

Gemma

Erasmus Mundus Master's Degree
in Women's and Gender Studies



Erasmus Mundus



UNIVERSIDAD
DE GRANADA

A critical approach to the concept of reciprocity in heterosexual sex: from subjective meanings to personal experiences

Martina Lauria

Supervisor
Jamila Mascot

Co-supervisor
Ana Alcázar Campos

Utrecht University

2019

Gemma

Erasmus Mundus Master's Degree
in Women's and Gender Studies



Universiteit Utrecht



Education and Culture

Erasmus Mundus



UNIVERSIDAD
DE GRANADA

A critical approach to the concept of reciprocity in heterosexual sex: from subjective meanings to personal experiences

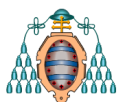
Martina Lauria

Supervisor
Jamila Mascot

Co-supervisor
Ana Alcázar Campos

Utrecht University

2019



UNIVERSIDAD DE OVIEDO



University of
LODZ



ALMA MATER STUDIORUM
UNIVERSITÀ DI BOLOGNA



ABSTRACT

This thesis analyses the meanings and experiences of reciprocity in heterosexual sexual encounters. Reciprocity, synonymous with mutuality and ‘giving and taking’, is a moral norm that traditionally refers to a concept of balance and equity, assuming the gratification of every party involved. However, as the theoretical framework I developed in the first chapter shows, reciprocity is often an ambiguous concept: far from guaranteeing the effective equality of the relationship, it entails pressures and status of obligation. Assuming that in heterosexual sex reciprocity can involve different types of giving and taking, I explore how this is imagined on a personal level.

For this purpose, as I explain in the second chapter, I established ethnography as the method of my research. In particular, this thesis is based on six interviews to six young women.

In the third chapter I present the three main discourses that emerged: reciprocity as an exchange of orgasms, reciprocity as an exchange of sexual practices and reciprocity as an exchange of attention and care. Focusing on how these discourses are performed during heterosexual sex, I discuss the limits of reciprocity by considering it in terms of an exchange of orgasm and sexual practices, legitimising expectations and status of obligation – and generating pressures that can lead to coercion. Instead, reciprocity become meaningful if understood as the attention of each partner to the other, with the decisive role of communication in ensuring an equitable, enjoyable and respectful encounter.

In the fourth chapter, I explore how such communication is experienced in sex, identifying problems and resistance in expressing one's own sexual desires and boundaries related to heterosexual scripts and mainstream discourses on heterosexual sex. Finally, I discuss the importance of a sexual education which promotes dialogue in sex and which breaks the taboo and stigmatisation of sexual pleasure – especially women's.

RESUMEN

Esta tesis analiza los significados y las experiencias de reciprocidad en los encuentros sexuales heterosexuales. La reciprocidad, sinónimo de mutualidad y de ‘dar y recibir’, es una norma moral que tradicionalmente se refiere a un concepto de equilibrio y equidad, suponiendo la gratificación de cada una de las partes implicadas. Sin embargo, como muestra el marco teórico que he desarrollado en el primer capítulo, la reciprocidad es a menudo un concepto ambiguo: lejos de garantizar la igualdad efectiva de la relación, implica presiones y estatus de obligación. Asumiendo

que en el sexo heterosexual la reciprocidad puede consistir en diferentes tipos de dar y recibir, exploro como ésta es imaginada a nivel personal.

Con este objetivo, como expongo en el segundo capítulo, establecí la etnografía como el método de mi investigación. En particular, esta tesis se basa en seis entrevistas a mujeres jóvenes.

En el tercer capítulo presento los tres discursos principales que surgieron: la reciprocidad como intercambio de orgasmos, la reciprocidad como intercambio de prácticas sexuales y la reciprocidad como intercambio de atención y cuidado. Enfocándome en cómo se llevan a cabo estos discursos en las relaciones sexuales heterosexuales, discuto los límites de la reciprocidad considerándola en términos de intercambio de orgasmos y prácticas sexuales, legitimando expectativas y estados de obligación, y generando presiones que pueden conducir a la coerción. En cambio, la reciprocidad se hace significativa entendida como la atención de cada pareja hacia el otro, con el papel decisivo de la comunicación para garantizar un encuentro igualitario, placentero y respetuoso.

En el cuarto capítulo, exploro cómo se experimenta dicha comunicación en el sexo heterosexual, identificando los problemas y las resistencias a la hora de expresar los propios deseos y límites sexuales relacionados con los scripts heterosexuales y los discursos principales sobre el sexo heterosexual. Por último, discuto la importancia de una educación sexual que promueva el diálogo en el ámbito sexual y que rompa el tabú y la estigmatización del placer sexual, especialmente el de las mujeres.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First of all, I am grateful to the Gemma program for giving me this fundamental opportunity towards my personal growth. It's been two intense, enriching and decisive years – doing this Master's degree is certainly a point of no return. I have learned a lot, also thanks to the extraordinary people that the path has made me meet.

Thanks to my supervisor Jamila who believed in this thesis, for her help and for making me see the things in a different way. Thanks to Ana for her trust and support.

Thanks to the teachers in Utrecht who try to put feminism into practice every day, in particular to Domitilla and Christine who during this year have supported us in difficult moments of conceiving and writing the thesis.

Thanks to *zia* Betta and Sara, without whose help this thesis would be in a language that nobody could understand.

Thanks to Anna, Giulia, J., Nuria, Serena, and Stephanie who accepted to be interviewed and decided to share with me, and with the world, part of their history and experience. Your testimonies are important, thank you for trusting me.

A big thank you to the friends who have walked me through these two years in Granada and Utrecht. To the wonderful *hermanas* Giulia, Anna, Valentina, Stephanie. You have taught me so much about friendship, love and care. You have accompanied me with kindness in this overwhelming process of deconstruction –and you still do it. Serena, Nuria, J. and Ada, thank you for making the Netherlands *home*. With the care and support of all of you, I never felt alone.

Thanks Ester for choosing to grow next to me, and for your esteem even in face of my internal chaos – that you know well.

Finally, thanks to my parents, who always believe in me no matter what I do. Thanks to my dad, who is always motivated to try and understand me. Certainly in the joy and suffering of two migrants we understand each other. Thanks to my mother, a woman of extraordinary strength. You taught me the importance of fighting injustice, reminding me everyday how important the love for oneself is in order to love others. I owe you everything.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION	7
1.1 About the concept of reciprocity	7
1.2 Some feminist approaches to reciprocity in (hetero) sex	9
1.4 My purposes	11
2. METHODOLOGY	13
2.1 Defining a feminist research	13
2.2 Ethnography	14
2.3 Situated knowledge and reflexivity	16
2.4 Settling on the interviewing and ethical issues	18
2.5 The subjects of the interviews	20
2.6 List of questions	21
3. THE MAIN DISCOURSES ON RECIPROCITY IN HETEROSEXUAL SEX	22
3.1 The meanings of reciprocity in heterosexual sex	22
3.1 Reciprocity as exchange of orgasms	24
3.2 Reciprocity as exchange of sexual practices	27
3.3 The different subjective experiences of sexual pleasure	31
3.4 Reciprocity as being attentive to the each other	32
4. PUTTING COMMUNICATION INTO PRACTICE	36
4.1 Reticence to verbalise discomfort	36
4.2 Communicating boundaries	38
4.3 The importance of knowing one's own sexuality	42
4.3.1 Re-signification	46
4.4 A safe space makes the difference	48
RECAP AND CONCLUSIONS	53
REFERENCES	56

1. INTRODUCTION

During an occasional sexual encounter not a long time ago, after he 'gave' me oral sex, my sexual partner was expecting his turn to receive the same. According to his perspective, I should reciprocate his 'gift', giving him oral sex. When I said that I would not do that because in that moment I did not feel like doing it, I remember he said something like 'it is not really fair thinking only about your personal pleasure and not giving back the thing I have done to you ... you identify yourself as a feminist, you are for equality, right?'. After he had invoked the concept of reciprocity, I was messing up the right balance for a real equal sex and a mutual exchange. He was really annoyed by my position. I remember I left his house disappointed. What he had said to me upset me deeply. On the one hand I was angry, and I could not believe how a person could appeal to the rhetoric of 'I did this for you, you should give it back in order to be equal'. On the other hand, I felt confused ... maybe a bit guilty. Did I do the right thing not performing oral sex on him? Or by not reciprocating had I been unfair, creating an imbalance between us?

1.1 About the concept of reciprocity

The concept of reciprocity represents an implicit moral norm which regulates the social and ethical aspects of Western societies (Gouldner 1960). It is internalised at a personal level and it regulates social relations, ensuring their stability and, more generally, the stability of the social system (Gouldner 1960). As the Collins Dictionary suggests, reciprocity means the exchange of something between two or more people, even groups, in which each party involved gives or allows something to the other. It is a sort of exchange, often related to the concepts of 'mutuality' and 'giving-and-taking', suggesting that the interaction between the parties involved is not unilateral, but quite the opposite: to an action of a subject A in favour of another subject B corresponds an action of B in favour of A (Gouldner 1960). The result is that each party is gratified, and a relational equilibrium is established. According to Gouldner, "social system stability presumably depends in part on the mutually contingent exchange of gratifications, that is, on reciprocity as exchange" (Gouldner 1960, 56). The balance and the stability of the relationship is ensured precisely by the simultaneous gratification of each party involved.

According to the principle of reciprocity, each party, at the moment of receiving something, undertakes to reciprocate the other. This is because the principle determines the moral obligation to return the benefits received. As Gouldner writes:

[reciprocity] requires that if others have been fulfilling their status of duties to you, you in turn have the additional or second-order obligation (repayment) to fulfil your status of duties to them. In this manner, the sentiment of gratitude joins forces with the sense of rectitude and adds a safety-margin in the motivation to conformity (Gouldner 1960, 64).

The moral norm is based precisely on the feeling of satisfaction that the fulfilment of reciprocity entails. Fulfilling reciprocity implies a feeling of self-realisation (since it corresponds morally to ‘doing the right thing’), and for this reason people are induced to accomplish their status of duties. On the other hand, it sets up rights. If referring to the Latin (right) formula ‘do ut des’, which means ‘I give (to) you (so) that you may give (to) me’, reciprocity legitimises expectations of return for someone who has given some benefits (Komter 1996). As Gouldner writes:

Invoking the general norm of reciprocity is one way of justifying (the) more concrete demands of status obligations. Forced to the wall, the man demanding his ‘rights’ may say, in effect, ‘Very well, if you won’t do this simply because it is your duty, then remember all that I have done for you in the past and do it to repay your debt to me (Gouldner 1960, 64).

Therefore, by establishing entitlements and obligations, reciprocity creates a relation of debt and dependency (Komter 1996).

However, the status of rights and duties that reciprocity implies are effective for each party. As Gouldner suggests, “there can be stable patterns of reciprocity qua exchange only insofar as each party has both rights and duties” (Gouldner 1960, 57). In this sense, reciprocity reminds a discourse of equity and balance. Even so, the equality which should be implied is not so obvious. Considering that structural inequalities are always present, the exchange may be inherently asymmetrical, and unbalanced (Komter 1996). As Komter suggests, “some people feel obligated to give much while receiving little, whereas others, though poor givers themselves, are endowed with abundant gift giving” (Komter 1996, 130). The act of giving, rather than being considered as an act of altruism, may be analysed in relation to the benefits and power that it confers¹ (Komter 1996).

Taking into account this theoretical framework, I wonder: by understanding sex as an exchange between two people, how does reciprocity work in heterosexual sex?

¹ According to Komter, one person can give for several reasons: in order to get attention, care or help in return or to get a closer relationship. Or again, it can be a consequence of affection, respect or gratitude, manipulation or flattering (Komter 1996).

1.2 Some feminist approaches to reciprocity in (hetero) sex

Reciprocity in heterosexual sex has different manifestations and could focus on very different types of giving and receiving (Braun et al. 2003). The same way, the literature on the theme has treated reciprocity in multiple modes. The result is that there is no universal definition of it. But, on the contrary, reciprocity can acquire different meanings.

To begin with, sex itself has been considered as an object of exchange which is crucial in the fulfilment of reciprocity. Conceiving heterosexual sex in the have/hold discourse's terms², that is, as part of a larger monogamous long-term (heteronormative) relational context, sex is seen as women's giving to men for providing economically for the family. As Braun et al. point out "a woman (traditionally) gets love and emotional satisfaction, children, a place to live, an income, and 'security' (and sex). Through his relationship with a woman, a man traditionally gets sex, as well as a network of care and support" (Braun et al. 2003, 254). By supposing women as not being sexual-desiring subjects – unlike the male partners – sex is understood as the women's contribution to reciprocity. That is to say that, in return to men's provisions, women give sex and their body. As this discourse suggests, thus, within the discourse on reciprocity in heterosexual sex, gendered inequalities may be involved, in the sense that the giving and taking may be gendered unbalanced³.

Actually, as feminist scholars have pointed out, the main discourses on (hetero)sexual sex and sexuality are founded in gender hierarchies, aimed at maintaining women in subordinated positions (Gavey et al. 1999). Next to the have/hold discourse, Wendy Holloway identified the male sexual drive discourse and the permissive one. In the first discourse, men are described as having a natural drive to have sex on the basis of biological and reproductive reasons, while women's sexual desires are not conceived. In the permissive discourse, instead, women are positioned as desiring subjects, but they are also expected always to have and enjoy sex – so their consent is taken for granted – (Holloway 1984 in Gilfoyle et al. 1992). All of these are gender-differentiated discourses, which

² Wendy Holloway (1984) has provided an influential analysis of women and men talking about relationships and heterosexuality. She identifies three discourses, which highlight the gender-differentiated positions: the male sexual drive discourse, the have/hold discourse and the permissive discourse.

³ The giving and receiving is unbalanced conceiving women as giving themselves, while men provide the existence of the entire family.

promote the idea of men as sexually active subjects and women's sexuality in function of men – and that is only in the cases where their sexual desires are admitted.

