

TALKING GOOD SEX: HOW YOUNG NEW ZEALAND WOMEN NAVIGATE COMPLEX DISCOURSES TOWARD DISCUSSING SEXUAL PLEASURE

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Abstract

Talking about good sex is vital to combating New Zealand's structurally entrenched rape culture. As awareness of and resistance to the hegemonic discourses of sexual violence and harm is at an all-time high, understanding talk on sexual pleasure is an important part of reclaiming the redemptive fundamentals of pleasure. New Zealand's sociocultural context presents a myriad of ideological barriers that constrain women's abilities to discuss pleasurable sexual experiences. Drawing on New Zealand case studies of conversations in intimate friendships about sexual pleasure, this article examines the ways in which New Zealand women navigate complex cultural and gendered discourses through discursive identity constructions. This article explores how the conflicting discourses evoked through productions of femininities and New Zealand's unique cultural norms are acknowledged and manipulated to allow for exploration into the parameters of the positive. The focus then turns to how discursive negotiation of sexual pleasure opens up discussions of desire, learning and the self. This reveals the dynamic ways in which young women make sense of their experiences of sexual pleasure. Emplacing these conversations in New Zealand's historical and contemporary sexual landscape offers unique affordances to the Applied Linguistic literature and encourages the embracing of a politic of pleasure.

Keywords: sexuality, pleasure, identity, discourse, women

Introduction

In 2003, feminist scholar Nicola Gavey published a widely influential book detailing the ways in which New Zealand has and continues to actively cultivate a 'rape culture'. She quotes a prominent New Zealand judge who, during the 1990s, remarked that "the world would be a much less exciting place to live...if every man stopped the first time a woman said 'no'" (Quaintance, 1996). While public consciousness had by this time shifted so that his comments were met with widespread condemnation (Gavey, 2005), this captured a diseased sentiment that

continues to echo throughout society today. Awareness about, and resistance to, rape culture has risen significantly in New Zealand over the last few decades, especially in the wake of the 2017 #MeToo movement. However, hegemonic cultural ideas about power and gender continue to shape the country's sexuality landscape (Wright, 2012).

The term 'rape culture' came into common vernacular in the 1970s when the way sexual violence was publicly perceived began to dramatically change. The feminist movement exposed the societal pervasiveness of rape and sexual assault by creating space for women to share their experiences (Bevacqua, 2000), and in doing so illuminating sexual violence as a major and rampant social problem (Gavey, 2005). In the contemporary context, women are formally and morally afforded equal status in their bodily autonomy in New Zealand and many other societies. Rape is routinely condemned as unambiguously wrong. However, this official recognition clashes with widely influential patriarchal discourses and assumptions about gender differences that continue to shape common understandings about gender (Gavey & Senn, 2014).

A key way in which rape culture is cultivated in New Zealand is through the linguistic production and circulation of rape-supportive discourses. While linguistic scholarship has taken interest in exploring the language of sexual violence, rape and consent (e.g., Ehrlich, 2019; King, 2011, 2014; Frith, 2009), little attention has been afforded to in-talk construction of sexual pleasure. One reason for remedying this oversight is that understanding talk on sexual pleasure is vital to combating rape culture. For this reason, identifying and circulating discourses of female sexual pleasure is crucial to flipping dominant fear-based narratives on their head. Providing counter-narratives that include stories of desire and pleasure is crucial to the challenging of hegemonic discourse of sexual terrorism (Bakar-Yusuf, 2013).

My focus on women in conversation is inspired by Sharma's (2013) work in North India where she ran sexuality workshops alongside rural women's rights activists. She describes how through the trainings conducted by her organisation, women came to name and recognise the power of patriarchal norms. In supportive spaces, they were empowered to reflect on how they conform to as well as challenge these norms in their everyday lives. She concludes that women will have the right to say 'no' to sex, only if they have the right to say 'yes'. New Zealand women face multiple sociocultural barriers to talking about sexual pleasure. Wright's (2012) research looks at contemporary conversations young women in New Zealand are having about sex, revealing a myriad of complex challenges faced daily. Understanding how women discursively negotiate conflicting discourses and norms

in conversation reveals the creative ways in which New Zealand women locate and reclaim sexual pleasure. This article reports on a study that demonstrates the innovative ways in which young New Zealand women navigate complex cultural and gender-based norms and restraints toward talking about good sex. This application of creative research is an important part of challenging the white colonial roots of rape culture (e.g., Morgan, 2015; Bakare-Yusuf, 2013; Bennet & Dickerson 2001). This first requires contextualising this inquiry in the wider applied sociolinguistic literature on sexuality, identity and agency.

