Who counts as a sexual partner? Women's criteria for defining and sorting through their sexual histories

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Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Who counts as a sexual partner? Women's criteria for defining and sorting through their sexual histories

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ABSTRACT

Notions of who counts as a sexual partner – that is, what specific actions, feelings, or relationships become defined as part of one's sexual history – often carry assumptions about sexual scripts, power, and social identities. In this exploratory study, we analysed semi-structured interviews with eighteen women from a diverse 2019 community sample (mean age = 36.39, SD = 12.24) collected in a large Southwestern U.S. city in order to examine how women made decisions about who was classified as a sexual partner throughout their lifetime when reviewing their sexual histories and previous sexual encounters. We identified six behavioural, relational, and emotional themes in how women defined and demarcated sexual versus nonsexual partners: 1) Having penile-vaginal intercourse; 2) Engaging in non-penile-vaginal intercourse (PVI) forms of sex; 3) Having an orgasm with someone; 4) Any physical sexual contact involving genitals; 5) Having a romantic relationship with someone; and 6) Feeling attraction and desire for a person. Tensions about heterosexist biases in sexual inventories were discussed, as were methodological implications for measuring, studying, and identifying non-PVI sexual encounters.

Many studies, particularly those in medical research, measure the number of sexual partners as a concept linked to health issues (Ankum et al., 1996; Liu et al., 2015), yet measures of who counts as a sexual partner are often taken-for-granted rather than contested. Definitions of concepts and terms within sexuality research have a long and fraught history, particularly in relation to heterosexist assumptions about 'real' sex (García, 2009; Tolman, 2002). Feminist sex researchers have warned that notions of what it means to be 'sexually active' or 'sexually activated' often carry heteronormative implications of penile-vaginal intercourse as the key criterion (Fahs & McClelland, 2016) just as ideas of what sex is often reference penile-vaginal intercourse rather than nonpenetrative sexual actions (Trotter & Alderson, 2007). Similarly, notions of who counts as a sexual partner – that is, what specific actions, feelings, or relationships become defined as part of one's sexual history – often carries heterosexist and gendered assumptions about sexual scripts, power, rights, and social identities.

While some researchers have looked at how sex is defined by adults in same and mixed gendered couples (Scott et al., 2018), and a few studies have posed hypothetical scenarios about sexual partners (Cecil et al., 2002; Randall & Byers, 2003), few studies have explored the

ways women determine who they count as a sexual partner. One might assume that this is a straightforward and simple issue, but this is far from true, as the interpretive process is complicated, convoluted, and often ambivalent. Accordingly, issues of overgeneralisation, social desirability, vague item wording, inaccurate responses, and overdemanding recall haunt quantitative surveys of sexual histories (McCallum & Peterson, 2012), and qualitative researchers have yet to explore the ways that women make sense of the 'who counts as a sexual partner' question in their own words.

In an effort to better understand and nuance the definitions by which women determine who counts as a sexual partner in their history, this study examined the spoken qualitative narratives from semi-structured interviews with eighteen U.S. women from diverse backgrounds (race, age, current relationship status, parental status, class backgrounds, and sexual identities). How women sorted people into partner categories, along with their criteria and reasoning found in their definitions of sexual partners, were a major focus of this study. To address sexual schemas, we focused on the cognitive, emotive, and verbal representations of sexual partners (Andersen & Cyranowski, 1994). As a qualitative study, we did not start with close-ended items on a survey, but instead used an inductive thematic analysis that featured women's narratives, conversational styles, and sexual subjectivities in their own words. Exploring these definitions offers crucial insights into how women understand and speak about their sexual lives and how sex researchers can better clarify the concept of 'sexual partner' when assessing women's sexual histories.

Literature review

The necessity of conceptual clarity

Concepts are abstractions that link a set of similar attributes or characteristics to a single term (Babbie, 2004). Formal definitions of concepts are most helpful in social scientific research when they are precise about what should be measured or observed. Political scientist John Gerring (1999) added that concepts are especially helpful in research when they are coherent and have logical consistency, are clearly articulated, resonate with readers, are able to classify all instances and parts of an event or phenomenon, and allow researchers to distinguish concepts from each other and speak the same language about an event.

