The `Fair Deal'? Unpacking Accounts of Reciprocity in Heterosex
Virginia Braun, Nicola Gavey and Kathryn McPhillips
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Abstract  Reciprocity is a basic premise of egalitarian relationships, and is typically depicted as a 'good thing' within heterosexual sex and relationships. Here we examine a discourse of reciprocity – articulated as orgasm for both partners – evident in accounts of heterosex collected from 15 heterosexual women and 15 men. We argue that notions of reciprocity are not necessarily as liberatory as they might seem, as they do not occur in a social or sexual vacuum. In conjunction with other dominant sexual meanings, a discourse of reciprocity produces entitlements and obligations that can render 'choice' in heterosex problematic, particularly for women.

Keywords  coital imperative, discourse, heterosex, orgasm, reciprocity

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Male concern that their partners experience orgasm may signal the development of more egalitarian and reciprocal sexual standards. On the other hand, the anxious question, ‘Did you come?’ may demarcate a new area of woman’s behavior men are expected to master and control – female orgasm. (Vance, 1984, p. 12)

For many sex researchers today, it is a truism to say that ‘sex is not a natural act’ (Tiefer, 1995). Rather, sex is understood to be socioculturally produced. This includes what counts as ‘sex’, where, when, and with whom one has sex, as well as the meanings attributed to, and the experience of, sex. Within an understanding of sexuality informed, in particular,
by poststructuralist theorizing, we can see heterosex practices, and accounts of these, as being produced and taking place within a social context shaped by competing discourses of heterosexuality. Such discourses are seen to enable, and limit the possibilities of, material-discursive practices (such as two bodies engaging in sexual activities).

Wendy Hollway (1984, 1989) identified three overarching discourses in accounts of heterosexual sex and relating: (i) a male sexual drive discourse, which proffers a natural, biological sexual drive in men, and where men, once aroused, are seen to need sexual satisfaction (orgasm); (ii) a have/hold discourse, where sex is only a small part of a much larger monogamous relational context, and where women act almost as gatekeepers of male sexuality (a traditional romance ideal); and (iii) a permissive discourse, in which sexual activity is good and right for both men and women, and anything goes, as long as no one gets hurt. This permissive discourse can be associated with libertarian ideals and ethics. A libertarian ethic of sexuality, whereby sex is constructed as legitimately to do with pleasure became evident in the sex manuals in the 1960s and 1970s (e.g. Seidman, 1989), marking a notable cultural shift.

These discourses appear to remain influential in constructing (contradictory) ideas about, and practices of, heterosex in the West. Thus we still have ideas about men’s inherent sex drive, that must be sated, while women have little or none, and need to be loved and cherished – had and held – (e.g. John Gray’s Mars and Venus works draw on these discourses, see Potts, 1998, 2002). We also have continual bombardment (e.g. in women’s magazines) of the idea that sex and sexual pleasure are good, and everybody’s right, and that women are as entitled to orgasms as men have been.

Of course, heterosexual practice is not only exclusively influenced by discourses of (hetero)sexuality, but also by other wider cultural values and discourses. One important norm of social life that has been identified within anthropology and social psychology is the principle of reciprocity (e.g. Gouldner, 1996). According to the Oxford English Dictionary (1989), reciprocity means a ‘relationship in which there is mutual action, influence, giving and taking . . . between two parties’ (vol. XIII, p. 330). In this article, we aim to identify how a discourse of reciprocity is articulated in accounts of heterosex and heterosexual relating, and discuss the effects such a discourse might have in practice.

Reciprocity in heterosex

On the surface, reciprocal heterosex sounds like a good thing, and it is not hard to find socio-cultural evidence of a discourse promoting reciprocal (or equitable, mutual)1 heterosex. In the quotation at the start of the article,
Vance positioned ‘egalitarian and reciprocal sexual standards’ (1984: 12) in opposition to control and mastery, and thus as implicitly desirable. It has been claimed that sex should be a mutual event (Sanders, 1988), with moral boundaries that are ‘defined by the presence of certain formal conditions in the interpersonal context, for example, consent, reciprocity and respect’ (Seidman, 1989: 311). Seidman identified an ethic for sexuality based around ‘whether the erotic exchange is consensual, reciprocal in its pleasures, caring, and involves mutual respect and responsibility’ (1989: 295). This discourse of reciprocity is also evident in accounts of ‘bad sex’: ‘sex . . . had just become a robot-like sequence of movements, a reflex activity without reciprocity or mutuality’ (Giovacchini, 1979: 268).

Various sexual practices have been described, evaluated, or repackaged in terms of some concept of reciprocity. Writing of the ‘increase’ in oral sex in the 1970s, Ehrenreich, Hess and Jacobs (1986: 81) commented: ‘oral sex seemed to offer the possibility of making heterosexual sex more reciprocal and egalitarian: Either partner could do it, and either could, presumably, enjoy it’. Our Bodies Ourselves (The Boston Women’s Health Book Collective, 1992: 219) advises women to: ‘think of intercourse as reciprocal – you open up to enclose him warmly, you surround him powerfully and he penetrates you’.

A discourse of reciprocity is also evident in writing about heterosexual relating, more broadly. Wendy Hollway (1993: 413) described heterosexual feminists who were ‘trying to engage in intimate relationships based on mutuality and reciprocity’. Reciprocity is also evident in the (less feminist) discourse of romantic love (Warr, 2001). In relation to long-term relationships or marriage, ‘women’s right to sexual satisfaction . . . to experience orgasm’ (Gordon, 1971: 68) became widespread in marital sex advice in the 1920s and 1930s, allowing, and even promoting, the possibility of sexual reciprocity. Subsequent social psychological concepts like equity theory (Adams, 1965) are premised on some form of reciprocity (e.g. Goodman, 1999; also Rosenbluth et al., 1998; Sanders, 1988). Adams noted a ‘deliberate effort to match outcomes, to give equal value for value received’ (1965: 278). Within relationships, ‘balanced, equitable relationships are definitely the preferred type’ (Goodman, 1999: 342). Hare-Mustin (1991, 1994) discussed a ‘marriage between equals’ discourse, arguing that ‘for many women it is important to perceive the marital relationship as equal and reciprocal and not to perceive themselves as subordinate’ (1991: 52). Hare-Mustin (1994) made the point that such a discourse can work to conceal relations of actual inequality.