The discourse on reciprocity in heterosexual sex appears – next to the have/hold discourse – in the 'pseudo-reciprocal gift discourse' elaborated by Gilfoyle, Wilson and Brown, in "Sex, Organs and Audiotape: A Discourse Analysis Approach to Talking About Heterosexual Sex and Relationships" – which represent an extension of Holloway's work. According to their study, men try to 'give' women the gift of pleasure or orgasm, as a return of the women's giving of themselves or giving sex to their male partners. In other words, women give themselves to men, whereas men give women orgasms. More precisely

women are seen as the object who is both 'given away' and 'given to'; while men on the other hand, are seen as the subject, maintaining their dominance by both being the recipient of the women and conferring on the object (women) the gift of pleasure and or orgasm (Gilfoyle et al. 1992, 190).

Again, the idea of male activity and female passivity is implied discursively and the giving and taking is unbalanced. Indeed, men are conceived as the active giver – since they give pleasure to women thanks to their skills and technique – whereas women are the objects of the giving. Thus, reciprocity in heterosexual sex in terms of giving and receiving, as Gilfoyle et al. suggest, would be far from equal between women and men – '*pseudo*-reciprocal' exactly.

Besides, the manifestation of reciprocity within the (hetero)sexual context has been explored by Braun, Gavey and McPhillips in "The 'Fair Deal'? Unpacking Accounts of Reciprocity in Heterosex". Here reciprocity takes the shape of orgasm exchange (Braun et al. 2003). Even upon recognising the potentiality of this discourse to promote equity in the sexual encounter by establishing the rights of each partner to pleasure⁴, the authors discuss the limits of the concept of reciprocity. As they suggest "it is unlikely to be possible to invoke a straightforward framework of reciprocity without moving into the domain of obligations for reciprocal exchange (which bring with them coercive properties)" (Braun et al. 2003, 256). From this discourse we see obligations that can be especially strong for women. Again, reciprocity reinforces gendered social inequities,

⁴ They write: "Without an acknowledgment of women's entitlement to sexual pleasure, the basis for reciprocity within heterosex is meaningless. In these ways, a discourse of reciprocity can be seen to challenge aspects of a traditional male-focused construction of heterosex. It arguably has the potential to produce more enjoyable and egalitarian heterosex for women – perhaps even more 'feminist' heterosex." (Braun et al. 2003, 255).

and cannot be considered outside from the context based on gendered hierarchies, historical and social inequities.

Finally, the works produced on the topic are important to highlight that the concept of reciprocity presents some limitations, also regarding (heterosexual) sex. At first sight, the idea of ‘reciprocal sex’ recalls a discourse of equity. Many discourses on sexuality and sex promote reciprocity and mutuality – being opposed to control, mastery, oppression or subordination – (Braun et al. 2003). Nevertheless, as anthropologists pointed out, it determines entitlements and obligations (Gouldner 1960, Malinowski 1922, Komter 1996), which, together with the structural inequalities that are always present (Komter 1996), undermine the effective equality of the sexual exchange. The result is that the sexual exchange may be asymmetrical and unbalanced.

1.4 My purposes

My personal experience in heterosexual sex has led me to understand reciprocity in a different way as compared with the literature on the topic. I found the literature on the subject not very exhaustive, starting from the very definition of reciprocity to the implications that derive from it. In particular, looking first with Braun et al.’s study, which is the most recent and the most specific one, reciprocity has been explained to a limited extent in terms of orgasm. It follows that the criticalities there discussed, have been reduced to this definition – I will analyse such limits in my third chapter. My assumption, instead, is that reciprocity can take on different facets, can be imagined, understood and experienced in many ways, that cannot simply be reduced to an exchange of orgasms. Thus, the possibilities and limitations related to the discourse of reciprocity may be different.

Considering reciprocity as a tricky concept (as my theoretical framework assumes) which can refer to an ethical discourse of equality (and justice) but can also fail to lead to a real egalitarian situation, my work aims to explore the different patterns in which reciprocity takes place in personal experiences, in order to see the difference between theoretical meanings and the concrete experience of reciprocity during heterosexual sexual encounters.

By analysing how reciprocity is imagined and performed in heterosexual sex, my aim was to investigate if this norm may lead to a situation of actual equality, examining limitations which derive from it.

The questions that led me in this journey were: What kind of pattern does reciprocity take in heterosexual sexual encounters? How does reciprocity work in heterosexual sex, by understanding

sex as an exchange between two people? Does reciprocity lead to a situation of real balance and equity in heterosexual sex?

Considering reciprocity not as an abstract and only theoretical concept, but as a principle which takes shape at the micro-social level, permeating interpersonal interactions, I decided that interviewing was the most proper way to explore how it works and the dynamics it creates at a personal level. The interview would give me the opportunity to investigate the meanings that reciprocity takes on a subjective level and, on the other hand, to explore how reciprocity is performed, how it is expressed at a more practical level in the sexual encounter. Besides, my decision to focus on personal experiences was inspired by feminists' teachings that 'the personal is political' and by the idea that feminist researchers should upgrade the personal as an object of study (Stanley and Wise 1983). The research is therefore based on six interviews with six young women who are attending (or have attended) Gender Studies – as I will explain more in detail in the next chapter. The aim was to see what having a mutual exchange in a sexual encounter means for them, how they understand reciprocity; how they experience reciprocity; how they negotiate their own pleasure with the partner's pleasure in the name of the principle of reciprocity. Finally, my purpose was to explore the possibilities and limitations of the principle of giving and taking regarding heterosexual encounters, with the final objective to articulate potential alternative approaches in order to practice a pleasurable and respectful heterosexual sex.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Defining a feminist research

For the last two years of Women's and Gender Studies, I have often grappled with the question of what feminist research consists of. During the course, I have often tried to figure out how to carry out an investigation which could be defined as feminist. At the beginning, I was sure it was the nature of the object which determined the distinctive feature of a feminist research project. I naively thought that doing a feminist research simply meant connecting it explicitly to gender/sex issues. But later, I was able to understand that "it is not the investigation of gender, or gendered social lives, as such, that makes a research project feminist" (Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002, 141). It is a question of perspective: it is how you are looking at the object which has an impact on the definition of a feminist research. In other words, it is a question of how you know, rather than of what you know. Consequently, the object of study can literally be everything (Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002).

However, as Hesse-Bieber pointed out, there is no single feminist perspective or way of knowing: "instead, multiple feminist lenses wake us up to layers of sexist, racist, homophobic, and colonialist points of view" (Hesse-Bieber 2011, 4). In fact, feminist investigations can be rooted in different epistemologies –"criteria for what constitutes scientific and scholarly knowledge" (Lykke 2010, 144). But there is also no distinct methodology –"a theory and analysis of how research should proceed"– or only one method –"techniques for gathering evidence" (Harding 1987, 2). Indeed, there are multiple ways of knowing that become a distinctive feature of feminist methodology.

As Ramazanoglu and Holland suggested:

What appears to make some projects feminist (despite political, theoretical and epistemological variations) is dependence on a normative framework that interrelates 'injustice', a politics for 'women' (however these categories are understood), ethical practices that eschew the 'unjust' experience of power, and theory that conceptualises gendered power within normative framework (...) Research projects can be thought of as feminist if they are framed by feminist theory, and aim to produce knowledge that will be useful for effective transformation of gendered injustice and subordination. But this does not mean that feminists have to study women, or only study gender, or treat women as innocent of abuses of power. (Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002, 141).

Therefore, this research project is not defined as feminist simply because the subjects are women. Rather, what guided this work was the idea that heterosexual sexual relations are part of a context

founded on implicit gendered hierarchies and power structures. Given that, I do not mean that the purpose of this thesis is to portray women as victims subordinate to men.

Following Joan Scott (1991) “subjects do have agency. They are not unified, autonomous individuals exercising free will, but rather subjects whose agency is created through situations and statutes conferred on them” (Scott 1991, 793). In this thesis, my purpose is not to conceive women as victims in power relations nor as unified subjects who exercise free will. The discourses that resulted from the interviews I have conducted showed clearly that it is not possible to imagine coherent subjects. As Butler points out: “subject is neither a ground or a product, but a permanent possibility of a certain resignifying process” (Butler 1992, 13). Discursively, it is evident how the women I have interviewed are negotiating all the time their agency and the constitutive forces of their discursive practices. Indeed, the narrative covers a central point in the practice of resistance: it is through their discourses that they are questioning internalised and socialised beliefs (Davies and Gannon 2005). According to post-structuralist feminist scholars “not only are we constituted through multiple and contradictory discourses, but how those discursive positioning are read opens up or closes down the possibility of agency” (Davies and Gannon 2005, 313). By discussing their experience and externalising their thoughts, subjects appear reflexively aware of the particular social, historical moments and material contexts they are living in. In this way, agency resides in the recognition and re-signification of the power discourses (Davies and Gannon 2005). This is the agency opened up by feminist post-structuralism, which “lies in the capacity to recognise that constitution as historically specific and socially regulated, and thus as able to be called in question. Agency is contingent on the discourses at play and on our positioning in them” (Davies 2008 in Davies and Gannon 2005, 313).

2.2 Ethnography

Considering reciprocity rather than an abstract and merely theoretical concept – with a universal meaning – a principle which takes shape at micro-social level, permeating the interpersonal interactions, I have considered ethnographic interviewing the most proper way to explore how reciprocity works. In other words, I have conceived the subjective experience central in defining reciprocity whereas ethnographic interviewing has given me the opportunity to explore personal meanings and experiences. Indeed, ethnography finds itself on inquiring the human experience by “direct and sustained social contact with agents” (Willis and Trondman 2000, 5). Whereas

interviewing represents a privileged method for “making experience hearable” (DeVault and Gross 2012, 210). In particular, interviewing is based on the conception that humans, rather than being the ‘object’ of the study, are subjects having consciousness and agency who “produce accounts of themselves and their worlds” (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007, 97). Thus, it allows to explore their personal meanings.

However, ethnography refers to a group of methods, and that means that there are multiple ways in which it can be translated into practice. In the same way, it is influenced by different theories, so it cannot be attributed to a “single, standard meaning” (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007, 2).

Ethnography can consist of reporting facts of everyday life, human actions, or institutional practices. That means that data can be collected thanks to the researcher’s observation of what is happening, the analysis of documents or artefacts. The focus of the ethnographic investigation furthermore includes the interpretation of the meanings that people attribute to these facts. Thus, it can involve formal or informal interviews, where the researcher focuses in listening to what has been said (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). As Hammersley and Atkinson point out in *Ethnography: Principles in Practice*, in ethnography

the task is to investigate some aspects of the lives of the people who are being studied, and this includes finding out how these people view the situations they face, how they regard one another, and also how they see themselves (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007, 3).

Despite the instinctive association of ethnography with anthropological research on non-Western societies and participant observation⁵, in the later decades of the twentieth century it has become an approach of interest among all social sciences. In particular, it has become a method of special interest among feminist scholars: personal experience has played a central role in feminism. With the slogan ‘personal is political’, in the 1960s feminists started to claim that the personal – closed in the private space – is intimately connected with the social and political spheres. That is to say, personal troubles are political issues. This expression meant that “women discovered that many of their problems and anxieties were shared by others and concluded that they were more than merely personal, they derived from our social situation and were characteristic of our oppression as women” (Jackson and Scott 1996, 5). By conceiving personal issues as rooted in the social and

⁵ Traditionally, ethnography has consisted in the researcher’s participation in people’s daily lives for an extended period of time (Hammerley, Atkinson 2007).

political domains, feminists claimed the importance of finding solutions at a political level. Personal experience acquired visibility and political relevance, but also authority. In fact, in the 1980s-90s, feminist theorists began to assert the authority of experience – of the personal kind – as the foundation of knowledge (De Vault and Gross 2012). Therefore, the knowledge from personal (and subjective) experience occupied a central space in feminist analysis. Feminist researchers called to elevate the personal as an object of study, privileging ethnographic methods (Stanley and Wise 1983).

2.3 Situated knowledge and reflexivity

The importance of the practice of positioning in the production of knowledge has been widely recognised in Feminist Studies (Lykke 2010). Following Donna Haraway, since the subjective position determines the knowledge that is produced, its situating is fundamental. As she explains, politics and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating “are claims on people’s lives” (Haraway 1988, 589). In other words, it consists of making explicit what the researcher’s perspective is, which is deeply connected with who she/he is. She argues “for the view from a body, always a complex, contradictory, structuring, and structured body, versus form above, from nowhere, from simplicity” (Haraway 1988, 589).

This concept resonates also with Joan Scott’s idea that vision – through which knowledge is gained – pertains to particular perspectives or standpoints, which should be problematised and contextualised (Scott 1991). As claimed by Joan Scott (1991), knowledge is achieved through vision and experience, which are inextricably embedded. As she suggests, “it is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience” (Scott 1991, 779). Individuals cannot be isolated from their own experience, which models their way of looking at the world, and thus their own identity. Consequently, all production of knowledge is to be understood as located or situated while an epistemological critical positioning of the researcher is required. Questions such as where the researcher is situated, who she/he is, how she/he is defined in relation to others, what the political effects of her/his history can be, cannot be neglected (Scott 1991). As Nina Lykke suggests in her *Feminist studies: a guide to intersectional theory, methodology and writing*, “the author has an obligation to make herself accountable for her location in it” (Lykke 2010, 4).

Besides, the idea of impossibility to transcend one’s location has been accepted among Social Sciences. As Hammersley and Atkinson point out, the researcher’s values affect the entire process

of knowledge, and so the practice of reflexivity is a significant feature in every social research (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). They write:

the concept of reflexivity acknowledges that the orientations of researchers will be shaped by their socio-historical locations, including the values and interests that these locations confer upon them. What this represents is a rejection of the idea that social research is, or can be, carried out in some autonomous realm that is insulated from the wider society and from the biography of the researcher, in such a way that its findings can be unaffected by social processes and personal characteristics (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007, 15).

My identity, determined by the context from which I come, by the experiences I have lived, which are well delimited in a certain space and time, has certainly given shape to this thesis and this research. Thus, I feel the necessity to make my location explicit.

