28

LEISURE SEX

More sex! Better sex! Sex is fucking brilliant! Sex, sex, sex, SEX

Feona Attwood and Clarissa Smith

Introduction

How might we understand sex as one of the Big Seven leisure pursuits? What is sex? On an entirely functional level, sex is the physical means by which the species engages in procreation – sex is a physical activity, but it can be more than the mechanics of reproduction – and of course much is hidden (and denied) in such a definition. The term also refers to forms of physicality that have absolutely nothing to do with conception. Moreover, sex is associated with myriad intangible qualities. Sex is entwined with ideas of romance, attraction, commitment, independence, orientation, crime, identity, hygiene, waste, fantasy, confidence, despair, nature, abnormality, deviance, degradation, fulfilment, liberation, status, sin, perversion. We've deliberately avoided organizing these different conceptions within hierarchies or offering a binary list, precisely because sex is such a movable feast, varying over time and across cultures – but there is also no doubt that rules and hierarchies have existed around sex, creating limitations and opportunities. In the confines of this short chapter there simply is not the space to discuss the complex positioning of sex in Western culture across the last few centuries; instead, we are going to draw on that old chestnut of Philip Larkin's in his poem *Annus Mirabilis* that: 'Sexual intercourse began/ In nineteen sixty three/ (which was rather late for me)/ Between the end of the Chatterley ban/ And the Beatles' first LP' (Larkin, 1967).

What Larkin's poem neatly encapsulates is the fond misbelief that every generation invents sex. But, crucially, it also links that invention to popular culture and the transgression of old certainties. Whether or not sex as a leisure pursuit is directly rooted in the permissiveness of 1960s popular culture or – to cite another myth of the liberalization of sex – was caused by the arrival of the contraceptive pill, there is no doubt that the past five decades have seen individuals encouraged to evaluate themselves and their bodies in the context of a modern, mediatized sexual culture whose symbolic resources valorize revelation and hedonism rather than discretion and self-discipline. It would, of course, be wrong to talk of sex as a singular activity or having only singular meaning – for many, sex and love are still absolutely intrinsic to kinship and to the formation of intimate relationships, but it is also clear that new forms and characteristics of sex are emerging, that sex is acquiring its own status as a recreational activity.

In modern societies, sexual consumption, experiences and practices have become ever more important to our sense of self and making the most of our lives. Sex is a source of happiness, a form of relaxation, a site of pleasure, expression of freedoms, a means of achieving spiritual wholeness and, in all its sensory potentials, sex is increasingly linked to leisure. Those processes are accelerated by the development of a range of technologies which have expanded and extended the material and mediated sources of pleasure and opportunities for sexual encounters and explorations. Even so, the common perception that Western societies have embraced an 'anything goes' view of sexual pleasure and practice is matched by intensifying drives to regulate many forms of sexual behaviour. In this chapter we examine some of the issues and contemporary contexts of leisured sex. We consider recent shifts in the definition of what sex is and could be and changing relations to commerce, leisure, self-care and relationships with others.

Sexual leisure as sexualization

According to commentators as various as the American Psychological Association, UK Prime Minister David Cameron and a broad array of activists, and academics including Abigail Bray (2009), Gail Dines (2010) and Brian McNair (2002), we are witnessing the sexualization of culture. Sex has become increasingly and insistently visible – from the endless media discussions of sexual values, practices and identities and attendant concerns about standards of morality and the prevalence of scandals; through controversies about the definitions, boundaries and proper regulation of obscenity; to the growth of sexual media of all kinds (erotica, slash fiction, sexual self-help books and porn genres), we are seeing the emergence of new forms of sexual experience (in, for example, instant message, avatar sex and sexting), made possible by developments in technology. These are all elements of a 'striptease culture' (McNair, 2002) and its cultural trends which privilege lifestyle, reality, interactivity, self-revelation and public intimacy.

In many accounts, sexualization is conceptualized as a force working on individuals and on society as a whole, but most especially on girls and women – providing scripts, moulding their bodies into particular forms of 'sexy'; and boys are 'a "guinea pig" generation … growing up addicted to hardcore pornography' (Peev, 2012: 1). What seems partly to be at stake here is the collapse of boundaries that have kept sex a part of private life, but, as Williams (2004: 166) suggests, it is nigh on impossible to define sex as 'a private matter, since it has, in effect, become so very public a matter, even to those who would argue to keep it private'.

Our understandings of sex, as orientations, practices and experiences in the twenty-first century, are shaped by changing relations of individualization which insist that sex, sexual identity and sexual health are matters for individual duty and responsibility. Being sexual is about being able to engage in the project of the self competently with due regard for one's health and well-being (Giddens, 1992), and increasingly about having sexual value (Hakim, 2011). Skills, resources and fitness are part of being a competent sexual being and taking part in sexual consumerism, sex as leisure. For some commentators, the injunctions to enjoy oneself and to uncover one's own sexual interests simply replicate the age-old patterns of women's sexual performance for men and their servicing of men's emotional and sexual needs (Jeffreys, 2009). Young women engage in pole-dancing classes as a form of fitness (Holland, 2010), strip clubs are rebranded as gentlemen's clubs, and the spaces and places for the purchase of sexual services and the commodities which facilitate sex as forms of leisure are increasing (Attwood, 2005; Smith, 2007).