The desirability of reciprocity or equality in sexual relating is also evident in (radical) feminist critiques of heterosex (e.g. Dworkin, 1987; Jeffrey, 1990; Kitzinger, 1994; MacKinnon, 1987), in which heterosexuality and heterosexual relationships are identified as a primary site of the oppression
of women, and in which ‘heterosexual desire is eroticized power difference’ (Jeffreys, 1990: 299). Diprose (1998: 13) argued that such radical feminist ‘safe sex discourse’ is characterized by an ‘ideal of mutual exchange between equals’. It is also evident in descriptions of ‘feminist visions of equality’ (Rowland, 1996: 80) for (lesbian, but also heterosexual, Jackson, 1996) sex and relationships, and in the promotion of ‘homosexual desire’ as the ‘eroticising of sameness, a sameness of power, equality and mutuality’ (Jeffreys, 1990: 301).2

The most pertinent examination of reciprocity in heterosex came in Gilfoyle, Wilson and Brown’s discussion of the ‘pseudo-reciprocal gift discourse’.3 The central proposition of this discourse is that:

Men require heterosexual sex to satisfy their sexual urges (corresponding to the male sex-drive discourse). However, in order to do so, this discourse relies on men viewing women as passive receptacles who must relinquish all control over their bodies, in ‘giving’ themselves, or in ‘giving’ sex to their male partners. In return, the man must try to please the woman, which entails, in most cases, trying to ‘give’ the woman an orgasm. (Gilfoyle et al., 1992: 217–18)

Although not discussed within such a framework, the notion of a pseudo-reciprocal gift, or of the giving and taking that constitutes reciprocity, draws on a much broader theorization of gifting, exchange and reciprocity (e.g. Mauss, 1989; Panoff, 1970). The individual is seen to enter into a ‘system of complex social relationships . . . through the acts of giving and receiving’ (Tober, 2001: 140), and gift exchange has been described as ‘the cement of social relationships’ (Komter, 1996a: 3). Reciprocity has been a central concept in writing about ‘the gift’ (e.g. Gouldner, 1996; Lévi-Strauss, 1996; Schwartz, 1996), with assertions that ‘a norm of reciprocity is universal’ (Gouldner, 1996: 59). A norm of reciprocity is typically seen to produce an obligation to respond in turn, if the receiver is able.

The gendered nature of gifting has also been observed – women tend to give more gifts than men (Komter, 1996b). In the context of their data, Gilfoyle et al. argued for profoundly unequal ‘givings’, based around gender:

Positioned in this discourse, women are seen as the object who is both ‘given away’ and ‘given to’; while men, on the other hand, are seen as the subject, maintaining their dominance by both being the recipient of the woman and conferring on the object (woman) the gift of pleasure or orgasm. (Gilfoyle et al., 1992: 218)4

Within their interpretation, the positions the pseudo-reciprocal gift discourse offers up for women are just as problematic as any others – despite the promise of pleasure. Men are positioned as active, as agents, giving and taking pleasure. Part of the problem, therefore, is what is seen to be a lack of ‘real’ reciprocity.
We are in agreement with much of Gilfoyle et al.’s (1992) critique of heterosex, but argue, based on our interview material, for a more nuanced reading of the possibilities a discourse of reciprocity offers in relation to heterosex. The effects of a discourse of reciprocity are more complex than simply continuing to enable men and disable women within a sexual encounter. We are interested in the ways a discourse of reciprocity can function, on its own and in conjunction with other discourses, to promote certain ‘norms’ for heterosex.

Details of the study

Our analysis is based on interviews with 15 women and 15 men, all of whom had had experience of heterosex, and most of whom were currently in heterosexual relationships. Participants were all Pakeha (non-Maori New Zealanders of European descent), and were mostly tertiary educated. In this sense, they ‘matched’ the social location of the researchers to some degree. However, they covered a wide range of ages (from 18–50 years), and had a variety of work, parenthood, and relationship histories and situations. They were recruited primarily by word of mouth and snowballing, to talk about ‘some of their experiences and thoughts about heterosexual sex’.

Interviews with women were conducted by KM or NG. Interviews with men were conducted by Tim McCreanor, Chris Dyson, and a third male interviewer (who chose to remain anonymous to protect the anonymity of participants), who were hired specifically to conduct these interviews. Interviews, which were semi-structured, lasted between 45 minutes and one-and-a-half hours. They were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim, including hesitations and speech repetitions. In presenting interview extracts, participants have been given a number (preceded by an M for men and a W for women). Data were analysed using a form of discourse analysis influenced primarily by (feminist) poststructuralist theories of language (e.g. Gavey, 1989; Weedon, 1997).

The theoretical position informing our research practice assumes that participants’ and interviewers’ talk can be taken as illustrative of the range of discourses circulating in a particular place, time, and culture. Moreover, consistent with poststructuralist theories of language, we assume that language and discourse constitute meaning, and hence particular discourses enable and constrain people’s options for how to be and act in the social world. As cultural (discursive) resources for sense-making, which are manifest in and created through talk, are understood to be crucial to the possibilities for various forms of social life, analysing the ways in which sex is talked about helps to make sense of how cultural imperatives may be silently upheld, and to highlight ways in which they may be potentially disrupted and resisted.
Our focus is on the discursive resources evident in people’s talk about their sexual relationships and their sexual practices. What people tell us about their sex lives in interviews will always be partial accounts, and ones that are likely to reflect socio-culturally acceptable versions of heterosex. We make no claim that what participants tell us is always a faithful rendition of the material practices they engage in – this would of course be impossible to satisfactorily verify. However, we assume that discourses constrain and enable practice, and, therefore, that the ways sex is represented to us have implications for sex as it happens on a material level.

