THE JOURNAL OF POSITIVE SEXUALITY is a multidisciplinary journal focusing on all aspects of positive sexuality as described in the Center for Positive Sexuality’s purpose statement. It is designed to be accessible and beneficial to a large and diverse readership, including academics, policymakers, clinicians, educators, and students.

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Please see the Submission Guidelines at the back of the issue for details regarding submissions. Manuscripts and supporting documents should be submitted as email attachments in Microsoft Word format to submissions@journalofpositivesexuality.org. Any questions or correspondence should be sent to the editor at info@journalofpositivesexuality.org.
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Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Article</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>So You Want to Run a Sexuality Research Lab: Ethical Issues and Recommendations</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceptions of Young Women who Engage in Anal Sex: A Sociological Inquiry</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Submission Guidelines</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This editorial offers advice on the publication process including (a) reading and following the Journal submission guidelines, (b) not waiting for a paper to be perfect before submitting it, and (c) responding productively to editorial decisions. Specific guidance is offered for responding to revise-and-resubmit opportunities, including the purpose and format of a cover letter and how to respond to negative reviews.

Keywords: publication, revise and resubmit, rejection, journal submission

Editorial

As my term as Editor-in-Chief of the Journal of Positive Sexuality (JPS) draws to a close, I wanted to share some tips about what authors can do to increase their chances of publishing their paper in JPS. I wrote these with JPS in mind, but most apply equally to other journals.

Read the Submission Guidelines (and Follow Them)
The submission guidelines for JPS describe the type of papers the Journal publishes (“...manuscripts on any topic relevant to positive sexuality”) and the people we hope will submit these papers (“Alongside the work of scholars and students, we are interested in contributions from community, clinical, and other nonacademic professionals...”).

The guidelines also describe the nuts and bolts of writing these papers:

- While the Journal of Positive Sexuality has a preference for shorter manuscripts (2,000–3,000 words), longer manuscripts up to 10,000 words will be considered. Authors should write in a straightforward and non-technical manner, avoiding jargon when possible. Manuscripts should be written in a style consistent with the latest edition of the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (APA).

Most authors do a good job with the positive sexuality focus, the paper length, and the readability, but I have been surprised by the number of submissions that are not in APA Style (American Psychological Association, 2020). JPS is a cross-disciplinary journal, and I realize that many authors might not be familiar with APA Style. Fortunately, there’s a straightforward way to bring your paper into compliance with APA Style:

Look at the sample paper linked at the bottom of the Formatting Guidelines. APA Style can be a bit persnickety, but if you make your paper look like the sample paper, you’ll be complying with 95% of the rules (and the other 5% can be fixed during copy editing).

Don’t Wait for Your Paper to be Perfect—Proofread it and Submit it

Perfect is the enemy of good, as they say, and in my experience, a paper is never 100% perfect. There’s always a sentence that could be reworded here or a citation that could be added there. But at some point, you must make the decision that your paper is good enough. At that point, give the paper a final read through, check citations against references, confirm the wording of quotes, proofread for spelling mistakes and grammatical errors, crosscheck your format with the submission guidelines, and submit it.

If You Get a Revise-and-Resubmit, Make All the Changes the Reviewers Recommend (and Document Your Changes in a Cover Letter)

Here’s what happens after you submit your paper. The editor reads your paper and makes an immediate determination as to whether the paper fits the scope and mission of the journal. If it doesn’t, the editor rejects the paper without sending it out for review (this is sometimes called a “desk rejection”). When I have desk rejected a paper at JPS, it has typically been because the paper does not have a positive sexuality focus. I explain this to the author and sometimes recommend alternative journals that the author might want to consider. Desk rejections can feel dishheartening, but they usually happen quickly, and the best response is to look for a better-fitting journal and submit the paper there.

If the paper makes it through the initial evaluation, the editor assigns the paper to an “action editor.” The action editor can be the editor themselves or it can be one of the associate editors of the
Journal. The action editor reads the manuscript and invites two to five scholars with expertise on the topic to review the manuscript. Reviewers read the manuscript and send their evaluation to the action editor. The evaluation includes comments for the author on the paper’s strengths and weaknesses, and recommendations for changes that would improve the paper. The evaluation also includes confidential feedback to the action editor regarding whether the paper should be accepted, given a revise-and-resubmit opportunity, or rejected.

The action editor reads the reviews and makes an editorial decision. Editorial decisions typically fall into one of three categories.

A paper can be accepted

This is, needless to say, very good news. An acceptance typically comes with a list of minor changes that the author needs to make, but these are usually straightforward to implement (fix this typo, add this citation, etc.), and as long as the author makes the specified changes, the paper will be published in the Journal.

A paper can be rejected

It never feels good to get a paper rejected, but keep in mind that you are in good company. Everyone who submits papers to journals regularly gets their papers rejected. It happens to all of us.

When I get a paper rejected, I read through the decision letter and reviews, and then I put them aside for a couple of days. When I’m ready, I re-read the decision letter and reviews, and I strategize on what to do next. Sometimes the reviewers have identified a fatal flaw in the research that cannot be addressed by revising the text. At that point, the path forward requires conducting another study or reconceptualizing the research at a fundamental level. More often, the reviewers have identified problems with the study or the paper that are not fatal flaws. The editor decided to reject the paper, but the paper isn’t necessarily doomed. Instead, I need to choose a different journal to submit it to. Before submitting it to the new journal, however, I try to address as many of the concerns raised by the reviewers as I can. I do this for a couple of reasons. First, reviewers are smart people with expertise on the topics discussed in the paper. Implementing their feedback will improve the paper and increase the chances of it being accepted at the next place I send it. Second, action editors choose experts on a topic to review a paper, and it is not uncommon for the same reviewer to be invited to review the paper again when it is sent to another journal. Reviewers are likely to be more positively disposed toward a paper if they see that their recommendations on the first submission were implemented.

If a paper gets rejected multiple times, it might be worth consulting with a senior colleague or mentor about the paper and the journals you’re submitting it to. The colleague might be able to suggest edits that would improve the paper or journals that would be better suited for the piece. Or the colleague might identify a deeper problem with the line of research that would be best solved by collecting more data. The last thing I’d note about rejections is that some of my best papers were published only after being rejected by multiple journals. My personal record is “An Ethical Approach to Peeking at Data” (Sagarin, Ambler, & Lee, 2014), which was rejected by five journals before being accepted by the sixth. Our perseverance paid off. Since publication, the paper has been cited over 100 times. Don’t give up on a paper. If it has a contribution to make, it can find a home.

A paper can receive a revise-and-resubmit opportunity

This is good news, but it doesn’t always feel that way. When I got my first revise-and-resubmit decision, it looked like pages and pages of criticism followed by a grudging willingness to read another draft of my paper if I felt the need to inflict it upon the journal. Then I showed it to Bob Cialdini, my graduate school advisor and mentor, and he translated the message for me. He told me that action editors don’t give authors a revise-and-resubmit opportunity unless they see a clear path to publication, and the pages and pages of criticism are the map to get us there. To maximize the probability of getting your paper accepted, he explained, you should go through the editorial decision letter and the reviews and make all the changes they asked for. Equally important, you should write a cover letter to accompany the resubmission that documents how you responded to each comment from the action editor and from the reviewers. I have taken this advice to heart over the years, and following this advice has led to the vast majority of my revise-and-resubmits being accepted (sometimes after another round or two of revision).

Here’s what I do: When I receive a revise-and-resubmit decision, I read through the decision letter and reviews and then, as with a rejection, I put them aside for a couple of days. It’s hard (at least for me) not to react defensively to the feedback. How could they have misunderstood our argument? Didn’t they see that we provide that information in the second footnote under Table 3? A couple of days gives me a chance to read the feedback more objectively, at which point I usually find that I had not, in fact, presented my argument as clearly as I could have and that the critical piece of information should probably be placed in a more prominent spot. Even for comments that I still feel are misguided (or even hostile), I try not to take it personally. It helps to assume (or to pretend, if necessary) that the reviewer meant the comment constructively and to find a kernel of useful advice in the criticism. That lets me figure out some change I can make to my paper to address the comment. My goal is to make at least one revision to address each recommendation offered by the editor and the reviewers. And when things get particularly harsh, keep in mind that the best revenge for a hostile review is getting your paper published.

I start the revision process by drafting the cover letter. My cover letters start with a paragraph or two to the editor, thanking the editor for the feedback and for the opportunity to revise and resubmit my manuscript. Then, I copy all the comments from the editorial decision letter and the reviews into my cover letter. I put these comments in bold, and beneath each, I explain how I plan to respond to the comment. In some cases, my explanation is brief (e.g., “Thank you for catching that typo. It has been corrected.”). In other cases, my explanation can be quite lengthy.

The cover letter serves multiple purposes. Writing it helps me strategize how I plan to revise the paper. Reading it then provides a list of the changes I need to make. And submitting it along with the revised manuscript demonstrates to the editor and reviewers all the changes I’ve made in response to their feedback.

Here are a few of examples from the cover letter my co-authors and I wrote for “Partner Selection, Power Dynamics, and Mutual Care Giving in Long-Term Self-Defined BDSM Couples” (Cutler, Lee, Cutler, Sagarin), published in JPS in 2020:

**Does average age refer to the mean or median?**

Average age refers to the mean. We have revised the text to clarify this (p. 11).

**This section needs some citations to back up this claim.**

I’m not so sure that people are dealing with BDSM relationship dynamics in the same way, nor even dealing with the same issues as 2 decades ago.

This is a fair point. As recommended, we have added citations to support our argument for the relevance of the current data despite their age. In particular, Hammack, Frost, and Hughes’s (2019) section on “Kink/Fetish/BDSM Intimacies” identifies a dearth of studies on such relationships and posits “four common features or experiences of kink relationships” (p. 576).