My name is Martina, and I was born in Udine, a small town in north-east Italy on 7th September 1993. At present I am 25 years old. I identify myself as a cis-woman, in the sense that I am gender conforming. I am white, with the privileges that derive from it. I was able to attend this Master as a full-time student, which puts me again in a privileged position. I identify myself as a heterosexual, in the sense that I have experienced attraction to members of the other gender, all of which has a certain relevance in this thesis. My identification as heterosexual cis-woman, together with my feminist consciousness, has undoubtedly influenced the process of writing this thesis, especially orienting and motivating me to choose this topic. For the last two years – while studying Gender Studies – I have started to problematise my life experiences, and, among others, I have assumed a critical position regarding my heterosexual sexual practises. Furthermore, it is important to make it clear that the use of the term reciprocity that this thesis here explores refers precisely to heterosexual sexual relations, understood as sexual encounters between cis-women and cis-men. In the same way, the meanings I explore and the experiences to which the interviewees refer are ascribed to a Western socio-cultural context (not exclusively European, since two interviewees come from Latin America). I assume that the personal meanings as well as the personal experiences of reciprocity in sex can be different from different intersections (ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, sexual identity).

2.4 Settling on the interviewing and ethical issues

As I mentioned before, I considered reciprocity as a moral norm which is expressed at an implicit level in interpersonal relationships – that means, it is a principle to which one comes across at a personal level (micro-level). Thus, I felt that exploring subjective experiences and meanings would be relevant in the analysis of this concept. But, what is the voice that would have been more interesting to hear?

At first thought, I considered young women's voices particularly interesting in order to clarify how reciprocity operates in a context where gender inequalities are structural. Furthermore, having conceived the contradiction of the notion of reciprocity in terms of equality in the relationship, in the sense that it may imply coercive dynamics – thence an unbalanced situation –, I deemed it significant to investigate the accounts of those who are practical at examining their own personal experience in a critical and conscious way. Therefore, I established to interview young feminist women, since having a feminist consciousness encourages critical reflections on lived experiences, especially regarding heterosexual sexual experiences. As Jackson suggests: “it is impossible to live in a patriarchal society as both a feminist and a heterosexual without being aware of contradictions – unless one is totally without reflexive capacities” (Jackson 1999, 3). On one hand, heterosexuality is an institutionalisation of gendered disparities. On the other, feminism would make people aware of the dynamics of power and inequalities that are active within the all social relations.

Assuming that at first sight reciprocity refers to an ethical discourse of justice that does not always find correspondence in the practice, I decided to focus exactly on how reciprocity is imagined and how it is performed, identifying young feminist women as the decisive subjects for the exploration into the negotiations between beliefs, meanings, and practice.

On the other hand, as a researcher, I also had to make some decisions, setting limits to the subjects of my research. In this way, feminism was representing a distinctive feature whereby to choose who to interview. I grappled in the dilemma: how to identify feminists? In which way could I admit someone's feminist consciousness? Therefore, I thought that circumscribing the research setting within gender studies scholars would have been a good solution – and I am not saying that only gender studies scholars have a feminist consciousness. Besides, in gender studies I had met friends with whom to share the questioning of our experiences, also at an emotional level.

All this considered, I identified some of my colleagues and friends as interviewees. I had supposed that being intimate friends would have been a positive thing, ensuring a safe and confident space to talk about sex, intimate and personal experiences.

At the same time, it would have been a challenge for me not to confine our talk to a simple chat. Indeed, I had discussed with my supervisor my role during the interviews. If in the beginning I was considering an exchange in which my experience could have been expressed as well, I then realised that my voice could have interfered and influenced too much the response of the interviewees. Nevertheless, I also confronted myself with some ethical aspects connected with my position as researcher. For example: how to deal with the hierarchical power relationship between interviewer and researched? How to go beyond the “one-way process where the interviewer elicits and receives, but does not give information” (Oakley 1981, 30)? Feminist scholars such as Ann Oakley have discussed a lot how to interview in a feminist – and ethical – way, questioning the tricky motif ‘be friendly but not too friendly’ for a successful interviewing (Oakley 1981). Oakley, in her inspiring article “Interviewing Women: A Contradiction in Term?”, suggests that “the goal of finding out about people through interviewing is best achieved when the relationship of interviewer and interviewees is non-hierarchical and when the interviewer is prepared to invest his or her personal identity in the relationship” (Oakley 1981, 41). Following this idea, I had decided to respond to any questions the interviewees would have asked me during the interview (but this did not happen), and to remain open to continue the discussion also after the conclusion of the interview.

On the other hand, even for these ethical aspects – and in the name of reciprocity, for their opening up to me by telling me about themselves – I decided to make explicit my starting point, that originated from my concern to deepen the theme of reciprocity in sexual encounters. This ‘collection’ of experiences represents a bit of a continuum between us, me and them, a dialogue that is still open.

However, the ethical dilemma did not only accompany me during the interview practice, but also while analysing the data. Since the interviewees were my colleagues, I have asked myself if I should involve them in the process of the analysis of data, discussing with them the results. I preferred not to do it for a question of time, but I had to confront myself with the tendency to assimilate another person’s experience into my own. As I mentioned before, my experience certainly has played a central role in the process of the conceptualisation and realisation of this thesis. I have had to distance myself from my own perspective, staying open to what the interviewees had to say about their experience and ideas. In order to do so, I had decided with my supervisor to use open questions (I will provide the list at the end of this chapter). In this way, I forced myself to have an open attitude towards the others’ perspective. Following DeVault and Gross, “interview researchers need to recognise that experience recounted is always emergent in the moment, that telling requires a listener and that the listening shapes the account as well as the

telling” (DeVault and Gross 2012, 212). In this sense, in my role as a listener I could influence the telling and flow of the narration, especially by emphasising some points instead of others. Even if I asked open questions, and I was listening actively, my subjectivity emerged during the interviews, by my asking to repeat or clarify some points that sounded interesting for me instead of others.

2.5 The subjects of the interviews

I decided to interview six cis-women whom I had met during these last two years of Gender Studies. I met three of them last year in Granada, and three others in September here in Utrecht. With all of them, I created a solid friendship.

They are between 25 and 32 years old. Three of them come from Italy, while the others are from Spain, Chile and Colombia. This way, I could do the interviews in Italian and Spanish.

As for sexual orientation, which here is important to clarify, two of them identify themselves as heterosexual, two bisexual and two underline that they have had most of their sexual experiences with men, but they do not define themselves as heterosexual (but neither in another ways), since they can experience attraction also for women or have had also sexual experiences with women. However, in the premise I made before the interviews, I specified that I would focus on heterosexual encounters. Furthermore it is important to point out that the categories of heterosexuality or bisexuality have different meanings for each person and are not fixed categories. Instead, they should be seen as constantly changing – one of them specified she identified heterosexual *in this period*.

The interviews took place in Italy, Spain and the Netherlands. In every case, I asked the interviewees to choose the location where they would feel most comfortable to talk. The interviews took place during convivial moments, at lunch or coffee time, at home, in parks or in cafes. In preparation for the interviews, I sent an email to each of them, explaining the general topical nature of my research and asking for their availability. The interviews lasted from 40 to 60 minutes, and were recorded with their consent.

During the interviews, I received spontaneous reflexions. As my colleague Giulia Cerioli underlines in her thesis, following Méndez de la Brena (2016), every discourse and narration “must be intended as dynamic, flexible, and open for a re-discussion” (Cerioli 2018, 20). Narratives, as well as identities, may change over time, thus the results here exposed have not to be intended as rigid and definitive.

2.6 List of questions

Assuming reciprocity as an ‘ethical’ norm that refers to an idea of justice, but which, by materialising in concrete experience, may involve situations of coercion, this research has aimed to understand the differences between ‘theory’ (that is to say, the idea of reciprocity) and practice (the experience of it). Therefore, the intent of the interviews has been to explore how reciprocity is imagined and how it is performed. In other words, to analyse what are the meanings that the interviewees give to reciprocity and how this takes shape within sexual encounters.

Moreover, in order to understand how it is experienced within relationships, questions dealt, on one hand, with the situation of not reciprocating the partner and, on the other hand, with not being reciprocated by the partner.

More precisely, by analysing concrete experiences and feelings that emerge from the stories, my purpose was to understand the limits related to the discourse on reciprocity.

This is the list of questions I followed during the interviews:

- What does reciprocity mean to you regarding a sexual encounter? What is a mutual exchange in sex for you?
- When do you think there is no reciprocity in a sex encounter?
- How do you feel if your partner does not want to reciprocate you and says no? What do you do?
- How do you feel if you do not want to reciprocate your partner? What do you do?
- Do you think that there are differences in the way you live your sexuality now in comparison with your past, with a specific emphasis on your feminist education?

3. THE MAIN DISCOURSES ON RECIPROCITY IN HETEROSEXUAL SEX

3.1 The meanings of reciprocity in heterosexual sex

With reference to the literature I have faced on the subject, I have come up with different definitions of reciprocity from those that my personal experience would have suggested to me. To recap them: according to Gilfoyle's work, reciprocity in a heterosexual sexual encounter sees on the one hand the woman giving herself (her body and sex) to the man, while he gives her pleasure (which often takes the form of orgasm). Besides, in Braun's work, reciprocity in a sexual encounter becomes precisely an exchange of orgasms between partners. However, the point from which I started suggested reciprocity as an exchange, a mutuality, of sexual practices.

The same definition of reciprocity allows for free interpretations as regards the context of a heterosexual sexual encounter: as stated by the Cambridge Dictionary, reciprocity is “a situation in which two groups agree to help each other by behaving in the same way or giving each other similar advantages”. Thus, it can be deduced that in an exchange, so as to be defined as reciprocal, the parties involved either (1) act in the same way or (2) reciprocally give each other benefits that are similar to each other. But how does this translates into a heterosexual sexual encounter?

Believing that reciprocity can materialise in experience in different ways, not necessarily related to the definitions given by existing literature, I decided to investigate not only what are the meanings attributed to this concept, but also the experiences related to it.

During the interviews, at an early stage – when I asked what reciprocity meant to the interviewees, reciprocity has precisely been described as a mutual exchange, in line with the existing literature. A reciprocal sexual encounter is when each party cares as much about their own satisfaction as about the satisfaction of the other person, or about their own pleasure as about the pleasure of the other. The interviewees suggested:

It's hard to define. But I think it has to do with mutual surrender, with worrying as much about the satisfaction of the other person as about your own. In other words, whether it's not just a giving or just a receiving, it's a mutual exchange. (Stephanie)

Well, I imagine it as a... do ut des, mmh... a possibility, within a relationship, to have an exchange. (Serena)

Reciprocity ensures the circularity of an exchange of pleasure/satisfaction, so when this circularity is lacking, reciprocity is also lacking. As Serena and J. say:

In a relationship that is not reciprocal I see a little ‘selfishness’, that is, I want to get pleasure because I want it right now, I do not give a shit about other people and I take what I want without paying attention to the needs or pleasures of others. I see the use of another’s body... I take what I want and I don’t care what the other person feels. (Serena)

A non-reciprocal relationship is a relationship in which each person is thinking of their personal pleasure. As a personal goal. (J.)

Thus, the principle of reciprocity ‘establishes’ the right of both partners to pleasure or to get any benefit or satisfaction from the sexual encounter. In this sense, recalling a notion of justice, the positive meaning of the concept is highlighted.

If I consider reciprocity as one's right to feel pleasure and that the other has the same right as myself to feel pleasure, then this is a positive reciprocity, there is equality, there is a positive equity in the sexual relationship. (Giulia)

However: how does reciprocity translate into practice in a sexual encounter? What are the experiences related to reciprocity? In other words, how is reciprocity performed in heterosexual sexual encounters? Then, is it real that reciprocity always provides justice, a real balance between the parties involved?

Concerning the experience of reciprocity in heterosexual sex, through the discourse analysis I have done, I identified three main discourses. The first sees reciprocity as an exchange of pleasure in the form of orgasms. In the second discourse reciprocity is an exchange of precise sexual practices. In particular, as we will see, it is compared to the idea of ‘oral sex by oral sex’. Third, reciprocity is understood as an exchange of attention to the needs of the other and as a possibility to an open dialogue within the relationship.

Bearing in mind that reciprocity is an ambiguous concept in establishing the effective equality of the parties (Gouldner 1960, Komter 1996, Gilfoyle et al. 1992, Braun et al. 2003), I was wondering: do these discourses imply effective equity in sexual intercourse?

In this chapter I will discuss precisely the limits – and the possibilities – of these three discourses in the effective equity of the (heterosexual) sexual encounter. In particular, I will explore the limits

regarding conceiving reciprocity as an exchange of orgasm or sexual practices, as I analyse the possibilities connected to the idea of reciprocity as an exchange of care, attention and listening.

3.1 Reciprocity as exchange of orgasms

On a general discursive level, as I have already mentioned, reciprocity in sex is defined as an exchange, during sexual intercourse, of pleasure. But what is meant by pleasure? As you can imagine, this is something that differs on a subjective level, and cannot find a universal definition. However, sexual pleasure is often expressed in orgasm: this would be the highest expression, the tangible proof, of physical pleasure. As Stephanie writes:

For me it has to be to enjoy the process that the sexual encounter itself entails but also to enjoy it by culminating with an orgasm. But of course, now that I think about it, maybe I don't always succeed in reaching orgasm but I could enjoy it, or I could reach a not so good orgasm, and I might still have enjoyed the process a lot. But as a general rule I have to admit that for me the orgasm is very important in a sexual encounter, yes, it is very important. That's not to say that the process is less important, but the orgasm is very important. When I don't come I feel uncomfortable, I think that unconsciously the pleasure is related to the orgasm. When I don't finish in the moment I have the feeling that something has been missing, or that I have been left with too much accumulated sexual energy. In general I seek orgasm, and I strive to find it. I'm not thrown away like a piece of meat. The orgasm is too related to pleasure, even though that's not all pleasure. The orgasm is like the icing on the cake. But of course when I realise that this is not present in my sexual relations it feels like I get a little frustrated. (Stephanie)

The idea of sexual pleasure being closely related to orgasm is reflected on a socio-cultural level in modern Western societies (Potts 2000). Sexological and medical discourses define what Béjin calls 'imperative orgasms' (Béjin 1986 in Potts 2000): the tendency to represent orgasm as something natural, inherently good, something that everyone should have. The ultimate goal that determines health (according to a medical discourse) or – in humanistic terms – self-actualisation. And, finally, what determines the success of 'good' sex (Potts 2000).