Karen Boyle has suggested that it is 'important to distinguish between the commercialization of sex (the invitation to buy products to enhance our sex lives) and commercial sex (purchasing access to the bodies of others for our own gratification and independent of theirs)' (Boyle, 2010: 3). Boyle argues that porn and sex are, and should be, different things; the argument is taken up most explicitly by Gail Dines, who offers the idea of 'healthy sexuality' in comparison to what she calls 'porn sex' – sex that is 'debased, dehumanized, formulaic, and generic (Dines, 2010: x); 'industrial strength sex' compared to sex that involves 'empathy, tenderness, caring, affection' … 'love, respect, or connection to another human being' (Dines, 2010: xxiv, xi). As Gayle Rubin wrote in 1984, such discussion of sexuality is based on the idea of a 'charmed circle' characterized by sex which is heteronormative, vanilla, procreative, coupled, taking place between people of the same generation, at home, involving bodies only, and avoiding commercial sex and pornography. Beyond this lie the 'outer limits' of sex; promiscuous, non-procreative, casual, non-married, homosexual, cross-generational, taking place alone or in groups, in public, involving sadomasochism (S/M), commerce, manufactured objects and pornography. Feminist critiques of 'sexualization' have often made clear the need to distinguish their objections from those based on moral or religious grounds, or on the offence to taste or decency. Yet recent feminist work does not seek to understand the pluralistic and shifting sensibilities around sex which embrace the postmodern elements of 'the spectacular, the popular, the pleasurable, and the immediately accessible' (Featherstone, 1991: 96).

A significant difficulty lies in the ways in which the condemnatory attitude towards the visibility of 'casual' sex, hook-up culture and so on almost always links these activities to the widespread availability of pornography, lap dancing clubs and other manifestations of the 'sex industries'. For example, Ariel Levy's invitation to readers to meet the female chauvinist pig, 'the new brand of "empowered woman" who wears the Playboy bunny as a talisman, bares all for *Girls Gone Wild*, pursues casual sex as if it were a sport, and embraces "raunch culture" wherever she finds it' (Levy, 2005, front matter) illustrates one problem in trying to maintain those distinctions. Young women's appropriations of the *symbols* of commercial sex are here held to account as indications that they are in thrall to the sex industries, that female sexuality has been commodified and repackaged back to them – that their own sexuality is buried beneath the acquisition of sex as a commodity to be packaged for men. The pessimistic views of sex being 'debased' by its contacts with 'porn sex' and 'porn culture' combine fears about child abuse, commercial sex and casual sex, as though these are all not only related but also uniformly problematic.

Despite the increasing visibility of sex, the public/private distinction may still retain its importance, drawing attention to the ways in which many people participate in 'a world of sex' without ever coming into personal contact with the 'sex industry', and indeed would reject any suggestion that their sexual practices have any connections with forms of commerce. It may not be that easy to separate out what might be understood as personal exploration and the 'simple' enhancement of one's sex life from the consumption of services which require the sexual labour of others. It may be difficult to separate out a recreational attitude to sex from that which might be conceived or experienced as sex *work*. As Jane Juffer has argued, the 'obliteration' of the public/private divide can lead to problematic assumptions of the transgression of regulation/boundaries exemplified in particular individuals such as Annie Sprinkle, where 'one performance artist's transgressive abilities begin to substitute for the conditions that determine the sexual practices of most women' (Juffer, 1998: 16). How do we give due attention to the differences while offering comprehensive and manageable groupings for research? Would filming one's sexual activities for personal

contemplation constitute the production of pornography, or how might we definitively link these private productions to the widespread availability of professional porn? Is the sex toy designer a sex worker? Is there a difference between stripping for a lover and stripping in a bar? The meanings and valuations of acts/activities/practices/experiences are not so easily separated.