Literature review

Sexuality

Sexuality has been a longstanding interest of feminist scholarship (Rich, 1980; Weiz, 1998; Nicholson & Fisher, 2014). Following a queer social constructionist approach, sex and sexuality are conceived as historical constructs. As Weeks (1986, p. 15) puts it:

Sexuality ... brings together a host of different biological and mental possibilities – gender identity, bodily differences, reproductive capacities, needs, desires and fantasies – which need not be linked together, and in other cultures have not been.

This definition underpins my analysis in which sexuality refers to interconnections of gender, bodies and erotic desires. In other words, I argue that ‘being sexual’ is really about the body one has, what one does and/or wants to do with that body erotically and what one has learnt about their body. In much the same way it is equally about other people's bodies, what one does and/or wants to do with those bodies and what one has learnt about ‘others’ who have those bodies (King, 2011, p. 10).

The view that sexuality develops exclusively within a social context originated with Gagnon and Simon (1974[1973]). For these theorists, sexuality has little to do with biology and is instead the outcome of a vast array of learnt behaviours within larger social scripts. Acts, feelings and body parts are not inherently sexual, but become so through sociocultural scripts that imbue them with sexual significance (1974[1973]). Individuals draw on a layering of interpersonal, intrapsychic and cultural scripts to negotiate sexuality in interaction. Gagnon and Simon’s approach therefore conceptualises sexuality as “interwoven with the everyday social fabric of our past and present lives and as constantly reflexively modified throughout our lives” (Jackson & Scott, 2010, p. 816). While some scholars position Gagnon and Simon

in opposition to a Foucauldian comprehension of sexuality (see Jackson & Scott, 2010, for summary of debate), a linguistic lens allows for a complementary reframing. Gee (2015, p. 197) reconfigures Foucault's theory into what he calls big 'D' discourses that are creatively drawn upon and negotiated to create subject positions. The everyday practicing of Gagnon and Simon's 'scripts' are in fact linguistic Discourses that interactionally evoke macro-level ideas on a micro-level scale.

Intersectional identities

The interaction of multiple discourses is crucial in understanding the systemic structural differences in women's experiences of sexuality. Iris Young (1990) interweaves poststructuralist feminism with an intersectional theory that accounts for differences between women based on racial or ethnic background, sexuality, class or ability. Intersectionality posits that every body is situated within, constructed and experienced throughout inseparable and interlocking standpoints constituted by certain structural realities and meanings (Crenshaw, 1991). Intersectionality theory therefore affords a useful means of conceptualising identity. This lens argues that our own conceptions of self as well as the access, opportunity and treatment we experience are the product of multiple intersecting systems of social classification.

Sociolinguistics has in recent years recognised intersectionality theory as crucial in responsibly undertaking ongoing identity investigations (e.g., McElhinny, 2007; Bucholtz, 2011; Milani, 2014). Kidner (2015) adopted this viewpoint in a grassroots approach in her discourse analysis of environmental activism. She reminds us that intersectionality arises from the direct experiences of oppressed groups (Scheyvens & Murray, 2003; Kidner, 2015, p. 230; Cho, 2013, p. 387) and thus requires a centring of the most marginalised in academic research (Cho, 2013, p. 392).

Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) theorising of identities as discursively emergent and intersubjectively negotiated in interaction is relevant for the forthcoming analysis. Intersectional identities emphasise the role of indexicality in the forms of social categories that are made salient when enacted in diverse lived experiences. The understanding of identities as multiple and in continuous states of change is widespread in linguistic literature (e.g., Jones, 2018; Holmes & Marra 2011; Lemke 2008; Cameron, 1990; Tannen, 1994). In line with a poststructuralist framework, identities are at all times embedded within larger discursive practices and ideological structures (e.g., Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2003; Woolard, 1998). A framework of intersectionality reveals that such identities are not so much in need of reconciliation,

but rather require an understanding of the complex discourses that constitute various intersecting subject positions.

