Addressing sex in narrative therapy:

Talking with heterosexual couples about sex, bodies, and relationships

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In talking with couples about sex, it is often assumed that storylines about sex also involve storylines about relationships and bodies. In our couple therapy work, however, we have found it significant to disentangle these storylines. By exploring separate storylines of relationship/intimacy, body image and sex, many new possibilities for narrative sex therapy with couples have emerged. This paper outlines these possibilities through sharing one example of narrative sex therapy with a heterosexual couple.

Keywords: sex, relationships, intimacy, body image, deconstruction, outsider witnesses, narrative therapy, narrative practice

INTRODUCTION

Dana and Jonathan are in their mid 30s; Dana is a banker and Jonathan a financial adviser. They came to consult us in therapy and told us with pride that they are best friends. They tell each other everything and enjoy being with each other. They met four years ago and have been married for two years. However, Dana said that she is extremely worried about their future because they rarely have sex. In fact, the only times they do have it is when she cries and begs Jonathan for it. She said, 'I feel that our relationship can't survive without sex and this makes me worried and sad'. During this part of our meeting, Jonathan seemed very agitated. He said, 'I don't know why Dana is so upset. She is the love of my life, we are great partners, we are committed to one another. What is the big deal about sex?'

Our prior training in couple therapy left us with similar questions, but for different reasons. In Dana and Jonathan's situation, how were we to make sense of the issue of sex, when nothing else seemed particularly 'wrong'? After all, their relationship was lovingly intimate, mutual, and respectful. In their context, issues of sex did not seem to be tied up in a broader 'dynamic' or to be some 'surface manifestation' of a 'deep-rooted' problem. When faced with problems regarding sexuality, we had previously considered them as a manifestation of issues in 'intimacy', 'power', or 'communication', depending on the theory we were affiliated with at the time. With these frames of reference, we focussed our conversations on these issues, and often partners' communication became clearer, friendship and intimacy became more present, 'gender roles' more flexible ... but sex continued to be frustrating! We realised that if we wanted to be influential in the telling and re-telling of richer stories about sex, we couldn't continue to ignore the particular stories of sexuality, relationships, and bodies and how each of these related to people's lives. In our couple therapy work, we have found it significant to disentangle storylines of relationship/intimacy, body image and sex and to look at the relationship between these stories. In doing so, and in richly describing each partner's stories around these themes, many new possibilities for narrative sex therapy with couples have emerged. Within these conversations the couple then has an opportunity to reconstruct their preferred unique sexual story.

This article explores these possibilities. First, however, we will discuss some of the broader cultural meanings related to sex and intimacy.

CULTURAL AND SOCIAL IDEAS THAT INFLUENCE PRIVATE STORIES ABOUT SEX

Let us briefly look at some relatively recent historic developments in cultural ideas about sexuality. Prior to the feminist revolution, within most cultures, women's sexuality was predominantly seen through men's eyes – whether their male partner (heterosexuality was generally assumed), or the 'masculine gaze' of the broader culture, or medical discourses, usually developed by men. If we look at various forms of art, the expression of sexual pleasure was mainly the expression of men, and women's voices were rarely heard (Halparin, 2003). Culturally, there were many limitations on women's sexuality, for example, virginity until marriage.

The women's liberation movement brought new possibilities. It offered a new freedom of sexuality in which women could learn and understand their unique ways to experience sexual pleasure. Shere Hite's ground-breaking report in 1976 included detailed first person narratives about women's experience of sexuality and, amongst other things, the importance of clitoral stimulation for many women's sexual pleasure. This was only thirty-two years ago. For women, it is relatively new to feel entitled to sexual pleasure. It is new for women's sexuality to be legitimate and acknowledged. From the time of this 'sexual revolution' onwards, women came to learn about their pleasure and share it with their partners. Sexual pleasure came to be understood as a personal quest. It came to be seen that it could be developed and constructed through time, and could be negotiated through conversations between couples. Due to the feminist movement, lack of sexual pleasure of women was no longer seen as a private problem but as a political issue.

The gay and lesbian rights movement, the queer movement and more recently transgender rights activists have also dramatically altered societal understandings of sex, gender and sexual pleasure (Qedar, Ziv & Kenner, 2003). Their work demands that it can no longer be assumed that sexual pleasure equals heterosexual pleasure.

And yet, despite these changes, broader societal norms and standards about gender, bodies and sexuality continue to influence our private experiences of bodies, our relationships and our sexual pleasures.