Sexy bodies

There are real problems with the kinds of thinking in which the body is seen as simply subject to disciplinary regimes, just as there are with the belief that sex is inevitably a force for transformation. Both reproduce a reductive essentialism and a rather naïve belief in bodies and pleasure as somehow outside the social. We need a space for understanding the exhortations to 'be sexy' as more than a disciplinary project and to recognize the conflicting experiences of sexual identifications and bodily sensations in the twenty-first century. Maffesoli suggests that 'the cult of the body and other forms of appearance have value only in so much as they are part of a larger stage in which everyone is both actor and spectator' (Maffesoli, 1996: 77). For those who argue that 'porn sex' involves 'using someone' and 'doing to someone', being a 'performance for others', a 'public commodity', 'separate from love', 'emotionally distant' (Malz and Malz, 2008) there is no room for understanding the ways in which new social forms of interaction, alternative sexual communities and the utilization of the body to communicate self-identity can and do offer opportunities for solidarity, recognition and sociality. It is hard to see why the characteristics of 'good sex' – as private rather than public, and clearly linked to love rather than to gratification – should be especially important for sexual politics, or why sex should be valued in terms of its capacity to develop intimacy rather than for any other reason. In fact, those characteristics of 'good sex' correspond much more clearly to a view of sex as sacred or 'special', and to the contemporary ideal of the pure relationship that Giddens (1992) describes, in which sex is anchored to emotional coherence and persistence. Casual sex, kinky sex, rough sex and even monogamous, straight, 'vanilla sex' that might be the product of routine, boredom, fun or thrill seeking does not meet these standards. A proper purpose for sex is assumed and there is little consideration of the variety of sexual practices that people engage in, their diverse understandings of what sex is or the multifarious reasons why people have sex. Despite their refutations of being 'anti-sex', writers like Dines foreclose the possibilities of sexuality as plural and in process, and the body as a significant conduit to experiences and emotions.

To fully understand the ways in which sexual interests might be changing, we also need to think about how bodies may be experienced and connected to modes of relating to one's self and to others. Lindemann (1997) describes three categories of body: the objectified, the experiencing and the experienced body. The objectified body is the one we see, it is an entity in social space and time but we cannot know how it feels. 'Just because that objectified body is read … as "sexy" (or sexually attractive) does not mean it is necessarily being experienced as sexual' (Jackson and Scott (2001: 16). The 'experiencing' body is a *sensory* one and the 'experienced' body is the specifically felt body, the one which has pain and pleasure but is also experienced as simply *there*. This becomes important in discussions of sex and sexual feeling because it is clear that there is a significant discrepancy between our stereotypical ideas of the 'sexy' body and the body which experiences sexual pleasure. Sex is not just a physiological response, a physical reaction that can be gained simply by being told what to do. The objectified body as both body in space and time and its comparator, the sexualized body or stereotypically sexually attractive body, cannot be separated from

the perceptions of sexual desire, rights and possible pleasures and therefore has a relation with the experiencing and experienced body. The embodied experience of having sex is not reducible to touching, kissing, penetration, orgasm or any other associated phenomena but occurs in specific contexts as a social practice. 'Sex entails embodied selves engaged in embodied social activity and embodied interaction' (Jackson and Scott, 2001:19).

The internet has, of course, created opportunities for networked engagement in sexual discourse, the possibilities for a more concrete sense of participation in a network of like-minded sexual subjects, and has also allowed for 'new forms of [sex] which disrupt older conceptions of its status and its place in society' (Attwood, 2006: 79). There are now online spaces in which individuals can construct communities, actions and subjectivities via message boards, blogs and hook-up sites. Increasingly, 'ordinary' individuals create their own interactive narratives, stories, films and commentaries, posting them in forms of dialogue that were never possible within the political economies of traditional publishing or film distribution; moreover, sites such as gaydar.com enable the creation of sexual subcultures that are 'both physical and "virtual" … with digital communications often structuring physical practices, identities and experiences' (Mowlabocus, 2010: 2), blurring the lines between on- and offline selves, distance and proximity, producer and consumer. In online spaces, forms of 'collectivity', 'community' and networks of sexual interactions become increasingly visible, though how far these are completely new phenomena or whether they will ever replace or even eradicate more traditional 'real life' interactions will require careful consideration. 'What do changing constructions of sexuality … tell us about the way we live now in contemporary societies, about the relation between bodies and machines, or practices and representations? What do they suggest about the way we envisage and organize the public and private worlds, or about changes in the management of intimate relationships?' (Attwood, 2006: 79).

Sex as leisure

In an important but functionalist division of forms of leisure activity Stebbins (1982; 1997) characterizes sex as a form of 'casual leisure' focused on sensory stimulation and sharing characteristics with eating, drinking and sight-seeing – all forms of what he sees as non-productive activity centred on 'immediately, intrinsically rewarding, relatively short-lived' pleasure 'requiring little or no special training to enjoy it' (Stebbins, 2001: 305). Casual leisure is understood in Stebbins' account as an essentially consumerist preoccupation with play, entertainment, stimulation – all those activities which are less substantial, and without a sense of future purpose, than their opposite, 'serious leisure': forms of activity which are 'important to the wellbeing of the individual and society' (Rojek, 2000: 18). Whether or not that categorization of sex as 'casual' was *ever* an adequate understanding of the multiplicities of previous generations' sexual cultures is beyond the scope of this chapter, but it seems entirely inadequate as a means of comprehending the reach, scope and meaningfulness of sex in the twenty-first century. We wouldn't want to deny that sex can be playful, entertaining, stimulating and experienced in the here-and-now, but Stebbins' 'scornful' (Blackshaw, 2010) dismissal of casual leisure fails to recognize the ways in which even the avowedly hedonistic pursuit of sex may be more than *just* frivolous, that it might, like forms of 'serious leisure' have significant benefits (and costs) for individuals and society, offering considerable potential for productivity, development of skills and knowledge, and thereby might engender self-confidence, identity and community through achievement. The placing of sex within a serious/casual leisure dichotomy confirms Rojek's suggestion that the concept of