Participant accounts of heterosex

In relation to our interview material, and our theorizing of the meaning of a discourse of reciprocity, we will outline and discuss a number of themes: (a) reported patterns of sex to orgasm; (b) the coital imperative; (c) the conflation of male orgasm with coitus; (d) reciprocity in accounts of heterosex; and (e) the meanings of non-reciprocal sex. We will cover the first three only briefly in this article (see Gavey et al., 1999; McPhillips et al., 2001 for a broader discussion of these and other points), as they are only necessary as a background to our analysis of the potential meanings of a discourse of reciprocity.

Patterns of sex to orgasm

Accounts of heterosexual activity have typically reported sex to be highly patterned. Script theorists have described a sequence of material events: ‘kissing, tongue kissing, manual and oral caressing of the body, particularly the female breasts, manual and oral contacts with both the female and male genitalia, usually in this sequence, followed by intercourse in a number of positions’ (Gagnon and Simon, 1987: 2). Coitus (and presumably [male] orgasm, which isn’t mentioned) is the endpoint in this sequence. The pattern forms a cultural resource for how (hetero)sex happens, and this was evident in our data.

Although participants described a wide range of sexual practices, a particular ‘pattern’ was identified in many accounts, and seemed to form a common-sense version of how heterosex happens. This typically involved a range of sexual activities leading to female orgasm first (through cunnilingus or other stimulation by the male), followed by coitus and male orgasm:

**M11:** usually she will come first, I go down on her and then later I’ll come inside her.

**W15:** a pattern for us seems to be, we’ve sort of worked it out, um what usually happens is we’ll sort of you know kiss and cuddle and touch
each other and stuff and then often like he’ll give me oral sex and I’ll have an orgasm and then we’ll have penetrative sex and he’ll have an orgasm and that’s the way it works.

The way these activities were described, as in these two extracts, often represented her orgasm as something that she had as a result of what he did or gave her. In contrast, his orgasm, achieved through intercourse, was not typically framed as her giving – instead, it was something ‘we’ did together, or about where his orgasm took place. In these accounts, the man is represented as more active in the production of orgasm – both hers and his own – than is the woman. In this way, it is a subtle account of the relative passivity traditionally expected of women in heterosex (e.g. see Gavey and McPhillips, 1999; Gilfoyle et al., 1992).

The coital imperative

This description of male orgasm through penetration reflects a ‘coital imperative’ (Jackson, 1984; McPhillips et al., 2001), where coitus is taken as the most natural form of heterosexual activity. A coital imperative is evidenced when ‘sex’ is taken by participants to (really) mean ‘intercourse’ or ‘penetration’ (implying of the vagina, with the penis), and when coitus is still seen as a crucial or inevitable feature in sex – the ‘logical conclusion’ (W13) or the ‘ultimate goal’ (M12). Men’s talk of their ‘desire to penetrate’ (M10) is further evidence of this. That participants also described coitus for men’s orgasms (see previous section) further demonstrated this, as did accounts which challenged the satisfaction that would be achieved through non-coital male orgasms. For instance, M10 claimed that ‘penetration will probably bring better orgasms’. These data, along with coitus being something that it was relatively hard for participants to articulate reasons for having (see Gavey et al., 1999), demonstrate a coital imperative in our participants’ accounts of heterosex.

Men are positioned within a coital imperative discourse to unequivocally desire penetrative forms of sex. In this sense, a coital imperative can be seen as something men possess. (Heterosexual) women are more ambiguously positioned than men within a coital imperative discourse – not necessarily having a coital imperative themselves (although they may) they are nonetheless subject to it through sexual relations with men.

The conflation of male orgasm with coitus

Closely linked to the coital imperative was a conflation of male orgasm with coitus (within heterosex). This was most strongly articulated by one participant:

Int: so, by that I mean y’know either or both of you coming to orgasm without actually having intercourse or engaging in sexual activity in a prolonged sort of way.
M12: sorry coming to orgasm without having sexual intercourse so how would that happen?

Int: by masturbation, rubbing... 

M12: ohh okay all right okay.

In this account, orgasm without coitus is represented as unthinkable through M12’s questioning of the possibility and his request for clarification from the interviewer. The patterning of sexual activity already discussed further demonstrates a conflation of male orgasm and coitus. Male orgasm was reportedly primarily achieved through coitus, which was often, but not exclusively, represented as more about his pleasure or orgasm than hers:

M4: other forms of stimulation to orgasm would be, have been her sexual pleasure. Ah, in terms of the intercourse it was more my pleasure.

Reciprocity

W5: it’s a very much two-way thing in the end (Kathryn: mm) giving to each other all the time.

A discourse of reciprocity is evident in accounts of sex which describe it as about giving and receiving ‘pleasure’: ‘Two people giving one another pleasure’ (M5). This notion of giving and receiving was also evident in talk specifically about coitus:

W15: there’s something incredibly mutual about [intercourse] that you’re giving pleasure and receiving pleasure at the same time and that’s quite a buzz you know.

This pleasure was most frequently articulated as orgasm,\(^5\) so that reciprocity effectively typically meant exchange of orgasms: ‘one for her and one for me’ (M4). The ideal sexual encounter offered up by a discourse of reciprocity, then, requires both partners to orgasm. This appears to articulate a broader cultural ‘orgasm imperative’ whereby orgasm is seen as naturally, inherently good, something everyone should have (Potts, 2000, 2002). However, based on reported patterns of sex, it seems that reciprocity potentially means not only an exchange of orgasms, but more particularly her orgasm in exchange for the promise of his orgasm-through-coitus.