The idea that women can also enjoy sex has given women more freedom to enjoy sex, but it also has brought expectations. *In some ways, in some* contexts, 'freedom' has become a standard to meet. Where people now are more freed up to be allowed to enjoy sex, if they're not actually participating in and enjoying as much sex as they think they *should*, this can then have negative effects on their identity and on their sense of relationship.

We've noticed in the past few years that many heterosexual couples are coming to see us in which the woman is complaining that the man is not sexual, or not sexual enough, and the woman is feeling shamed by this – as if the man is rejecting her somehow.

Because of the cultural expectation of heterosexual men to be very sexual and always interested in sex, it can be shaming of the woman if he is not, but it also can become linked to questioning the man's masculinity and sexuality. This can bring a real distance as they try to avoid what shames them. In these circumstances, couples may try and avoid sexual contact or intimacy.

Another common cultural idea that we now encounter in sex therapy – and which, to us, needs to be deconstructed – is the idea that it's always necessary to have great sex. It appears that now, just as there is increasing freedom in relation to sexual pleasure, so too is an increasing normalising judgement about the amount of sexual pleasure that couples *ought* to be experiencing (Perel, 2006). As narrative therapists we are more careful now not to make assumptions about how much sex a couple *should* have.

A person's relationship with his/her body in modern society is also often affected by cultural ideas. For instance, the control of the mind over the body is often considered a virtue in many western and eastern cultures – humans should not be like animals, but should control their desires. Modern western culture also has unquestioned standards for the 'right' way men and women should look, the various body measurements to desire, and the proportion and shape different body parts *should* have. We have standards for age-specific looks, as well as faith, gender, and class expectations. These broader cultural ideas influence our relationship with our bodies and the ways we physically express ourselves.

There are other more subtle ways in which our cultures influence our private stories and experiences of sex. The very language we have available to describe our sexual lives influences how we understand and experience sex.

LANGUAGE LIMITATIONS

Language plays an important part in the construction of reality. In the languages familiar to us, the words available for describing intimate body parts and sexual actions tend to be limited. Words describing sexuality are often either 'dirty' curses or scientific and cold.

The Oxford Dictionary, for example, offers the following description: 'Sexual intercourse: the physical union of male and female person or animals that produces offspring'; 'Sexuality: sex characteristics or appeal'. These words have very little to do with relationships, aspirations, self-expression, or indeed any experience that is near and particular. Sex therapy, too, often reflects a vocabulary of anatomy and mechanics. The words we choose to describe sex with those who consult with us will have an influence on the sorts of meanings and storylines that are constructed in our conversations.

Let us consider for a moment, the dominant cultural definition of 'sex'. Despite the influence of feminist and queer writers, 'sex' is still commonly defined in popular imagination as 'penis-vagina intercourse culminating in orgasm'. All other sexual acts are often seen as 'fore-play', leading up to the 'real act'.

Such a narrow definition of sex has real implications on heterosexual couples (let alone those who are enjoying non-heterosexual sex, or self-pleasure). When definitions of sex can be broadened, then other experiences of touch, playfulness and fun can become part of sexual repertoire. For instance, Yosi and Sara consulted us and said, among other things, that they no longer had sex. They told us that this was making Yosi question Sara's love for him, and it was making Sara question their relationship. So we asked them, 'When you say sex what do you mean?' This led to a conversation about the idea of sex being an act of penetration and we discovered that penis-vagina intercourse for Sara was associated with physical pain. Although the couple had once very much enjoyed a range of other non-penetrative sexual acts, they had been avoiding these for some time in the thought that if they engaged with them these would necessarily 'lead to' penetrative sex. Finding ways to alter the trajectory of certain storylines, to uncouple acts of touch with acts of penetration,

resulted in subordinate storylines about touch, playfulness and kindness being brought forward. This is just one example in which the definition of sex has significant implications.

Another influence of language on sex is when people take up what Michael White refers to as 'naturalistic accounts' of their own sexual identities or those of their partners. Attraction, passion and desire are often considered personal 'traits' (a notion based in the 'internal-state psychologies'). If attraction, passion and desire are located as 'internal traits', however, they may be seen as unchanging or unchangeable. For instance, a common naturalistic conception of sexual identity is the idea that a sexual problem exists because one person is 'more sexual' and the other isn't. This sort of conception of the sexual relationship can be a 'dead-end'. We prefer what Michael White described as 'intentional-state categories of identity'. These are associated with priorities, values, wishes, hopes, commitments, and so on (see White, 2004a). Within our therapeutic conversations we seek to create a context in which so-called 'traits' or unchangeable 'truths' about people's sexuality can be deconstructed. To do so, we explore the rich stories that each person has about sexuality, bodies, and relationships, and how these are deeply influenced by culture and history.