serious leisure is underpinned by moral foundations and seeks to valorize particular forms of social behaviour – such as the development of heteronormative companionship and community. As Rojek suggests: 'Serious leisure' can be understood as 'a vehicle for the cultural and moral reaffirmation of communities as places in which the individual recognizes relations of belonging' (Rojek, 2000: 18). Even so, while recognizing the hierarchical and potentially regressive designations, we also feel that the term 'serious leisure' may have resonances and application for our understandings of sex in the twenty-first century.

First, the designation of 'sex' as 'casual leisure' fails to acknowledge the role that sex has played in official and non-institutional discourses of marriage and romance, of the sexual revolution, of identity formation, identity politics, religious moral revivalism, campaigns against pornographication (pornification) and sexualization. In each of these, though to varying degrees, impacts and effects, sex has acted as a driver, motivator, consolidator and important means towards intimacy, community, social cohesion and, for pessimistic observers, the most potent destroyer of all those 'pro-social' effects. The importance that sex assumes in these variously motivated conceptualizations surely undermines the idea that it is *simply* hedonistic and purposeless (though it can be those things). For example, anti-porn author Robert Jensen suggests that 'good' sex is private rather than public, and clearly linked to love rather than to gratification, that sex should involve 'a sense of connection to another person, a greater awareness of one's own humanity and sometimes, even a profound sense of the world that can come from meaningful and deep sexual experience' (in Boulton, 2008: 257).

Second, sex is, of course, socially constructed within contextual frameworks of competing cultural norms. Sex is experienced in intensely personal ways – for some, as we have already seen, it is a conduit to the most wonderful sensations and a means by which long- and/or short-term intimacies are fostered, but for others it is a tiresome chore, a painful imposition or simply tedious. Sex can be understood as an everyday activity, not particularly important to the individual, pleasurable as and when it is indulged in but having little further meaning – a functional way of keeping oneself healthy and in touch with a partner. For others, sex may most nearly connect with forms of communality where social belonging and social relationships beyond normative or monogamous relationships are important to identification and possession of one's 'sexuality', for example in gay, lesbian, bisexual or open relationships. For yet others, sex may be more like an 'extreme sport', where orgasm (temporary pleasure) is less important than as a side-effect of testing the body's limits, or creating new and exciting forms of intimacy with one or more partners, of acquiring skills and knowledges, of thrill seeking and risk taking, sought as pleasures in their own right. Of course, it is easiest to see these other sensations in relation to activities occurring within sexual subcultures such as swinging or BDSM (bondage and discipline; dominance and submission; sadism and masochism), which, with their focus on initiation, mentoring and community, may most effectively display qualities of serious leisure, providing a fulfilling leisure experience – restorative, resourceful and enhancing participants' quality of life (Newmahr, 2010). As Mark Brendon comments of his swinging lifestyle: 'Here I can fall in love and truly love my fellows, give and take in equal measure and walk away, having learned from them, shared with them and feeling more integrated with my world, whereas in every other form of casual – or, still worse, pseudo-committal – sex, I feel diminished.' (Brendon, 2008: 303).

Thinking about sex as leisure we draw here on Csikszentmihalyi's definition of leisure as a crossover of free time, activity and attitude (1975); 'leisured sex' isn't simply about having sex, clashing genitals or some other body parts in pursuit of orgasm, it is about having the time to give to exercise one's interests in sex, to engage in sex as a form of relaxation, entertainment, self-realization, self-gratification and gratification of others, and

personal development. The experience of 'time-crunching' means that while people may have gained additional free time, their subjective sense is of having much less (Robinson and Godbey, 1997), and in the modern construction of sex it is important to *make time* for sex – an element explored in some depth in sex manuals which exhort readers, particularly long-term partners and couples who have just become parents, to ensure that they make time for sex as a key means of keeping their relationship healthy and intimate.

This functional and heteronormatively romantic ideal has increasingly been marked by a middle-class 'fun ethic' (Bourdieu, 1984) which incorporates a hedonistic and 'liberated' sexuality. Articles in magazines as diverse as *Cosmopolitan*, *GQ*, *Good Housekeeping* and *Nerve* are written by the cultural intermediaries of 'striptease culture' (McNair, 2002) a new service class (Lash and Urry, 1987) of 'sexiterati' – journalists, designers, PR practitioners, advertisers, sex therapists, marriage counsellors, and dieticians whose knowledge about the 'symbolic goods and services' (Nixon and du Gay, 2002: 496) necessary to a good sex life are on seemingly constant display. Women's magazines, advice manuals, videos such as *The Lovers' Guides* have, for decades, focused on the ways in which sex ought to be pleasurable and fun and can be learned. Interestingly, for an aspect of human life which is seemingly so important, its purpose and intentions are often conceptualized in limited ways – we have swapped procreation for recreation and therefore FUN, but the notion of 'fun' is limited by concerns that sex should, however wild, remain within the boundaries of adult, consensual and sane and be, above all, pleasurable.