We evaluate the present data in the context of these common features (pp. 36-38). We hope that this evaluation has helped to highlight the ways the present data are still relevant (in the context of Hammack et al.’s...
features of recreational power exchange, consensual and collaborative scripting, and minority stress) while also acknowledging the areas in which the age of the data have an impact (in the context of Hammack et al.’s feature of embeddedness within a larger community and with respect to terminology).

There is a lot of descriptive data here. Although fabulous for a longer publication a lot of it is somewhat repetitive and could be revised and condensed, especially for a results section. I recommend removing much of the description and discussion and maybe using some of that in the Discussion section. Also, I’m not sure all of the subsections are really necessary here. Provide the highlights and the most interesting items, not an exhaustive analysis.

We have revised the Results section, retaining the material that seemed most relevant to the purpose of the paper and removing the material that seemed less relevant. We have also attempted to remove redundancy, both within the Results section and between the Results and Discussion sections. We would be happy to make further revisions if extraneous or redundant material remains.

After drafting the cover letter, I revise the actual manuscript. While making the revisions, I sometimes discover that the plan I outlined in the cover letter for a particular point doesn’t work in practice, in which case I revise that part of the cover letter. When I’m done revising the manuscript, I give it a full read-through to ensure I’ve addressed all the points. The read through also helps me fix any writing issues that arose from the changes I’ve made. Addressing individual reviewer points can sometimes disrupt the flow of the paper. Finally, I go back through the cover letter, filling in page numbers to show where the changes I made appear in the revised manuscript.

All this can lead to some very long cover letters. In fact, some of my cover letters have end up longer than the paper itself!

My experience as an editor and a reviewer is that a comprehensive cover letter effectively demonstrates that the author has done everything we asked them to do and that the paper is ready to be accepted.

Some Final Words

To close, I want to take this opportunity to thank the dedicated people who make the Journal of Positive Sexuality happen: Founders of the journal: Emily Prior and DJ Williams; Incoming Editor-in-Chief: Joye Swan; Production Editors: Jim Fleckenstein and John Edgar Browning; and Editorial Board Members: Aleah Poncini, Apryl Alexander, Daniel Copulsky, Dave Holmes, Jennifer Vencill, Jim Fleckenstein, John Edgar Browning, Karen Sabbah, Kat Clement, Liam Wignall, Moshoula Capous-Desyllas, Richard Sprott, R. Todd Hartle, and Zaedryn Rook. It has been a pleasure to work with such wonderful, generous colleagues. I look forward to seeing where Joye takes the Journal from here!

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Sexuality research engages with multiple disciplines and methodologies and sexuality researchers can receive a wide range of training. Though a common job duty for academics, researchers rarely receive formal training in how to establish and run a lab to conduct their research. In this paper, I walk through a variety of lab management tasks, such as selecting personnel, launching a program of research, conducting studies, and disseminating findings, and discuss ethical dilemmas that might arise in each of those in the context of sexuality research, such as befriending research assistants, conducting observational field research, and presenting negative results. I also provide specific recommendations for academics looking to establish a lab focused on gender and sexuality topics.

Keywords: ethics, ethical dilemmas, field studies, research lab management, sexuality research

Introduction

In addition to the other duties of teaching and service, professors and lecturers frequently work with graduate and undergraduate students on research projects, which can necessitate the management of a research lab. While the stereotype of a “research lab” includes researchers in white lab coats tinkering with chemicals and equipment, labs range in space and personnel depending on institution, funding, and research program. Running any kind of lab requires a different set of skills than teaching or conducting independent research and formal training for these skills is often lacking across academia. In this paper, I discuss some of the practical issues of research lab management in the unique context conducting sexuality research; I explore potential ethical dilemmas sexuality researchers might encounter in the course of running their lab; and I offer recommendations for best practices.

Positionality and Experience

I am a white, middle-class, atheist, queer, nonbinary person based in and educated in the United States. I have been a sexuality and gender researcher for 15 years. My training is in experimental social psychology as well as feminist theory and methodology. I have managed two sexuality research labs for seven years in total, during which time I also managed three multi-method field studies that included behavioral observations, physiological and cognitive data collection, and self-report questionnaires. I have supervised 32 undergraduate research assistants on a variety of research tasks, including literature searching, data collection and analysis, manuscript writing, and conference presentations. Throughout these experiences, I have encountered different ethical dilemmas, which I will discuss in greater detail below.

Codes of Ethics as a Starting Point

Researchers may choose to focus on topics related to gender and sexuality across several disciplines, such as psychology, sociology, social work, medicine, criminology, and public health (though this is certainly not an exhaustive list). As members of their respective professional and academic associations, researchers, or principal investigators (PIs) are likely to be bound by different codes of ethics. However, there is considerable overlap in these codes, particularly as they relate to treatment of research and research participants. Below I discuss relevant common themes across these multiple codes of ethics, particularly as they relate to managing a sexuality research lab.

Ethical Principles and Standards

After reviewing the codes of ethics for six U.S.-based professional associations (American Psychological Association [APA], American Sociological Association [ASA], National Association for Social Work [NASW], American Medical Association [AMA], American Society of Criminology [ASC], and American Public Health Association [APHA]), I found five major principles that appeared in some form across them: (1) equity and justice; (2) privacy; (3) respect; (4) integrity; and (5) responsibility. These principles...
relate not only to the processes of conducting and disseminating research but also can be used as guidelines for setting up and managing a research lab. For example, equity and justice apply to hiring research assistants, compensating them, and treating them well. Responsibility can pertain to a PI’s obligation to provide mentorship for colleagues and students. In Table 1, I connect these five principles across each of the codes of ethics and provide practical applications for them in the context of managing a sexuality research lab.

Practical Issues and Ethical Dilemmas

With little formal training in managing a research lab, academics are nonetheless often expected to hit the ground running when they obtain a position at a college or university. Below I consider several aspects of starting and managing a research lab in a higher education setting, incorporating the ethical guidelines discussed above as a way to navigate ethical dilemmas that can arise.

Issue No. 1: Setting Up the Lab

Particularly at research-intensive institutions, academics are expected to set up a lab when they accept a tenure-track position. Your offer might come with start-up funds to get the lab underway, or you may need to seek external funding via government or private grants. As a new PI setting up your lab, determining whether to begin as a sexuality lab is an early decision to make. I cover this topic in more depth in the next section, but in doing sexuality research, there are two major routes to take, with differing levels of risk. Waiting until you have established a non-sex-related line of research can be a better course of action for PIs right out of graduate school, particularly if there is concern over whether your institution would support you or whether you could secure external funding for your research. External funding is increasingly more competitive in the current economic and political climate, and funders and agencies may be less willing to award money to projects exploring sexuality or topics that could be considered controversial by the public.

In addition to figuring out how the lab will cover research equipment and expenses, PIs might be encouraged or interested in hiring undergraduate and/or graduate research assistants. These student researchers can be trained (for the undergraduate level) or assigned to tasks that help the lab run smoothly, such as running participants through lab studies, searching for research articles for a manuscript in progress, double-checking analyses, as well as presenting lab research at conferences. Because of the unique workplace norms of academia – with its greater latitude to accommodate students’ needs – managing a lab of students brings with it some unique complications. Ongoing discussions of power dynamics in research labs across academia (Jacy & Hegarty, 2019; Sutton, Culatta, Boyle, & Turner, 2021; Young & Wiley, 2021) and high-profile cases of researchers sexually harassing and victimizing their students (Anderson, 2020; Hartocollis, 2018; Kranz, 2022) point to a larger issue that PIs need to be mindful of. Particularly in a lab where the subject matter can lend itself to more intimacy, it’s critical that PIs establish strong boundaries for both their undergraduate and graduate students.

Ethical Dilemma: Is It Unethical to Be Friends with Your Research Assistants?

The academic culture of conference socials, happy hours, and working late nights in the lab can contribute to fuzzy boundaries for relationships. In a greater social context where discussions about sex are taboo, it can be easy to bond with lab-mates around shared interest in a research topic. This can be intensified on research projects that include travel and/or field components, as the traditional norms of the workplace are disrupted. An added complication is that at institutions with graduate programs, undergraduate research assistants frequently work closely with graduate research assistants who may have supervisory power over them.

All of these elements added together can lead to a variety of situations that range from awkward or uncomfortable to predatory. As the PI, it’s imperative to set clear boundaries about expected behavior, whether in the lab or in the field. It should also be clear that while PIs may be friendly with their research assistants, they are not friends, in a way similar to an instructor/student relationship or any other supervisor/employee relationship.

Issue No. 2: Choosing a Topic to Study

The fundamental aspect of a sexuality lab is that the researchers are investigating questions related to sexuality. This can range from basic research, such as biological functions and brain imaging, to applied research, such as therapeutic efficacy or sexual violence interventions, to policy research, such as best practices for sexual education or STI prevention programming. As mentioned in the last section, researchers might start off their career exploring sexuality and gender topics or wait until their lab (and funding) is established before embarking on a sex-related program of research. Because of the potential costs to engaging in sexuality research, such as sparse funding, lack of institutional support, and the reasonable fear of public backlash, researchers should be mindful of the risks of conducting this research.

Some topics and some research questions have the potential to harm the population the research is investigating (e.g., see Tart-Zelvin & Xu, 2016 for a discussion of the shift toward gender equality in neuroimaging). An example of this is gender and sexual minority (GSM) research. In the context of a worsening anti-queer political climate and passage of legislation banning transgender individuals from sports, healthcare, and public space (Burns, 2021; Krishnakumar, 2021, it is important to explore the impact that individual and institutional homophobia and transphobia have on GSM individuals. However, studies that seek to pinpoint a biological cause of non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgender identity can be harmful to GSM individuals, as significant findings can be used to support conversion therapy-style techniques to attempt to “change them back” to heterosexual and/or cisgender identities (see Turban, 2020). Researchers investigating GSM topics, particularly researchers who are not members of a GSM themselves, should be aware of the potential implications of their studies, and should endeavor to include members of the population they are investigating on their research team. Doing so will help researchers process the real-world consequences their work might have on the population under study. Regardless of how well-intentioned researchers are, it’s critical to be aware of how the study and outcomes can impact participants and their community.