The importance of conceptual clarity in sexuality research cannot be overstated. As cultural theorist Mieke Bal (2002) argued, 'Concepts . . . are the sites of debate, awareness of difference, and tentative exchange. Agreeing does not mean agreeing on content, but agreeing on the basic rules of the game: If you use a concept at all, you use it in a particular way, so that you can meaningfully disagree on content. That use does not go without saying' (p. 18). She further argued that concepts need to be continuously evaluated for each study and each use, and that researchers far too often assume shared definitions of concepts are universally applicable. In this study, we direct attention to the way that concepts and definitions of sex operate.

The operationalisation of a psychological process to a measurable construct is intellectually demanding, rarely transparent, and often rooted in various classed, gendered, and raced worldviews (Danziger, 1997; Martin & Sugarman, 2009), suggesting that researchers need to relentlessly reflect upon how concepts are imagined, assessed, and measured (Fahs & McClelland, 2016; Machado & Silva, 2007). Within sexuality research, researchers have directed attention to conceptual analysis and clarity on numerous behavioural and subjective realms, including safe sex (Alexander et al., 2012); sexual empowerment (Lamb, 2010); sexual satisfaction (McClelland, 2010); desire and arousal (Mitchell et al., 2014); wantedness of sex (Muehlenhard & Peterson, 2005); sexual attraction (Savin-Williams & Joyner, 2014); among many others.

A relevant concept to this paper is the notion of what counts as becoming *sexually active*, what 'activates' young women, and how this connects to phallocentric definitions of sex and sexuality itself. While some studies of young women have allowed participants to self-define being sexually

active (García, 2009), most researchers define *sexually active* in quite narrow terms: 1) having oral, anal, or vaginal intercourse (Julio et al., 2015); 2) eschewing definitions altogether (Bach et al., 2013); or assuming penetrative penile-vaginal intercourse is the sole definition of becoming sexually active (McGraw et al., 2015). While narrow definitions of sexual partners might be warranted in public health studies or studies on pregnancy risks (for example), many studies build assumptions about sexual partners into their questions that overly limit the complexity of this issue. Other kinds of sexual experiences – and aspects of sexual experiences – are often ignored, including masturbation, touching, kissing, rubbing, watching pornography, ejaculating, consent, and fantasising, thus suggesting that intercourse (and, in a related sense, sexual risk) should epitomise the definition of sexual activity (Michaels & Giami, 1999). Further, these definitions overwhelmingly endorse the heterosexist views that the penis or phallus is the only real 'activator' or 'activating agent' and that the female body is only activated when penetrated (Fahs & McClelland, 2016; Tolman, 2002). For young women, these definitions also suggest their sexual lives only begin when they have been passively penetrated, thus obscuring the sexual experiences queer women have with other women and limiting the definitions of what counts as sex (Akintola et al., 2012; Fahs & McClelland, 2016).

What is 'having sex' and who is a 'sexual partner'?

With regard to measuring what *sex* is and how people define it, the borders and boundaries around definitions of sex are often quite incompatible, vague, murky, and implicit. Researchers and lay people define sex according to a wide variety of definitions and criteria (Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2007; Sanders & Reinisch, 1999). The 'coital imperative' narrative is often built into people's definitions of heterosexual norms, but large groups of people have more expansive definitions of sex (Frith, 2013; McPhillips et al., 2001). For example, in a study of 155 undergraduates, students identified longer dating status, an opposite-sex partner, and the presence of orgasm as definitions of having 'had sex', while women were more likely than men to have a broader definition of 'having sex' beyond penile-vaginal intercourse (Trotter & Alderson, 2007). Another study of 223 undergraduates presented hypothetical scenarios about 'Jim' and 'Susie' and asked participants to judge whether certain behaviours would be considered to be sex. Results found that definitions varied by context and that vaginal and anal intercourse were considered sex under most circumstances, oral sex at times constituted sex (more often for women), and that participants sometimes labelled an action as sex if an orgasm occurred (Bogart et al., 2000). For sexual minority women, sex was defined much more broadly, including sexual acts that involved partnered sexual touching (Scott et al., 2018). One study of 486 adult men and women found no universal consensus on which sexual behaviours constituted having 'had sex' (Sanders et al., 2010), suggesting that caution is needed when studying and defining the concept of 'having sex'.