Conceiving pleasure in terms of orgasm has implications in the discourse on reciprocity, that become particularly evident in the work of Braun et al.:

A discourse of reciprocity is evident in accounts of sex which describe it as about giving and receiving 'pleasure' (...) This pleasure was most frequently articulated as orgasm, so that reciprocity effectively typically meant exchange of orgasms (Braun et al. 2003, 244).

The first discourse understands reciprocity in sex precisely as an exchange of orgasms. But what implications does this discourse have in practice, in subjective experience?

Understanding reciprocity as an exchange of orgasms, on the one hand – as the authors suggest – it is translated as the right of both partners to orgasm. To seek it out, to have it and, if it doesn't happen, to discuss reciprocity legitimately, to demand one's turn (Braun et al. 2003).

On the other hand, though, this discourse creates pressure: if the rights of one person, as we have seen, imply duties for another, reciprocity also entails states of debt and obligation (Gouldner 1960). In their work, Braun et al. in particular reflect on the obligations that weigh particularly on women. On the one hand, they are expected to always reach orgasm – which is what determines their sexual normality and what reinforces the male partner's 'sexperts'. On the other hand, the discourse on reciprocity translates into the obligation to return the pleasure of orgasm to the partner, once reached by oneself. As Giulia states:

In my experience, despite the deconstruction of sex and my curiosity to experiment with creative ways of having sex, I still feel the pressure of reciprocity very strongly. In many ways. That I also feel in not giving an orgasm to the other person, even in this case it can be seen as a lack of reciprocity. If I have experienced an orgasm and the other person has not, it immediately feels like there is a lack of reciprocity, something missing that I have not given back to the other person. (Giulia)

This way, the manifestation of reciprocity as orgasms becomes more oppressive than genuinely reciprocal (Braun et al. 2003).

Besides, the pressure to give an orgasm to a partner can be explained by the same 'imperative orgasmic'. As Potts discusses, becoming "the aim and measure of successful sex" (Potts 2000, 69), orgasm is implied in the definition of how sex should be, categorising 'bad' and 'good' sex. In this way, the lack of orgasm of one of the two parties leads to negative feelings, being perceived as a failure of the sexual encounter. Stephanie and Giulia report:

In heterosexual relationships, it almost never happened that the other person didn't reach an orgasm. Oh, God, no, Andres didn't have an orgasm and I did. If I had it and the other didn't ... It's inevitable that you will experience it a bit like a lack on your part. (...) But then, underneath, I actually had the idea that I had not been capable or that I had not given enough. Even with Andres. I experienced it as a great empowering, in the sense that I came and this is the most important thing but he did not experience the orgasm ... But then I was wondering why? Maybe I didn't do something, I wasn't good enough (...) and with Sonia ... Mmm, at the beginning you know, it was an experience so full of

pleasure in every point that really my orgasm was only a part of the act. But then going on ... After a while ... Yes, I started to say to myself mmh, maybe it's me who's not good or who's not capable. When the orgasm doesn't come from both sides, you feel the weight of reciprocity, that is, you ask yourself, didn't I give enough pleasure? (Giulia)

In the context of a relationship that I had at one time that was more of a sexual relationship than another type of relationship or affective bond ... It happened that this person did not always reach orgasm. I thought – it was many years ago – that maybe it wasn't a pleasant encounter for him. It made me think that maybe he wasn't enjoying the sexual relationship because he didn't reach orgasm, which was how maybe I thought of pleasure. (Stephanie)

Therefore expectations related to orgasm weigh on both partners: on who may feel obliged to have an orgasm and on who does not 'give' the orgasm – since the lack of orgasm on the part of the partner is conceived as a personal lack. Finally, understanding reciprocity as an exchange of orgasms can be critical, as it legitimises expectation and a state of obligation. Also Braun et al. conclude:

Rather than being a 'pure' or 'free' gift, the 'giving' of orgasm to the other sexual partner appears bound up in complex relations of expectation of exchange within a discourse of reciprocity (which, as anthropologists have argued, typically tends to be the case, even in supposedly altruistic exchanges) (Braun et al. 2003, 254).

In addition, this discourse does not guarantee equity and equality. Beyond the expectations and the duties it implies, it does not take into account that pleasure can be experienced in various ways, as I will explore later. The exchange of pleasure can be translated into sexual encounter in ways that cannot be reduced to the idea of 'orgasm for orgasm'. As Stephanie continues in her story:

One day we talked about it and he had this idea that he didn't necessarily have to have an orgasm to enjoy sex. And that he considered it as a very intense release of energy and reaching an orgasm was not always the culmination of a pleasant relationship. Then of course, perhaps my conception of pleasure at that time was very different from the one of that person. (Stephanie)

3.2 Reciprocity as exchange of sexual practices

Another discourse on reciprocity is the one which considers the exchange in terms of certain sexual practices. In particular, in addressing the issue of reciprocity, the equation ‘oral sex by oral sex’ emerges in many of the interviews.

This idea is reflected also in the literature. The reciprocal potential of oral sex in heterosexual sex is suggested by the authors Ehrenreich, Hess and Jacobs, in *Re-Making Love. The Feminization of Sex*. They state: “either partner could do it, and either could, presumably, enjoy it” (Ehrenreich, Hess, Jacobs 1987, 81). Within a mainstream discourse on sex⁶, this practice sees a person giving and a person receiving, and in this way, in oral sex the norm of reciprocity is clearly expressed.

Serena, in recalling an experience, underlines precisely how the reciprocity on the sexual encounter was based on the idea of ‘returning’ the oral sex ‘received’. Consequently, the absence of the action to return would determine a non-reciprocal encounter.

I’m thinking about this guy I was with ... Sometimes he didn't want to ... Yes ... He didn't like it... I don't know, I don't know the reason ... The idea of receiving oral sex, he didn't like it very much, but sometimes I offered to do it. And this thing disturbed me a little, yes, I didn't understand well what the problem was, if there was a problem. If he didn't like the way I did it in particular. I remember that at a certain point he told me this thing ... At the time, he lived in this house with his mother, his sister, a friend lived with them, those situations in which there are forty people in a cramped house, and ... When we wanted to do something there was this aspect of ... We might make a mess, so let's not wake up the others, which would be easy since the walls are plasterboard ... Let's be careful not to make any noise. And so he told me something like that, maybe it's better not to do this because I let myself go too much, I might mess up and make a lot of noise and I do not want to be heard by the others. But anyway, I was not sure. In that instance I wanted to reciprocate. From that point of view he was very good, receiving oral sex from him was one of the best things for me. So it was important for me to try to give him back something in return. But he was quite reluctant to do that. Again, he explained it to me this way, but sometimes the doubt came to me it was for some other reason, but I don't know. Maybe he didn't like it, I don't know. I questioned myself ... Then, yes, the more you grow, the more you can understand these things and deal with them in a little more dialogical and deeper way. I was younger at that time, so I also had a little trouble putting on the table my doubts, like by saying ‘so let's hear about this and that’, I've never done it so explicitly. During the sexual encounters I tried to tell him, but I don't know ... His explanation, for what I can remember was that one. But ... In my perspective it was a bit like a lack of reciprocity, that is, I was thinking, I like it, I want to do it and I want to exchange with you this thing ... But clearly ... In a childish way at the time I thought: ‘you do this and I want to do the same...’. (Serena)

⁶ I argue that it is only a perspective, and it is not to be taken as the a real meaning of oral sex.

In the case of oral sex, implicit expectations of returning the 'same' practice come into play. Reciprocity functions as an internalised principle that involves the moral sense of having to reciprocate a certain sexual practice, which can be very strong. As Giulia suggests:

So... If I think about reciprocity in a heterosexual relationship, I think about giving a blowjob after someone has gone down on me, that's the emblem (of reciprocity) for me. Reciprocity in sexual relations is something due, that has to be present, so I very often feel manipulated. In heterosexual relationships it is not possible that if he goes down on you then you don't do the same for him... That is, there's definitely something wrong ... 'But why?' 'Take it in your mouth, give it to me'. It has to happen, it's not even an option. In the relationships I've lived it has to happen, especially if he does it to you. Like I'm giving you this, now it's time for you to give something back. (...) In my experience, despite the deconstruction of sex and my curiosity to experiment new creative ways of having sex, I still feel the pressure of reciprocity very strong. In many ways. For example, I feel like the emptiness in which the other person expects me to do something that he did to me. If one goes down on me it's not that I think 'I'm not touching him enough' no, I think 'ah but I don't want to give him back the same thing'. So despite the deconstruction of sex, the weight of reciprocity exerts a very strong pressure, which I feel very much. (Giulia)

In the same way, always in the name of reciprocity, there are strong expectations of receiving in return the practice that one has given. This is evident in Stephanie's account:

Me: - Did you receive a no during sex?

Mmm ... It happened that this person never got to give me oral sex, and his excuse was that he had little experience, he had tried on some occasions with some girls and it had gone really bad. Then I started to think that maybe he didn't want to do it because he didn't like it and he wasn't able to say 'look, I don't like it' or maybe I don't know, he really didn't have experience in that field. And of course, sometimes I wanted to, but it wasn't like I went crazy without it, like if he didn't perform oral sex I wouldn't enjoy sex, given that I could enjoy that relationship in another way ... We did other things. I told him once or twice, but if he didn't do it spontaneously, I wasn't going to make him feel uncomfortable either, forcing him into something he wasn't going to feel comfortable with, exactly because of reciprocity. Because I wouldn't want to be forced to do something that I said no to for some reason. It caught my attention. It was something important for me but I was more understanding than I expected ... I thought, well, he may not like it, he may be afraid, he may feel insecure, there can be many reasons. But now that I think about it, unconsciously, before I asked him, I performed more oral sex to him ... I think it was my little revenge (laughs) not doing so much after that, maybe not doing it at all for a while. And I remember sometimes he asked for it.

Me: - And what did you do when he asked for it?

I think I pretended a bit to have misunderstood, I did some other things, but no more. I didn't say no to him regarding that, but I left him a little with the desire. Maybe it was also a small revenge, I have to admit it. I don't know if it's right or wrong. But if, as he said, if he didn't want to go down on me, then why did I have to suck his cock (laughs). Even though I sometimes like to do that, it's not something I do just because it gives the other person pleasure ... I also like the game of seduction, of pleasure, of seeing the other person enjoying it, I like that very much, I like seeing the other person enjoying it. And even though I sometimes knew that it was going to give pleasure, I didn't do it just because I was angry that he didn't do it for me. But I also didn't get to make him feel uncomfortable by explicitly saying 'I want you to lick my pussy'. It was a bit of a hidden revenge. It was like a way to send him a subliminal message. If you don't do it, I'm not going to do it, if you want it, I want it too. Sometimes yes, I did it, but at one point I realised that I had performed oral sex to him less frequently because I was angry that he didn't do it to me. Although it's a thing that I don't go crazy about, still yes, reciprocity is nice and when it isn't there, well, I do myself justice in some way. If you are disgusted, it maybe disgusted me too. (Stephanie)

Here, reciprocity acquires two meanings. At first, reciprocity seems to be the positive ethical norm that guarantees respect for the limits of the other person: "I wouldn't want to be forced to do something that I said no to for some reason". In the name of reciprocity, the no of the other must be respected, just as the no of one's own. This concept also refers to the idea of not doing what you don't want to be done to you – which can also be, on the contrary, doing what you want to be done to you, as is clear in Serena's account.

On the other hand, in the course of the narrative, reciprocity is also expressed in the equation 'oral sex by oral sex', by giving and receiving the same practice. In Stephanie's story it is clear how giving oral sex generates implicit expectations of return, of being reciprocated.

Finally, the first and second meanings of reciprocity are negotiated with the 'small personal revenge' of reducing one's own giving, without giving into forcing the other: "reciprocity is nice and when it isn't there, well, I do myself justice in some way".

Nevertheless, in other cases, expectations of being reciprocated can generate real pressure on the partner to return to the practice, which can culminate in coercion.

With Gianluca, yes, I said explicitly 'look, I don't like to do this' and he was like ... 'but why don't you like to do it, it's not normal, because it's an exchange - I'll do it to you and therefore you too should like to do it to me'. (Giulia)

And she continues:

It's sad to say it, it really makes me sad to say it because I would like to be a stronger person but many times I did it because I said you know, whatever, let's just give him this blowjob, and let's close it here ... It won't last long, it doesn't even make sense to get here ... Because every time I said 'no, I don't want to' it was like, I was selfish, or I had some taboo or jammed a natural fluidity with which an act had to come. But why do you do that? There's a penis in one half moon and a vagina in another. (Giulia)

To conclude, reciprocity operates clearly within oral sex. In guaranteeing the right of both partners to receive oral sex, reciprocity determines also the obligation of both partners to perform oral sex. In this way, it may acquire coercive power, legitimising demands and expectations, to the detriment of respecting the partner's boundaries.

Consequently, the equity of the relationship that derives from the discourse on reciprocity as an exchange of sexual practices is effective only in an ideal world, where both partners enjoy in the same way giving and receiving this practice.

Furthermore, the idea of equity that derives from this discourse is based precisely on conceiving male and female oral sex as symmetrical and equal. As Giulia suggests, it is based on the same binary logic in which a practice has the exact equivalent, and the male sex corresponds to the female sex ...