Ethical Dilemma: Is It Unethical to Study Sexual Victimization Experiences?

Since my undergraduate education, I have been interested in studying sexual violence, first from the perpetration side (as with my undergraduate independent study on pedophilia) then shifting to the victimization side, focusing on beliefs and attitudes that shape our perceptions of victims of sexual violence (Klement, Sagarin, & Skowronska, 2022; Bates, Klement, Kaye, & Pennington, 2019; Klement, Sagarin, & Skowronska, 2019; Klement, 2018; Klement, 2017). Studying sexual violence can be risky for participants: individuals who have engaged in sexual violence risk being identified and facing social or legal sanctions, while individuals who have experienced sexual victimization risk traumatic reactions to questions about their experiences. For PIs wanting to attend to the principles of respect and responsibility, there is some research indicating that even for participants with a history of sexual victimization, the benefits outweigh the costs. Yeater, Miller, Rinehart, and Nation (2012) conducted a study with college students to determine if they experienced more negative consequences from participating in studies concerning sexual violence compared to more harmless...
Table 1
Concordance of multidisciplinary ethical principles in running a sexuality research lab

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethical Principle</th>
<th>Organizational Standards</th>
<th>Practical Applications</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Justice</td>
<td>• AMA (Justice)</td>
<td>• Hiring research assistants regardless of skill level</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• APA (Justice)</td>
<td>• Providing training and skill-building opportunities for all research assistants</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• APHA (Health Justice and Equity)</td>
<td>• Compensating research assistants on the same scale (i.e., ensuring pay equity)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• NASW (Social Justice)</td>
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<td>Privacy</td>
<td>• AMA (Autonomy)</td>
<td>• Maintaining confidential personnel records</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• APA (Respect for People’s Rights and Dignity)</td>
<td>• Not disclosing research assistants’ and colleagues’ marginalized identities</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• APHA (Human Rights and Civil Liberties)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• ASC (ASC Members Respect the Rights of Research Populations)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• ASA (Professional Competence)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• NASW (Competence)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respect</td>
<td>• AMA (Autonomy)</td>
<td>• Working with research assistants to adjust duties or hours as needed</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• APA (Respect for People’s Rights and Dignity)</td>
<td>• Accommodating students who may need a break from a specific project(s)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• APHA (Human Rights and Civil Liberties)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• ASC (ASC Members Respect the Rights of Research Populations)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• ASA (Respect for People’s Rights, Dignity, and Diversity)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• NASW (Dignity and Worth of the Person)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Integrity</td>
<td>• APA (Integrity)</td>
<td>• Maintaining transparency in research processes and procedures</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• APHA (Professionalism and Trust)</td>
<td>• Maintaining transparency around authorship responsibilities and opportunities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• ASC (ASC Members Strive to Maintain Objectivity and Integrity in the Conduct of Criminological Research)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• ASA (Integrity)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• NASW (Integrity)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibility</td>
<td>• APA (Fidelity and Responsibility)</td>
<td>• Maintaining appropriate socio-emotional boundaries with research assistants</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• APHA (Professionalism and Trust)</td>
<td>• Writing letters of recommendation for jobs or graduate school</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• ASA (Professional and Scientific Responsibility, Social Responsibility)</td>
<td>• Staying current on best practices for research design, methodology, and analysis</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• NASW (Competence)</td>
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Note: AMA = American Medical Association; APA = American Psychological Association; APHA = American Public Health Association; ASC = American Society of Criminology; ASA = American Sociological Association; NASW = National Association for Social Work
measures, such as cognitive tests. Yeater et al. (2012) found that the group of participants who completed studies exploring sex and sexual violence reported greater positive affect and perceived more benefits and fewer costs to the research than did the other group of participants, and across both groups, participants reported regular life stressors as causing more distress than participating in either of the studies. Further, in a meta-analysis of 70 samples of participant reactions to trauma research, Jaffe and colleagues (2015) found that even if participants experienced emotional distress, this distress did not last long. The studies in Jaffe et al.’s (2015) meta-analysis do not speak to the risks of reporting whether one had committed sexual violence, but if the informed consent clearly explains that participants do not have answer every question, participants’ right to privacy should be upheld.

However, the risks to participants are not the only ones to consider when conducting sexual victimization research. Because the research process is long, even conducting one study can mean at least months of reading related literature, talking about the research topic, analyzing and interpreting results, and writing a report. Researchers with emotional connections to their topics should consider strategies for self-care around their work and should be prepared to take breaks if necessary to maintain their health.

Issue No. 3: Conducting Research

Once the lab has been established and the topic selected, it is time to begin conducting the research. Depending on discipline, the methods and designs of sexuality studies will vary greatly. Public health researchers might rely on large-scale epidemiological cohort studies to explore STI risk factors, while medical researchers might utilize randomized control trials to investigate the effects of a new hormonal birth control. Aligned with the principles of integrity and responsibility, PIs should ensure that they have the proper training in methodology and analysis for a given research study.

Ethical Dilemma: Is It Unethical to Observe and Record Sexual Behavior?

Sexuality researchers have employed a variety of methods that can get quite invasive, from interviews and focus groups, to physiological gauges and brain imaging. Sometimes, though, the best way to answer questions about how individuals engage in specific sexual acts is to observe them in those acts. There are many major ethical issues to consider prior to conducting sexuality research that includes observing and/or recording individuals having sex. Below I contrast two field studies that featured behavioral observations as a major component of the project: Humphreys’ (1975) tearoom trade study and the Dance of Souls study (Klement et al., 2017).

The Tearoom Trade

The case of Humphreys’ (1975) tearoom trade research is widely discussed in psychology and sociology. Humphreys investigated men’s experiences with casual sex partners for his doctoral dissertation. In particular, he observed men in public restrooms seeking and receiving anonymous sex from other men, without initially disclosing that he was a researcher (Lehmiller, 2012). He would offer to be a lookout for his participants against police officers, observe the men, then disclose his researcher status and ask the men questions about their motivations. Additionally, he followed some men to parking lots, noted their license plate numbers, and later visited their homes for interviews, disguised as a health service interviewer (Sieber & Tolich, 2013).

There are several ethical issues with how Humphreys conducted his research, but I will focus on the aspects that are relevant to fieldwork. First, Humphreys did not disclose his status as a researcher when he first approached potential participants. While this choice allowed him to observe behavior uncontaminated by the knowledge that he was a researcher, it also meant that participants did not have informed consent, and did not have adequate information to be able to determine whether they would want to participate in the study. Second, Humphreys’ actions violated the participants’ right to privacy (Sieber & Stanley, 1988): because they were unaware of being observed by a researcher, they were unable to decide what information or behavior they did not want to disclose. Finally, by copying down license plates for a later follow-up interview, Humphreys did not allow the participants determine how much of the study they wanted to participate in, or what parts from which they could withdraw.

When conducting field studies, it is important that individuals are fully informed about the expectations, risks, and benefits for participating prior to giving consent. Researchers engaging in fieldwork should also be aware of any inherent power dynamics between participants through culture, gender, ethnicity, or other identities (Sultana, 2007). By hiding his status from participants who were engaging in illegal sexual activity in a public restroom, and by tracking down individuals via license plate, Humphreys was not considering his position as a researcher. Further, he was putting individuals at risk for legal and social sanctions. Particularly when engaging in fieldwork for a sexuality study, the context of the sexual behavior must be taken into account; in this situation, Humphreys should have identified himself prior to engaging in any behavioral observation, even if it meant that he would collect fewer data, or that the data collection would take longer.

The Dance of Souls

The ethnographic investigation of the Dance of Souls provides a counter-example to how sexuality fieldwork can be conducted with the concerns of participants foregrounded. Members of the Science of BDSM Research Team (myself included) conducted a field study in Phoenix, Arizona at a BDSM (bondage/discipline, dominance/submission, sadism/masochism) conference (Klement et al., 2017). The field study was centered around an event called the Dance of Souls, a “160-person ritual involving temporary piercings with weights or hooks attached and dancing to music provided by drummers” (Klement et al., 2017 p. 453). Participants for the study were recruited throughout the weekend-long conference and the procedures for the study were explained. Participants could opt-in to any of the study’s measures; all questions and samples were voluntary. The entire procedure comprised three temporal surveys (pre-Dance, during-Dance, and post-Dance), a cognitive test, and saliva samples collected during the Dance. Those who opted into any of the measures were able to choose when to complete them while they were available (e.g., participants could not complete a pre-Dance survey after the Dance). Following the BDSM conference, an email was sent to individuals who had signed up for the researchers’ mailing list with a thank-you message. After the data were analyzed, the researchers returned to the conference the following year to present the findings.

There are several distinctions between Humphreys’ (1975) study and the Dance of Souls study (Klement et al., 2017). First, the researchers were identifiable at all times during the conference. They staffed a table in a visible spot of the conference hotel and were available throughout the conference to answer questions about the study. Second, Klement et al. provided an extensive informed consent procedure. Due to the social and legal taboo nature of practicing BDSM, indication of consent was verbal; after reading the informed consent document, participants were asked to verbally consent prior to completing any measures. Further, individuals were able to begin participating in the study at any point, whether prior to or during the Dance. Third, participants were informed about the opt-in nature of the measures and thus the ease with which they could withdraw from any aspect of the study. Finally, no identifying information was collected from the participants. They chose codenames for themselves to identify their data across administrations; participants were advised that these codes should not have any names or numbers that could be traced back to the participant. Separately, any conference attendees (whether or not they were study participants) were able to add their emails to a mailing list sheet; thus, there was no record of identifying information regarding who did or did not participate in the study.
Though these two studies are contrasted here, there are important differences of both temporal and sociocultural context. At the time of Humphreys’ project, sexual behavior between same-gender partners was still criminalized; the risk to participants would have been high. This risk was potentially offset by the potential benefit of scientific knowledge, both in the sense of understanding how and why men were having sex in public toilets, but also with a goal of destigmatizing queer sex. While using an opt-in system of participation led to lower sample sizes for some measures than desired, Klement et al. (2017) felt the trade-off, where participants were able to participate or withdraw as they were comfortable, was worth it. This field study allowed the researchers to build a relationship with the conference attendees, and when the researchers returned to present their research the following year, they were well-received. This study led to a second field study at a later Dance of Souls ritual, which included more invasive procedures (Lee et al., 2016). Because the researchers had laid the groundwork of the relationship of trust within the conference community, they were able to develop more intensive research protocol, and answer more detailed questions.