Agency

Exploring how identities are instantiated is enriched by the recognition that agency is broader than individual and deliberate action. Multifaceted identities are agentively negotiated within wider frames of structural and systemic institutions. The relationship between identity and agency offers rich insight into this process. Identity here is understood as created through contextually situated and ideologically informed perceptions of self and other (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, p. 605). As such, any identity performance is contingent on interactional and ideological constraints. As noted by VanderStouwe (2016, p. 14), the “agentive manipulation of and negotiation around constraints, whether self-imposed or external, that limit the capacity of a subject or group of subjects to act” (i.e. constrained agency) becomes an accomplishment of social action (Ahearn, 2001). This turns attention from the individual’s capacity and toward an appreciation of social agents operating within sociocultural conditions. Such an understanding informs my investigation into how young New Zealand women agentively navigate conflicting discourses toward talking about sexual pleasure. These insights may present possibilities for new ways of centring pleasure in discussion, be they intimate, educational, research-based or on a broader societal scale.

Methods

To illustrate the significance of a sociolinguistic focus on pleasure, this article draws data from recent research on the ways that pairs of close friends discuss their experiences of sex and pleasure. I developed a research design inspired by feminist consciousness-raising groups (Spain, 2016; Combahee River Collective, 1977) and sought to build collective sharing, action, and healing into the foundation of a methodology. Discussing these research methods here demonstrates the significance of a critical feminist approach to analysing the language of sexual pleasure.

Conversations within intimate female friendships have been long acknowledged as low-risk spaces for complex identity construction where autonomy and independence are reconciled (e.g.: Martínez Alemán, 2010; Baxter-Magolda & King, 2004). Linguistic scholarship reaffirms this through its characterisation of women’s talk as agentive and empathetic (Baxter-Magolda & King, 2004; Holmes, 1997; Tannen, 1994, 2010). Safe conversation spaces are therefore valuable sites for

exploring how women negotiate conflicting discourses toward being able to talk about sexual pleasure.

Within feminist ethnography that problematises ‘objective’ knowledge production and the boundaries between researcher/researched (Coffey, 2002), my strategic reimagining of alternative research methods led me to operating as an “intimate insider”. This position, in which “the researcher is working, at the deepest level, within their own ‘backyard’ ” (Taylor, 2011, p. 9), afforded many benefits alongside inevitable drawbacks (for more detail see Couper, 2019). I relied on my friendship networks to invite participation in the data collection. The approach to participant recruitment relied on the “snowball” technique (Browne, 2005), which uses word of mouth to disseminate the open invitation to participate. Also known as the ‘friend of a friend’ technique, this method has been used by linguists to expand participation pools for decades (e.g., Milroy, 1987; Holmes & Bell, 1988).

I met with six pairs of young female friends over a period of four months. These 12 women ranged between the ages of 23 and 35, conveniently half of whom identified as queer and half as straight. As Browne (2003, p. 137) mentions, the researcher’s relationships with the participants allows for some flexibility with arrangements, as access to each other is easier. In this way, these meetings were examples of the field extending “beyond formal research sites” (Browne, 2003, p. 142). After establishing interest, I met with each pair at a location of their choice. These meetings were opportunities to create a safe research environment (Taylor, 2011, p. 13) by providing a chance to offer full details of the aims and intentions. I then left participants with a loose conversation guide to record themselves conversing at a time and place of their choice.

This feminist research practice evolved into a methodology that affords a critical lens through which to explore the ways in which young New Zealand women negotiate conflicting discourses. In response to King’s (2011) findings on agentive subversion and Fine’s (1988) “missing discourse of desire”, my focus is sexual pleasure. The conversation guide’s questions (see Appendix 1 for an abridged guide) were designed to prompt reflection and discussion on the participants’ experiences of sexual pleasure, while allowing and accounting for a range of potential answers by keeping questions open-ended and non-compulsory. The recorded conversations produced six hours of data and an additional focus group produced four hours, together producing 10 hours of recorded conversation available for close analysis in the discourse analysis tradition.

Findings

A data-driven approach demonstrates a strong justification for this inquiry's focus, as seen in Extract 1.1 below (see Appendix 2 for conventions).