THE SEXUAL PLAYGROUND: AN ALTERNATIVE METAPHOR TO PERFORMANCE AND GOAL-ORIENTATION

In our work, we have begun to view sexuality as having the potential to become an expression of a person's preferred ways of being with themselves, and in relationships (rather than being some kind of innate 'state', or a site of 'truths' about people). From this perspective, the sexual domain can be considered a type of 'adult playground'. Good children's playgrounds are a space for ingenuity and creativity. They are filled with toys that invite children to extend their knowledge of what is possible for them to do and what their body is capable of. These playgrounds are a space in which social skills are tried and authenticated via the acknowledgement of playmates and parents.

The adult 'sexual playground' that we seek to create is an arena in which ways of being that do not fit with narrow descriptions of self allowed by dominant professional, gender, and social discourses can be tried and authenticated. This is a place where tenderness, fantasies, spontaneity, playfulness, boldness, innovation, and power games have a legitimate place.

Of course, if a playground is inhabited by harassment, abuse, bulling or fear, then this will contribute to the development of thin conclusions regarding a person's identity. Safety and respect are essential conditions for sexuality to be a positive experience. Thus, in our work, it is critical to be attuned to the possibility of current practices of abuse within relationships, or previous experiences of abuse which may impact on current relationships.[1]

With this in mind, we work to create 'sexual playgrounds' in which both members of a couple relationship can play.

TALKING WITH DANA AND JONATHAN

We will now return to Dana and Jonathan and describe in some detail the ways in which we conducted these couple sex therapy consultations. The reason we are choosing this example is because it offers clear descriptions of two key aspects of our work: richly describing separate storylines of sex, relationship and bodies[2]; and the use of outsider-witness practices. We will quickly describe each of these ideas here:

Richly describing separate storylines of sex, relationship and bodies

When a couple comes to consult us, we now assume that each member of this couple will be living out particular storylines in relation to sex, relationship and their body. The chances are that the influence of these different storylines on themselves and on each other is in some way problematic (which is why they have consulted us). It is also likely that each partner is not aware of these different storylines or their effects. We now spend time separately deconstructing each of these three storylines.

This was not always the case. In our earlier work, we sometimes conflated the storyline of sex and the storyline of relationship, and we sometimes ignored the storyline of the body. We thought that if we worked on the relationship/intimacy/love between the two people that this would somehow necessarily enable their sexual life to become more preferred. In time, however, we came to see that this was not always true. In the case of Dana and Jonathan for example, they were both very clear that their relationship and sense of intimacy with each other was in very good shape. There was no problem

there. There was no lack of intimacy. They were, however, experiencing conflict and distress in relation to their experiences of sex. When we spent time exploring each of their storylines around relationship, sex and their bodies, it became clearer to us and to each other why this was the case, and different possibilities for action then emerged.

Realising that we need to separate storylines of sex, relationship and body, has been liberating. It has made us more aware of the significance of working with the particular meanings that sexuality and intimacy and their bodies have for those with whom we are meeting. It has challenged us further to ensure we are never prescribing some predetermined notion of what makes for 'good sexual relations', or a 'good relationship'. In the conversations we share with couples, we discover rich worlds of diverse meanings.

Broadly speaking, our work with couples now involves deconstructing the dominant storylines they each have about relationship/intimacy/love, about sexuality, and about their body. When we start to work on these separate storylines, we explore how they have been built through personal history, through the couple's relationship history, and through broader cultural history. We also look at the effects of each of these stories.

When people start to realise how the storylines they have about sexuality, about intimacy and relationships, and about their bodies, are constructed through history, these things stop being seen as a 'trait', or the only 'truth' about themselves – and they can then take a position on these storylines.

This creates an opportunity for conversations that richly describe preferred storylines in relation to each of these themes. We explore their dreams, hopes, intentions, values, and commitments that they bring to that relationship; their values, thoughts, dreams, fantasies that are connected to sexuality; and their hopes and wishes about their relationships with their own bodies. These explorations of preferred storylines are often collaborative. They involve both members of the couple collaborating in developing preferred storylines.