However, simultaneous orgasm was apparently (still) something of a ‘golden standard’ (M4):

W5: um [my partner] usually tries t– to ah he usually likes me to come first (Kathryn: mhm) um and then after that he will come or we might
come together (Kathryn: mhm) but I must admit the times that I the
better times are when we actually really make love and climax together
(Kathryn: mhm) those are very special times

Constituted as ‘special’, simultaneous orgasm has been promoted in sex
manual materials since the early 20th century (Gordon, 1971), frequently
becoming an aspiration in heterosex (Duncombe and Marsden, 1996). It
may constitute an ‘ultimate mutuality’, or be a manifestation of ideal
reciprocity – both partners giving and receiving simultaneously. A few
participants suggested that simultaneous orgasm was the best thing in sex,
because ‘it’s a mutuality in it’ (M15).

In this section, we have mapped out some accounts of sex in which a
discourse of reciprocity is clearly evident. Within this discourse, mutually
reciprocally pleasurable – albeit not necessarily simultaneously pleasurable
– orgasmic sex is constructed as ‘right’ and as desirable. By implication,
instances of ‘non-reciprocal’ sex (i.e. where one person does not have an
orgasm) are portrayed as somehow ‘wrong’ or problematic. Through
examining these, which we do now, we start to see the strength of a
discourse of reciprocity.

Always a ‘pure gift’? The meanings of non-
reciprocal sex

A discourse of reciprocity was perhaps most tellingly evident in accounts
of the meaning or experience of sexual encounters where only one partner
had an orgasm. The following are a number of extracts from a long
sequence from one participant talking about the importance of his
partner’s orgasm, and the meaning of her or him not having an orgasm
during a sexual encounter. Initially, he described the meaning of his
partner’s orgasm:

M4: that was the quid pro quo really. Ah meaning I didn’t, I did not feel
good about the idea of having an orgasm, having um intercourse with
orgasm, with her, if she hadn’t had some orgasms. Um and I mean
I’ve, I’ve felt that as being, that’s been a, a um a part of the internal
deal, I s’pose, I have had um y’know in previous relations as well. Um
like what I mean is in order to feel okay about my having intercourse,
and all, the pleasure of orgasm and so on, in order to feel good about
that, she had to have an orgasm, at least one, as well.

Tim: why?

M4: um, cause if that wasn’t, if that didn’t happen, then I would be using
her. That was then. Some sense of I would be um, yeah, using her.

Tim: so in what sense?
This initial extract illustrates the influence of a discourse of reciprocity. Both partners having an orgasm was described as a ‘quid pro quo’, a ‘fair deal’, an ‘equal exchange’. M4 reported that if his partner did not orgasm (non-reciprocal sex), he felt he was ‘using’ her. He went on to comment that her not orgasming might also mean that he ‘had failed in some way’. He then reiterated that their sex, their ‘exchange’ of orgasms, was ‘fairly strictly in a quid pro quo’ and that:

M4: . . . if she had some orgasms then I, then I deserved one. Almost like a y’know trading thing. It sounds rather clinical.

Tim: it’s um reciprocity.

M4: yeah, reciprocity. When it didn’t, I mean I always, I mean the vast majority of cases were I would, it would work out like that. If I didn’t have an orgasm, suppose we got interrupted or something, I was thinking that sort of situation

Tim: mhm

M4: . . . ah which happened very rarely, but I think if it was something neutral like an interruption

Tim: mm

M4: then um that was, that was kind of neutral. It didn’t, it didn’t carry overtones of, of failure or um, um, cheating or deceit or manipulation or anything like that. It was pretty clean, but. And mostly that was how it was.

In this section, M4 has characterized his orgasm as something he ‘deserves’ if she has had one; the giving and receiving of orgasm characterized as ‘a trading thing’, and reframed as ‘reciprocity’ by Tim. His not having an orgasm reportedly only happened ‘very rarely’. In talking about such situations, he introduced a serious element: of ‘cheating or deceit or manipulation’ on her part. When asked by Tim about these elements, he elaborated:

M4: I was thinking of the situation where she might have um gained some pleasures and and had no intention of having intercourse and somehow connived it, a way out of it, and that didn’t actually happen. That sort of sense of cheating or um –

Tim: (indistinguishable) what sort of –

M4: like, like if, if um I had ah had oral sex with her, and so she had an orgasm or some orgasms and then um con yeah connived I mean it’s,
it just didn’t happen but as far as I can ever recall to, to then not have intercourse.

His account that her having an orgasm and then him not having one ‘just didn’t happen’, perhaps reveals the imperative nature and strength of this ‘internal deal’. The language of cheating, conniving, and manipulation points to the potential difficult positions this discourse can offer women, which we consider in the next section.

Positioned within a discourse of reciprocity, each partner is expected to both receive and give pleasure (in this case orgasm). Looking at these extracts, what does a discourse of reciprocity enable? For her, it enables orgasm, or at least the position from which to expect or seek one. For him, it also enables orgasm (not that this has ever been troubled by dominant discourses of heterosexuality). Further, given men’s apparent desire for coitus, and a conflation of male orgasm with coitus, her orgasm may function as a justification for this desire/activity. And if she does not ‘give’ him one after she has had hers (usually before his), she is reneging on the deal.

These positions can be seen in the following quotations from participants talking about sex which did not follow an ideal ‘reciprocal sex’ pattern:

W6: sometimes of course we wouldn’t, I wouldn’t have an orgasm,
Kathryn: mhm
W6: so at times um we would just head straight into intercourse.
Kathryn: right, and what would make the difference?
W6: and sometimes we might, if I was still feeling that I needed more.
Kathryn: mhm
W6: then at the, after we’d had intercourse I would, you know, say to him ‘come on
Kathryn: right.
W6: (laughs) my turn!’