Traditional gender scripts that value male promiscuity and women's sexual chastity suggest that men have overestimated and women have underestimated the number of sexual partners they have in their lifetimes (Alexander & Fisher, 2003; Fisher, 2013). Studies of American adults found that, when participants were asked for their number of sexual partners, men overwhelmingly left out any sexual encounters they had had with sex workers, and men overreported their number of sexual partners and women underreported their number of sexual partners (Alexander & Fisher, 2003; Brewer et al., 2000; Fisher, 2013). A British study that used a national probability sample found that men were more likely than women to exclude oral sex-only partners in their total number of sexual partners, and that men reported twice the number of sexual partners compared to women (Mitchell et al., 2019). Some studies also suggest that men generally define their sexual partners by amounts of sexual contacts while women are more likely to limit sexual partners only to people who are in long-term romantic relationships (Cecil et al., 2002; Wiederman, 1997). Building on this, a study of people's reported number of sexual partners suggests that men and women relied on different criteria and standards for counting their sexual partners rather than

intentionally misrepresenting their numbers of partners (Brown & Sinclair, 1999), again pointing towards the need for better accuracy and gender-specific ways of understanding how women define sexual versus nonsexual partners.

With regard to who counts as a sexual partner, few studies have examined this through close-ended survey items (Cecil et al., 2002; Michaels & Giami, 1999), but no studies have examined this with regard to how person defines a sexual partner in their own words, phrases, and descriptions. The quantitative studies suggested that American adults report having an average of 7.2 partners in their lifetimes in the 1980s (Smith, 1991) and that number had grown to 11.22 in 2012 (Twenge et al., 2015). Young adults average roughly one sexual partner per year (Kan et al., 2010). That said, the numbers of young adults having sex seems to have plateaued or even declined in recent years, as Americans born in the early 2000s had fewer sexual partners and less sexual activity than previous cohorts (Twenge et al., 2017b), even controlling for gender, race, region, educational level, and work status (Twenge et al., 2017a). Experiments have also tested how people judge definitions of 'sexual partner' in hypothetical scenarios. One study that presented 223 undergraduates with hypothetical scenarios involving 'Tom' and 'Lucy' found that students more often labelled them as sexual partners if they had vaginal or anal intercourse as opposed to oral sex, if they had more frequent sex, or if they were in a steady dating relationship (Cecil et al., 2002). A survey that asked 164 Canadian undergraduates to sort a list of sexual behaviours into *sex/no sex* and *sexual partner/not a sexual partner* responses found that 25% of participants considered oral sex as having sex, and more than 60% thought that the giver or receiver of oral sex was a sexual partner; further, 4% considered masturbating in front of someone to be sex, while 34% felt that was sufficient criteria to be considered a sexual partner (Randall & Byers, 2003). Finally, a study of heterosexual undergraduates found that students rated PVI more often as 'definitely sex' than other kinds of sex (e.g. oral sex) and that they defined more specific actions as 'sex' when speaking about their partners compared to when they assessed their own behaviours (Sewell & Strassberg, 2015). These studies collectively suggest methodological slipperiness in the concept of what counts as sex and who counts as a sexual partner.

Research questions

Given the lack of qualitative research on this topic, this study began with several research questions: First, how do women of diverse sexual identities define sexual partners, and how do they delineate the key criteria for defining who is a sexual partner? Second, how do their narrative definitions fit into, or diverge from, commonly held sexual scripts that prioritise penetrative sexual intercourse above all other sexual actions? Third, to what extent do women's accounts rely on behavioural, emotional, or relational criteria when defining sexual partners, and what does this suggest about gendered notions of sexuality?

Method

This study utilised qualitative data from a sample of 18 adult cisgender women (mean age = 36.39, SD = 12.24) recruited in 2019 in a large metropolitan Southwestern U.S. city. Participants were recruited through the volunteers section of the local online section of Craigslist. Finding participants through Craigslist has some limitations but it allows researchers greater access people from different ages, races, and sexual identities than community snowball samples (Head et al., 2016) or convenience samples of undergraduates (Alto et al., 2018). Craigslist also attracts women from more diverse age, sexual identity, and social class backgrounds compared to Facebook and Google AdWords (Antoun et al., 2016; Head et al., 2016; Warren et al., 2015).