Lifestyling sex

Magazines and self-help programmes like the *Sex Inspectors* and *The Lovers' Guides* exhort heterosexual couples to bring a kind of work ethic into this most personal sphere of everyday life – with the application of techniques, tools and toys to enhance sexual pleasure and get over the 'trauma' of lack of orgasms etc. Efficiency, investments and rewards are all part of the leisure of sex (Harvey and Gill, 2011). But self-help can also be seen as more than exhortations to get more from your sex life: the *Lovers Guides* videos of theb1990s, for example, may be seen as an interesting response to the problem of AIDS and the ways in which the possibilities of infection problematized 1960s discourses of sexual liberation and sexual satisfaction through multiple partners. The *Guides* offered a way of reinvigorating the long-term romance and sexual pleasures of monogamy, part of the broader projects of sex as a leisure pursuit but also of an understanding of sex as a form of skilled practice whose pleasures come at least partly from according it significance within the routines of daily life. From this viewpoint it is not enough to have sex, much better to be able to demonstrate skill, imagination and practice, and in the *Guides* this became a possibility within mature and long-term relationships where the domestic space became a playground, sexing up the home. With their emphasis on dispelling ignorance and shame, their avowed intent to speak to couples attempting to deepen levels of intimacy and pleasure in their relationships, the *Guides* offered themselves to interested couples seeking ideas and practical steps for improving skills within a sophisticated but domestic arrangement. Individuals need to negotiate competing and often conflicting social pressures to be sexual, and to conform to ideas of 'normality' (Barker, 2012), particularly the emphasis on maintaining the body as a desiring body in the sense of leisure, but also putting in the work to make that happen. Sexuality is something that we possess, innately, but also is something to be worked at, practised and improved – it is to be both disciplined and enjoyed as a form of pleasure, relaxation and as access to the true self.

Contemporary sexualities may often be constructed as forms of consumer lifestyle, requiring the necessary therapeutic and commercial products which give access to proper sex. Certainly, new forms of sex-cultural production are partly aimed at meeting the 'extension of sexual consumerism' (McNair, 2002: 87), which can be traced not only in the expansion and diversification of the 'pornosphere', but more broadly in the emergence of a 'striptease culture'. Striptease culture embodies a widespread preoccupation with 'self-revelation' (McNair, 2002: 81) and 'public intimacy' (ibid.: 98), evident in reality TV and other types of first-person media, as well as in the development of new technologies for self- publishing and social networking. Sex also figures more visibly than ever before in forms associated with high culture. Since the early 1990s, erotica have been sold in large bookstore chains, but, with the publishing phenomenon of E.L. James's *50 Shades of Grey*, supermarkets have now begun to stock tales of lust and leather beside the check-out. Sex is a recurring theme in contemporary art, and more recently in design, possibly because both 'offer a realm of sexual pleasure and hedonism … are treated as recreational activities … and … are viewed in openly self-preoccupied, consumerist terms' (Poynor, 2006: 7–8). We are, Poynor argues, 'in the process of designing a pornotopia' (2006: 9). Key to the development of a 'pornotopia' has been the rise of sexual consumerism centred on 'feminine' sensibilities, for example, the visibility of chic sexual products – expensive lingerie and luxury sex toys – sold in glamorous sex shops modelled on stylish boutiques that emphasize their designer credentials and reaffirm nostalgic ideas of 'secrecy' and 'privacy' wrapped up in 'affordable luxury' (Juffer, 1998).

The expressions of young women's sexual interests that are condemned as deriving from pornified culture are more complex than the 'effects' complaints might suggest; there is no doubt that sexual freedom has not consigned sexism to the bin and the emotional outfalls of casual relationships are as painful as they ever were, but the idea of these interests as simply an effect of sexualization is one which cannot find anything positive in more open attitudes and more aggressively expressed interests in sex. How can we open up debate about active female sexualities and their materialization in culture, how do we understand the complexities of sexualization, commodification, objectification and, crucially, subjectification in the expressions of new sexual sensibilities and their hedonistic pursuits?

Sexual cultures

Although increasingly mainstream, this new sexual hedonism draws on some previously quite marginal sexual sensibilities. The first of these is derived from sex-positive and sex-radical writing and practice devoted to the reclaiming of sexual pleasure and to a revaluation of reviled practices such as masturbation, S/M, the use of pornography and sex work. The second is drawn from gay cultures, emphasizing the celebration of diversity and the creation of communities based around sexuality. The third is a 'playboy' sensibility, embodied in the development of media and leisure spaces focused on straight men's entertainment.