Why does it never happen that one person says 'I'm going down on you, and then you do something to me', mmm like I don't know... 'lick my nipples, lick my ear, put a finger in my anus'. No, it's always a 'miss your part', 'miss that you do this to me'. Going down on someone it is not a complete sexual act, in which I am the subject who does it and you are the subject who receives it. No. It's me giving you something, so now it's up to you to give something to me. But not giving something to me in another part of the body. No. Giving a blowjob is not a random act of sex that can happen between things, no. It's always that you think then, I have not done the same thing. I mean, it's like saying 'he went down on me but I didn't do it to him'... You feel like there must be this symmetry. Because it cannot be that the blowjob is similar to having anal sex with a finger, it's not like this equivalent. So I perceive reciprocity as strongly linked to binarism. At first glance, reciprocity seems to be something positive, but in reality it can be a very manipulative concept. It's often manipulated as: 'Ah, I did this to you and you didn't do it to me'... What does that mean? Why is there a subject who receives pleasure and the other person is considered a missing part that has to be paid back to get even? In this sense reciprocity is really binary: there is a penis and a vagina, it all happens between two people ... When you are alone for example the concept of reciprocity already gets disoriented. (Giulia)

3.3 The different subjective experiences of sexual pleasure

Conceiving the concept of reciprocity connected to the idea of exchange, the interviewees argue for the criticalities resulting from the comprehension of the exchange in the simplistic terms of orgasms or sexual practices. As Serena and Nuria point out:

Hmm ... it's such a malleable concept that there's not a definition of reciprocity, like you touch me on the elbow and then I touch you on the elbow, no, it's not so simple. For me maybe the way you touch me on the elbow is very important and has a meaning but maybe you don't care about touching the elbow and you prefer something else. It's actually more playful. (...) It's not that if I give you something you have to give me the same thing in the same measure, in the same way. Reciprocity may be that we exchange two different things, and that make us feel good, balanced between us... (Serena)

The practices are not interchangeable between each other, I do not think of (reciprocity) as if we were doing a trade. There has to be more to it ... we have to understand that we are different people, we have different bodies and maybe we also have different pleasures. Then I give something to you, you give something to me, with the understanding that we will need different things. But of course, from such a simple vision, and if it also the other person does not know you and such, then perhaps this idea of oral sex for oral sex or whatever is more common (Nuria).

By reducing reciprocity to the terms of exchange of orgasm or certain sexual practices, the same concept of pleasure is restricted. Both discourses are problematic, not contemplating that pleasure can be expressed in different ways for each person.

For example, for someone orgasm may be essential for a satisfactory relationship, but for someone else it may not be of great importance. In the same way, a particular sexual practice – such as oral sex – may not be so desired by both partners. In other words, the experience of gratification or satisfaction is not universal for all. Thus, even though reciprocity actually works on the basis of the mutuality of gratification (Gouldner 1960) – in the sense that each party should be gratified –, neither of these two discourses promotes an effective reciprocal (and egalitarian) encounter.

Interestingly, the interviewees highlight how pleasure can take a variety of forms not limited to achieving orgasm or receiving a certain sexual practice, changing subjectively. For example, it can involve other senses besides touch, such as sight. As Serena suggests:

How would I define pleasure? ... Any kind of practice that makes me happy in a simple way (laughs).
Hmm ... Any kind of practice in which I feel safe, and I know that this gives me pleasure, makes me happy. I can't define it well in another word right now ... I'm also thinking about visual pleasure, if you

want it to, it doesn't involve any kind of contact but there is also that dimension of visual pleasure, in which I see that person ... That part of the body, that causes me pleasure simply because I look at it. (...) I also know that I use visual images a lot, when you masturbate you have that image in your head of that encounter, of that person who stimulates you particularly and you use it when you want to masturbate. Because it's visual pleasure, not in the end?, an image that makes you happy (laughs). (Serena)

Again, the pleasure experienced during a sexual encounter can extend beyond the concrete moment. It is also pleasure to rethink/to remember a meeting at a later time (e.g. during masturbation):

Now for me sexual pleasure also includes other things [besides orgasm] ... For example, even, spending a good time with a person and feeling good and being able to think about it again later on, for example when you masturbate. (Anna)

Besides, pleasure can also go beyond the physical level. It can regard emotional and affective domains:

I think reciprocity has a lot to do with pleasure ... With pleasure in emotional, affective and also bodily terms. As if there was a balance between these two things in the relationship. That is to say, that the other person has the sensitivity to perceive what are your needs and to respond to them, or to ask what are your needs, talk about them, negotiate them. (...) I think pleasure is intimately linked to affection ... I think. (J.)

Finally, as Gavey, McPhillips and Braun point out: "Reductive analysis which simply equate women's sexual pleasure/desire with orgasm are inadequate to explain the pleasure that many women talk about experiencing during intercourse" (Gavey et al. 1999, 49). And, I might add, it can be the same for men. Everyone experiences pleasure in different ways, so considering reciprocity as the possibility for both partners to be satisfied and gratified, it makes no sense to conceive a reciprocal sexual encounter as the exchange of the same practice or the same thing.

3.4 Reciprocity as being attentive to the each other

So, how is it possible to create reciprocity in a sexual encounter, understood as a space in which both partners can experience pleasure and satisfaction? How can reciprocity promote an equal and balanced sexual encounter?

So [reciprocity] should not be understood as ‘I give you a leaf and you give me back a leaf’, it’s not the same object which has to be exchanged, the same practice or whatever ... But overall there is an idea of balance, a balance between two parts. I think it's very personal, in the sense that everyone understands it in their own way, so for me reciprocity is something and for another person it’s something else, but the important thing is that there is a balance between two people (...) So, within a heterosexual relationship, I don't see it as a mathematical equation - like I perform oral sex for you and then you have to do it for me. I don't think it’s that simple, that's all. I think of it as a idea of listening, in which maybe you particularly like that thing and you feel pleasure in that particular thing and I am able to ... understand it, and I try to do it, and in the same way you do it for me. (...) In sexual intercourse [reciprocity] requires a good if not very good amount of listening. Precisely because reciprocity is perhaps something that’s always different, it is important that each subject is attentive to the other ... In order to listen and understand what are the needs of the other ... Paying attention to the other is essential, mmm ... You have to receive and understand what the other person needs and be willing to give it in case you can give it. (Serena)

Reciprocity becomes meaningful when understood as the ability of both parties to listen to the needs of the other. In particular, communication plays a fundamental role in promoting a mutual encounter. Communicating one's needs to the other and, on the other hand, understanding the needs of the other offers the possibility of a respectful, pleasant and equal encounter (and so, reciprocal).

For me it's mostly about feeling cared for and taking care of the other person and I think it's very closely related to being able to communicate what you need. In other words, when there is the confidence of being able to communicate things and you know what is pleasant for you or what is pleasant for the other person.

Me: - How do you imagine a heterosexual reciprocal sexual relationship?

I imagine it ... With an emphasis on caring for the other person ... During sex, before and after and ... Listening a lot to how the other person is. For example, the situation could be that you are having sex with a person but one day you feel a certain way and another day maybe you don't feel the same things or whatever ... Or maybe you don't want to have sex. You have to listen to these changing needs, and not take for granted the dynamics that you have because you are used to having sex... It's important to understand that things change depending on the moment.

- Speaking...

Yes, talking. Actually, in my mind, I get this idea that it would also be good if it came out a little more natural but it can be ... resolved with communication. Perhaps there can be an intuitive aspect too, but yes, it can happen through words. And it doesn't have to stop being something nice if you talk. (Nuria)

And again

In my opinion, time can make sex mutual and telling what one actually wants more deeply ... A dialogue. If me and this person actually began to tell each other, and we gradually discovered what one likes and what the other likes, we would create reciprocity. I think it's a more open dialogue about what's going on. By the way, to have a dialogue does not necessarily mean telling one another everything, simply clarifying a few points. (Anna)

Listening means having an attentive and open attitude towards the other. In other words, to have attention and care for the other's needs. As Giulia suggests:

Reciprocity could be saying 'the sex I had with this person last night was beautiful because there has been the same level of attention and care by both of us, no one has claimed something because the other has not done something, no one has imposed something on the other, so there has been a parity, a treating each other with care in the same way'. Perhaps in this case reciprocity, intended as recognising the other, considering, valuing the desire and pleasure of the other, can be positive. (Giulia)

In this sense, reciprocity gets a positive meaning. Mutual attention to the other implies respect for the boundaries of the other, without resulting in an imposition or claim. In fact, understanding reciprocity as a mutual exchange of attention with another person recognises the right of both parties to enjoy sex, but also the duty of both parties to be attentive to the limits and the desires of the other.

Obviously, communication is the main instrument for negotiating two different perspectives, for understanding the other and for pointing out to the other what one does or does not want.

When I asked Stephanie if it would be possible to conceive as reciprocal a sexual encounter in which for example only one person has reached the orgasm, she argued:

I think it depends on whether we have talked with this person about what satisfies him. If I see that this person does not reach the orgasm and that is what I look for in a sexual encounter, I try to understand what this person wants. I try to get to know why he didn't reach an orgasm and if he tells me that he doesn't always need to, that is also reciprocity. But I think the point is to worry about what the other person wants, because we can enjoy the process in different ways, we can try pleasure in a different way. Maybe, look, I want you to have oral sex now and I'm going to enjoy it, but maybe he's not going to ask me for oral sex, he's going to ask me, I don't know, to have sex in a classic way. And if I see that he is enjoying it and I am also enjoying what I asked for, that too counts as reciprocal, because I believe that there is a different way to live pleasure, to look for it and to obtain it. (Stephanie)

This way, talking offers the possibility for negotiating, obtaining the satisfaction of both partners. However, this does not mean that one has to satisfy the wishes of one's partner against her/his will. Negotiating may also mean giving up a sexual encounter if one considers themselves to not be able to respect the limits or desires – hence the rights – of the other person.

In conclusion, on an ideal level, dialogue encourages an effective mutual encounter, offering the opportunity to both parties to be satisfied, and to live a pleasant sexual encounter. However, what happens in practice? What are the experiences of communication during heterosexual sexual encounters?

In the next chapter, through the stories of the interviewees, I will explore how communication gets translated into practice: the difficulties and requirements for a sincere dialogue.

4. PUTTING COMMUNICATION INTO PRACTICE

In this chapter I will examine how communication is experienced during heterosexual sexual encounters. In particular, through a discursive analysis, I will identify the difficulties related to communication. I will explore the resistance to communicate what one likes or dislikes, and how setting boundaries in the sexual domain is translated into practice – the reactions of the partner and the consequences on the encounter. Then, I will try to understand how it is possible to have clear communication in a sexual context. On one hand, I will discuss how important it is to know one's body and one's sexuality. On the other, I will stress the responsibility of both partners to promote a safe space that facilitates dialogue. Finally, I will argue for the fundamental role of sexual education in promoting an open dialogue during sex and emphasising women's pleasure.

4.1 Reticence to verbalise discomfort

By identifying the importance of communication in promoting reciprocity in sexual encounters, I have tried to understand how communication is experienced by the interviewees. In this way, obstacles and problems related to the act of speaking in sex emerged.

First of all, what emerged from the stories is that expressing one's discomfort regarding a certain practice during sexual intercourse is not easy.

It's never happened to me to say yes because I was sorry to say no. Never. If I don't feel comfortable I can't do anything. But I think of something ... I do not always say I'm not comfortable. Sometimes I'm uncomfortable and I don't say anything. But sometimes I'm waiting for that person to have his own pleasure. In some moments of the relationship I prioritise that person to have pleasure without me having it completely. For example the position from behind, sometimes it makes me uncomfortable. Sometimes. And sometimes I feel that there is a person who likes it very much and even if I am uncomfortable, I can wait a moment if the person is enjoying himself. Sometimes I'm uncomfortable and it's not easy to say: 'hey I'm uncomfortable'. (J.)

Also when I asked Nuria if verbal communication was important for her, she replied

Yes, it is very important. But there is a problem, at least I, I think it is not necessary to speak because everything has to flow naturally. But that's not really the case. In other words, it is very good that there is the confidence to be able to communicate verbally as well and I think it is also a little related to the little sexual education we have. I don't know, I think that for example women don't feel empowered to say 'I want this or that', or 'I don't like this'. It has happened to me sometimes that something was not

pleasant or I did not like it but the fact of saying it to the other person ... I thought maybe he is going to feel bad ... Or it's going to be an uncomfortable moment, you know... (Nuria)

Interviewees demonstrate reticence to speak and communicate their discomfort during sex. This depends on several factors that are interrelated between them.

First, there is the idea that sex does not entail any talk. Media culture promotes precise cultural sexual scripts by which in sex there is no need to talk. As a result many people ended up believing that talking explicitly is unnecessary, and having a romantic idealisation of sex which brings satisfaction without saying what one likes or dislikes (Mogilevsky 2015). This idea appears also in another account:

Of course I can tell you that I like it but not knowing is also part of the magic – that is to say, understanding without words that the other is liking it. (J.)

Consequently, western societies stigmatise sexuality in a way that makes talking about sex embarrassing or anxiety-provoking (Mogilevsky 2015). Or, as Nuria suggests, you may feel ridiculous:

There is all that taboo ... That in sex you can never talk, like in my family environment ... Of course I don't want to talk about specific sexual practices, but there's all this taboo about sex, so that if we were to say things we would feel ridiculous ... Because it's like it's something that can't be said. (Nuria)

In other words, talking makes one uncomfortable, and these 'bad' feelings represent an obstacle for a clear dialogue.

Furthermore, one of the consequences of not being used to talking during sex is that people are not able to manage their reactions. They can react by getting angry or pushing the other away (Mogilevsky 2015). Or again, as Nuria suggests, one can feel bad and disappointed to hear something, taking the words as a personal critique. So, fearing some bad reactions, one can be reticent to setting sexual boundaries.