Issue No. 4: Disseminating Research Findings

Once the data have been collected for a given project, the time has come to analyze them and prepare the results to be presented in some format (assuming the findings are statistically significant or otherwise viable). Particularly in a lab of both graduate and undergraduate students, there are several possibilities for how the data can be presented, including student-focused or campus conferences, (inter)national or regional conferences, and publication in a peer-reviewed journal. For research conducted with a specific community or population, a presentation might be arranged for an audience of participants or community stakeholders.

Under the principles of justice, respect, integrity, and responsibility, PIs should be transparent about authorship responsibilities related to any presentations or publications. Ideally, authorship credit and obligations would be determined prior to the beginning of a project, so that the PI, the research assistants and any colleagues are aware of what they need to contribute in advance. However, with the changing nature of the academic year, funding, and other surprises (like a global pandemic), the authorship order may be subject to change, with open discussion of everyone on it.

Sharing research findings may also happen online, via social media accounts or a lab website. Hosting presentation visuals and journal articles on a lab website can be a way around the paywalls common in academic publishing, which can increase the reach and accessibility of your lab’s work. Similarly, by posting major research findings on social media, the lab can reach a wider audience, which can lead to further funding, conference presentations, and project collaborations. There are drawbacks, however, to having a large web presence as a sexuality researcher. Sex-positive, queer- or trans-centered, or otherwise progressive sexuality research can attract negative attention from conservative outlets and internet trolls which may open the possibility of receiving harassing messages and emails. This risk is higher for PIs belonging to marginalized groups. Thus, an open and exhaustive cost/benefit analysis may be necessary in deciding whether or not to have lab social media accounts. I address this further below in the recommendations.

Ethical Dilemma: Is It Unethical to Present Problematic Findings?

For PIs working with marginalized communities, there may be an underlying concern through the research process about what the results will say: will they confirm stereotypes and outdated beliefs? Could a study’s findings harm the community the research is trying to help? In the discussion of Issue No. 2, I mentioned that consideration of a study’s potential outcomes is necessary when working with specific populations, such as GSM, who have historically been pathologized in psychology and medicine. This consideration must come at every step of the research process, yet what is to be done if the results of the study are unfavorable despite the researchers’ engaging in reflexivity, having a mixed research group, and utilizing available participant protections?

Under the principles of integrity and responsibility, PIs have a duty to accurately report a study’s findings. However, there are still strategies that researchers can use to put a study’s results in the proper context. First, consider the analysis: is a deficit model or a strengths-based model being used? For example, say a study finds that one group of participants reports a greater number of sexual partners than another group. Are the results being presented as frequencies of sexual partners, or are they being compared? What is the need of comparison and what are the implications of making that comparison? Who is the anchor group? Historically, white participants, straight participants, cisgender participants, and middle-class participants have been used as anchor groups to compare against other marginalized participants. PIs can consider the need to compare groups at all and for marginalized groups, can consider what unique features this community can bring to scientific knowledge about the topic.

Recommendations for Ethically Running a Sexuality Lab

In the sections above, I have detailed issues that may arise during the course of establishing and running a lab that studies sexuality. In this section, I will provide concrete recommendations for running a sexuality lab centered on ethical practice and participant care.

Recommendation No. 1: Know Your Subject

Multiple professional codes of ethics include the standard of competence (ASA, 2018; NASW, 2021). Researchers should be knowledgeable about their area of study. This knowledge encompasses the entire research process, from the selection of the topic to the training of research assistants to the dissemination of the results. Section 2.01(b) in the APA's Code of Conduct specifically mentions that researchers should be aware of intersectional factors that may affect the research process (APA, 2017): sexuality researchers need to understand the historical and cultural context of their subject. For example, if working on a project related to HIV education and prevention, researchers should be aware of racial disparities in HIV diagnoses, particularly as Black individuals are less likely to have access to health care (Priest & Williams, 2018) and more likely to be stereotyped as hypersexual (Miller, 2019). Further, Black men who have sex with men may carry internalized stigma around their HIV diagnosis on top of their experiences with externalized and internalized homophobia (Overstreet et al., 2013), which also highlights the necessity of using intersectional theory as a framework (Bowleg, 2008; Hill Collins, 2019).

Recommendation No. 2: Locate Your Position

While more common in qualitative research, a sexuality lab using any research methodology would benefit from creating a positionality statement, whether for the lab, for individual researchers, or both. Positionality is the space that researchers occupy in their social categories (e.g., racial identity, gender identity) and in their academic privilege relative to participants (Gabbidon & Chen- neville, 2021; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Particularly with research on the experiences of marginalized populations, creating a statement that acknowledges historical and contemporary privilege and context can create transparency and trust with participants (APA, 2017; ASA, 2018; NASW, 2021; Lake, Majic, & Maxwell, 2018). Discussing how researchers’ social lens can impact the research process will also allow for richer interpretation of data, whether they are quantitative or qualitative.
Recommendation No. 3: Connect with a Subject Matter Expert When Studying a Population

As a different perspective to the competence standard, it is also important to make connections with a community whose behavior or attitudes are being investigated. If a researcher is interested in studying puppy play, or role-playing as a dog (Wignall & McCormack, 2017; Wignall, 2022), they should seek to connect with a member of the puppy play community. This is important for four reasons: (1) this member can act as a gatekeeper, granting the researcher access to community events, and vouching for them to other members; (2) this member can be a source to provide feedback for research questions, including what variables to assess and what measures to use; (3) this member can provide the researcher with the correct language to use, particularly if there are community dialects; and (4) this member can provide feedback for the researcher’s interpretation of the study’s findings.

Recommendation No. 4: Provide Extensive Training for Research Assistants

Regardless of what type of research a lab investigates, research assistants should be properly trained in research protocol and ethical treatment of human subjects. For a lab investigating socially sensitive topics such as sexuality, research assistants should receive intensive training in three key areas: (1) using the correct language for marginalized populations under study, such as correct gender pronouns for trans and non-binary participants; (2) handling participant problems, either those who are affected emotionally by the content, or those who may harass the assistants; and (3) informed consent for the assistants themselves. Research assistants should be aware of the area of study and its implications for their work; they should be instructed that they also have a right to withdraw and a right to privacy, particularly for more intensive data collections, such as field studies (Sieber & Tolich, 2013).

If research assistants are undergraduate students, there are additional implications. First, because of the power disparity they face, undergraduates may be more inclined to work on research they find unsettling because they are unaware they can choose not to. Similarly, it is important that they only be given tasks that fall within their zone of competency (ASA, 2018; NASW, 2021). Second, consider whether lab activities and projects can be aligned with any potential discipline-relevant comprehensive learning goals, such as the APA’s (2016) Guidelines for the Undergraduate Psychology Major. In particular, a sexuality lab project could fit with Goal 3, Ethical and Social Responsibility in a Diverse World, by having students explore and predict how beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors might be influenced by sociocultural factors. Goals 4, Communication, and Goal 5, Professional Development could also fit with research presentations and lab duties.

Graduate research assistants can also benefit educationally from being a part of a sexuality lab, beyond content mastery. Graduate assistants can have increased responsibility in training undergraduates, designing studies and analyzing results, and presenting findings to a variety of audiences. Particularly for those farther in their program or ABD, graduate students can take on more of a management role under the mentorship of the PI.

Recommendation No. 5: Have Detailed Procedures in Place for Handling Data

Prior to beginning data collection, the lab should have a document outlining the procedures for collecting and storing data. If data will be on paper, a fireproof lockbox should be used to store them until they are entered into statistical software; after the data have been entered, they can be moved to a larger safe for a pre-determined length of time (e.g., 5 years). This can also apply to signed informed consent forms. Identifiable data, such as participant sign-in sheets or study run sheets that track participants across conditions and administrations should be kept separate from the data. When the data across different administrations are matched, there should be procedures for how to handle the identifiable information. One option is to purge this part of the data from the larger dataset while destroying any identifiable data on paper. However, the destruction of these data can interfere with further data collection, as in a longitudinal project, or a follow-up study. Further, there are some governmental and institutional guidelines that require data storage for a set period of time. In the U.S., federal regulations require researchers to maintain research records for at least three years (45 CFR 46), while some institutions require original data to be retained for at least five years (University of Arkansas, 2016; University of Virginia, n.d.). If maintaining research data with identifiable information for long-term storage, use best practices such as encryption and restricted access to ensure the data remain safe.

Additionally, prior to data collection, the researcher should determine whether the data will be posted in a public forum, such as the Open Science Foundation website (https://osf.io/). If there is a plan to publicly post data, this should be included in the informed consent information, so that participants are aware that their data may be viewable after the study (though it will be de-identified), with an option for participants to opt-out of having their data included in a public dataset.

Recommendation No. 6: Communicate Through Regular Meetings

Because of the sensitive nature of topics studied in sexuality labs, it is important to touch base regularly with all lab members. Weekly or biweekly meetings can help to bring issues and problems immediately to the PI’s attention and to resolve them quickly (Danovitch et al., 2010). Regular meetings can also help research assistants in interpretation of data, especially if they are working on qualitative projects, such as interview or focus group data. These meetings can also serve as a way to check in on the research protocols in use and to determine if there are any unexpected negative effects being reported by participants.