Couples as outsider witnesses

While deconstructing with couples their stories about love and relationship, their bodies, and their stories about sex, we are quite deliberate in how we assist each person to listen to each other. As we interview one member of the couple, we reposition the other as a *friend*, who knows how to listen and give acknowledgement. We interview one partner at a time and we help the other to listen quietly, not having to be on guard or respond immediately to what is being said. Only later do we help the partner to reflect on what they heard, and what touched them, following the categories of outsider-witness questions in narrative practice (White, 2004b).

In these outsider-witness conversations, we work with each of the three stories with each partner. Each partner has the opportunity to unpack the dominant storylines of sexuality, intimacy/relationship, and their bodies, and then hear reflections from their partner, through a process of telling and re-telling. Each conversation traces the history and social-cultural background of these ideas; the effects of these on the person, their partner, and their relationship; their position on these effects; and their preferences for themselves, their partner, and the relationship.

QUESTIONS TO UNPACK STORIES ABOUT SEX, BODIES, AND RELATIONSHIPS

The following questions are just some examples that we might use in a conversation of this sort.

Questions about sex:

- What were some of the ideas about sex in your family, your culture?
- How did you learn about sex?
- How was sex discussed in your family, culture?
- How was sexuality expressed in your background?
- When you think about words like sex, intimacy, love, relationship, passion, and desire, what comes to your mind?
- What is the history of your sexuality?
- What is the history of sexuality for you as a couple?
- What are the messages you received in your upbringing about sexual pleasure?
- What did you learn in your history about gender roles and sexuality?

Questions about people's relationship with their body:

- How do you feel about your body?
- What were the messages you received in your history about your body?

- What are the messages of your culture about body pleasure and body size?
- How does the way you feel about your body, if any, affect your sex?

In this section, we may need to also ask questions about hormones, health problems, and other difficulties that can interfere physically with sex, and might need to be helped by a physician.

Questions to explore relationships:

- What did you learn in your personal history about couplehood?
- What did you learn about intimacy, about friendship between partners, about trust?
- What did you learn about gender roles and their effect on relations?

Exploring the effects of personal narratives & cultural discourses:

We can then ask questions about the effects of each of the above three stories in relation to sex, bodies, and relationships:

- How does each story affect your picture of yourself, your partner, and the relationship?
- What are the effects in the past, present, and future? How might these things affect your children?
- How does the story you have about sex (or relationship, or your body) affect your partner's ideas about herself, her womanhood, her body?
- How does the story affect the stability of your relationship?
- How does it affect your happiness, and your partner's happiness?
- How does it invite you to act towards each other?

Preferences:

- What do you want for yourself, your partner, and the relationship? Why is it important to you? What are some of your dreams, your fantasies?
- Can you tell me of a time or an event that you enjoyed being sexual with your partner? What was it that you enjoyed? How is it connected to what is important to you?
- Do you know someone else that has a relationship like that? Do you appreciate it; if so, why? What is it about this way of being that attracts you, and why?

DANA AND JONATHAN

When we met with Dana and Jonathan, we first explored Jonathan's couplehood/relationship story. Everywhere he looked in his background, he didn't see any couples who succeeded in building a friendship. He was sceptical about the possibility of friendships between women and men. His father disrespected women, and coached his two sons to disrespect women and see them as objects. Through his father's eyes, Jonathan had seen his mother as a very weak person, and generalised this to see women as weak. Before he was in a relationship with Dana, he acted exactly like his father – he disrespected women and did not believe in friendships with women.

However, when Jonathan met Dana he made a decision. He felt that she was different and respected her mind and her intellect. And when they started to get closer they became very good friends. They would sit and talk for hours, and Jonathan loved these talks. This was different from what he had ever had with other women. Somehow, Jonathan and Dana managed to build a beautiful friendship, and she became his best friend. They succeeded in doing something very different than what he had thought was possible before.

We then explored Jonathan's story of sexuality. The sexuality story for men that Jonathan believed is that men's goal is to have fun and enjoy themselves, without caring about women. And in his own sexual history, that was the kind of sexuality Jonathan had experienced. When he met Dana, it wasn't so important to him to have sex with her, because that's not what he wanted for the relationship. He had sex only to please her from time to time; sex in this case was for her and not something he wanted for himself. To Jonathan, sex with a woman was something a man did when he doesn't respect the woman, and was actually dangerous for relationships. He didn't like this idea, but only started to look at it during this conversation; it had just been a part of what he believed in up until then. When he started to think about all of this, he said he wanted 'to be something different' with Dana, and at that point they then started to build a different, mutual sexuality together.