Something very recent is that a person came to see me, a boy I had sex with once in Barcelona, and I had a good time ... But there was not a lot of communication ... It was just fun. But when he came here in NL, we had sex for quite a few times but I didn't think it was quite as fantastic, you know? (laughs) But I didn't want to say anything because I still had this feeling ... I thought that maybe the other person was going to feel bad ... Or attacked. So that's what I was feeling ... (Nuria)

She continues:

It happened to me not to enjoy sex too much and maybe not say anything, in order not to be unpleasant or create an uncomfortable situation. Yes, I have this idea sometimes, even, that the other person ought not to feel bad, I don't want him to feel that he's doing it wrong ... It's like all these ideas that we have misunderstood I think, as there are people who are good in bed and people who are bad in bed, but I think it really depends a lot on what the other person wants, because there is no good or bad way to have sex, but it's more important to know the other person, I think ... But in order not to embarrass the other person you think 'I'm not going to go into details' or 'I won't say I don't like this because I want the other person to feel fine' ... But I know that's like cancelling what you need by putting the reaction of the other person first. Actually if he feels bad maybe he wasn't the right person to have sex with ... I feel like I still have these communication barriers. (Nuria)

Finally, there is no education on how to express how one actually feels or on how to deal with the partner's feelings. As Weiss in her article writes:

Women's magazines offered tips for the hottest things to say in bed, but they rarely taught me to express how I actually felt. And they also didn't teach me how to figure out how my partners felt. Any vocalizations that happened in bed were supposed to be for the sake of a performance.(...) I didn't know it was okay to say I wanted sex, or more sex, or a different kind of sex. I didn't know it was okay to admit the current activity was doing absolutely nothing for me. I didn't know it was okay to say if I was in pain or to say I felt pressured into something. (Weiss 2017)

In conclusion, the idea of a sexual encounter that does not involve communication is normalised. This means that expressing your preferences or discomfort becomes problematic. The absence of education affects the ability to react positively to the dialogue, as well as the ability to speak (which is also part of the consequence). The impossibility of creating a sincere dialogue therefore hinders a sexual encounter characterised by reciprocity and mutuality of pleasure. Thus, a sex education that promotes communication between partners can be an effective tool for promoting effective reciprocity in sexual relations.

4.2 Communicating boundaries

Communication does not only mean to express one's sexual desires, but also to make one's limits explicit (in other words, to express what one does not like). As Serena and Nuria pointed out,

expressing limits in sex is legitimated by reciprocity. It is essential in order not to fall into the obligations that the rhetoric of reciprocity entails. If the limits of the other are not respected, the sense of positive reciprocity is lacking, and the intercourse is lived in a selfish way by one of the partners. Therefore, 'true' reciprocity implies respect for the limits of the other. This way, communication of one's own boundaries may ensure the mutuality of pleasure.

Um ... And yes, reciprocity also implies a good attention to the other's boundaries, because then maybe there are things that one prefers not to be do or that one does not like as practices ... Yes, I think that in a sexual relationship there are also boundaries which may be very difficult to establish and which are subtle, in the sense that it only takes a moment for you to do something aggressive towards the other without even realising it or not being completely aware of it. (Serena)

When it comes to sex it is legitimate to set limits, because maybe there are things that you don't feel comfortable doing, or that the other person doesn't feel comfortable doing, and I think it's okay.

It's clear to me that you have to set limits, 'cause otherwise you end up feeling obligated to do anything the other person wants, you know, but if you are in a context where you have sex with someone and you know that the other person is not okay doing that, it is also reciprocity to say: 'Okay, nevermind, we can do other things' ... But it is a complicated matter. But I think you have to respect it if the other person doesn't want to do something. (Nuria)

It would also be selfish to force the other person to do something they don't want to do. And that wouldn't be reciprocity either, regardless of the fact that I didn't get something I wanted. (Stephanie)

However, what happens to setting limits during sexual encounters? In order to explore how communication is implemented during a heterosexual sexual encounter, I realised it was important to examine men's reactions regarding the other person's setting boundaries during sex.

So I asked the interviewees if they had ever said 'no' to any practice and what the partner's reaction had been. At this point, the communication difficulties that had been addressed in the previous paragraph emerged; and also, how a 'no' can create moments of tension that have negative repercussions on sexual relations was also explored. As Anna reported:

Uuuh, I don't know how many times I've been asked to do this or that, if I can do this or that, and these are claims that if not fulfilled can lead to clashes. When I was younger I've been asked to do everything. You are put into a situation whereby you are induced to believe that you are weird because you don't want to do a thing, that you are boring, that you have a thousands problems, that you are not okay with your sexuality. (...) Now I feel like I have the tools to handle the situation. If I don't want to do something, I don't do it and I feel that I have the language capability to express why I'm saying no

and why the other person shouldn't put himself in the situation of telling me what I should or shouldn't do and of saying what I am or how I'm not. But beforehand, when I lacked this capability, it has happened to me to reluctantly do things that I did not want to do, because the other person had a stronger convincing ability than mine and I would succumb. I felt that there was no way out and that it was the only thing I could do. I've thought 'I'm the weird one' a lot of times ... 'Maybe I should do it'.

Me: - And what about recently?

It has happened to me even on an ironic level, a little joking, masking the thing, when I do not want to do certain sexual practices and the other person makes me feel as if I am not completely free or things like that. There's this idea that if you have a free sexuality you're willing to do anything and there's nothing you don't like when that's not true. My sexuality is constantly changing, one month my imagination is of one kind, the next month it's completely different, and it's normal for it to be like this. But yes, it still happens to me to meet people who have this idea that if you do not want certain things you have a problem with yourself, and you are not free enough and all these sort of phrases ... Usually I hear that the other person lets it go because it's convenient for him to let it go, but maybe by joking or something like that he makes me understand that ... But yes, you get stuck with the label of frigid and things like that. (Anna)

A 'no' generates a bad reaction in the partner. This type of situation is connected to the permissive discourse. As I mentioned before, according to it, women are conceived as desiring subjects, but they are always expected to have and enjoy sex. In this way, a woman who set boundaries in sex or refuses to have sex, may be identified with labels such as frigid, tease, and so on (Gavey et al. 1999). And this of course puts on women "pressure to do it anyway" (Gavey et al. 1999, 45). Again, as Anna suggests, education can be a tool to women's empowerment to cope with the situation – also Nuria reported she does not feel like speaking because she does not feel empowered. Thus, empowerment is associated with the capacity to express oneself and to be able to manage any partner's bad reactions.

However, the kind of pressure lived by women is clear in Giulia's account. When I asked her what had happened when she had said no to some practices she replied:

A surge, a cataclysm, the end of the world, an apocalypse. Every time I said no I was a bitch, I was selfish, I had a taboo, or every time I came and then I took off and said I don't want to continue and make you come ... Imagine, my partner's eyes were saying 'and my part where is it? and me?'. (Giulia)

Finally, to refuse to do something leads to reactions which have clear repercussions on the relationship. A 'no' may create a situation of conflict and tension, that ends up putting pressure on

women. Eventually, giving in to the demands of the other becomes the only way to avoid this kind of situation.

Thus, the rhetoric of reciprocity ('you should give me back what I did to you'), and the discourses on sexuality are addressed to control women's sexuality, with the consequent lack of reciprocity of pleasure in the encounters.

However, what happens on the the opposite, when it is the male partner who sets boundaries and says no? It is clear that hegemonic discourses of heterosexual sex and sexuality may also burden men. Both the male sex drive and the permissive discourses have constructed a masculinity always wanting and needing sex (Gavey et al. 1999). Therefore, men's possibility to setting boundaries is restricted. As Anna e Giulia point out:

Me: - Have you ever asked for anything and they said no?

Yes, yes, it happened to me to ask somebody to do this or that. But no. Well, that has a lot to do with masculinity. Imagine if ... From the point of view of masculinity, of the ideals of virility, it is difficult for an hetero cis man to tell you: 'No, I don't like it' or, 'I don't like putting my fingers inside your vagina, I prefer to lick your anus'. It has never happened to me to meet someone say 'No, look, I don't want to do this'. I don't believe that all men like to go down on women, I can't believe it. (Giulia)

When you hear a no ... Well, in my opinion, you kind experience it as a rejection. I think. I mean, I remember that I experienced it as a rejection and I was disappointed. Well. And I also found it strange because we still have in our imagination male sexuality as a sexuality willing to do anything, so when a man says no you feel hurt in your feeling attractive and in a series of things ... To you it feels like there is something wrong with you because he's telling you no, when instead if a girl does not feel like doing something and expresses it she's right, isn't she? We have this stereotype about male sexuality whereby it has to be open to everything, but when it's not so, it's not true, everyone has their own imagination. (Anna)

Thus, men are supposed to always want sex, and they are not supposed to be submissive or unsure about what they want (Mogilevsky 2016). These discourses on sexuality may end to make harder for men to express their discomfort. Interestingly, Serena told:

On the other end, It happened to me with this friend with whom I slept recently that I had ... I was the one who (a little to my own disadvantage) ... It was me who did not respect his boundaries. In the sense that we were together and during the sexual intercourse we did not have a condom and we said: 'Oh fuck, I do not have it, you do not have it' and then I ... I said 'I don't care, fuck, let's have sex'. He was a bit uncomfortable in this and in fact, then I apologized because I realised that on that occasion I was not particularly reciprocal. Yes, at that moment I felt like it ... But ... And then I repeat, this was

also to my detriment, in case something might have happened, regarding diseases or possible pregnancies. But in that case it was me ... I felt it was me ... That is, I followed my personal pleasure, I wanted that at that moment and I wouldn't pay attention to anything else. (Serena)

Beyond making clear men's issues to avoid sex, this story dispels the simplistic myth that depicts women as victims of men's power, while men are the active subjects who act according to their will. Practical sex is more complex, and androcentric and patriarchal discourses on sex limit everybody, both women and men. Besides, the possibility of effective reciprocal encounters is restricted: sexual discourses end up forcing one partner, if not both partners, to do something against their will. In this sense, pleasure is experienced only by one, so the encounter could be conceived as unilateral, rather than mutual.

4.3 The importance of knowing one's own sexuality

In reciprocity it's important to know what you want, what you like, what you are going to enjoy, but also to know the other person. It may be that the other person does not enjoy the orgasm as much as I do, but I have to find out what this person wants in order for him to have a good time as well. (Stephanie)

As I pointed out before, making clear what is pleasure for each partner may ensure a reciprocal sexual encounter, in which both partners can experience pleasure. Through dialogue, indeed, one can claim and negotiate her/his own pleasure with the other person.

However, making explicit one's own pleasure requirements presumes knowing one's own sexuality, what one likes and dislikes. Like Stephanie suggests, "it is important to know what you want, what you like and what you are going to enjoy". In the same way, Anna suggested:

I don't know, in my opinion the more you get to know yourself and start to understand what you want, the more you enjoy your sexual relationship. Until I reached a very high level of awareness of what I like and what I want, I didn't feel like I was there for myself but for the other, so I didn't feel reciprocity. (Anna)

Not knowing and not being aware of one's own sexuality and pleasure compromises the possibility of searching for and claiming one's own pleasure during a sexual encounter. In this sense, there can be a lack of reciprocity. If the other is focused only in her/his own pleasure, the encounter is perceived as unilateral, and not as a mutual exchange. Anna continued:

Since you don't know what you like and what you don't like, you are there and ... I don't know ... Yes, you are going through a moment that is shared with another person but you don't know if you are doing it for the other person or for yourself. So for me it's about achieving awareness of what I want and creating a clearer dialogue with the other. If you don't know what you want, you can't expect the other to explain it to you or to guess it ... And so, when in the past I didn't know what I wanted, I wanted the other person to make me reach pleasure and if he didn't give it to me I got pissed off, it was all very conflicting, it's obvious that this way you don't create reciprocity, do you?... (Anna)

Communication appears as an essential tool in building reciprocity. A dialogue can have a positive impact on the possibility of reciprocal sexual relations, in the sense that the pleasure of each partner is at the centre. But how is it possible to communicate to others one's own desires and boundaries, if one does not know them?

As the interviewees pointed out, only a greater knowledge of one's own sexuality makes to establish an open and clear dialogue between partners possible.

However, in the contemporary western context, for women the knowledge of their own pleasure is hampered: women's pleasure is strongly stigmatised at a socio-cultural level. Barbara Miller, director of the recent documentary *#Female Pleasure* argues that in the 21st century, female sexuality is still worldwide controlled and censored (Miller 2018). On the one hand, sex education in schools is focused exclusively on the prevention of sexual diseases and unwanted pregnancies, while pleasure is not addressed at all. Also Nuria argues:

Martina, I think that the key of all this idea of reciprocity, respecting the diversity and having nice sexual encounters, is sex education, from a feminist perspective. All the talks I had at high school were concerned with putting on a condom, all the diseases I could get, or pregnancies. But this is not putting pleasure at the centre. (Nuria)

On the other hand, media production and pornography, which informally educate about sexuality, are deeply androcentric, made by and aimed at men's pleasure (Huberlant 2017, Miller 2018). The result is that women are not educated through socialisation to focus on their own pleasure during sexual encounters, while men's pleasure is prioritised.

Interestingly, as all the interviewees share, the firsts heterosexual sexual experiences are usually centred on men's satisfaction, while female's pleasure is dismissed, and not considered important as much as the male partner's.

I think that feminism has made me think more about my sexual desires. It has made me see how in my past relationships I never came first, man came always first. Like what he wanted, how he wanted it ...
(J.)

Mmm... It's as I said to you, when I was younger I was simply more dependent on what the other person wanted than on what I wanted. And then it was a bit like letting myself go in his direction ...
(Nuria)

Before I felt like I was there because the boy wanted me there, I never had the certainty of being there because I wanted to be there. And so I was not feeling well because everything was linked to the other person and I felt that I was there but I did not know if I really wanted to be there or not. (Anna)

Almost all the interviewees pointed out that in the past, their own sexual desires and needs had been neglected, with the consequent lack of experience of pleasure during sexual encounters. Again

I remember I didn't have an orgasm to say ... with penetration (which was what I considered true sex) so I was having sex without feeling pleasure until mmh, four years ago. I only felt it with other practices that I didn't consider sex. Paradoxically, pleasure was not a priority for me. It was not so absurd to think 'I do this thing and I don't feel anything', no, I was living it as a very normal thing. It was linked to a total lack of knowledge of my body, to a romantic aspect... In the sense that sex is part of a relationship, and when it was not a relationship it was still an idealisation of a one-night stand.
(Giulia)

Furthermore, the lack of self-pleasure during heterosexual encounters is a condition that most young women live in a normalised way, at least when they start having sex – since it is connected with a lack of knowing one's own pleasure, and maybe with a lack of experience. The roots of this situation are to be traced at an educational and social level. As the writer Suzannah Weiss says:

Desire was strangely absent from the sex lessons I received from adults and peers alike – or at least the desires of people other than men were absent. I learned all about men's supposed desires. I learned men's desires were uncontrollable. That they would try to use me to satiate them (Weiss 2017).

