottlieb also wrote, *Marry him! The Case for Settling for Mr. Good Enough* for the same magazine (2008), and has since written a popular book of the same name. However, this interest in singleness and single women in the popular media has not been matched in the academic literature, and few studies on the topic of singleness and single women. In addition, since Helen Gurley Brown wrote her best selling manual for single women, *Sex and the Single Girl* (1962), there has been little serious attention given to single women and their sexual lives in both the popular and social science literature (Trimberger, 2005).

While women are moving in and out of romantic relationships and re-experiencing singleness at midlife, either through separation, divorce, or widowhood, there has been very little exploration of their perspectives on sexuality at this point in life. Most social science research explores midlife women's sexuality only within the confines of a monogamous romantic relationship, i.e., marriage, ignoring how such women negotiate the beginnings of dating relationships or how they get their sexual needs met, either while alone or in a new dating relationship. Related to this, there is little research on how midlife women maintain sexual health and manage sexual health risks. In addition, when midlife women's sexuality is studied at all, it is in terms of aging bodies and menopause, which creates a perspective on sex as either "functioning" or not. The everyday experiences that shape women's understanding of their sexuality tend to get ignored.

Given these gaps and limitations in the social science literature, the goal of this study is to explore single-at-midlife women's relationships with men and their sexual lives. Your participation in this study is greatly appreciated. If you'd be interested in obtaining a copy of the results once the study is complete, you may contact the primary researcher, Jennifer Moore at [E-mail address] and [Phone number]. If you have a more general interest in this area of research, you may also wish to consult the following references relating to singleness, midlife single women, and solo living:

Brown, H. G. (1962). *Sex and the single girl*. New York, NY: Random House.

David, K. (Producer), & Cove, M. (Director). (2008). *Seeking Happily Ever After* [Motion picture] (<http://seekinghappilyeverafter.com/index.html>). United States: SHEA Productions & Lucky Crow Films.



- DePaulo, B. (2006). *Singled out: How singles are stereotyped, stigmatised, and ignored, and still live happily ever after*. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press.
- Gottlieb, L. (2010). *Marry him! The case for settling for Mr. Good Enough*. New York, NY: Dutton.
- Klinenberg, E. (2012). *Going solo: The extraordinary rise and surprising appeal of living alone*. New York, NY: Penguin.
- Trimberger, E. K. (2005). *The new single woman*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Watters, E. (2003). *Urban tribes: A generation redefines friendship, family, and commitment*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury.

Thank you very much for your participation!