The advertisement asked for women ages 18–59 to participate in an in-person interview study about their sexual behaviours, practices, and attitudes. Participants were selected only for their gender, racial/ethnic background, sexual identity, and age, with only self-identified cisgender women responding to the request to participate in the study; no other pre-screening questions were asked. A purposive sample was generated to provide greater demographic diversity in the sample: sexual minority women and racial/ethnic minority women were intentionally oversampled and a diverse range of ages was represented (33% or 6 ages 18–31; 39% or 7 ages 32–45; and 28% or 5 ages 46–59). The sample of cisgender women included 44% (8) white women and 56% (10) women of colour, including four Mexican-American women, two African-American women, two Asian-American women, 1 Native American woman, 1 Arab-American woman, and one biracial Filipina/Mexican-American woman. For self-reported sexual identity, the sample included 44% (8) heterosexual women, 39% (7) bisexual women, and 17% (3) lesbian women. All participants in this IRB-approved project consented to have their interviews audiotaped and fully transcribed and all received USD $20.00 compensation. Identifying data was removed and each participant received a pseudonym to ensure anonymity. Participants directly reported a range of socioeconomic and educational backgrounds, employment histories, and parental and relationship statuses. More specifically, 22% had a high school diploma, 33% had some college, 33% had a bachelors degree, and 12% had a graduate degree; 22% were unemployed and 78% were employed (e.g. bartender, marketing, non-profit work, student, teacher, retail, lawyer, caregiver, etc.); 44% had children and 56% had no children; and 61% were single and unpartnered while 39% were married or partnered.

Participants were interviewed using a semi-structured interview protocol that lasted for approximately 90 minutes, where participants responded to 24 questions about their sexual histories, sexual practices, and feelings and attitudes about their sexuality and their body. All participants were interviewed by the Breanne Fahs, the lead author, in a university office that ensured privacy and confidentiality of responses. Due to the nature of this research, participants of this study did not agree for their data to be shared publicly, so supporting data is not available.

Women were asked two questions about how they defined when a person counted as a sexual partner: 'How do you count your sexual partners? For example, how do you decide that someone is a sexual partner?' with the follow up clarifying question, 'If I were to ask you, for example, how many sexual partners you've had, how would you decide who falls into the category of sexual partner versus not a sexual partner?' These questions were scripted, but served to open up other conversations and dialogue about related topics, as follow-up questions, clarifications, and probes were free-flowing and conversational.

Responses were analysed qualitatively using a 'critical realist' and phenomenologically oriented form of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To conduct our semantic analysis, we familiarised ourselves with the data by reading all of the transcripts thoroughly, and we then identified patterns for common interpretations posed by participants. For this analysis, we looked for common and uncommon definitions of sexual partners. We paid attention to the attributes and qualities of a 'sexual partner' and how women categorised people into or out of that label. We reviewed lines, sentences, phrases, and paragraphs of the transcripts, looking for patterns and exceptions within and between individuals (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We selected and generated themes through the process of identifying logical links and overlapping characterisations between several participants. When looking for coherent patterns in the data we were concerned about the qualities of descriptions found in the theme as well as issues of boundaries between the themes, having enough instances to support the existence of a theme, and the presence of 'internal homogeneity' and 'external heterogeneity'.

This program continued until all transcripts were read and the researchers could no longer find any new themes. We then utilised a small team of secondary coders (one graduate student and one undergraduate student) who read the transcripts separately. The researchers refined and clarified the themes until we arrived at a mutually agreed upon list of six themes that reflected women's definitions of who counts as a sexual partner. There were not any notable

instances where we disagreed on these themes. Once these themes were generated, we reread the transcripts to see if each person coded the same passages in a similar fashion (drawing from the recommendations of Campbell et al., 2013). We adjusted a few of our interpretations and ensured that we reached alignment after reviewing any discrepancies between us.