Within a discourse of reciprocity, orgasm can be claimed by a woman as her right, although it is notable that W6 suggests she has to assert that it is her turn (if she wants it) rather than it being automatic (as intercourse following female orgasm from oral sex or masturbation often appeared to be). This points, perhaps, to some of the limits of a discourse of reciprocity, and suggests that male orgasm continues to signal an end to ‘sex’, while the female orgasm does not appear to be required in the same way, or have the same effect. Various factors might contribute to
this different ‘status’ of male and female orgasm, such that female orgasm remains less essential than male orgasm. First, debates about ‘vaginal orgasm’ still exist, with coitus being constructed as a means of orgasm for both men and women (although for women it is recognized as far from universal). Indeed, some participants constructed coitus as pleasurable for both partners. This might render less imperative non-coital (clitoral) forms of stimulation. Indeed the anxieties expressed by some men seeking viagra in order to sexually satisfy their female partners attests to this possibility (Potts et al., 2001). Second, there is undoubtedly an ongoing influence of the have/hold discourse, which renders women more interested in ‘love’ and men more interested in ‘sex’, and which constructs women as legitimately getting other things (such as love) out of sexual relationships. Reciprocity can, potentially, be centred on these very different ‘receivings’. Given these, women may sometimes need to be assertive in pursuing ‘reciprocal’ orgasm. Women who feel constrained from such actions because they find it difficult to escape the straitjacket of passive female sexuality (Gavey and McPhillips, 1999), and/or to find room for their sexual desire within heterosexual relationships (Holland et al., 1998; Tolman, 1994), may find occasions and relationships in which they don’t receive the ‘gift’ of their partner’s attentions directed towards their pleasure/orgasm.

However, reciprocity does appear to be a powerful discourse around orgasm. Another woman talked about the difference in how she and her partner felt about her not having an orgasm:

W5: . . . and sometimes um I don’t at all. Um that’s fine. It worries him but it’s actually quite fine with me.

Her reassurances that this is ‘fine’ or ‘quite fine’ with her suggests that a discourse of reciprocity operates in such a way that not having an orgasm needs now to be accounted for. Her partner’s reported worries could both reflect sentiments of concern about not ‘giving’, and/or anxieties about ‘male competence’ – which M4 also reported in saying that her not orgasming would mean he had ‘failed’. Female orgasm can be important for men not simply for reciprocity and the importance of the woman’s pleasure, but also as an indicator of performance and his skills as a lover (Duncombe and Marsden, 1996; Mansfield et al., 1992; Roberts et al., 1995). Numerous studies have pointed to the links between male sexuality and performance/competence (e.g. Gilfoyle et al., 1992; Kilmartin, 1999). It also points to how ‘saturated’ heterosexual reciprocity is with unequal status. If a woman’s orgasm is ‘given’ by a man, as it is in the discourse of reciprocity, men stand to gain positive identity positions (sensitive and unselfish) through this discourse. Furthermore, the caring, sensitive man partaking in reciprocal heterosex is also imbued with
‘sexpertise’ (Potts, 1998, 2002) – the competence to know how to meet the complex challenge of producing orgasm in the female body, as well as the more straightforward task of his own orgasm. Women’s ‘gift’, on the other hand, is recognized less as an active gift than as a taken-for-granted expectation. As such, the positive identities to be gained by women through the discourse are less clear (although the negative implications of not participating are clear).

A number of participants described ways in which they felt uncomfortable not being able or willing to reciprocate pleasure:

W3: and there were times when I didn’t feel like [intercourse], and I’d think well you know, that’s as far as I feel like going now and I, I used to question whether that was a bit selfish at times, to sort of to say well ‘I’m tired’, you know, ‘I just’, you know (laughs).

Kathryn: thanks.

W3: but I, I know that um, his orgasm meant s – a lot to me too.

In this account, her orgasm (recounted just prior to this extract) consolidates an expectation that his orgasm will follow (through coitus). If she chooses not to have intercourse, the position available to her is one of being ‘selfish’ or ‘tired’. Kathryn’s ‘thanks’ suggests a common knowledge that such behaviour involves reneging on an implicit bargain. W3’s reiteration of the importance of his orgasm for her, at the end of this extract, repositions her as a ‘good’ sexual partner, concerned with his orgasm as much as her own.

One male participant discussed his experience of only receiving oral sex from a woman (a narrative which, interestingly, contradicts the common representation of fellatio as an ultimate male fantasy), and not having coitus, and why this was difficult for him to enjoy:

M13: it’s a bit like, it’s a power thing, and um, that we’re unequal in the sort of, times that I’ve had sex without intercourse, I remember a woman that didn’t want to have intercourse but was very keen on performing oral sex on me, of course I was right into that, but, but, as it turned out I wasn’t right into that, I wanted, like it was as if she was performing this act on me, and I, I was just receiving and not able to reciprocate.

M13’s reported discomfort with receiving but not giving pleasure arguably partly arises from being positioned within a discourse of reciprocity, but it might also tie into more traditional notions of intercourse as for both partners’ pleasure (and therefore as reciprocal hetero-sex). Further, this discomfort might reflect the ‘passive’ position M13 recounts – a position that is notably different from that traditionally offered by the gendered power dimensions of heterosex.
Finally, a male participant described why he found it ‘difficult’ to only have coitus in a sexual encounter.

M12: I’ve always found it just, difficult just to have [intercourse] for me.

Int: right.

M12: it’s like I’ve always had to, I’ve always had to satisfy the woman. It’s like I’ve always had to give her pleasure really. That’s been my bottom line around sexual experiences in the past.

Here he implies that ‘pleasure’ or ‘satisfaction’ is given to a woman through activities other than intercourse, and therefore for him to have coitus in the absence of performing other such activities would be difficult because it would be reneging on the premise of reciprocity. Like earlier extracts, there are potential links in this account not only to reciprocity, but also to competency and the construction of the ‘good lover’ for (heterosexual) men as someone who performs well, who gives her ‘pleasure’ (e.g. Kilmartin, 1999).