Recommendation No. 7: Have a Plan for Dealing with the Press

While the public may not always express enthusiasm at general psychology findings, sexuality is a broad topic that most individuals have strong attitudes about. As a result, particularly provocative sexuality research findings may be picked up by popular media. This can lead to interviews with researchers, either in print or on camera. While this can certainly be an exciting experience for a researcher, it is important to be circumspect when being interviewed. Researchers should be careful not to stray too far from their paper’s conclusions and the limits of the data. However, once the journalist has finished the interview, the researcher’s contributions are generally over, and they have no way of altering a narrative set up by the journalist. For example, if a researcher is interviewed about the finding that individuals can reach a certain altered state during orgasm, no matter how cautiously the data are interpreted by the researcher in the interview, the journalist may extrapolate those data into other domains than sexuality. In turn, other journalists may catch onto that narrative, and the story may take interesting turns from there.

A good procedure to have in place when publishing sexuality research is to keep in contact with the university marketing department. Likely they will employ individuals who can send out press releases to media organizations to generate interest in the research, and they can establish the right tone and boundaries of the results through these press releases (Rhodes, 2015).

Recommendation No. 8: Maintain a Social Media Presence

In direct relation to Recommendation #7, having a social media presence can be extremely helpful for a sexuality researcher. First, if there is popular press coverage on a paper that is inaccurate about key points, the researcher can attempt to correct the inaccuracy via a blog or social media page, such as Facebook or Twitter.
Second, social media is a good way to maintain connections with other sexuality researchers, as well as members of a population under study. Potential participants can reach out to researchers over social media, which can be a less intimidating interaction medium than the phone or email. Third, being active on social media can lead to ideas for new directions in research, by observing trending sexuality topics in popular media and by direct conversations with other individuals. Finally, maintaining a social media presence can be a job easily delegated to a research assistant, as a way for them to be involved in a less-intense aspect of the lab.

There are also a few things to keep in mind when using social media to promote your research, particularly if your projects could be considered explicit or graphic. Each social media platform has rules about the type of content they allow; ensure that whoever is running your account(s) is aware of the rules and standards around sexual content. Depending on the platform, text or visual euphemisms may be necessary or preferred when talking about your project findings.Engaging with fellow researchers and a broader audience via social media can be rewarding, but if the energy and attention needed gets to be too much, step back and focus on a different method of dissemination.

Conclusion

Running a sexuality lab can be challenging, but it can also be extremely gratifying. Researchers who seek to explore sexuality topics should be aware of potential ethical issues that may arise in the course of their research, from the collection and management of data, to the observation of participants’ rights, to the dissemination of research results. Above, I have discussed several different types of potential ethical issues and made recommendations for how to ethically manage a sexuality research lab. However, other issues could develop through the course of such research. Sexuality researchers should always be proactive about educating themselves and their assistants regarding ethical treatment of participants. Doing so will help them maintain valuable relationships with colleagues, supervisors, and, most importantly, participants.

References


Perceptions of Young Women Who Engage in Anal Sex: A Sociological Inquiry

Despite data suggesting that anal sex is increasingly common among heterosexual individuals, women who engage in anal sex have had little attention in academic scholarship beyond medical fields. Research on anal sex is typically androcentric, with many key studies examining the dynamics of male-male sexual practices. Moreover, research reporting anal sex among young women is often accompanied with concerns around coercion and health risks. Taking a critical view, we argue that normative assumptions about anal sex may obscure or ignore other ways that women and others might engage in anal sex, and, given the emphasis on harm reduction, may obscure a range of reasons for involvement in anal sex. Through focus groups and individual interviews with a range of individuals (n=20) including sexual health practitioners and young people, aged 19-56 years, our qualitative pilot study generated detailed discussion on (1) how anal sex is perceived in general (‘what’ practices constitute anal sex, who might be involved, and why), and (2) specifically how it is perceived in relation to young women. This paper focuses on the second area and three resultant analytic themes: why women may engage in anal sex, women’s bodies and gendered agency, and sexual literacy. We conclude that meaningful sex and relationships education and sexual health services could usefully adopt a more nuanced appreciation of the range of practices that can comprise anal sex, and that some young women engage in anal sex for a variety of reasons (beyond coercion) including pleasure, bodily autonomy and relationship dynamics.

Keywords: anal sex, young women, sexual health, sex and relationships education, sexual literacy, agency

Introduction

Women who engage in anal sex have had little attention in academic scholarship beyond medical fields. Research on anal sex is typically androcentric, with many key studies examining the dynamics of male-male anal sexual practices (for example, see Chow et al., 2016; Hart et al., 2016; Macapagal et al., 2018; Rice et al., 2016). This paper builds on the work of Wood et al. (2019) who scrutinised evaluative interviews with sex educators and sexual health practitioners who had attended training and adopted resources produced by a center for sexual health in a UK city that aimed to promote pleasure-informed positive sexualities and relationships education (SRE). Their analysis highlighted participants’ concerns regarding young women’s involvement in anal sex. Concerns over the wellbeing and sexual health of women who engage in anal sex have been covered extensively in medical literature. Studies have addressed a variety of challenges that include (a) reducing HIV and other STI transmission (Baggaley et al., 2013, Maynard et al., 2009, Owen et al., 2015), (b) condom usage (Hensel et al., 2010), (c) accompanying ‘risky’ sexual behaviors such as drug and alcohol use and multiple partners (Hutton et al., 2013), sex work (Rahmani et al., 2021), sexting (Beckmeyer et al., 2019; Rice et al., 2018) or (d) heterosexual anal sex as coercive, painful and unsafe (Marston & Lewis, 2014) and/or leading to health concerns including anal malignancy (McBride & Fortenberry, 2010). Many of these studies, to their credit, posit the responsibility of health care providers to ask young women about their sexual engagement to improve HIV/STI and other health risk aversion strategies. However, such concerns derive mainly from quantitative studies and appear to inhere assumptions about ‘what’ constitutes ‘anal sex engagement’, with penetration of the anus by a penis (commonly referred to as anal intercourse or AI in medical literature) viewed as the primary practice under investigation. Our study aimed to problematise this assumption and contribute to bridging the gap in sociologically driven, qualitative research on perceptions about anal sex involving young women. Specifically, we sought to explore the range of practices that can comprise anal sex, and the reasons why young women might engage in anal sex.
Porta and Last (2018: np) define anal sex in the Oxford Dictionary of Public Health as
sexual intercourse consisting of the insertion of the penis through the anal sphincter into the partner's rectum. This form of intercourse is used mainly by male homosexuals, and sometimes by heterosexual couples to avoid risking pregnancy or to vary sexual pleasure. It can be a way to transmit sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV infection.

This definition omits consideration of anal play involving oral sex (rimming), penetration using sex toys and/or fingers, or anal sex involving two or more partners that do not have penises. Taking a critical view, we argue that these normative assumptions about anal sex may obscure or ignore other ways that women and others might engage in anal sex, and, given the emphasis on harm reduction, may obscure a range of reasons for involvement. Further, Wood and colleagues’ (2019) research also found that sexual health education and services for women and girls neglected inclusion of anal sex, highlighting a significant gap in educational provision and the potential for inaccurate case histories and omissions in resultant care and treatment (Gana & Hunt, 2022). This research follows on from such findings and is intended to develop deeper understanding of anal sex and young women and the concern that can accompany narratives on this population group.

**Background**

Studies examining prevalence rates of anal sex are limited. Various studies highlight conflicting prevalence rates but an increasing trend overall. Only 13 papers met the inclusion criteria in a global study by Owen et al. (2015) whose systematic review and meta-analysis of heterosexual anal intercourse among young people found an overall prevalence rate of 22%, “with no statistically significant differences by gender, continent or age” (p. 1338). However, in a study of 20 cities in the USA, 30-44% of men and women reported experiences of anal sex (Hess et al., 2016). Frederick et al. (2017), also in the USA, found that twice as many people engage in anal stimulation as anal intercourse, for the purpose of pleasure. More recently, Statista (2023) reported that around 40% of people (of all ages) have tried anal sex in the USA, highlighting an increase from 39% in 2020 and 2021, and 31% in 2001. In Britain, the National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles (Lewis et al., 2017) showed a rise in reported heterosexual anal intercourse over the past twenty years from 12.5% to 28.5% among 16- to 24-year-olds.

Specific studies on women are also limited. Among them, Carlos et al.’s (2019) study of women in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo, found that of 718 participants reporting heterosexual sex, 59% had oral sex, 22% engaged in anal sex, and 18% engaged in both. In contrast, 1% of 386 Tanzanian young women (aged 17-18 years) reported engagement in anal sex (Francis et al., 2019). Albeit in different geographic and cultural contexts. Benson et al. (2015) found that more than one-third of women in the U.S. have engaged in heterosexual anal intercourse. Similarly, Habel, et al. (2018) reported that 33.2% of U.S. women had engaged in anal sex at least once. Statista (2022) reported an increase among women in France who said they had had anal sex from 1% in 1970 to more than 50% in 2021. Gana and Hunt (2022) identified similar trends, arguing that “anal intercourse is becoming more common among heterosexual couples” (np).

In sum, prevalence data on anal sex appears to be variable, with geographic, contextual, and intersectional factors seemingly influencing engagement in anal sex and/or willingness to disclose accurate accounts of personal experience. Notably, terms used across different studies are rarely critiqued or standardised, with anal intercourse and anal sex used interchangeably despite the potential for interpretive distinctions between these terms. Nonetheless, rates appear to be rising, and as Maierhofer et al. (2018) posit, anal sex “… is, simply, normal behaviour” (p. 783) with a higher proportion of U.S. adolescents and adults engaging in anal sex intercourse than have a Twitter account. Given the shifting landscape surrounding discussions about both engagement in, and willingness to discuss, anal sex, it is important to examine the qualitative meaning and terminology used to describe anal sex.