Extract 1.1
[Min 13.46]

1. Beth: isn't it funny we're still we are still cycling round to
2. bad experiences
3. Freya: I know it's a shame sorry shannon
4. Beth: yeah sorry but //um\ maybe that's just like how I don't
5. know maybe that's just +
6. Freya: /um [laughs] well that's I think that's just how we
7. communicate about sex normally isn't it it's hard to talk
8. about the good bits cause we don't //+\ have the
9. vocabulary it's not normal to talk about like oh yeah last
10. night I had a really good uh ^orgasm and it lasted for
11. like five minutes and

In lines 1 and 2, Beth notes that their conversation keeps returning to negative experiences in *we are still cycling round to bad experiences*. Freya ratifies this with a researcher-oriented apology, saying *sorry shannon* (line 3) and Beth echoes this with *yeah sorry* (line 4). Beth makes two false starts in line 4 to explain this tendency, employing numerous downtoners (Holmes, 1984) in *I don't know maybe that's just*. Freya collaboratively picks up on Beth's hesitation and builds an observation that *that's just how we communicate about sex normally isn't it* (lines 6-7). Here the pair identify that it is 'normal' to only talk about bad experiences (line 2), demonstrating the gap in the sexual conversation and the immense value of conducting research on good experiences. Hence, my study aims to seek out how women tell positive stories of sexual pleasure.

Freya goes on to observe that *it's hard to talk about the good bits cause we don't have the vocabulary* (lines 7-9). Here it seems that Freya overtly acknowledges the absence of discourses available to her that could be used to mobilise conversation about the 'good bits'. This "missing discourse of desire" (Fine, 1988) presents a significant conversational hurdle for the pair, where talking about pleasure is considered *not normal* (line 9). This, alongside Beth's feelings of struggle, positions talking about sexual pleasure as outside of normative behaviour. As such, the pair

jointly identify a lack of available discourses and the pervasiveness of societal norms as barriers to talking about sexual pleasure. This extract demonstrates a serious lack of discourse available for young women to draw upon in discussions of sexual pleasure and offers a sound rationale for the forthcoming research.

Beth continues exploring the difficulties of discussing sexual pleasure in Extract 1.2. One of the prevailing themes that emerges in this analysis is how young New Zealand women discursively navigate gender ideologies.

Extract 1.2

[Min 13.46]

1. Beth: /it's hard to\ cause how would you ever just like I would
2. again just going back to my a c c 1//on a scale\1 of one
3. to ten how much pain are you in like I couldn't like
4. I'm struggling to even give a comment on that very fucking
5. easy understandable situation like I struggle like to
6. if someone was like describe how an orgasm feels
7. if I was sit with an alien and they were like what's an
8. orgasm how does it feel I'd be like [tch] I don't really
9. know how to tell ya like there's nothing else that feels
10. like it it's like why 2//not it's like\2
11. just go and have one and tell like you know like
12. I couldn't be like oh it feels like this +
13. you know some people are like [in breathy voice]: oh it's
14. this intense burning fire of passion: I'm like what
15. Freya: 1/[laughs]\1
16. Freya: 2/[laughs]\2
17. Freya: I don't want a burning fire in my fanny
18. Beth: no me neither I just //I can't relate\
19. Freya: /[laughs]\

By identifying feelings of struggle, Beth indirectly constructs talking about sexual pleasure as non-normative behaviour. Beth's extended turn in this extract is ripe with Tannen's (1989, 1995) constructed dialogue. She first compares how hard it is to talk about *the good bits* to being asked to rate pain on an overly simplistic scale and says *I couldn't like I'm struggling to even give a comment on that very fucking easy understandable situation like I struggle* (lines 3-5), explicitly identifying the communication challenge. This turn is bookended by two false-starts that index Beth's uncertainty (Holmes, 1984; Coates, 1987), even as she describes it as a *very*

fucking easy understandable situation (lines 4-5). This potentially references the pro-sex discourse that Pichler (2007) identified among British working-class youth. Both Freya and Beth originate from this cultural context where open displays of heterosexuality have been identified as appropriate gendered behaviour (2007, p. 80). Applying an intersectional lens allows for this generated layering of social class, age and cultural background to be located within a contemporary New Zealand context. The significance of how Pākehā identities tread across the New Zealand sexual landscape will be explored later on. Here, it's possible that by positioning active sexuality as highly normative, Beth's affective evaluation reflects and reinforces this dominant discourse of sociocultural femininity.

This is followed by an imagined scenario: *if someone was like "describe how an orgasm feels" if I was sit with an alien and they were like "what's an orgasm how does it feel"* (lines 6-8, quote marks added to reflect intonation). This marks the beginning of the animation of dialogue which Beth uses to set up her own evaluative retort. She responds to this imagined questioning with *I'd be like [tch] I don't really know how to tell ya like there's nothing else that feels like it it's like why not it's like just go and have one and tell like you know like I couldn't be like oh it feels like this* (lines 8-12). She recreates her inner speech as dialogue (Tannen, 1989, p. 115) through use of the quotative discourse marker 'like' (Levey, 2003) to offer her personal judgement. This is contrasted with how *some people are like oh it's this intense burning fire of passion I'm like what* (lines 13-14). Beth constructs dialogue that invites involvement through both paralinguistic cues like rhythm and prosody, and the internally evaluative effect (Tannen, 1989, p. 132). The breathy quality of her voice when parodying *oh it's this intense burning fire of passion* contrasts to the peak of intonation in the incredulous *what*. She incites active participation in sense-making that contributes to the creation of involvement and collaboration.