In this section, we have used accounts of non-reciprocal sex to further demonstrate the presence of a discourse of reciprocity around heterosex. In these accounts, sexual practices that fall outside of what would be normative understandings of reciprocal heterosex, are reportedly not straightforward to simply do and enjoy, or have far more serious connotations, in terms of what is offered for women and men (as in M4’s account). So, through looking at participants’ talk about sexual encounters where both partners orgasm (reciprocal sex), and instances where they don’t, or where this is not automatic, we can see that the discourse of reciprocity seems to have a strong influence in how sex can reportedly be engaged in and experienced by these participants, and how sex is represented in these interview settings.

We now turn a more critical focus on this discourse of reciprocity, and ask not only what can it enable, but what can it constrain, for women, in particular. While we recognize that men and women are equally produced within discourses (of heterosex), we focus our attention on women because, as we will argue, the potential drawbacks of this discourse on women are greater than on men, both materially and in terms of subjectivity.

**Unpacking reciprocity**

A discourse of reciprocity in accounts of heterosex offers a man the position of the nice, caring, considerate lover, but not at the expense of his sexual pleasure. A woman is offered a somewhat agentic position, of taking and making pleasures. On one level, we would not want to argue against the deployment of a discourse of reciprocity in relation to
heterosex – indeed, on the surface, it seems to enable sexual practices in which both people consider the other’s wants and needs, and space for both people to be sexually satisfied during a sexual encounter. However, we are interested in looking at what happens when this social norm runs up against coexisting (dominant) discourses of heterosex. In this more ‘real’ context, we question whether reciprocity always functions to ensure mutual benefit, or whether it may work to constrain choice and to limit the possibilities for what heterosexual couples do sexually, and how they do it.

In line with Vance’s (1984) concern about male control of female orgasm, Gilfoyle et al. (1992) and Plumridge et al. (1997) have suggested that ideas of reciprocity and mutuality may serve problematic functions, denying women agency, and reinforcing traditional gender roles. Writing of the pseudo-reciprocal gift discourse, Gilfoyle et al. argued that its mutuality was ‘illusory’ (1992: 218) and observed:

> It is ironic . . . that the ‘enlightened’ male discourse, in which men take some responsibility for their partner’s pleasure, is yet another example of men abrogating power to themselves, as they take away women’s ability to be an independent sexual agent. (1992: 224)

In a study in which they looked at men’s accounts of ‘consuming’ commercial sex, Plumridge et al. found that men talked about commercial sex as mutual, and mutually pleasurable (even when told explicitly by the prostitute that it wasn’t). They asked:

> If mutuality is so mutable that it can be applied and held in highly unlikely circumstances for strategic and self-serving ends, in conjunction with contradictory assumptions and even in the face of contradictory evidence, what does it mean to call for mutuality as an indicator of excellence in sexual encounters? (Plumridge et al., 1997: 179)

Thus Plumridge et al. (1997) suggested that, far from being used to describe relationships centred on an egalitarian ideal, the rhetoric of mutuality (or reciprocity) can be, and is, used by men to construct their behaviour as reasonable in circumstances where mutuality is ‘highly unlikely’ – such as a context in which they are paying for sex. Thomson and Holland have similarly commented that ‘stories of mutuality do not negate asymmetry in relationships. Men and women may be differently positioned within negotiated relationships for mutual sexual pleasure and may have different access to the products of that relationship’ ([Thomson and Holland, 1997] cited in Ryan, 2000: 97).

Should we therefore be sceptical of this discourse of reciprocity in our participants’ accounts? We think the answer is yes, and no. Beyond asking questions about whether ‘reciprocity accounts’ refer to sex that really is...
reciprocal, we suggest the need to focus on the critical question of what actions (and identities) are constrained or enabled by particular constructions of heterosex. While the concepts of pleasure, power, and (differential) givings are a good place to examine this – as indeed Gilfoyle et al. (1992) have done – we focus our attention here on entitlements and obligations.

**Entitlement or obligation**

As we noted earlier in the article, a discourse of reciprocity in accounts of heterosex entitles both partners to orgasm, or at least the potential to legitimately seek this. In our interviews, women recounted entitlement to an orgasm: if he had had one, and she hadn’t, there was a discursive space in which it became possible for her to assert ‘my turn’ (W6). Women’s ‘right’ to have an orgasm in heterosex is not something we would want to dispute. However, we are concerned about potential links between entitlement and obligation, and will argue that on its own, and in conjunction with other discourses, a discourse of reciprocity can work to produce certain obligations during sex. One is that women are not only entitled to have an orgasm, they are expected to have one: ‘she should have an orgasm’ (M5). This can be read as either meaning she is entitled to have an orgasm (which seems the most plausible reading in its context), or that having an orgasm is what she is meant to do. While the first reading is the least problematic, some sense of obligation is produced by both interpretations. If a woman does not have an orgasm she is potentially positioned as not normal (because women should have them, and having them positions her as normal). The almost coercive effect of ‘normality’ with regards to sexuality has been noted elsewhere (Duncombe and Marsden, 1996; Gavey, 1992; Gavey et al., 1999). However, she also (potentially) lets down her male partner, as her lack of orgasm undoubtedly reflects badly on his performance as a ‘good lover’. Further, if she has an orgasm, she allows him the full pleasure of knowing that he has not been selfish – that there has been a ‘fair deal’, and no ‘using’ or ‘cheating’ (M4) has taken place. In this sense, a woman’s orgasm can be seen as obligation – required both to establish her own sexual normality and to reinforce her partner’s ‘sexpertise’ (Potts, 1998, 2002). As Gilfoyle et al. (1992: 223) noted, an orgasm ‘is not a no-strings-attached gift’. Pellauer (1999: 12) anecdotally reported women being ‘tired of the pressure to have orgasms’.

Women’s reported concerns about ‘taking too long’ (W7) (for whom?), demonstrate another potential layer of obligation (have one, but don’t take too long about it):
W7: um, I, I think at that stage I always used to think ‘oh shit this is taking too long. I’ll be, he’ll be getting really bored with this’. Um (Kathryn: Mhm, mhm.) um, you know I either better, better (pause) you know. I don’t think I ever faked it but um, move on to something else.