McBride and Fortenberry (2010) conducted the first systematic review on heterosexual anal sex looking in a variety of areas. They found that “heterosexual anal intercourse is associated with increased risk for HIV and other genital and anal sexually transmitted infections” (p. 123). Indeed, a significant amount of research on anal sex has focused specifically on HIV prevention (e.g. Evans et al., 2018; Herbert et al., 2015; McBride & Fortenberry, 2010; Owen et al., 2017). Research on women’s engagement in anal sex, beyond the parameters of HIV prevention, is a relatively new field of inquiry. While the sexual health implications of various sexual behaviors are no doubt important, McBride and Fortenberry (2010) note that little attention is paid to women’s agency when engaging in anal sex, with most studies (at that time) overlooking the role of pleasure. It is unclear whether Gana and Hunt (2022) acknowledged a model of pleasure-based sexuality in their research, linking increasing rates of anal sex among heterosexuals to “an increase in pornography media”, but they did find that “it is no longer considered an extreme behaviour but increasingly portrayed as a prized and pleasurable experience” (np). Utilizing pleasure-based principles in sexual health promotion is arguably beneficial in reducing overall harm while promoting safety, bodily autonomy, and desire (Allen, 2023; Race, 2008). However, sociological understandings on women’s engagement in anal sex is particularly underdeveloped. For instance, it is unclear (a) how women define ‘anal sex’, (b) what factors inform or influence choices to engage in anal activity, (c) the role of pleasure in such decision-making, and (d) how many women actually have experienced anal sex. Our research contributes to qualitatively examining some of these issues, notably a, b and c, but given its pilot status, more research with larger numbers of participants is planned.

Lewis at al. (2017) suggest that young heterosexual individuals are using oral and anal sex to complement rather than replace vaginal intercourse within their sexual repertoires. However, accurate rates of anal sex are difficult to document if self-disclosure is required; this is a limitation, given the stigma often associated with anal sex that may discourage admissions about engaging in anal sex (Benson et al., 2019). Also, as mentioned previously, there is reason to doubt that working definitions of anal sex are clear (for respondents) or representative of how people actually engage in anal sex. For example, McBride et al. (2017) found that men and older people are more likely to label analbehaviours as having ‘had sex’ than other cohorts, highlighting the need for specificity when conducting anal sex research. This is not uncommon, as what constitutes ‘having sex’ changes historically, culturally, and socially (for an overview see Lister, 2020) demonstrating that the meaning of sexual activity is socially constructed (Gagnon & Simon, 1973). Carpenter (2001, p. 127), for instance, argues that “people even disagree about which sexual acts constitute ‘real’ sex, as became apparent during the 1998 independent counsel investigation of President Clinton, in which classifying certain sexual activities as sex or as foreplay was a major point of contention.” To develop a deeper understanding of these definitional issues, our project explored what was understood by the term ‘anal sex’, through discussion of four broad questions: (i) What practices might be involved? (ii) Who might be involved? (iii) Who does what to whom? (iv) Are specific roles ascribed to either partner?, alongside investigating any concerns over young women’s engagement. A previous paper reported our analysis of findings on perceptions of anal sex (Hirst et al., 2022), with results suggesting current perceptions and narratives are limited and may have the potential to undermine honest education, advice-giving and safer sex if they are not questioned prior to working with young people. The present paper addresses this underinvestigated topic. We offer more specific findings on anal sex involving young women and any attendant concerns that participants have witnessed in their roles.
within sex education, sexual health services and/or working with young people.

Anal sex research pertinent to women is typically heteronormative and located in contexts with high prevalence of HIV, with most studies exploring male-female anal sex in African states, particularly South Africa (Carlos et al., 2019; Francis et al., 2019; Owen et al., 2017; Ybarra et al., 2018). Owen and colleagues (2017) justify this in stating that “South Africa is an important setting to examine patterns of heterosexual AI [anal intercourse], as it has the largest HIV epidemic driven by heterosexual sex in the world” (p. 1). However, this literature can overlook the intersectional relationship between gender, race, class and sexuality that might inform the agentic decisions employed by women who choose to engage in anal sex. While research on anal sex linked to HIV and STI transmission is no doubt important, and perhaps bound by funding ringfenced for HIV prevention and reduction, it also means the corpus of data on anal sex is medically rather than sociologically framed. Furthermore, according to McBride and Fortenberry (2010), research on non-intercourse anal sexual behaviour, including oral-anal contact, digital penetration, manual stimulation, and pegging, is scarce. The research that informs this paper aimed to contribute to filling the gap in sociologically informed research.

Maierhofer et al. (2018) caution that the terminology used in medical literature is of vital importance to furthering epistemological gains in anal sex studies. Indeed, the heteronormative assumptions made when researching anal sex can invisibilize queer women. There is limited literature on anal sex practices amongst gay, bi, and queer women. Ybarra and Mitchell’s (2016) national (USA) study of LGB and non-LGB sexual behavior found that 1% of lesbian, gay, and queer women and 14-28% of bisexual women had engaged with penile-anal sex with their most recent partner but give no details on the dynamics, nature, and types of anal sex practices or whether their partners were trans or cis women. Marrazzo et al.’s (2005) research with 23 lesbian and bi women aged 18-29 found that “… in each focus group, at least one woman indicated that she had never used a sex toy for either vaginal or anal sex … penetrative anal sex using a sex toy was acknowledged though viewed as less common” (p. 8) but give little information on rates, types, or dynamics of anal sex practices with queer women. Thus, we have little understanding of queer women’s relationship to anal sex. In addition, not all women who engage in male-female anal sex identify as heterosexual or in binary gendered terms and such language can exclude gender nonconforming and queer identities.

Currently, we also have a limited understanding of trans people’s engagement with anal sex. Out of a sample of 45 trans men who have sex with (cis)men, Sevelius (2009) found 70% had engaged in anal sex. Other studies focus on so-called ‘high risk’ individuals, compare rates of protected and unprotected sex, HIV transmission, and/or ‘risky’ practices. For example, Verre et al., (2014) explored associations between socialization patterns, unprotected anal sex and STIs among ‘high risk’ men who have sex with men (MSM) and transgender women (TW) in Peru and found that frequent attendance at MSM/TW venues (e.g., saunas, pornographic movie theaters/video arcades, “prostitution areas…transvestite houses” (pp. 2031, as defined by the researchers) was associated with increased prevalence of unprotected anal sex amongst trans participants. Also in Peru, Satcher et al., (2017) explored factors associated with HIV transmission and anal sex between transgender women and their partners, reporting that condomless insertive anal sex was more common amongst those with substance misuse issues and in interactions with transactional and casual partners, whereas condomless receptive anal sex was more common with primary partners. Cai et al. (2016) reported HIV prevalence of approximately 30% among trans women sex workers in China who had condomless receptive anal intercourse with male clients, noting means of client recruitment, charge per episode, perceptions and self-efficacy of condom use and engagement in “feminizing medical procedures” as mediating factors in condomless anal sex. Magno et al. (2018) also focused on unprotected receptive anal intercourse among Brazilian transgender women and highlighted that increased gender-based discrimination (GBD) in family relationships resulted in higher engagement in unprotected receptive anal intercourse (URAI) with stable partners as well as greater likelihood of engagement in survival sex work due to economic precarity.

Violence, victimization and depression were identified as mediators of condomless anal intercourse (CAI) in Wang et al.’s (2021) study of transgender women in China; transactional partners were more frequently violent and CAI was most frequently reported in relationships with greater intimacy, echoing Magno et al.’s (2018) and Satcher et al.’s (2017) findings. A study in San Francisco and Oakland, USA (Nemoto, et al., 2014) of trans women sex workers (n=573) found that 55% engaged in unprotected anal sex as the receptive partner with their primary partner, 30.8% with a casual partner, and 22.8% with commercial partners In short, aside from studies of trans sex workers, data to ascertain trans people’s engagement in anal sex as part of their wider sexual repertoire and relationships is particularly limited.

Arguably, the framing of much of this research relies on heteronormative social constructs of sex, which reinforce phallocentric scripts that value the role of the penetrator as male, aggressive, and dominant whereas the receiver is female, passive, and submissive (Austin, 2017). Such scripts dictate that sexual pleasure belongs to (cis) men with sex beginning with insertion of the penis and ending with the male orgasm (Diorio, 2016); women are the receptacles of male pleasure. In relation to anal sex, Mcbride and Fortenberry (2010, p. 132) argue that … there is a cultural assumption that women should view anal sex as undesirable or unerotic and that participation in the behavior can only legitimately result from some level of coercion of acquiescence. This perspective does not allow for wanted anal sex, which marginalizes the sexuality of women who find anal sex pleasurable or erotic.

Following on from Fahs and Gonzalez (2014) who found that anal intercourse was an increasingly normative yet stigmatized and coercive part of one’s sexual repertoire, McBride (2019) qualitatively explored attitudes towards penetrative anal intercourse amongst women aged 18-30. She found that anal intercourse was “constructed as a prevalent but highly stigmatized, painful act motivated by relational factors. However, themes related to a woman’s own sexual pleasure, desire, and curiosity also emerged” (2019, p. 370). Large, the desire for a woman to please her male partner sexually was the main motivator factor for engaging in anal intercourse. Interestingly, while participants in her study articulated the stigmas attached to penetrative anal intercourse, none of her participants associated stigma or pain with manual-anal stimulation and the use of sex toys for anal stimulation - attitudes towards non-penetrative anal stimulation were generally favorable. Our research sought to explore general perceptions of anal sex (see Hirst et al., 2022) and investigate concerns – if any – over women and girls engaging in anal sex.