Freya responds to Beth's impassioned turn with encouraging laughter and ratification of the literal interpretation of *intense burning fire of passion* (line 14), agreeing that *I don't want a burning fire in my fanny* (line 17). The lexical choice of fanny to reference her vagina is understood but would be unusual for New Zealand English, so arguably indexes Freya's British background. Beth accepts this, responding *no me neither I just I can't relate* (line 18). This emotional evaluation employs many affective resources, associating negative feelings with discussing sexual pleasure. Krebber (2017) identifies such resources as being typical of the construction of social norms. Freya participates in this joint construction by describing the behaviour of talking about bad experiences as *just how we communicate about sex normally* (Extract 1.1 lines 6-7). Constructing a positive self-image is part of the communicative goal in appealing to the researcher's perceived

interests (Krebber, 2017, p. 120). As such, Freya here constructs a norm by describing her own behaviour. This is confirmed in Freya's follow up utterance, *it's not normal to talk about* [good sex] (line 9). This appraisal seems to employ "judgement devices" (Krebber, 2017, p.120; Martin & White, 2005) that evaluate this behaviour as transgressing the speaker's social norms, indirectly tagging it as deviant to the norm. Both Beth and Freya utilise discursive strategies to jointly construct a social norm that positions discussing sexual pleasure as abnormal, or at least linguistically challenging.

I argue that the social norm of not talking about good sex indexes a macro discourse of humility, one that is closely associated with certain performances of femininity prescribed by the gender order (Connell, 1987; Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1992). Sociolinguistic research suggests that the gender order condemns self-praise by women more than men (Baxter, 2011, 2012; Holmes, 2006). The pressure to perform humility and self-effacement has given rise to what is known as New Zealand's "tall poppy syndrome", where touting personal success is heavily discouraged and even looked down upon (Woodhams, 2015; Harrington & Liu, 2002). This builds a context in which both gender and cultural narratives are compounded to create powerful discursive forces. Intersectionality posits that every body is situated within, constructed and experienced throughout inseparable and interlocking standpoints constituted by certain structural realities and meanings (Crenshaw, 1991). Here the stratification of *woman* and *New Zealander* intersect to constitute a position molded by layers of discursive influence. Sociolinguistic research (Holmes, Marra & Lazzaro Salazar, 2017) suggests that New Zealand women employ a number of discursive strategies to successfully present their abilities positively while negotiating societal ideologies of gender and culture. The double layer of humility presents a significant challenge for the young women in this study, where to talk about good sex might risk being seen as boastful and challenging two social norms. As Freya points out, it's not normal to talk about *like oh yeah last night I had a really good uh orgasm and it lasted for like five minutes* (Extract 1.1 lines 9-11). Here she uses constructed dialogue, imbued with prosodic qualities, to parody talking about good sex, offering an evaluation of this as being potentially boastful. This gender discourse intersects with another powerful narrative that may also have an effect on identity construction in talk. These participants are emplaced (Pink, 2009) in the sociocultural context of New Zealand, where cultural norms, values and discourses shape expectations of behaviour. Within such structures, these women can orient toward or away from such norms throughout the negotiation of talk. Woodhams (2015) provides a comprehensive analysis of how humility is also encouraged through the culturally specific discourse of egalitarianism (2015, p. 145). These participants are negotiating these complex contextual discourses throughout the

discursive identity constructions. Identifying these hurdles is important to facilitating conversations about good sex and sexual pleasure.

Talking sexual pleasure

Sociolinguistic literature has benefitted from the work of King (2011, 2014), who demonstrated young women inverting sexually harmful discourses in a negotiation toward sexual agency. It is against the fraught discursive backgrounds discussed above that young New Zealand women collaboratively build understandings of what sexual pleasure is. In doing so, they combat the predictions of the historical literature that has largely been occupied with discourses of disempowerment (Lees, 1993; Holloway, 1995). While this research recognises the entrenched stigmatisation of women's agentive sexuality that underpins much of society, recent research has challenged this self-presentation of women as only ever sexually oppressed; sociologists Jackson and Cram (2003) and Levin et al. (2012) show evidence of young women's efforts to reclaim agency when discussing sex; Tolman (2009) platforms teenage girls' talk about sexuality, and; Wright (2012) offers insight into contemporary conversations young women are having about sex in New Zealand. These studies among others suggest the public tide is changing, or at least, contemporary research is starting to catch up with what has been happening for a long time.