Results

All participants were able to provide a definition of what criteria they used to classify someone in their sexual history as a sexual partner, though they discussed their feelings about this in notably different and distinct ways. With participants using either sexual behaviours or emotional connections as the basis of their judgements, we identified six themes associated with how women determined that someone counted as a sexual partner when they reflected on their sexual histories: 1) Having penile-vaginal intercourse; 2) Engaging in non-penile-vaginal intercourse forms of sex; 3) Having an orgasm with someone; 4) Any physical sexual contact involving genitals; 5) Having a romantic relationship with someone; and 6) Feeling attraction and desire for a person. Every response by participants fit into one of these six themes, but some participants made longer and multifaceted comments that fit into several themes.

Theme 1: having penile-vaginal intercourse

As the most common theme, five of the eighteen women said that they defined sexual partners and, at times, sexual activity itself, according to penile-vaginal intercourse. Some participants were explicit about defining sexual partners according to penetration and the 'coital imperative'. Karen (50/White/Heterosexual) said, 'I think it would be intercourse. I wouldn't count someone I didn't have intercourse with. It has to be penetration'. Sandra (54/Latina/Heterosexual) insisted that for her, sex only occurred if it was penile-vaginal intercourse and that other sexual actions were something else: 'Intercourse. As a teenager you make out or whatever, so I never really considered that sex. That wasn't sex. It was like when you did the whole nasty thing'. Maritza (45/Latina/Heterosexual) also felt that intercourse stood out as the defining feature of a sexual partner rather than other kinds of sexual activities or affectional practices: 'Intercourse, for sure, 'cause there's intimacy, cuddling and stuff, but I don't consider that sex. It's only sex if there's intercourse because of the technicality of the physical anatomy'.

Even when limiting sexual partners according to intercourse, some slippage and inconsistencies in definitional terms and conditional stipulations existed. Lucy (26/Biracial Arab and Mexican/Heterosexual) said that she only counted partners she had intercourse with and excluded all other behaviours: 'If I'm thinking about the number of people I've had sex with, it's true intercourse. I know some people think that "hooking up" can be oral sex, but for me, if I count a number it's legitimate intercourse'. She went on to clarify that she delineated her official 'number' from her ideas about what was sexual, saying, 'It's kind of a grey area though. When people ask, "What's your number?" for that, the full sexual experience, but I still definitely include others as a sexual partner because it was a form of sex, and you still need to be cautious with health concerns and all that, so I consider them sexual partners but not in my number'. Jess (23/Korean-American/Bisexual) also expressed hesitancy at solely defining sex as intercourse, but nevertheless landed on penile-vaginal intercourse as her key criterion despite identifying as bisexual: 'I guess I just kind of define real sex as penis-in-vagina sex kind of thing, which is a weird thing that society has formed, like "It's only sex if it's male-female". So I think that's kind of warped my mind so when I think of sexual partners it's pretty much just intercourse. I wouldn't count anything short of intercourse'. This use of the penile-vaginal framework was exclusively expressed by heterosexual and bisexual women and was never expressed by women who identified as lesbian or queer.

Theme 2: engaging in non-penile-vaginal intercourse forms of sex

Three women defined sexual partners as people they shared some kind of sex with, including non-penile-vaginal intercourse forms of sex. Note that these descriptions evoke types of sex commonly recognised in the broader culture (e.g. oral, anal, etc.) and are not limited to the 'coital imperative' when defining sexual partners. Amara (21/White/Bisexual) defined sexual partners as those who she went beyond kissing with: 'I guess if we get to a base beyond kissing, so like oral sex or, of course, penetrative sex'. Erin (19/White/Bisexual), too, felt that a sexual partner was a person she had any kind of genital sex with: 'I would say anyone who I have had oral sex, vaginal sex, or anal sex with, that kind of stuff. It has to be one of those'. Dani (40/Filipina and Mexican/Lesbian) more expansively defined sexual partners as those who she has had sexual touching with, saying specifically of her experiences with manual sex (fingering) and breast touching 'Whether or not I've had any sexual relationships with them, that's how I define it. I think anything that you really do experimenting with the body is sexual. I don't think like a personal relationship where we don't touch each other is a sexual thing. I know some people feel that it is but I think that when you cross that boundary into sexual touching, then it is'.