As a result, women are not conceived as subjects of their own sexuality. Instead, they are seen as the male's objects, and their sexuality is in function of the male's one.

Consequently, the mainstream culture promotes an idea of sex which is not optimal for women's pleasure (Weiss 2015). For example, as Giulia suggests, sex is often defined in terms of penetration,

which does not represent the greater source of pleasure for women, as several studies have demonstrated. Whereas other activities, which may be more pleasurable for women because directly stimulate their clitoris, are considered as warm-ups, or extras, in a few words 'not real sex'.

Moreover, topics such as female masturbation, and clitoral pleasure, are not discussed and explored, both at level of formal and informal education. On the contrary, women's masturbation is still marked as shameful, and something to be kept secret (Huberlant 2017). As Stephanie said:

At the beginning if I didn't reach orgasm, that was it and I didn't care so much. (...) Beforehand I didn't do it, until a few years ago, I didn't get to masturbate so freely. Because of the taboo on masturbation and on giving yourself pleasure. I was not so aware of the importance that it had to be my pleasure, too. (Stephanie)

In conclusion, female pleasure, in a hyper-sexualised society, still remains a taboo today. Women have been socialised as passive subjects, while men are the active part, able to achieve their own pleasure. So, young women do not often have the tools to seek their pleasure and claim it during their sexual intercourses. Considering their own sexuality as dependent on someone else and not on themselves is very problematic for women,

because once (they have) grown up, they do not know what they truly enjoy or how to ask for it. One is not taught that through any form of sexual activity they could actually reclaim their own sexual being and body, their own desires and sense of pleasure (Huberlant 2017).

Therefore, how can it be possible to talk about reciprocity in this context of imbalance of sexual satisfaction? How there can there be a reciprocal and equal exchange if women's pleasure is deprioritised? If women do not know their own sexual desires, what they like and what they do not like remains unexpressed, so how could a sexual encounter be satisfactory for them as well?

I don't know, with him sex was weird, and I keep thinking about it. I think that with him it was very hard for me to verbalise my physical sexual desires, I was very nervous. And many times I let him take the initiative, and do what he wanted to do, you know. I never put my desires about sex explicitly. There's always someone who leads, you know, the game, I don't know. I think I felt very passive with him. Because I was not capable of ... In that case I can link reciprocity with the power that the woman has to say what she wants in bed, and what she likes. (J.)

Only breaking taboos would promote real reciprocity in heterosexual sexual encounters. And as reported by the interviewees, feminism – breaking taboos, and criticising the social heterosexual scripts and the mainstream discourses on sex and sexuality – plays a decisive role in it. An education which stimulates the awareness of the right of women to pleasure and the knowledge of women's own bodies and sexuality would enhance their ability to claim and achieve pleasure during sexual encounters. Thus, equality in sexual practices implies the re-appropriation of one's own pleasure, in terms of knowing what brings pleasure and claiming it. Finally, only by starting from an education centred in the pleasure of both women and men, can it be possible to speak of reciprocal and equal sexuality, with respect for the other and without prevarication.

4.3.1 Re-signification

The pressure of societal norms makes it difficult to talk about female sexuality today as it is charged with the male gaze. Does a woman enjoy certain practices because it comes from her own impetus, or does it come from a male partner, an androcentric society telling her that this is something she should like? (Huberlant 2017)

As I mentioned, sexuality is socially, historically and culturally determined. This means that sexual desires can also be produced by the social context. In the previous paragraph I have discussed how media and discourses on sex promote a strongly androcentric sexuality. So the question arises: to what extent are women's sexual desires influenced discursively?

From a feminist consciousness, a tension may emerge between the definition of women's own pleasure and the practices associated with male pleasure. This is particularly visible in Anna's account:

Me: - Do you think that in your last heterosexual relationships there was reciprocity?

Yes ... Because I am in a period of my life in which I feel more free to live things, I have deconstructed many aspects of my sexuality, so many things that I used to relate to a male imaginary and that were a bit my taboos, I let them go, that is ... There are so many sexual dynamics which before I did not live in a free way and that I thought were exclusively linked to masculine pleasure and could not be part of my imagination as a woman, that now (that I have let them go) I live much more peacefully and therefore I feel that I know more sides of my sexuality than I did before. Before I judged ... Like I don't know, having oral sex with a man had always been a symbol of submission for me and I related it to so many moments in which I felt submissive, I felt obliged to do it, I have memories of my adolescence related to male oral sex that are ugly, traumatic, in which I felt I had no way out and I found myself in the situation where I felt I had no chance to say no. I would have never

thought I'd get there one day and say, damn, I'm going to do it because I want it and not because someone else is telling me. For me coming to wish to perform oral sex for a person ... I found it liberating, because I was able to realise that I had eradicated some stereotypes that I had stored in my mind for years. This is an example. Having said that, I wonder to what extent heterosexual sexual relations are guided by male or female imagery. Sometimes I wonder how my imagination is shaped by the male one... What excites me excites me because it excites the other or because it excites me for real? I don't know. I have realised that ... Especially recently, what excites me is to see the other person excited so it is obvious that I feel that my imagination is strongly linked to the one of the other person, so I wonder if I am free to decide what excites me or simply it is a consequence of what society imposes on us. Most of the imaginary is built, unfortunately... (Anna)

As Anna suggested, sexual desires and imaginary may be considered as the result of socialisation and education, so society has its impact in the definition of them.

Moreover, particular practices such as male oral sex acquire negative meanings (linked with women's submission), which Anna, Giulia and J. are trying to re-signify or deconstruct, in order to live sex serenely – and in a more reciprocal way.

Me:- And other sexual practices that you did not feel like doing but knowing that the other person liked them ...

Ah yes yes, like blowjobs. Sometimes I feel ... Indeed I talked a lot with my psychoanalyst in a moment of my life ... A blowjob is to kneel in front of a man and suck his dick. It's a very symbolic act. Literally, one kneels down, as if begging 'pardon' to the man to suck his dick. There was a time when I questioned myself a lot because sometimes I didn't want to. And the men love it ... And sometimes I was like no ... I'm not going to kneel. If I lie down and you come here perfect, but you know ... how to change the position of the woman who is going to ... I was thinking about this, I did not have so much pleasure. Now it gives me a little pleasure to do that. Not before. But I do it my way, you know. Before I didn't do it and we did other things. ... Lately I'm enjoying it more. Lately it feels like more to me ... Because one has control of the penis, you know. You do what you want. I changed my perception, now I see it as no, now I have the power. I have his penis in my hand. It's not only that I'm kneeling in front of a man, no. I'm having control of his penis. I'm the one who decides at what speed I do it, how I do it, if I suck it ... I decide everything I do. Sometimes the men can tell you ah I want (this or that) ... in which case I do it a little bit and then change. Until I feel comfortable. But there always comes a point where I'm ... Pffff ... Ya? (laughs) It's like a fucking challenge this shit. (J.)

Many times I think ... Maybe in the process of deconstructing it I see the blowjob as an intrinsic act of submission? So I don't want to do it because it would be like saying that I'm a bit submissive. Maybe it's another taboo. If I lived it as an act unrelated to a society in which it is really represented as an act of submission (I think of porn, of any kind of narration) maybe I would like to do it, maybe I would. I

have been pushed to do it many times too. With Gianluca I reciprocated his oral sex because I said mah ... A little for the pressure of having to equalise, a little because maybe I said 'But ... Mmh, maybe I'm the one obsessed with the fact that it's an act of submission whereas it's not'. (Giulia)

Finally, conceiving women's desires in function of men's sexuality infers a problematical reciprocity: how is it possible to imagine a reciprocal sex in these terms?

If we consider women's sexual desires as determined by an androcentric context, the same concept of reciprocity can be problematic, as no longer referred to a concept of justice and equity. In this sense, the agency to re-signify certain practices may imply and promote the re-appropriation of women's own pleasure, which is fundamental in reciprocal encounters. However, their accounts reveal the questioning and tension between symbolic meanings and re-signification.

4.4 A safe space makes the difference

In order to overcome all the communicational issues I have explained in this chapter, the interviewees have pointed out the importance of a relationship characterised by a safe space.

The experience I have in which I have expressed myself ... I think I have done it because the context had really helped me a lot to express myself and then in such cases the response was good. As for the other cases in which I didn't expressed myself I didn't have bad experiences in this sense [of bad reactions] because maybe I didn't say anything directly, because maybe I didn't feel that ... I don't know, that the other person wasn't as attentive to what I needed or willing to create such a space. Because I believe that it is also very much the responsibility of the other person, you know ... Now talking to you I've realised that ... uff, very strongly that I still can't express so clearly what I want or don't want in a sexual encounter. But I have also realised that it's also the other person who has to make the situation easy and make you feel comfortable or ask you what you like, and not do things directly. When the other person had this attitude, I was able to express myself, you know. But yes, if from the beginning there isn't this space to talk, ask or ... If there is not this (attitude) from the other person then I can not feel comfortable. So, it's not only my fault in this sense, it's also the responsibility of the other person, it's not like now we have to say yes and we have to be very communicative ... Yes, (I only feel comfortable) when the other person makes this effort to create a safe space. (Nuria)

The other person's open attitude makes all the difference and facilitates communication. Feeling the other is attentive, listening and proactive in the creation of an intimate and trusted space makes it easier to express sexual desires and sexual boundaries. In the same way, Anna pointed out:

In my opinion reciprocity is something that can be created by both sides... so there should be a guy who is really interested in what you are feeling, which is not easy, and at the same time you have to be aware of what sexual pleasure means for you. (Anna)

So, first, it is important to know what your sexual desires and boundaries are. Then, in order to be able to communicate, it is necessary for the other person to be willing to listen and to understand. Otherwise, the communication is hindered. Nuria has remarked the responsibility of the other person. While she was thinking about her limits in communicating easily with the other person, she stressed:

We may also not be so self-critical and more critical with the other person and say 'well, guy, you're the one who didn't ask me', or 'I didn't sense such attention from you'. (...) It's a shared responsibility with the other person ... We should take some pressure off in this sense and be able to analyse the dynamics that are occurring, and the atmosphere and situations that are generated, rather than think 'shit, I haven't been able to say this'. I think men have the bulk of responsibility and they have to be very active in creating this security and this care as well. (Nuria)

Again, the proactive attitude of the partner makes it possible to have a sincere dialogue.

I don't know, the other person's desires are important as well, that's why I'm speaking of 'negotiating', and of the importance of verbalising. And I think that's very difficult, because the other part is not always willing to listen to you, to negotiate what you need. Especially with men, it happens all the time. Men do their thing and feel it's time to leave. It has happened to me not only when I've had casual sex, but it has happened to me with people whom I was supposed to be closer with. (J.)

At this point a question arises: does a longer relationship make the difference in making an encounter reciprocal? Or may hookups be reciprocal too?

As J. suggested, it seems that it does not really matter what kind of relationship you have with the other person – it can be occasional sex or a slightly longer relationship – as the other person's predisposition to listen. However, what has been shared by several interviewees is that time is fundamental in creating the familiarity that facilitates dialogue. It is not tantamount to say that in hookups sex cannot be reciprocal, but time makes it easier to talk and promotes a situation of reciprocal encounter, since it allows one to get to know the partner better and to have the closeness needed to effectively share one's own sexual desires. In this regard, Nuria also said:

To give you a concrete experience I can remember that when I was attending an Erasmus exchange I was with a boy. And I felt really comfortable with him talking about everything I needed or didn't need. He was also a big fan of being able to talk about these things. At that time it was very good because I didn't feel like 'I can say this or I can't say that'. And I also saw a very clear evolution. Because when you're having sex with someone you get to know deeply, sex changes too. And this was a very positive experience. (Nuria)

As time goes by, familiarity increases and communication becomes more spontaneous and easier. When I asked her if the experience of reciprocity can change in occasional encounters and in sexual encounters in which there is more confidence, she added:

I believe there can be reciprocity in a temporary encounter, too. But ... Maybe if it is something that has happened more than once, you have more tools to know what the other person wants. But there may be space for this kind of communication in temporary encounters as well ... And there is the possibility that between the two people there can be that reciprocity, not from a simplistic vision as I have discussed, like 'I do this to you and then you do the same to me', but to say 'look, I feel like this, what do you feel like?' This can be achieved I suppose ... But, well, it is more difficult because there is not that confidence perhaps. (Nuria)

In the same way, Anna perceived that it is possible to talk about reciprocity only with time, understanding this concept in terms of friendship:

With Pablo I feel that there is reciprocity because we have a continuous relationship, we have built it with time. It takes time ... As in all things. As with friendship, there is no immediate reciprocity if you go and have a beer with someone you don't know. Because it's a person you don't know. Then as months pass by, you can create a relationship in which both people are opening up and sharing something. It takes time.

And she continued:

Reciprocity is a strong word. I feel it's charged with a very positive meaning and I also link it to a concept of friendship. With a friend there is reciprocity, so I can't use it in a situation with a person ... For example I happened to have an occasional relationship with an American guy one night, and it was super intense, we reached pleasure three times each, for God's sake ... But it remains a person I don't know and since we shared just one night, he didn't know me and my sexuality in depth. (...) In friendship there is reciprocity because there is a continuous giving and receiving, what I feel in a relationship of friendship is a continuous sharing in which you are there to understand what the other is telling you, you really want to understand and you can express what you are feeling and you know

that on the other hand there is a person who actually wants to understand it. There is a reciprocal, sincere exchange, in which two people are there to understand each other and accept each other and obviously this is created with time and not in an evening. In my opinion it's a matter of finding a person with whom you can actually let yourself go to what you would actually like to experience, and you feel in a safe environment. Just like in friendship. Friendship is when you feel in a safe space and you can let yourself go, you feel like you can tell what you feel and you know that you will not be judged and you will be accepted. (Anna)

Actually, studies demonstrate that having familiarity with a sexual partner can make the difference in making the sexual encounter pleasurable for both partners. It makes women easier to talk, but within the context of an affective relationship, men also demonstrate to care more to make the effort. Instead, in hookup situations, men are used to not trying so hard to please their partners, or to ask for their desires, as much as with a partner they really care about (Mogilevsky 2016).