The following extract demonstrates the ways in which the young women formulate meaning of pleasure through negotiations of gendered discourses. In Extract 1.3, Mila and Charlie are answering the question proffered in the conversation guide: 'What makes sex good for you?'. Mila has just completed her turn and defers to Charlie for her answer.

Extract 1.3

[Min 14.13]

1. Charlie: bad sex is always sex where I'm too focused on
2. the situation and not on my own pleasure cause I can't +
3. I kind of disconnect //like it's a real\
4. Mila: /what situation\
5. Charlie: like if I'm I think I think cause I I learned sex
6. through not on my own pleasure but being conscious about
7. who I was pleasuring which uh that's a really common
8. story for people 1//+\1 but I think that means that it
9. takes it's taken me a long time to unlearn + who sex is

10. for 2//+\2 cause sex is actually not you know so I
 11. always thought you know sex is for them and I feel good
 12. after sex if I know they've had a really good sexual
 13. experience 3//so\3 and so for me this is coming from a
 14. deficit point of view but for for me I know I'm having
 15. great sex when I'm just I'm lost in the experience with
 16. the other person it's almost like mindfulness 4//it's\4
 17. you know you're going with it and you're not counting
 18. anything you're ^so into it and I think that as well like
 19. I'm you don't know where you're 5//go^ing\5 you're
 20. playful you're explorative and as well you're so
 21. connected to the other person because each part of
 22. wherever you're going is so related to their response to
 23. you
24. Mila: 1/yeah\\1
 25. Mila: 2/yeah\\2
 26. Mila: 3/yeah\\3
 27. Mila: 4/yeah\\4
 28. Mila: 5/yeah\\5

Charlie's first response to Mila's prompt is to define what she considers to be *bad sex* (line 1). She seems to offer this definition as a strategy to contrast with what she would define as good sex. This negative defining derives meaning in what something is *not* in order to explore what something is. Charlie's definition of bad sex is when she is *too focused on the situation and not on my own pleasure* (line 2), describing this as *a kind of disconnect* (line 3). Mila prompts her to expand on *what situation* (line 4), and from lines 5 to 28 Charlie develops a rich extended turn. It begins with a historical justification for how she learnt about sex. Charlie points to the early flattening of her own pleasure in favour of *being conscious about who I was pleasuring* (lines 6-7). This other-orientation is repeated in lines 11 and 12 where she recalls sex as being something for them that she could only derive pleasure from if *I know they've had a really good sexual experience*. Charlie directly critiques this powerful hegemonic discourse of male-centric sexuality by pointing out that this is *a really common story for people* (lines 7-8) and something that has *taken me a long time to unlearn* (line 9). Here she evokes discourses of hetero-patriarchy, through which (hetero)sexuality is "systematically male dominated" (Jackson, 1999, p. 163). A significant number of studies show how heteronormativity restrains women's agency in negotiating equal sexual outcomes (Sinclair, 2017; Allen, 2003; Burkett & Hamilton, 2012; Chung, 2005). This research comprehensively details the complex gendered discourses of sexual shame, safety, harm and pleasure that young

women navigate within heterosexual relationships. Amidst this, young women are able to challenge these messages (Sinclair, 2017), as Charlie demonstrates. She establishes a contrast by drawing on powerfully gendered sexuality discourses to construct both a certain femininity and compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, 1980), as well as women's capacity to resist. In saying these harmful discourses *have taken me a really long time to unlearn* (line 9), Charlie evokes her agentive capacity through the use of a learning analogy. Charlie discursively repositions herself as re-educated on her own sexuality and having become empowered enough to prioritise her pleasure.