Methodology

For the purposes of this exploratory pilot study, and given the sensitivities of asking people about anal sex (in general terms) and women and girls who engage in anal sex (specifically), we purposely recruited 20 participants who worked in sexual education and/or sexual health and/or had a vested interest in the topic. This choice was due to previous research in sexual health and sexuality youth work with young people, presupposing that these individuals might be less reticent to share their views and experiences. This current or previous role was the only inclusion criteria for the study. We did not stipulate the sex or gender for participation since condom use anal sex in general, and perceptions of anal sex and young women specifically, were the foci of the study, rather than women’s personal experiences of anal sex. Had the latter been the focus, identifying as a woman would have been an inclusion
criterion. Although this research did not specifically focus on queer and trans women, we emphasised that our definition of woman included both cis and trans women.

Participants were recruited through convenience sampling as the principal investigator held established links with local sexual health and youth work services (see Wood et al., 2019). Having received ethical approval from Sheffield Hallam University, invitations and information sheets were disseminated through these networks, inviting prospective participants to either a focus group of between 3-5 people or an individual interview (participants specified their preference), on the topic of anal sex in general and anal sex and young women specifically.

Given the exploratory nature of our pilot research and aim to encourage participants to debate with each other, we used focus groups to facilitate participants’ expression of their views and experiences and elicit input from other participants. As Morgan and Krueger (2013, p. 12) state, participants “may find that answering questions from the moderator and other participants makes them aware of things that they had not thought about before.” Thus, in contrast to surveys, in which one is often warned against asking about a topic if people do not have prior opinions, the interaction in focus groups can create a cuing phenomenon that has potential for extracting more information than other methods. Hence, the role of the facilitator during the focus groups and interviews was to offer non-judgmental cues, participatory exercises and questions that avoided phallocentric and heteronormative positions that assume anal sex involves penile-anal intercourse and to create ample space for latitude of responses. For instance, as an opening exercise we asked participants to write down the words they associated with the phrase ‘anal sex’ (as opposed to entering dialogue with the focus group facilitator) to minimize influence or prompting. Participants shared their responses with each other in the presence of the facilitator, and then the facilitator evoked further discussion by asking them to draw out the practices, identities, and narratives that their responses suggested in terms of ‘what’ anal sex is perceived to involve, ‘who’ is perceived to engage in anal sex, and ‘why’ (reasons and motivations for anal sex). Had women and anal sex not arisen organically in these conversations, participants would have then been asked for their views and perceptions, but given that participants were explicitly informed that the focus of the research was on anal sex and young women, discussion evolved without prompting.

Face-to-face or telephone interviews were conducted with those who could not join focus groups due to time or travel constraints or who opted to participate on an individual basis, using the same format as the focus groups. Throughout data collection, we emphasized that contributions were valid with no requirement to share information about themselves and/or friends, partners or children (some had teenage children for whom the topic felt relevant). As a result, participants often distinguished their references to public information about themselves and/or friends, partners or children. Given the exploratory nature of our pilot research and our aim to encourage participants to debate with each other, we used focus groups to facilitate participants’ expression of their views and experiences and elicit input from other participants. As Morgan and Krueger (2013, p. 12) state, participants “may find that answering questions from the moderator and other participants makes them aware of things that they had not thought about before.” Thus, in contrast to surveys, in which one is often warned against asking about a topic if people do not have prior opinions, the interaction in focus groups can create a cuing phenomenon that has potential for extracting more information than other methods. Hence, the role of the facilitator during the focus groups and interviews was to offer non-judgmental cues, participatory exercises and questions that avoided phallocentric and heteronormative positions that assume anal sex involves penile-anal intercourse and to create ample space for latitude of responses. For instance, as an opening exercise we asked participants to write down the words they associated with the phrase ‘anal sex’ (as opposed to entering dialogue with the focus group facilitator) to minimize influence or prompting. Participants shared their responses with each other in the presence of the facilitator, and then the facilitator evoked further discussion by asking them to draw out the practices, identities, and narratives that their responses suggested in terms of ‘what’ anal sex is perceived to involve, ‘who’ is perceived to engage in anal sex, and ‘why’ (reasons and motivations for anal sex). Had women and anal sex not arisen organically in these conversations, participants would have then been asked for their views and perceptions, but given that participants were explicitly informed that the focus of the research was on anal sex and young women, discussion evolved without prompting.

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Both interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed in full. Data were analysed using a thematic, inductive method with written codes produced and organized as data emerged (Nowell et al., 2017). Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-phase thematic framework was utilized by a team of five researchers. Each researcher individually coded all transcripts. The resulting codes were analyzed collectively to assess similarity and then refined, and transcripts were re-analyzed using these codes to find data that supported them. These codes were explored and analysed by the team and grouped into three core themes, discussed below. All researchers were involved at each stage of the process and frequent discussions were held to ensure reliability and consistency in each phase.

Results and Discussion

Three themes emerged from the discussions on anal sex specifically pertaining to women: ‘why women may engage in anal sex’, ‘women’s bodies and gendered agency’, and ‘sexual literacy’. These themes cover the rationale for why participants believed women would engage in anal sex, whether these reasons to participate in anal sex were agentic, and how a lack of knowledge of sex education (i.e., a woman’s sexual literacy), influences the ability to consensually engage in pleasurable sex generally and pleasurable anal sex specifically.

Why women may engage in anal sex

When asking participants why they thought women may engage in anal sex, a variety of reasons were articulated. Initially, participants suggested practical reasons, such as avoiding discomfort when menstruating (also found in Baggaley et al., 2013; Beckmeyer et al., 2019) or “it’s a way to avoid pregnancy” (Tim). Largely, these practical motivations were perceived as alternatives to the primary, vaginal sex, with penile-vaginal sex being viewed as ‘proper sex’ above other sexual activity.

...often when people talk about sex, they’re talking about penis-in-vagina sex and that’s what constitutes proper sex . . . (Olivia)

This was unsurprising as several previous studies indicate that penile-vaginal sex is often considered as the default sexual position (Hirst, 2012) especially when defining first sexual experiences (Boydell et al., 2021).

The assumption underpinning many of these responses viewed women as the receivers of anal intercourse and men as the penetrators. For example, as Ben articulated.

I think in my eyes, anal sex with genuine penetration and stuff is more the man to woman.

However, he went on to explain,

But, I think sort of softer anal sex, things like fingers and tongues ... I think both sides is pretty common. But strap-ons and dildos and stuff like that, I think that’s more taboo . . . I think guys getting, yes, by a girl with a strap-on is quiteemasculating . . . I don’t think many guys would be up for feeling that vulnerable as well because I think it does put someone in a very vulnerable position. (Ben)

Representations of the penis carry phallocentric constructions that imbue the phallus as a universal symbol of masculinity and dominance. Such constructs reinforce gendered and sexual scripts that can determine attitudes and behaviors when engaging in sexual activity (Diorio, 2016). As outlined by Ben, receptive anal sex through an object designed to represent the phallus, by a woman, was deemed emasculating. This was further reinforced by another participant who relayed:

I remember one young woman speaking to me about asking her new partner if she could anally penetrate him, and he was really uncomfortable with that . . . I think there’s always this idea that it’s going to be something that is . . . done to the woman . . . it’s this idea that you’re going to
be more passive and you’re going to be the recipient of something until your top [giver or inserter] reaches their climax … so I think it’s quite interesting to make some of those gender kind of imbalances. (Rebecca)

Many conversations, like these, centred male pleasure as a core rationale for why women engage in anal sex. Again, women were commonly viewed as the passive instigators of anal sex with engagement being something that a woman should endure rather than enjoy:

I think some young women are quite, “Oh, I really don’t want that. I wouldn’t want to even try it”. Or some young women have been saying, “It’s fine if you’re a bit drunk. You just need to be a little bit drunk so it doesn’t hurt”. … it’s something that you have to put up with rather than enjoy. (Julie)

As this comment suggests, numbing the perceived pain of anal sex through alcohol was viewed as a key factor in whether women engage in anal sex. The receptive anal partner was assumed to be the woman, and it was something done to her rather than her being an active, agentic participant. Indeed, women who were curious or wanting to engage in anal sex were framed as experiencing pressure from partners or peers:

I’ve had a few young women who’ve talked about it, if they are one-to-one, and asked… “How do you do it?” and, “Does it not hurt?” So, it’s clearly the pressure, but also curiosity around it as well. Could be pressure from peers or partner. (Cassie)

Some participants, however, asserted that pleasure had been absent from their focus groups or interview conversation, for example:

We haven’t talked about pleasure. (Olivia)

Yes, there’s pleasure. (Kate)

Like, the fact that actually a lot of people want to do it and enjoy it, and if they are able to – because I think we’re only thinking about the young people that might be feeling pressure. (Olivia)

This was affirmed by a participant with a counter narrative to the cultural perception that anal sex is inherently a coercive act, and that pleasure might play a role in young women’s decisions to choose to engage in anal sex:

… It can be enjoyable for a lot of people. That’s literally it, point blank, that is why people do it. Why do people have sex in general? Because it’s enjoyable. (Bella)

Omitting pleasure from discussion of anal sex in sex and relationships education limits the potential for raising self-knowledge and obscures anal pleasure in favour of anal risk. We argue that focusing on anal sex as a problem devoid of pleasure will not deter those who are interested in partaking voluntarily. Denying that pleasure can be a motivation for anal sex is dishonest and erroneous. Acknowledgement of the potential for pleasure would ideally occur within sex and relationships education, to help facilitate discussions with potential sexual partners on safer, consensual practices.

**Women’s bodies and gendered agency**

These initial conversations with participants (outlined above) segued into the gendered dimensions of anal sex, and the specific role of agency or choices made when engaging in anal sex. We were particularly interested in participants’ views on the types of choices women make in this context. When asked who the primary instigator of anal sex might be, most participants said men.