We can see that the expectation of orgasm for women is not unilaterally good (and is still based on an androcentric understanding/script of heterosex). Pellauer, talking about her partner’s interest in, and pursuit of, her pleasure, observes: ‘some partners and some circumstances might make his stance oppressive’ (1999: 18). Women in Băban and David’s research reported a similar ‘obligation’ to experience pleasure, or ‘to simulate pleasure and orgasm’ (1994: 22) if not experienced. While we do not have space in this article to follow them up, there are obvious links between the practice of ‘faking’ orgasm, reciprocity, and obligation. Although reciprocity appears premised on ‘genuine’ pleasure, ‘faking’ provides the appearance of pleasure and its practice might signal how strongly the obligation to affirm his performance of reciprocity can be experienced.9

What else does reciprocity do? It effectively enables a sexual interaction where, if a woman has had an orgasm, or he has at least attempted to ‘give’ her one, then the man is entitled to have one too. Given the conflation of male orgasm with coitus in our participants’ accounts, and elsewhere, the obligation of reciprocity potentially compromises women’s choices about whether or not to have intercourse:

W3: sometimes I think once I’d orgasmed I’d feel that (pause) it was more to pleasure him if it was penetration because I’d already received (Kathryn: mhm) my pleasure.

W3 later commented:

W3: there were times when I really did think um you know, I don’t feel like it because it’s you who is, I’m tired you know (Kathryn: mm) I’ve enjoyed that and I’d like to stop. You know I was really conscious of it being um penetration being more um to give him his orgasm [. . .] be fair, he’s put a lot of energy into you.

Understandings and practices of heterosex produced by a discourse of reciprocity, then, are not necessarily as liberatory as they might seem. Expectations of reciprocity may converge with other dominant discourses (such as the male sexual drive discourse, and the coital imperative) to weaken a woman’s ability to finish sex when she would like to. If she has had an orgasm – or even if she hasn’t, but he has ‘put the work in’ towards this goal – she has already embarked on the swing of reciprocity which is able to render her not ‘fair’ if she does not return the favour. This could possibly make it even more difficult for a woman to choose not to have
(potentially unwanted) coitus – which is already a difficult choice given its naturalized and prioritized status within heterosex (see Gavey et al., 1999).

Rather than being a ‘pure’ or ‘free’ gift, the ‘giving’ of orgasm to the other sexual partner appears bound up in complex relations of expectation of exchange within a discourse of reciprocity (which, as anthropologists have argued, typically tends to be the case, even in supposedly altruistic exchanges; Malinowski, 1996; Mauss, 1989; Sahlins, 1996). The position of a woman who does not reciprocate (through ‘giving’ her body for coitus/his orgasm) is potentially a difficult one to occupy, when reciprocity is a powerful discourse through which sexual relationships are constituted and understood. While the obligations of reciprocation also fall on men, there are considerably more acceptable degrees of freedom in how they might choose to engage in this – no one act is imperative within the discourse.¹⁰

### Challenging heterosex, or reinscribing old norms in more palatable guises?

In this article we have outlined how a discourse of reciprocity is played out in accounts of heterosex. Our focus has been on an articulation of reciprocity within the sexual domain, and, more narrowly, around orgasm. Reciprocity here is based around an exchange where each person gets (their own version of) what is essentially the same thing: orgasm. However, the discourse of reciprocity as articulated here is perhaps only one particular manifestation of the broader discourse of reciprocity noted earlier in relation to heterosex and heterosexual relating, and to social life more generally. Reciprocity could focus on very different givings and receivings. It has been noted that ‘often women value the relationships they have with men far more than the gratification aspects of sex. Many women want sex to be a place in which they can experience love, care and affection from their partners’ (Ryan, 2000: 94; see also Roberts et al., 1995). Giving and receiving of very different things offers a different notion of reciprocity (or exchange), and this is institutionalized in the ideal of marriage or a long-term relationship in a have-hold discourse: through her relationship with a man, a woman (traditionally) gets love and emotional satisfaction, children, a place to live, an income, and ‘security’ (and sex). Through his relationship with a woman, a man traditionally gets sex, as well as a network of care and support. These ‘entitlements’ in marriage have probably been in existence for a long time, and are probably present in contemporary conservative discourse about sex. What is different about our manifestation of reciprocity is that it reduces it to a purely sexual, even orgasmic, level.
So is this manifestation of reciprocity as orgasm exchange liberating for women’s experiences of heterosex? We want to argue for a both/and approach to thinking about this question: that is, that it can be experienced as both oppressive and/or genuinely reciprocal. Reciprocity talk does seem to challenge or disrupt other conventional discourses of heterosex. In particular, women are cast as active sexual subjects; as potentially equal sexual partners, who give and receive, equally, with their male sexual partners. Reciprocity also offers women an entitlement to pleasure-as-orgasm within sex, which can, at least theoretically, be sought if not achieved. Without an acknowledgment of women’s entitlement to sexual pleasure, the basis for reciprocity within heterosex is meaningless.

In these ways, a discourse of reciprocity can be seen to challenge aspects of a traditional male-focused construction of heterosex. It arguably has the potential to produce more enjoyable and egalitarian heterosex for women – perhaps even more ‘feminist’ heterosex. But all is not roses (as research on heterosex and heterosexuality continues to show – e.g. Holland et al., 1998). Reciprocity brings with it the potential to reinscribe aspects of heterosex that we would want to continue to critique, including a coital imperative – until the conflation of male orgasm and intercourse can be dislodged. In conjunction with particular patternings of heterosex, reciprocity offers another potential layer of sexual expectation and obligation for women (and possibly also for men). And it may be, as Gilfoyle et al. (1992: 218) have argued, that it offers men (and we would argue, women) ‘linguistic resources to develop more flattering descriptions of what it is that heterosexuality, and its associated sexual practices, involves’.