The setup of this negative contrast is realised from line 14 where she begins a vivid, enthused description of what great sex and pleasure is. This is marked by both prosodic and discursive features that together create a highly evocative sense of building flow. When Charlie moves from describing what pleasure is *not* to describing what it *is*, she makes a clear switch at line 17 from first-person pronouns to second-person pronouns. Use of the latter generic *you* affords Charlie distance from the topic at hand, relieving her of the task of relying on her own intimate experiences. This shift to an impersonal *you* also operates as a form of stance-taking that positions Charlie's perceptions as shared, not merely individual (Myers & Lampropoulou, 2012). Holmes (1998) also identifies use of the generic *you* in New Zealand English as evoking persuasiveness (1998, p. 36), emphasising the point being made to the interlocutor rather than the personal details of the description. This dramatization invites intimate rapport. Charlie's frequent use of *you know* (lines 10, 11 & 17) is also significant, as this often functions to perform certain gendered performances. *You know* serves various linguistic purposes (Stubbe & Holmes, 1995), but its pragmatic function is the focus here. Most importantly, *you know* is found to frequently operate as an "intimacy signal" (Holmes, 1986) that commonly indexes femininity. Here Charlie employs discursive markers that work together to construct a feminine gender identity.

The rest of Charlie's description uses key lexical items like *mindfulness* (line 16), *playful and explorative* (line 20) and *connected* (line 21). These terms contrast directly with the initial word *disconnect* (line 3) and point to a much deeper analysis of how embodiment plays into experiencing pleasure (this is explored more in Couper, 2019). By first critiquing hegemonic male-centric scripts to embracing the presence and flow of connection, Charlie builds a colourfully contrastive description of sexual pleasure.

Discussion

These four participants demonstrate the desire to situate pleasure within a greater context of sexual experiences, recognising that pleasure comes as part of a complex mix of different emotions and feelings. Within oppressive societal frameworks that stigmatise pursuits of pleasure, discourses of pleasure and fear are often closely intertwined (Jolly et al., 2013, p. 7). These include anxieties about loss of control, pressure to please another, sexual trauma and not being satisfied (Vance, 1984). In facilitating talk on sexual pleasure, adequate space must be provided for talk of suffering. This analysis demonstrates how sharing “troubles talk” (Tannen, 1990) is another way to create relational intimacy in conversation. Allowing for this invites narratives of female sexualities in all their multidimensional rich complexities. Redemptive stories can be shared that reconfigure violation as not the foundational blueprint, but agency gone awry.

It is precisely because female sexualities are often experienced and aligned so closely to complex and contradictory feelings that the pleasurable dimensions must be highlighted. While allowing space for the vast array of experiences, this article’s focus on the positive works toward preventing a fall into sexual paralysis occasioned by the still dominant discourses of danger and oppression. Linguistic attention to how these conversations are negotiated offers analytical value to an understanding of how women talk about and conceive of their own experiences of sexual pleasure within such powerful and pervasive discourses. What informs the lived experiences of sexual pleasure takes us back to a key consideration. What does an intersectional lens across the New Zealand sexual landscape reveal about the pursuit of collective sexual liberation?

The politics of being Pākehā

The final theme that arose points again to the specific dimensions of New Zealand’s sociocultural landscape. As mentioned earlier, understanding the interlocking constructions of social identities is crucial to critically analysing how sex is discussed. Intersectionality compels us to address what voices are being centered and what voices are missing from the cultural conversation. Intersectionality asks us to dig below the discursive surface and question what foundations need to radically shift for sexual liberation to be possible for all. In Extract 1.4, Charlie acknowledges a type of privilege that is specific to the New Zealand context:

Extract 1.4
[Min 43.00]

1. Charlie: I do think that being + Pākehā is something that you ++
2. or like that definition of myself that I only encounter
3. when I + have to check it on an exam or a census +
4. you know because it's something that we enjoy +
5. implicitly through privilege as we get + do you know
6. what I mean

In this extract Charlie very explicitly acknowledges her Pākehā ethnic identity as something that she *only [encounters] when I + have to check it on an exam or a census* (lines 2-3). Here she references something that Gray (2012) describes as when Pākehā individuals “discursively obscure both the cultural capital that whiteness provides, and the privileges afforded by this capital” (2012, p. 3). By acknowledging her privilege, she indexes the wider cultural sexuality context she operates within.

New Zealand continues to be dominated by white hegemony that has been well documented (Gray, 2012; Gray et al, 2013; Matthewman, 2017; Borell et al., 2009), within which indigenous Māori are disproportionately discriminated against within the public sexual health care system (Came, 2012) and sexual and reproductive health policy (Green, 2011). Māori youth are also disadvantaged by inadequate sexuality education (Clark, 2002; Clark et al., 2006; Fitzpatrick, 2018) and face barriers accessing contraception (Clark et al., 2006; Lawton et al., 2016). While efforts have been made to improve sexuality services to better meet Kaupapa Māori needs (Smith & Reynolds, 2006), indigenous youth still face significant access challenges, not to mention the intergenerational trauma faced by the Māori LGBTQ (Takatāpui) communities (Reynolds, 2012).