... in the vast majority of cases, we think it’s men that instigate it. And even when it’s women, in some cases, it’s because of what they think the man wants, so it sort of revolves around power ... we were saying it seems the majority are led by men, and men’s pleasure, and power of men over other people. (Lara)

This notion of what women or girls “think the man wants” reflects Holland et al.’s (1998) concept of “the male in the head” wherein young women in heterosexual relations internalize the systematic privileges of masculininity and find it difficult not to collude with male power and resist male dominance and desires. Carpenter (2001, p. 128) reminds us that “… different cultural groups, both within and across societies, interpret different activities as sexual and imbue different sexual practices with specific meanings.”

The young women in our research context of England displayed awareness of sexual scripts that are informed with patriarchal values and language (Jackson, 1984). It is therefore understandable that participants perceived anal sex using a traditional gendered lens with the woman as receiver and the male as giver, and the male as the primary instigator. Knowledge of gendered scripts and unequal power are not limited to women, as a young male participant suggested:

“I think sometimes if the guy sees porn, sees anal sex, he’s like, “I want to try that”. One of his mates has tried it. “Let’s do this”. She doesn’t feel that comfortable with it, but because she’s in this new relationship it’s like, “I want to please you”. I think it’s easy to exploit young girls, because they are not that sure of themselves yet. I think it’s a very insecure time. (Ben)

While women were framed as being at higher risk of persuasion or coercion regarding anal sex, and men as the primary instigator of anal sex, participants acknowledged that some women have agency and bodily autonomy to experiment with their bodies and sexuality. Perhaps unintentionally, the lens of experimentation frames anal sex – even when it is perceived as an act fully consented to and chosen by a woman – as non-normative, adventurous, or experimental:

It might be younger women who are a bit more experimental, or it might be older women who are a bit more confident really … I don’t know much about gay men, but for women, I think it feels right in some relationships and doesn’t in others. (Rosie)

For a woman it might be, “I’m not a liberated woman, or a free woman, until I’ve had anal sex”, or “I’m not an adventurous woman”. So, there’s something about rites of passage. It’s emblematic of their sexuality. (Paul)

Concerns were voiced regarding constraints that might impact women’s potential for agency, such as how informed they were about their anatomy, anal sex, and sex more generally. For instance, a lack of education that centred women’s bodies, sexuality, and sexual pleasure could inhibit some women from making informed choices about their sex lives:

... don’t think the clitoris is still particularly talked about in school, you know, as part of biology and not reproduction, just what your body does … Young women that I’ve spoken to, the thought of putting your hand down there and just have a feel and getting a mirror out and having a look, it’s like “eurgh”. There’s that revulsion with your own body, it’s heart-breaking. So, then to have a conversation about anal sex in a fully informed way is almost impossible because they don’t even know they’ve got a clitoris. (Jane)

For this participant, young women’s self-bodily revulsion was a significant barrier to experiencing pleasurable sex, together with a lack of knowledge about their anatomy, including the clitoris.
Although conversations around anal sex were said to be lacking, the lack of pleasure-based information and positive experiences for women was of concern to several sexual health practitioners who lamented that even ‘normative’ vaginal-penile sex was, in their professional experience, frequently a negative experience for women, so concerns over anal sex were more pronounced.

I just feel so, so worried … I just automatically think, so many people are having bad vaginal sex, so you can only imagine how many more people are having bad anal sex where there is just more possibility for pain. (Kate)

Ultimately, participants felt that more information on pleasure, vaginal and anal sex was a pre-requisite to a greater degree of agency by informing them about their own bodies.

It’s their bodies. It’s their bodies, give them the information. I’m talking teenagers now but it’s their body, they have a right to pleasure … it’s their bodies, let’s equip young people with as much knowledge and information and skills to be able to explore that, so they have healthy, happy, pleasurable sex lives. (Ellen)

Arguably, a lack of education around anal sex specifically, and women-centred sexual pleasure more generally, creates a dearth in sexual literacy that individuals could otherwise draw on to explore and practice their sexuality. In parallel, gendered agency can be facilitated by reciprocal consent, and as Bella asserted, might not be helped by adult-driven questioning of consensual decision-making:

… there’s too many questions about why people do it, when the fact of the matter is that if it’s consensual and people want to do it, you should just let people do it. (Bella)

Sexual literacy

One participant outlined that due to unfamiliarity with their bodies, it was difficult for women to seek out knowledge about their sexuality in order to make autonomous decisions regarding their sex lives.

Some young women wouldn’t even know what to Google because … young women are still very unfamiliar with their bodies, and I think a lot wouldn’t know exactly what’s happening. (Jane)

Overall, it was felt that one of the most salient barriers to true bodily autonomy, including the ability to fully assent to anal sex, was a lack of sexual literacy and education about the body (see also Herdt et al., 2021). This lack of knowledge about anal sex specifically, concerned sexual health practitioners who frequently encountered young people with little awareness or understanding of anal sex.

Young people have no idea, honestly, I’m not exaggerating, I’ve probably been asked about ten times if you get pregnant from anal sex. I think people just don’t know, and that’ll be from kids in year 9, so fourteen [years old] … I think people have a real lack of actual knowledge about it. (Cassie)

This led to further concerns about choices made when engaging in anal sex, particularly whether a woman was (a) making an informed decision, (b) making her own decision based on her own sexual pleasure, and (c) enjoying anal sex for herself rather than her partner:

It’s something I struggle with … for young women in early heterosexual sexual relationships, if they’re talking about anal sex being something that’s the most practiced thing that’s happening within the relationship, I think I would feel concern … If it was two 14-year-olds say, I would feel, what is she getting out of it? (Jane)

Lack of discussion around women and anal sex within sex and relationships education was viewed as symptomatic of wider neglect of women’s sexual anatomy, repertoires, and bodily pleasure:

Maybe people go to the anus before they go back to the clitoris and, you know, we need the clitoris to rise up and revolt really, this is what needs to happen. We need more, kind of, clitoral literacy. I think. (Bella)

Increasing the sex and relationships literacy of young women through a positive program of education and support was argued as key to empowering them to make informed decisions about their sexual lives.

I think if you give people information, then it enables them to challenge any kind of coercion. (Jane)

Concluding thoughts and limitations

This research formed part of a pilot study and was undertaken to understand if, how, and why narratives of concern about young women’s anal sex practices are being expressed by both sexual health and education practitioners and adults working outside of sexual health. Although our sample size is limited due to its exploratory nature, the pilot project yielded such rich and interesting findings that the research team felt them worthy of sharing with the wider field of researchers, educators and service providers. We also acknowledge that the sample is atypical, in that most of the participants were either workers involved in sexual health, or young people who were willing to talk about anal sex, and therefore not necessarily representative of wider populations in terms of experience, expertise and views. Also, the largely racial homogeneity of our participants made an intersectional analysis impossible. Thus, we do not claim that our findings are generalizable, but some issues are transferrable and worthy of further interrogation in discussions with young people in schools and other youth settings, in clinical settings and future research involving larger samples of young people, and young women particularly, in order to achieve a more nuanced understanding of young people’s perceptions of anal sex.

We found that concerns surrounding anal sex appear to concentrate on the act itself as a site of gendered action. Participants often conceptualized anal sex as an act involving the coercion of young women and girls by a male instigator for the primary purpose of male pleasure. Anal sex was acknowledged as a neglected area of sex and relationships education and certainly not a practice that might be linked to pleasure. Lack of education on female pleasure concerned our participants and it was felt that this limited the sexual literacy available to women and girls, shaping their ability to assent to anal sex on their own terms. We emphasize that we are not seeking to encourage anal sex arbitrarily but advocate that if young women are to have anal sex, they are entitled to the self-knowledge that will allow this to occur safely, consensually, plausibly, and positively. Our project highlights that there is a paucity of pleasure-based anal sex discourse surrounding women and girls, and more generally a lack of attention for all genders in relation to scrutinizing and widening definitions of anal sex to acknowledge that the umbrella term ‘anal sex’ can include more than penetration of the anus with a penis. In order to equip people with the necessary literacy that considers female pleasure, relationship dynamics, and bodily autonomy, we recommend that education on anal sex move beyond medicalized parameters of risk and HIV and other STI reduction to more holistic discourses that view women and girls as agentic individuals capable of sexual pleasure who are entitled to information relating to their own bodies and how their bodies can experience pleasure; vaginally, orally, and anally.

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We invite the submission of original manuscripts on any topics relevant to positive sexuality. We encourage submissions from diverse epistemological perspectives, and we welcome a wide range of quantitative and qualitative methodological approaches, as well as theoretical and conceptual essays. Alongside the work of scholars and students, we are interested in contributions from community, clinical, and other nonacademic professionals, especially contributions that help strengthen the connection between the study and practice of positive sexuality.

While the Journal of Positive Sexuality has a preference for shorter manuscripts (2,000–3,000 words), longer manuscripts up to 10,000 words will be considered. In preparation for submission, authors should observe the following guidelines:

- Manuscripts should have a clear sex-positive focus.
- Given the diverse readership of the journal, authors should write in a straight-forward and non-technical manner, avoiding jargon when possible. Manuscripts should be written such that they can be easily understood by scholars and professionals outside of one’s own field or discipline.
- Manuscripts should be written in a style consistent with the latest edition of the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (APA). Please include DOIs for all references when available. Instead of endnotes, please use footnotes when necessary.

New submissions should be emailed to submissions@journalofpositivesexuality.org, and should include the following Microsoft Word attachments:

- A title page, including: (1) the title of the manuscript; (2) names, institutional affiliations, and contact information for each author; (3) the word count of the main manuscript; (4) a statement certifying that the submission has not been previously published and/or is not currently under review elsewhere; (5) any pertinent information about the approval or regulatory process for human subjects research; (6) any acknowledgements that the authors would like to include for publication.
- A fully-blinded manuscript, including: (1) the title of the manuscript; (2) a brief abstract, 100 words or less; (3) the body of the manuscript; (4) references
- Tables or figures can be submitted in separate files in either Microsoft Word or Microsoft Excel format, or embedded in the manuscript. If tables or figures are being submitted separately, please provide the preferred location as a reference note within the manuscript.

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