While quite different in many ways, these share a view of sex as a valid source of effort, play and work, and all have become more visible in contemporary popular culture. If *Playboy* can be understood as the forerunner of much of the lifestyle media and the mainstream leisure venues that are currently aimed at men, most obviously in men's magazines and the 'gentlemen's clubs' (Osgerby, 2001), then it has also had significant impact on the ways in which women might view sex. A sex-positive/sex-radical stance is evident in the sexy form of mainstream post-feminism embodied by performers such as Madonna and Lady Gaga. Gay lifestyles have been mainstreamed as a form of cosmopolitan leisure and conspicuous consumption.

If sexual cultures originate within the contexts of dominant heteronormative culture, some can be understood as positive responses to the demands of structures such as marriage, monogamy etc., and then there are those that are in negative response (Jenks, 2005: 10) or forms of 'delinquent' sexualities. As with other subcultures, sexual subcultures are often non-normative, non-mainstream, 'deviant', marginalized and even criminal groups (Jenks, 2005: 121) offering their own sources of identity and signifying differences – modes of inclusion – even as dominant culture might be 'disapproving' or 'repulsed'. Subcultures are often valued positively because they are actively produced: a means for people to express their differences from the 'mainstream', creating 'cultures' that are defined by their 'authenticity' (Hollows, 2003: 36). In relation to mainstream culture, some sexual cultures may appear deviant, resistant and transgressive, but they are also expressions of alternate identities and forms of community.

While deviant sexual activity is often understood as the result of 'forces' which must be halted, regulated or medicated away, the sensuous pleasures of these acts are not acknowledged. Just as gay couplings occurred while such liaisons were criminalized, so we have to think about the reasons why people might commit acts that are criminalized today – because they want to, they like it, find pleasure, find fulfilment. Risk also needs to be understood as part of the thrill. The conception of 'risky sexual practice' too often contributes to a pathologizing of non-normative sexual practices as 'evidence' of an inability to make sound assessments or rational judgements about what constitutes 'safe sex'. Participants in unusual sexual activities may have uneven levels of understanding of the health implications of individual acts but also make calculations about those relative risks and their possible pleasurable outcomes – indeed risk taking can produce or intensify pleasure. Instead, sexual activity should be understood as sets of intense experiences linked to the wider norms of sexual culture. Work on participants in extreme sports has highlighted the very different understandings of the vocational habitus that characterizes, for example, competitive bodybuilding or its polar opposite, ballet, demonstrating that the requirements for specific body types, regimes of discipline and training, expectations of hard work and mental toughness 'impact on the ideals, aspirations and conduct … influenc[ing participants'] perception and understanding of risk, pain and injury' (Probert *et al*., 2007: 273). The pleasures and dangers of any pursuit are not absolute; they are socially and culturally bounded and may be understood quite differently by those within the particular milieu and those outside. As Probert *et al*. indicate, 'risk may be construed … as an essential, routine part of activity … a sensation which can be embraced and valued … a means to test skill and self-mastery … and/or an element … to be managed, minimized and downplayed' (Probert *et al*., 2007: 273).

For example, 'intensive sex partying' practised by some gay men can involve 'high risk' behaviours, including multiple partners, sexual adventurism, drug taking and higher incidences of 'unsafe' sexual activities such as 'fisting', but Hurley and Prestage (2009) caution against pathologizing this kind of partying precisely in order to understand the place of risk in some gay men's lives and how such risk is mitigated by knowledge and shared expertises, the development of sexual repertoires and practical sexual literacies. Far from engaging in risky practices in dangerous ways without due regard for one's own or others' safety, sex-party participants take pleasure both in the sexual sensations *and* in each other's well-being. For many people there are gains to be made in terms of mastering sexual techniques: increasing one's sexual capital, engaging in and cementing relationships, acquiring the proper physical prowess, developing skills and opportunities for orgasm, reducing risk and, if we take to heart Naomi Wolf's (2012) recent claims about the possibilities for creativity derived from the vagina's capacity for orgasm, then capacities for joy, pleasure and

creativity. If 'being sexy' is a form of leisure, a form of engaging with the aspects of the social in particular ways, then reading the how-to techniques in women's magazines, being good at sex, taming elements of the masculinized pornosphere (Juffer, 1998) in order to enjoy participation in sexual cultures are all pursuits sought for their own pleasures and for the connections they enable to one's own body, experiences, emotions and to those of others. In this sense sex as leisure might be understood as 'delight in a surplus beyond the satisfaction of basic need' (Inglis, 2000: 59)