While sexual meanings are unlikely to be singular or fixed, and can be both oppressive and liberatory at different moments, there seem to be three bottom lines to consider: First, sexual relations do not happen in isolation (Duncombe and Marsden, 1996) – any instance of heterosex takes place within society dominated by the institution of heterosexuality, which has been founded upon a gender hierarchy (Jackson, 1995a) that persists to the present day. Therefore, the odds are stacked against mutuality and equality simply happening (Brown, 1994). For this reason it makes sense to continue to critically examine claims of reciprocity, and to unpack the assumptions that surround even such ostensibly progressive discourse.

Second, quite apart from the historical and ongoing social inequities, coitus is always a potentially risky practice – for women, in particular. When a discourse of reciprocity can be seen to uphold and reinforce a coital imperative, feminist researchers are likely to question whose interests it ultimately privileges in its current mode of articulation.

Finally, it appears that choice and freedom within heterosex remain strongly linked with obligations and responsibilities for women. It is
unlikely to be possible to invoke a straightforward framework of reciprocity without moving into the domain of obligations for reciprocal exchange (which bring with them coercive properties). The question that remains to be seen, however, is whether or not it is possible for the basic relational value of reciprocity to be interwoven with the nuance of gender politics, such that it might emerge as a less ambivalent aspiration within a feminist vision of heterosex.

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Notes
1. Mutuality and reciprocity (and equity and equality) are not synonymous terms, although they play into the definition of each other. For the purposes of this article, we are taking reciprocity to be more action-oriented, and given the articulated exchange of orgasm ‘ideal’, this has been the focus of our analysis. However, there are facets of each in the discourse of reciprocity, as well as in broader constructions of ‘ideal’ (hetero)sex.
2. Of course, same-sex desire and sexual practice, while removed from power dimensions based on differently-gendered bodies, and privileges and oppressions based on these, are not necessarily free from other, potentially multiple, power dimensions.
3. They initially called it the reciprocal gift discourse, but changed it to the pseudo-reciprocal gift discourse on ‘the advice that the original title connoted too much equality and mutuality’ (Gilfoyle et al., 1992: 217).
4. We wonder about the extent to which giving one’s body, or giving part of one’s body (the vagina, say), is necessarily, always, the same as giving one’s self, which seems to be the premise from which Gilfoyle et al. (1992) work. The concept of bodily giving and bodily generosity, in sex, is discussed in some detail by Diprose (1998).
5. We do not want to unquestioningly suggest that pleasure is all about orgasm, as there are multiple pleasures (physical and otherwise) in sex aside from orgasm.
6. This is not to suggest that women do not ‘desire’ coitus in the same way that men do – many women in our study reportedly enjoyed coitus. However, most reported orgasms through other means.
7. While saying we would not want to dispute this, nor to suggest that pleasure is in and of itself necessarily good (e.g. Brown, 1994; Frith, 1994), there is a danger in unilaterally condemning any pleasures of heterosex (Jackson, 1995b), and in not recognizing the strategic uses to which the articulation of pleasure can be put.
8. It could also be linked to the idea of his pleasure being incomplete without her orgasm. In Plumridge et al.’s (1997) data, perceived ‘mutuality’ of pleasure was part of the man’s positive experience.
9. Faking orgasm has been described as a ‘social obligation’ (Hite, 1977: 263) that reflects a number of intersecting discourses. Both the male sexual drive discourse (women fake it to not hurt the man’s ego, or suggest he’s not skilful); ‘to avoid disappointing him and spoiling his plateau of excitement and sexiness’ (from The Sensuous Woman, 1969, quoted in Ehrenreich et al., 1986: 84; also Hite, 1977; Roberts et al., 1995) and permissive discourse (women fake to avoid being labelled frigid; Hite, 1977) make faking orgasm socially viable. As recently as 1992, Cosmopolitan magazine has been advising women to fake orgasms as the polite response in situations where they were not enjoying sex (Roberts et al., 1995). Apfelbaum (2001) notes that some evidence suggests that the majority of American women have faked orgasm. The extent to which the ‘pressure’ to fake orgasm in heterosexual relating is a woman’s prerogative, rather than a man’s, is also revealing. The almost complete linking of orgasm and ejaculation for men almost exclusively precludes men faking orgasm because ejaculation acts as visual indicator of orgasm, while for women (fake) orgasm tends to be read from auditory and overall bodily performance (rather than vaginal spasm. See Roberts et al., 1995) – as the film When Harry Met Sally so aptly demonstrated.

10. Of course individual men may end up in situations where they feel obliged to participate in particular sexual acts that they might prefer not to do (at the request of their partner, for instance). However, without the support of over-determining cultural scripts – which construct intercourse as the only essential act – any negotiation will be of a different, and likely more flexible, nature.

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Biographical Notes

Virginia Braun is a lecturer in the Department of Psychology at the University of Auckland, New Zealand. Her research interests centre on women's health, sex and sexuality, (gendered) bodies, and popular culture. Her current research projects are on sex in long-term relationships, and on female genital cosmetic surgery. Address: Department of Psychology, University of Auckland, Private Bag 92019, Auckland, New Zealand. [email: v.braun@auckland.ac.nz]

Nicola Gavey is a senior lecturer in the Department of Psychology at the University of Auckland, New Zealand. Her interests focus on the intersections of gender, power, and sexuality. Currently she is working on a project on cultural constructions and theories of rape trauma. She is also completing a book on the cultural scaffolding of rape and sexual coercion within heterosexual relationships. Address: Department of Psychology, University of Auckland, Private Bag 92019, Auckland, New Zealand. [email: n.gavey@auckland.ac.nz]

Kathryn McPhillips is a clinical psychologist working in the field of sexual violence. Her current research interests include community approaches to the prevention of sexual violence and working with survivors of drug rape. Address: Clinical Director, Auckland Sexual Abuse HELP Foundation, P.O. Box 10345, Dominion Road, Auckland, New Zealand. [email: k.mcphillips@sexualabusehelp.org.nz]