Theme 3: having an orgasm with someone

Sometimes the classification of sexual partners depended on a desired sexual outcome. As a third theme, two women defined sexual partners as someone they have had an orgasm with (note that this could be either party), suggesting that the experience of physical pleasure mattered more than the sexual behaviours themselves. Robin (43/White/Heterosexual) defined sexual partners primarily according to their own orgasm: 'If I have an orgasm, that's a sexual partner. Orgasm or maybe penetration, because kissing and fondling, not really, but if you're having an orgasm, yes'. Tala (51/Native-American/Bisexual), who worked for several years as a sex worker when she was younger, said that she sorted sexual partners from nonsexual partners based on the expectation that she might have an orgasm:

> I used to be a sex worker so I have more sexual partners overall than the average person, but I still count them. There were people that were my own personal choosing and people that were part of my job, and it doesn't mean that there wasn't some bleed over, because every sex worker who's been in the business for more than five minutes ends up having a relationship with a client at some point . . . I would say let's say anybody that you've had an interaction with along with the intention of somebody having an orgasm.

Notably, women focused sometimes on their own orgasm and other times on partners' orgasms when using this as their definition of a sexual partner.

Theme 4: any physical sexual contact involving genitals

As a fourth theme, three women defined sexual partners according to genital contact rather than specifically mentioning orgasm, intercourse, or a type of sexual action. Bobby (37/White/Lesbian) said that intentional and consensual genital contact mattered more than anything else to her: 'I think I have a loose definition. If there's any genital manipulation involved, I count it, but if there's no genital manipulation, I don't count it'. Ciara (18/African-American/Bisexual) linked her feelings about genital contact with her emerging bisexuality, noting her struggles to move beyond intercourse as her definition of a sexual partner: 'This is a thing I've struggled with because even though I'm into women I haven't done anything with a woman besides first or second base kind of stuff. I personally wouldn't count it as anything but all my experiences sexually have been with men so it's much easier for me to say that anything, not even anything penetrative, but anything "down there" I would count as sex but that's just because I haven't had any other experience'. Vera (19/Latina/Bisexual) contrasted her current understandings against her earlier definition of virginity and nonvirginity by including all genital contact: 'I recently came out to my parents. I used to say, "Oh so you're

technically a virgin, you've never been with a guy" and things like that, but at the same time I feel like sex can be defined as stimulation of genitals and things like that, and I feel like that's how it would be defined, but even that, I feel like most women don't orgasm in heterosexual relationships so if that's the case then yeah, I was probably a virgin until a bit ago'.

Theme 5: having a romantic relationship with someone

Defining sexual partners sometimes had no connection to sexual behaviours at all, as three women mentioned that a sexual partner was someone they had a romantic relationship with and not just someone they had sex with. Phyllis (50/White/Lesbian) defined sexual partners as an intimate romantic relationship but did not indicate if these intimacies were emotional or physical: 'It's difficult because with the lesbianism or whatever, it's just more intimacy rather than sexual things like a male and female can do, so I really don't know how to answer that because I see it more as intimacy and I don't see each scenario as a sexual scenario necessarily'. Kayla (33/White/Heterosexual) described a sexual partner as someone who she had an emotional (and monogamous) relationship as the primary feature: 'I believe I view it as relationships, someone who you could define as cheating on if you did. I think it first starts mentally, even like envisioning having sex with somebody or thinking about it, wanting it. That's a sexual partner'. Gabriela (35/Latina/Heterosexual) also felt that relationships defined what counted to her as a sexual partner: 'It's an actual relationship or who I was in an actual relationship with, not being promiscuous. Being promiscuous or random things like that, it's sexual but I see sexual as different from making love, from actually being involved and experiencing something completely different. That's enjoying each other'.

Theme 6: feeling attraction and desire for a person

As a final theme, two women defined sexual partners as people they felt attraction and desire for, even if they did not obviously link that attraction to immediate sexual contact. Britney (42/White/Bisexual) defined sexual partners as those she felt attraction and desire for: 'There has to be intimacy. First I have to be sexually drawn to somebody and I have to be physically attracted to them in order to approach in the first place. Then I'll get to know them after that. I've had issues before where I've been so horny that it doesn't matter who they are and that's sad but I've done it. A sexual partner is different'. Here she distinguishes a sexual partner as someone who she feels attraction to *and* who she gets to know more, while a hook-up partner would not necessarily count as that. Whitney (49/African-American/Heterosexual) also felt that sexual chemistry, attraction, desire, and intention mattered more than sexual activity when defining a sexual partner: 'If I'm really attracted to someone and feel a strong desire to have sex with them, and if I feel aroused by them either from being around them or being close to them, even if we're not having sex, that's a sexual partner. If I feel strong jolts of attraction, even if it's just flirting and stuff, I count them as a sexual partner when I make my list. How I feel matters more than what we do'.