Acknowledging and harnessing white privilege in this New Zealand context is key to aligning our activist efforts with those who still face constant oppression. Many participants in this research demonstrate a self-awareness about the privileged identities most, if not all, of them possess, and how this might impact on their access to pleasure. While the scope of my analysis was never intended to be comprehensively representative of New Zealand's demographic make-up, the identities represented in my participant pool are largely middle-class, educated Pākehā. Even within this group there is guaranteed diversity of experience and positions along other social axes. As such, there are glaring gaps present. Discussions of sexuality require cultural sensitivity, and an intimate insider research

approach would require a trusted member of specific community groups to responsibly conduct this research. The intersectional identities that emerged in my analysis in some part reflect the identities that my participants made salient, including queer, sex worker and economic identities (Couper, 2019, 2020). However, it is possible that my own white privilege obscures the influences that cultural self-identification might have been having on discussions of sexual pleasure or identity construction. My hope is that by making explicit the affordances and limitations of our lived experiences of privilege we can contribute to a politic of collective liberation that continues to centre the pleasure of the most marginalised by working toward revolutionising our sociopolitical structures.

Within a framework of pleasure activism (brown, 2019), prioritising collective pleasure guides social justice attention toward liberatory practices through principles of healing, joy, desire and agency. Individual and collective consciousness raising, visioning, action and reflection are key to this process (Crass et al., 2013). This research has sought to contribute to this movement by curating space for transformative discussion and empowering young women to illuminate the interconnectedness of their experiences.

Conclusion

This study has sought to elevate the significance of studying pleasure through an applied sociolinguistic approach. There are real life implications of the ways in which sexual pleasure is talked about, not only in the sociolinguistic field, but in everyday conversations. Grounding in a New Zealand sociocultural context illuminates how the sticky interplay of gendered cultural norms and discourses can pose barriers for women in discussing good sex. Reckoning with the ongoing colonial violence that continues to shape the sexual landscape of New Zealand is necessary for dismantling the patriarchal, racist and misogynistic pillars upholding rape culture. This study demonstrates that when women discursively negotiate ways to talk about good sex, they are creatively pushing up against the restraints of their constrained agency. Breathing into those discursive cracks and spaces opens new space for pleasure-filled conversations.

Throughout history, powerful sociocultural discourses about women's bodies have built the structures within which women live. This is demonstrated in the unique discursive landscape of New Zealand, where young women must creatively innovate ways to navigating conflicting discourses toward discussions of pleasure. Platforming stories of pleasure highlights the power of female voices, desire and agency in transforming New Zealand's sexual landscape. Employing a linguistic

analysis to these stories and cementing them a place within linguistic literature is a crucial step toward sexual liberation and ultimately, the dismantling of rape culture.

“The truth is, no one of us can be free until everybody is free”

- Maya Angelou

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – Conversation Guide



CONVERSATION GUIDE

Below is a list of questions and discussion topics you can refer to guide your conversation. You can answer as many or as few as you want to. These serve only as a general guide and you need not stick to the questions at hand. You are welcome to expand on anything or take a more informal, conversational approach.

1. Can you talk about the last time you had a pleasurable sexual experience?
2. What makes sex good for you?
3. What does sexual pleasure mean to you?
4. How would you describe your sex life?
 - a. Start wherever you feel comfortable – maybe your sexual history, or a sexual event that was important to you, or what your sex life is like at the moment.
Talk about what you're most comfortable with, whatever is important to you.
5. How do you go about figuring out what you like in sex?
6. How does your relationship with your body affect your sex life?
7. What makes you feel good in your body during sex?
8. Do you think any aspect of your identity influences your experience of sexual pleasure? If so, how?

Appendix 2 – Transcription conventions

- [XXX] : : Paralinguistic and prosodic features and editorial information in square brackets, colons indicate start/finish
- + Pause of up to one second
- ... //.....\ ... Simultaneous speech
- ... /.....\\ ...
- () Unclear utterance

(hello)	Transcriber's best guess at an unclear utterance
-	Utterance cut off
[...]	Section of transcript omitted
^	Pitch increase