We then explored Dana's different stories, first of all exploring her ideas about relationships. Dana was very close with her mother and dreamed of having a very similar relationship with a partner. She believed that two people can be close and talk

about everything and rely on each other. This was easy for her to do, and she continued to do what she believed with Jonathan, the first man she had a relationship with.

However, another part of her story in relation to sexuality was that there were many conflicts in her family. Her father put his energy outside the family, and her mother thought that the father put her 'last on his list'. Dana remembered many fights and felt very badly for her mother. But at night, she would hear her parents having sex, and she loved hearing this because it made her feel more safe. Sex made her parents happy – she remembers her mother waking up in the mornings happy, gentle, and kind. So sex to Dana was something that connects people and makes them happy. She said she loved having sex and loved her body, and loved Jonathan's body also.

We then explored Jonathan's story about his body. He was a bit overweight and felt there was something wrong with his body. He told us that he thought he cannot be a 'good, sexual man' because he is overweight. Jonathan didn't like his body and was embarrassed about it. We discussed how this was connected to cultural ideas, and he started to take the position that he doesn't want to judge himself according to these cultural norms, and he doesn't want them to affect his relationship with his body.

Clearly, there were a lot of gendered meanings in these different storylines, and we worked hard to separate the storylines to explore the relationship between them. It became clear that for Jonathan, the relationship between sexuality and friendship/couplehood was contradictory, while for Dana, sexuality was one of the ways of bringing these themes together. So we then talked about what effects these stories about relationships had on the story of sex, and about what the effects of the stories of sex had on the story about relationship.

In exploring these topics, we are engaged in multi-layered conversations – about each of the three storylines of intimacy/relationships, bodies, and sex. We are exploring:

- What the effects of these dominant storylines are on the person.
- What the effects are on their view of their partner.
- How these, in turn, affect their partner's view of them.
- How these affect their partner's view of themselves.
- How these storylines affect the relationship.

In our experience, these multiple layers lead to very rich conversations indeed.

What was highly significant for Dana and Jonathan was coming to understand the meaning of these storylines in each other's lives. The moment Dana understood the history of Jonathan's relationship to sex, she stopped being offended about Jonathan's lack of interest in having sex with her. At the same time, the moment Jonathan understood the effects that his lack of interest in sex were having on Dana's identity, this was also a turning point. From this moment, Jonathan and Dana felt as if they were together in the mutual desire to have a good intimate sexual relationship. This made it possible to work with each other rather than against each other.

CONSTRUCTING PREFERRED SEXUAL STORYLINES

After deconstructing the three storylines, and understanding the effects of these stories on each partner and their relationship, we asked about what they wanted for themselves. Realising the history and the effects of these stories on their lives, both partners chose to find a way to combine friendship, intimacy and a close sexual relationship. In this situation, Dana and Jonathan said that they wanted the story of relationship, sex and intimacy to be brought together.

Usually, whenever people speak about what they want for themselves, there are some examples of experiencing this, or glimpses of this in the past. After explaining the dreams and thoughts of what they want, we asked if there were times when they felt that they had achieved this combination. In this case, it became possible to build preferred versions of sexuality from instances they had previously shared.

The first memory Dana spoke about was the first time they had sex together. Jonathan came to visit Dana and while she had arranged dinner for them, Jonathan took her directly to the bedroom. She thought he was spontaneous and strong and passionate and also very gentle and intimate. Both agreed that this evening was a time of good sex with a lot of intimacy. It was also the first time Jonathan had come to Dana's home.

The second event they described took place during the time they were coming for therapy. It was a summer's evening and they decided to go to a café next to the beach. They loved the place, there were pillows on the sand, and it was very dark. Apparently, it was a bit like being in a tent and

Jonathan started to touch Dana. They became very aroused and went back to the car and had sex.

When they were able to name these events from the past that were close to what they wanted for their sexual life together, we asked questions to enable them to dive back into these experiences:

- Where did she touch you?
- How did he touch you?
- What did you each feel, hear, smell?

These questions were not aiming to simply gather information. Instead the aim was to enable the couple to 're-live', in some way, these sensual experiences. We then also asked about the meanings of these events:

- Why was this event significant?
- What picture of each other did you have at that time?
- What was it that was special to you? Why?
- What made it happen? What steps led up to this?
- What is it like to know that this is a possibility in your relationship?