Discussion

Researchers who make surveys often assume widespread agreement on what counts as a sexual partner. This study suggests otherwise, in that women sorted, filtered, and organised their sexual histories into *sexual partner* and *nonsexual partner* in six different ways. Moreover, definitions of a sexual partners differed greatly depending on the age and developmental stage of our participants as well as their feelings and impressions about sexual activity, their sexual orientation, the outcomes of the sexual interactions, and their emphasis on emotional ties versus sexual behaviours. While this sample is too small to consider larger patterns for these various identities and groups, it does suggest that future quantitative research could look at these as possible variables that influence how people determine their sexual partners.

These findings should serve as a cautionary tale to researchers who want reliable and valid measures about who counts as a sexual partner. Quantitative researchers often define sexual partners based on people's sexual activities (Michaels & Giami, 1999), but many women count sexual partners beyond the confines of penile-vaginal intercourse. Accordingly, this study warns that sex researchers need to address the topic of sexual partners in a multi-question or open-ended format. Specifically, researchers should *ask* people about how they currently or historically have defined a sexual partner, or they should phrase questions much more specifically, before moving onto any frequency questions about how many partners people have had in their lifetimes or during the last year. Asking the simple question, 'How many people have you had sex with?' is fraught with complications in definitions that can undermine the reliability and validity of any information that was gathered through such a question.

Less than a quarter of the women in this study relied exclusively on penetrative penile-vaginal intercourse to identify their sexual partners. It is notable that several women defined sexual partners as people with whom they have been involved in a romantic relationship and/or to whom they felt attraction, rather than someone with whom they had PVI. Some women counted sexual partners as people they have had sex with in a behavioural sense, and some counted those they had a romantic relationship with, while still others counted those they felt desire and attraction for (see, McCabe et al., 2010). This pushes beyond the mere notion that not all people count nonpenetrative sex as 'real sex', and instead suggests that women classify sexual partners through many different lenses. Relationships and attraction also provide evidence that some women define sexual partners based on emotions and feelings rather than actions and behaviours. This maps onto the research about women drawing upon the presence of long-term relationships to avoid 'slut-shaming' labels (Armstrong et al., 2014). Whether this is also true for how men count sexual partners would be a compelling subject for future research.

These results also nuances and problematises understandings about sexual identities and sexual behaviour, in that, while some tendencies emerged for how lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual women defined their sexual partners (Horowitz & Spicer, 2013; Sewell et al., 2017), the results presented a complex view of sexual identity and definitions of sexual partners. For example, Jess, who identified as bisexual and has reported having sexual experiences with women, still said that sexual partners required penetrative penile-vaginal intercourse, while other sexual minority women defined sex as anything involving genitals or non-PVI sex (or, in two instances, orgasm). The tendency of lesbian women defining sexual partners more by genital contact than did heterosexual women was notable (Horowitz & Spicer, 2013), though more exploration of why this is true could be fruitful. Similarly, heterosexual women spanned a range of responses as well, suggesting that definitions of sexual partners had some patterns along sexual identity lines, but this data was still quite murky and inconclusive. Larger samples of sexual minority women along with more attention to the definitional criteria for sexual partners both among heterosexual women and sexual minority women is needed given these results.

Perhaps the single most important finding in this study was that women draw from diverse definitions of sexual partners, including PVI, oral sex, anal sexual acts, other sexual acts (e.g. fingering), relationship status, and even attraction. This supports other research that has found that women often define sexual partners *outside of* the context of penile-vaginal intercourse (McGraw et al., 2015; Sewell et al., 2017; Trotter & Alderson, 2007); this study, too, gives voice to experiences that veer away from the dominant heterosexist sexual scripts that dictate that people should define sex as PVI only. These findings suggest that a sizeable proportion of women largely refute the notion that penetrative sex is the only 'real sex' and that everything else is 'foreplay' or less serious forms of sex (and thus not worthy of sexual partner status). Many women in this study also insisted on an emotional criterion for defining sexual partners, with some weeding out partners they had sex with for other non-emotional reasons (e.g. hook-ups, sex for money, etc.).