What are the ways in which intimacy might be understood more precisely and understood as a social good, and a shared aim beyond the traditional and heteronormative dyad? What commonalities can we theorize? Traditionally, proper intimacy in sex has been predicated on exclusivity (monogamy), but various sexual cultures, from wife-swapping through to swinging, may produce intimacy, and offer opportunities for intimacy via variation, community, sharing, etc. As Newmahr (2010) illustrates, 'skills' may not be limited to physicality and technicalities (although those do seem to be a major concern within sex manuals); skills may have emotional dimensions, imaginative dimensions and important social capital can be derived from those. Sexual pleasures may be pleasures which are sought for their own sake, but also on an experiential level enable a sense of belonging to a community in which others are also exploring the possibilities of sex. There are varieties of acts, identities, behaviours and a variety of sub-cultures which are products of their interactions, sometimes organized around orientations or identifications, specific acts, fashions or performances – young people's sexual cultures may be very different from those of older individuals, differentiated as well by attitudes towards religiosity, gender, ethnicity etc.. Thus, socio-cultural norms and values and their specifics influence sexual behaviour and may be unique to the individual, while at the same time shared. 'Atmosphere', 'knowledge', 'environment', self-confidence, value systems, perception of safety, understandings of risk, social skills, ability to compromise or readjust to circumstances, may have considerable influence on what an individual feels inclined to pursue. As Deleuze and Guattari have argued, 'we know nothing about a body until we know what it can do, in other words what its affects are, how they can or cannot enter into composition with other affects, with the affects of another body' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 257). This spirit of experimentation/exploration may be the defining characteristic of many modern sexualities.

Conclusions

The emergence of modern recreational sexualities is linked to – and can be seen as emblematic of – a broad range of contemporary concerns with image, lifestyle and self-exposure, which have become means of self-care, self-pleasure and self-expression. In this sense, sex increasingly overlaps with other important spheres of contemporary life, and in particular that of leisure. Sexual practices in the West have become matters of personal taste and lifestyle – even that most sanctioned of sexual relationships, the heterosexual marriage, has become a site of playfulness where long-term intimacy is to be fostered through recognition of the importance of sex. Other kinds of sexual encounters – the affair, the one-night stand, 'pleasing oneself' through the use of pornography and sex toys, forms of commercial and virtual sex have also become more acceptable and a 'sexy' persona is now often expressed through a set of performances accompanied by consumption of sexual commodities. It is in this commodification of sexuality that we have seen the development of a new 'recreational' sexuality focused on self-pleasure and fun: characterized by 'adventurism', 'experimentation', 'choice', 'variety' and 'sensation' (Illouz, 1999: 176). Recreational sex has become part

of what has been described as the 'ethical retooling' of consumer capitalism and its promotion of a 'morality of pleasure as a duty' (Bourdieu, 1984: 365–71).

Alongside this, we also see growing irritations with the sexualization of culture and a sense that sex has become the big story at the expense of more politicized conceptions of sexual freedoms, choices, individualism and community. Even so, any examination of the ethics or politics of sexual leisure will need to engage with the particular commitments and engagements of specific sexual cultures (including those most ordinary and supposedly 'natural' heterosexual couplings). Of course, sex is an intensely topical issue, subject to many opposing views and 'strong opinions'. And, for many people, the only important considerations are the moral or political issues related to sex (who, and in what contexts, is having sex?), its practice (is it 'healthy' for the individual, for their partners, for society? Is it premised on 'equality' or 'authentic' values?), and its 'effects' (what 'harms' might come to individuals and to society at large). Even as we consider ourselves to live in liberated times, too often the practices, cultures and identities that are constructed around sexual desire are measured against a standard of 'regular' heterosexuality. Sexual practices and experiences and their roles and significances in everyday life continue to be contested, the focus of new struggles over the definitions of healthy sex, work and play. Capturing the meanings of recreational sex and the varying importance of sex in everyday life will need research which proceeds with recognition of the multiplicities of rights and responsibilities, pleasures and displeasures, interests and issues for individuals and sexual communities. If the limits of 'sex' are undergoing significant revision, research will need to engage with the wheres and hows of its modifications, what modes of representation, what technologies, strategies and practices, and by whom the boundaries of sex are being redrawn.

References

Attwood, F. (2006) 'Sexed Up: Theorizing the Sexualization of Culture', *Sexualities* 9(1) 77–94.

Attwood, F. (2005) 'Fashion and Passion: Marketing Sex to Women', *Sexualities* 8(4) 392–406.

Barker, M. (2012) *Rewriting the Rules: An Integrative Guide to Love, Sex and Relationships*. London: Routledge.

Blackshaw, T. (2010) *Leisure*. London and New York: Routledge.

Boulton, C. (2008) 'Porn and Me(n): Sexual Morality, Objectification, and Religion at the Wheelock Anti-Pornography Conference', *The Communication Review* 11(3) 247–273.

Bourdieu, P. (1984) *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. London: Routledge.

Boyle, K. (ed.) (2010) 'Introduction', *Everyday Pornographies*. London: Routledge.

Bray, A. (2009) 'Governing the Gaze: Child Sexual Abuse Moral Panics and the Post-Feminist Blindspot', *Feminist Media Studies* 9(2) 173–191.

Brendon, M. (2008) *Swinging: The Games Your Neighbours Play*. London: The Friday Project.

Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1975) *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. (1987) *A Thousand Plateaus*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Dines, G. (2010) *Pornland: How Porn Has Hijacked Our Sexuality*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Featherstone, M. (1991) *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*. London: Sage.

Giddens, A. (1992) *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Hakim, C. (2011) *Erotic Capital: The Power of Attraction in the Boardroom and the Bedroom*. New York: Basic Books.

Harvey, L. and Gill, R. (2011) 'The Sex Inspectors: Self-help, Makeover and Mediated Sex', in K. Ross (ed.) *Handbook on Gender, Sexualities and Media*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Holland, S. (2010) *Pole Dancing, Empowerment and Embodiment*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Hollows, J. (2003) 'The Masculinity of the Cult', in M. Jancovich, A.L. Reboll, J. Stringer and A. Willis (eds) *Defining Cult Movies: The Cultural Politics of Oppositional Taste*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Hurley, M. and Prestage, G. (2009) 'Intensive Sex Partying amongst Gay Men in Sydney', *Culture, Health and Sexuality* 11(6) 597–610.
Illouz, E. (1999) 'The Lost Innocence of Love: Romance as a Postmodern Condition', in M. Featherstone (ed.) *Love and Eroticism*, London: Sage.
Inglis, F. (2000) *A Delicious History of the Holiday*. London: Routledge.
Jackson, S. and Scott, S. (2001) 'Putting the Body's Feet on the Ground: Towards a Sociological Reconceptualization of Gendered and Sexual Embodiment', in K. Backett-Milburn and L. McKie (eds) *Constructing Gendered Bodies*. London: Palgrave.
Jeffreys, S. (2009) *The Industrial Vagina: The Political Economy of the Sex Trade*. London: Routledge.
Jenks, C. (2005) *Subculture*. London: Sage.
Juffer, J. (1998) *At Home with Pornography: Women, Sex and Everyday Life*. New York and London: New York University Press.
Larkin, P. (1967) 'Annus Mirabilis', *High Windows*. London: Faber & Faber.
Lash, S. and Urry, J. (1987) *The End of Organized Capitalism*. Cambridge: Polity.
Levy, A. (2005) *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture*. New York and London: Free Press.
Lindemann, G. (1997) 'The Body of Gender Difference', in K. Davis (ed.) *Embodied Practices: Feminist Perspectives on the Body*. London: Sage
Maffesoli, M. (1996) *The Time of the Tribes*. London: Sage.
Malz, W. and Malz, L. (2008) *The Porn Trap: The Essential Guide to Overcoming Problems Caused by Porn*. New York: HarperCollins.
McNair, B. (2002) *Striptease Culture: Sex, Media and the Democratization of Desire*. London and New York: Routledge.
Mowlabocus, S. (2010) *Gaydar Culture: Gay Men, Technology and Embodiment in the Digital Age*. Farnham: Ashgate.
Newmahr, S. (2010) 'Rethinking Kink: Sadomasochism as Serious Leisure', *Qualitative Sociology* 33(3) 313–331.
Nixon, S. and du Gay, P. (2002) 'Who Needs Cultural Intermediaries?', *Cultural Studies* 16(4) 495–500.
Osgerby, B. (2001) *Playboys in Paradise: Masculinity, Youth and Leisure-style in Modern America*. Oxford and New York: Berg.
Peev, G. (2012) 'Children Grow Up Addicted to Online Porn Sites', *Daily Mail*, 19 April.
Poynor, R. (2006) *Designing Pornotopia: Travels in Visual Culture*. London: Laurence King Publishing.
Probert, A., Palmer, F. and Leberman, S. (2007) 'The Fine Line: An Insight into "Risky" Practices of Male and Female Competitive Bodybuilders', *Annals of Leisure Research* 10(3–4) 272–290.
Robinson, J.P. and Godbey, G. (1997) *Time for Life: The Surprising Ways Americans Use Their Time*. State College, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press.
Rojek, C. (2000) *Leisure and Culture*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
Rubin, G. (1984) 'Thinking Sex. Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality', in C.S. Vance (ed.) *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*. Boston, MA: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
Smith, C. (2007) 'Designed for Pleasure: Style, Indulgence and Accessorized Sex', *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 10(2) 167–184.
Stebbins, R. A. (2001) 'The Costs and Benefits of Hedonism: Some Consequences of Taking Casual Leisure Seriously', *Leisure Studies* 20: 305–9.
Stebbins, R. A. (1997) 'Casual Leisure: A Conceptual Statement', *Leisure Studies* 16(1): 17–25.
Stebbins, R. A. (1982) 'Serious leisure: A Conceptual Statement', *Pacific Sociological Review* 25: 251–272.
Williams, L. (2004) 'Second Thoughts on *Hard Core*: American Obscenity Law and the Scapegoating of Deviance', in P. Church Gibson (ed.) *More Dirty Looks: Gender, Pornography and Power*. London: BFI.
Wolf, N. (2012) *Vagina: A New Biography*, London: Virago.