The two events mentioned above were unique outcomes for Dana and Jonathan. They provided a guide towards what they wanted for themselves and their sexual relationship. With these two unique outcomes as starting points, we then started to build a storyline of moments when Dana and Jonathan felt they were successful in combining intimacy with good sex. In doing so we explored both the landscape of action (what occurred) and the landscape of identity (what meaning they gave to these events). During each counselling session, Dana and Jonathan also planned new events for the future that would fit this storyline. We did not take a behaviourist approach in which we as therapists made suggestions as to sexual acts that Dana and Jonathan could experiment with. We did not give 'homework'. Instead, the couple made plans in relation to their sexual relationship. They planned certain events that they could do before the next session.

Fun was an essential part of this process. In our experience, getting too serious about sex can become an obstacle. With Dana and Jonathan it was important to explore what would be fun, and to discuss what contexts would allow for this fun.

Often people have the idea that sexuality is supposed to be 'non-thinking' and 'spontaneous'. This can result in people thinking that if they make plans in relation to their sexual relationship that this will somehow be 'false'. We've found it is helpful to have a conversation about this belief. Dana and Jonathan spoke of wanting to widen their life in relation to sexuality. They spoke of wanting to experiment with things that had been lost and with new things. We spoke of how planning these experiments and putting them into practice can initially feel awkward. Once this was spoken about Dana and Jonathan both embraced the idea of making plans.

This meant that in each counselling session they would discuss with us events that had occurred since the last session and then also make plans for the coming weeks. This led to a collaborative process of re-authoring a new storyline about sex. Over time, Dana and Jonathan started to feel as if they were enjoying being together as sexual partners more and more.

NO ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT PEOPLE'S PREFERENCES

While the outcome with Dana and Jonathan has involved re-building a passionate and intimate sexual relationship, this is not always the outcome of therapy in relation to sex. Other couples may conclude that they have friendship and intimacy rather than a sexual relationship, and that this is not problematic for them. They may decide they are very happy with this. In no way do we have an assumption that people ought to be having 'more' or 'better' sex as a result of consulting us in therapy. What we are interested in is deconstructing storylines that may be getting in the way of people's preferences and that may be causing difficulties in relationships, and then creating opportunities for couples to create new, preferred storylines about relationship, about sex and about their bodies.

For instance, we recall another couple who consulted us who did not have sex and who were both worried about this. They thought this meant that they would not stay together and were very concerned that their relationship was going to fall apart. By going through the same process of deconstructing different storylines of sex,

relationship and body, as we have outlined in this paper, we discovered that both partners were actually quite content not to have sex at this time. They both thought that they might want to have sex again some day, but for now all was okay. They both revelled in their friendship and intimacy and felt that this was all they wished for at this time. Through the conversations we shared, the negative connotation of 'not having sex' was removed. Negative connotations were also removed from the relationship. And there were no longer fears that accusation would be directed at either partner due to the 'lack of sex'. In this way, 'lack of sex' stopped being seen as a problem that somehow represented the 'truth' about them or their relationship. The meaning of events changed.

INTRODUCING THE TOPIC OF SEX IN COUPLE THERAPY

There is one other aspect to talking about sex in couple therapy that seems important to mention... and that is, that it is important to mention sex in couple therapy! We routinely enquire about sex with the couples who we meet, because we know that if we do not mention sex, then it is not likely that the couples will bring up the topic themselves. Then again, we also don't assume that it will necessarily be a good idea to speak openly about sex. Talking openly about sex does not always make things better. With this in mind, we take great care in how we bring up the issue. Here are some of the questions we ask:

- Would it be helpful for me to ask about sex?
- Is it a good idea to talk about this?
- If so, why is this?
- What are your hopes in relation to talking about sex?

There is so much shame and embarrassment associated with sex that we are very sensitive in the ways we ask these questions. We try to discern whether this is the proper place for them to be speaking about these topics before we begin to explore them.

We see it as our responsibility as couple therapists to make it possible for people to speak about sex, if they wish to. And we realise that in order to do this, we have to open the space to do so.

We hope this paper will support other practitioners in talking with couples about sex.

NOTES

1 Certain gendered stories and beliefs can contribute to abusive sexual relations and limit the possibilities for mutual sexual pleasure. These can include ideas about men's expectation or sense of entitlement to sex from women partners. Within our work we seek to make these beliefs visible and possible for questioning and we approach these discussions from a feminist perspective. For more discussion of these issues, see Augusta Scott (2003) and Alan Jenkins (1990).

2 In richly describing separate storylines, we also pay close attention to the ways in which these storylines impact on one another. For example, how is a particular idea in regard to sexuality influencing ideas about relationships, and how are these influenced by ideas about the body?

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