From a public health standpoint, this data points to the critical importance of asking better questions and nuancing definitions about how women catalogue sexual partners. There are important implications here for health practitioners such as gynaecologists and primary care doctors.

Medical doctors need to ask questions, both in their intake paperwork and in person, about sexual behaviour and sexual partners rather than just asking about whether someone is 'sexually active' (For important critiques of the notion of being 'sexually active' and 'sexually activated', see Fahs & McClelland, 2016; Tolman & McClelland, 2011). For studies of sexual health behaviours, researchers need to think carefully about the methodological framing of their questions and, as an example, ask about behaviours if they are assessing STI risk or ask about romantic partners and sexual behaviours when asking about sexual partner histories. Further, researchers who measure number of sexual partners should consider the use of multi-item scales that encompass questions about sexual behaviours, relationship dynamics, and sexual desire/attraction.

Limitations and future directions

Certain research decisions may have affected this study's results, as the choice for wording the interview questions may have captured some, but certainly not all, of the facets of how women define sexual partners. For example, asking specifically about sexual coercion, consensual versus nonconsensual partners, sex that felt more out of obligation versus sex that was freely chosen, or sex for money versus sex without money could help further nuance these definitions in future studies. Moreover, the dichotomous designation of a sexual partner can oversimplify aspects of women's sexual lives. For example, some women might struggle to define partner versus nonpartner status because definitions of consensual sex are sometimes convoluted with some experiences falling into the ambiguous zones of 'just barely sex' or 'almost sex' (Horowitz & Spicer, 2013; Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2007). Future studies could also consider providing one-word prompts with colloquialisms like 'booty calls', 'fuck buddies', and 'friends with benefits' to see whether women placed any of these casual and episodic sexual encounters/relationships into the sexual partner column (Fahs & Munger, 2015; Wentland & Reissing, 2014).

Future research could include younger (teenagers) and older (over 60) women or look longitudinally at how women define sexual partners, as their definitions of partners might change over the lifespan. More stigmatised versions of sexual encounters like non- or semi-consensual sex and paid sex also complicate definitions of sexual partners, so explicitly asking about these actions may provide useful additional nuance to definitions of sexual partners. Definitions of acceptable sexual partners might also vary by marital status because people in supposedly monogamous relationships might not deem their extramarital affair partners as sexual partners (Wilson et al., 2011). Moreover, women might also deflate their number of sexual partners because of conservative sexual scripts about women's chastity, promiscuity, and compulsory heterosexuality (Fisher, 2013). More research on the emotional dimensions of sexual partner definitions could prove useful, particularly in how people may define having a sexual partner even in the absence of explicit sexual behaviours. A larger random sample would be better at exploring the ways in which women's definitions of sexual partners vary by cohorts, class, race, and sexual identities. Moreover, a mixed methods approach to definitions of sexual partners might be necessary in future studies because sex research has not settled on the ideal or even consistent modes of studying sexual behaviours and sexual partners (McCallum & Peterson, 2012).

Ultimately, the narratives in this study revealed how definitions of sex and sexual partners are not universal and intuitive but are instead conflicted, complicated, and methodologically slippery. We want this study to be a call for future researchers to be very specific about how they define sex and sexual partners in studies, to be clear about the goals of their studies in relation to these definitions, and to not ask overly broad questions like, 'How many sexual partners have you had?' More attention to how women define sexual partners has value in multiple arenas: public health (especially sexual health), sexuality research, relationship conversations and disclosures, and political efforts to shift definitions of sexuality away from heterosexist scripts and towards a more inclusive justice-based approach to studying and understanding women's sexuality as a whole. This study also serves as a reminder that extra care to definitions and criteria for how people talk about and understand their

sexual lives is critical. Understanding the complex ways that people imagine, think about, and make stories about their sexual lives allows researchers to better understand and even *find* the gaps and omissions in the broader story of women's sexuality.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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