Again, Anna associate reciprocity with the possibility to talk openly, so to a situation of closeness. When there is no communication – which is given by the intimacy with the partner – the encounter is perceived as lacking reciprocity.

For me ... For example with Albe, I don't know him, there is chemistry, sex is beautiful because we probably have more or less the same imaginary even if we never talked about it. So I don't know if I would say that there is reciprocity. There is a satisfactory relationship but I do not know him and he does not know me. I think you can say that there is reciprocity when you get to the point where you know the other person so much and feel that the other person is within your imagination. With Pablo I feel that there is reciprocity because we have a continuous story, we have built it with time. It takes time ... As in all things. As with friendship, there is no immediate reciprocity if you go and have a beer with someone you don't know. Because it's a person you don't know. Then after a few months you can create a relationship in which both people are opening up and sharing something. It takes time. So maybe with Albe there is pleasure and there is the fact of giving each other pleasure but I would not call it reciprocity yet. With Pablo it's something that happened slowly, we started to tell each other the things that excited us, as we went on I saw how his imagination changed and he saw how mine changed. But if you see a person maybe two or three times it's still ... (Anna)

She continued:

When I meet guys who are particularly interested in my pleasure I wonder how much in fact this is related to their pleasure. There are some guys who get excited at the idea of giving you pleasure so can this be called reciprocity? They do everything to give you pleasure, making you reach pleasure because that's their way of reaching it in turn. So you understand, if you don't talk about it, how can you understand what's going on? (Anna)

In the same way, J. suggested:

There's a difference between occasional relationships and those that are a little longer, because you are getting to know each other's bodies better. If I have sex with you only once, I know your body a little quickly. On the other hand if you know this body today, tomorrow and another day... If I know someone for longer, more days than a casual sex, it is ... I don't know. When I've had casual sex it has also seemed to me accidental pleasure. (J.)

Knowing the partner better facilitates a dialogue which promotes an effective reciprocal encounter – where reciprocity has a positive meaning, of real mutual attention to the needs of the other. According to the interviewees, it is the communication, with the attentive attitude to the other (asking and listening), that defines reciprocity in a sexual encounter. If the other person is not asking, or if there is not a conversation, maybe there can be doubt on the partner's real interest to know better what is pleasure for his/her counterpart. Communication, in this sense, allows us to create this circularity of giving and taking. It is through dialogue that each partner can clearly share their needs and boundaries. Thus, communication – together with an attentive and caring attitude – is a tool to avoid situations of prevarication or equivocation. Finally, the right of both to be satisfied comes to be respected, and it is possible to consider the sexual encounter reciprocal – in the sense of balanced and equal.

RECAP AND CONCLUSIONS

Reciprocity, synonymous of mutuality and ‘giving and taking’, means that in the exchange between two or more people, each party involved gives or allows something to the other. Referring to an idea of justice and balance related to the gratification of all parties involved, it is a moral norm that implicitly regulates all social interactions. As such, it also affects sexual encounters. My personal sexual experience – which represents the starting point of this thesis – suggested to me that reciprocity is an ambiguous and often manipulated concept, far from guaranteeing equity and justice in the sexual encounter. Anthropological studies also showed how reciprocity entails rights and duties, creating relationships of debt and dependence. Likewise, the work produced on this topic in the context of heterosexual sex highlighted how this concept may imply states of obligation and lead to coercion, presenting limits in defining the equity of sexual intercourse.

However, in the light of my personal experience, I came up with a literature in which reciprocity assumed specific but limited meanings. Considering that reciprocity in heterosexual sex is open to various interpretations and can focus on different types of giving and taking (as Braun et al.’s study suggests), I decided to explore the multiple meanings it assumes and the various experiences related to it.

Conceiving reciprocity as a norm that takes shape at a micro-social level, permeating interpersonal interactions, I decided that the interview was the most proper way to explore how it works – as it is imagined and performed. Besides, I was inspired by the feminist principle that ‘the personal is political’: the assumption of the authority of personal experience as an object of study and how the ‘private’ sphere is defined by the social and political domains. This way, I considered the relevance of testimonies in the production of knowledge and their impact on a social analysis.

Thus, I decided to interview six young women with a background in Gender Studies on the meanings and experiences of reciprocity in heterosexual sexual encounters.

As result, the interviews suggested reciprocity in sex as a mutual exchange of pleasure, and, deepening how this idea of exchange translates into practice, three discourses emerged. The first sees reciprocity as an exchange of pleasure in the form of orgasms. In the second discourse reciprocity is an exchange of precise sexual practices – in particular, it is compared to the idea of ‘oral sex by oral sex’. Third, reciprocity is understood as an exchange of attention to the needs of the other and as a possibility to an open dialogue within the relationship. Through the analysis, my intent was to explore the limits, but also the possibilities, of these discourses in establishing the equity of sexual encounters.

First, I discussed the limits of considering reciprocity in terms of exchange of orgasms and sexual practices. If one establishes the right of both partners to orgasm or to receive a sexual practice such as oral sex, one then implies the obligation to give to the other an orgasm (and to have it) or to 'return' a same practice. Thus, both discourses legitimise expectations and status of duties, to the detriment of respecting the partner's boundaries. Besides, by reducing reciprocity to the terms of exchange of orgasm or certain sexual practices, the same concept of pleasure is restricted, not contemplating that it might be expressed in different ways for each person. Therefore, in as much as reciprocity actually works on the basis of the mutuality of gratification (Goulnder 1960) – in the sense that each party should be gratified –, neither of these two discourses promotes an effective reciprocal (and egalitarian) encounter.

By considering the limits of viewing reciprocity as a mathematical equation in which giving and receiving is based on the same thing, the potential of understanding reciprocity as mutual exchange of attention and care emerged. Reciprocity becomes meaningful when understood as the ability of both parties to listen to the needs of the other. In particular, communication plays a fundamental role in promoting a mutual encounter: communicating one's needs to the other and, on the other hand, understanding the needs of the other, with mutual respect for the boundaries of one another, offers the possibility of a respectful, pleasant and equal encounter.

However, dialogue encourages an effective mutual encounter, offering the opportunity to both parties to be satisfied, only on an ideal level. While exploring how communication gets translated into practice within sexual encounters, I identified difficulties and issues connected to it.

In (heterosexual) sex, expressing preferences or discomforts is challenging, since the idea that sex does not involve that kind of communication is normalised. As result, there is no education on how to express how one actually feels or how to deal with the partner's feelings. In fact, examining the reactions regarding the partner's setting boundaries during sex, how a 'no' can create moments of tension that have negative repercussions on sexual relations was explored. Thus, the absence of an education which promotes dialogue, together with the mainstream discourse on sex, affects the ability to react positively to dialogue, as well as the ability to speak up (which is also part of the consequence).

Besides, by making explicit one's own pleasure requirements presumes knowing one's own sexuality, what one likes and dislikes. Again, the sexual education in western societies, stigmatising women's sexual pleasure and considering it as dependent on someone else, prevents women to claim their own sexual desires and their right to pleasure during (heterosexual) sex. Thus,

prioritising male's pleasure during (heterosexual) sexual encounters prevents the equality and reciprocity in bed.

Therefore, to avoid situations of prevarication, it is important first to know what your sexual desires and boundaries are. Then, in order to be able to communicate, and to avoid situations of reticence, it is necessary for the other person to be willing to listen and to understand. Indeed, communication in sex is facilitated by the open attitude of the partner – feeling the other is attentive, listening and proactive in the creation of an intimate and trusted space – and also by the degree of closeness with the partner – which increases with time.

To conclude, reciprocity can be a manipulative concept in settling obligations. Its ambiguity is especially connected to the androcentric and patriarchal heterosexual scripts and the main discourses on sex and sexuality. Nevertheless, situations of prevarication or equivocation implied in it may be avoided through communication. To communicate one's sexual desires and boundaries allows the two participants to create this circularity of giving and taking, ensuring an effectively reciprocal (balanced and equitable) sexual encounter in which both partners are satisfied. In this sense, a sexual education which breaks taboos and promotes communication during sex, respect of the needs and boundaries of the other, as much as the one's own, can be an effective tool for promoting pleasant and satisfactory sexual encounters. Finally, truly reciprocal.

REFERENCES

- Blair, Karen L. Cappell, Jaclyn. Pukall, Caroline. 2017. "Not All Organs Were Created Equal: Differences in Frequency and Satisfaction of Orgasm Experiences by Sexual Activity in Same-Sex Versus Mixed-Sex Relationships". *The Journal of Sex Research*, 55:6, 719-733.
- Braun, Virginia, Gavey, Nicola and McPhillips, Kathryn. 2003. "The 'Fair Deal'? Unpacking Accounts of Reciprocity in Heterosex", *Sexualities* 6, no. 2: 237-261, London: Sage Publication.
- Butler, Judith. 1992. *Gender Trouble*. London: Routledge.
- Bryant, Joanne and Schofield, Toni. 2007. "Feminine Sexual Subjectivities: Bodies, Agency and Life History", *Sexualities* Vol 10(3): 321-340, London: Sage Publications.
- Cambridge Dictionary. Accessed May 14, 2019. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/it/dizionario/inglese/reciprocity>
- Cacchioni, Thea. 2007. "Heterosexuality and 'the Labour of Love': A Contribution to Recent Debates on Female Sexual Dysfunction" in *Sexualities*, Vol 10(3): 299-320. London: Sage Publications.
- Ceroli, Giulia. 2018. "Deconstruction the First Time: An Ethnographic Approach to The Myth of Virginity Loss". MA Thesis, University of Granada, University of Bologna.
- Davies, Bronwyn and Gannon, Susanne. 2005. "Feminism/Post-structuralism" in *Research methods in the social sciences*. London: Sage Publication.
- DeVault, Marjorie L. and Gross, Glenda. 2012. "Feminist Qualitative Interviewing: Experience, Talk, and Knowledge." in *Handbook of Feminist Research: Theory and Praxis*, 206-236. Thousand Oaks: SAGE.
- Diprose, Rosalyn. 1998. "Generosity: Between Love and Desire". *Hypatia*, Vol. 13, No. 1, 1-20.
- Ehrenreich, Barbara, Hess, Elizabeth, Jacobs, Gloria. 1987. *Re-Making Love. The Feminization of Sex*. New York: Anchor Press.
- Fahs, Breanne. 2011. *Performing Sex. The Making and Unmaking of Women's Erotic Lives*.

- Ferguson, Sian. 2014. "3 Examples of Everyday Cissexism." *Everyday Feminism*, March 21, 2014. Accessed April 18, 2019. <https://everydayfeminism.com/2014/03/everyday-cissexism/>
- Fine, Michelle. 1993. "Sexuality, Schooling, and Adolescent Females: The Missing Discourse of Desire" in Lois Weis and Michelle Fine *Beyond silenced voices: class, race, and gender in United States schools*, New York Press.
- Gavey, Nicola, McPhillis, Kathryn and Braun, Virginia. 1999. "Interruptus Coitus: Heterosexuals Accounting for Intercourse" in *Sexualities* 2(1): 35-68. London: Sage Publication.
- Gilfoyle, Jackie, Wilson, Jonathan and Brown. 1992. "Sex, Organs and Audiotape: A Discourse Analysis Approach to Talking About Heterosexual Sex and Relationships" in *Heterosexuality: A Feminism & Psychology Reader*, 181-202. London: Sage Publication.
- Goldey, Katherine, Posh, Amanda, Bell, Sarah and van Anders, Sari. 2016. "Defining Pleasure: A Focus Group Study of Solitary and Partnered Sexual Pleasure in Queer and Heterosexual Women" *Sex Behav* (2016) 45:2137–2154.
- Gouldner, Alwin W. 1960. "The Norm of Reciprocity: A Preliminary Statement" in *The Gift: An Interdisciplinary Perspective*, edited by Komter, 49-66. Amsterdam University Press.
- Jackson, Stevi, and Scott, Sue (edited by). 1996. *Feminism and Sexuality, A Reader*. Edinburgh University Press.
- Jackson, Stevi. 1999. *Heterosexuality in Question*. London: Sage Publications.
- Komter, Aafke E. 1996 "Women, gifts and power" in *The Gift: An Interdisciplinary Perspective*, edited by Komter, 119-130. Amsterdam University Press.
- Hammersley, Martyn and Paul Atkinson. 2019. *Ethnography : Principles in Practice*. Fourth. New York: Routledge.
- Haraway, Donna. 1988. "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question In Feminism And The Privilege of Partial Perspective." in *Feminist Studies*, 14(3): 575-599.
- Harding, Sandra. 1987. "Is There a Feminist Method?" in *Feminism and Methodology: Social Science Issues*, 1-14. Indiana University Press.
- Hesse-Bieber, Sharlene Nagy. 2011. "Feminist Research: Exploring, Interrogation, and Transforming the Interconnections of Epistemology, Methodology, and Method." in

Handbook of Feminist Research: Theory and Praxis, 2-26. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publication.

Holland, Janet, Ramazanoglu, Caroline, Sharpe, Sue, and Thomson, Rachel. 1992. *Pressured Pleasure: Young Women and the Negotiation of Sexual Boundaries*. London: The Tufnell Press.

Huberlant, Alizée. 2017. "Why is Female Sexual Pleasure Still a Taboo?" in *The Bell. UCMSA's student magazine*, Issue no.15. Accessed June 12, 2019. <https://universalisthebell.wordpress.com/alizee-huberlant/>

Lykke, Nina. 2010. "Methodologies, Methods, and Ethics." in *Feminist Studies*, 144-62. London: Routledge.

Sandra J. Jones. 1997. "Reflexivity and Feminist Practice: Ethical Dilemmas in Negotiating Meaning." *Feminism & Psychology* 7 (3): 348-53.

Oakley, Ann. 1981. "Interviewing Women: A Contradiction In Terms." in *Doing Feminist Research*, 30-61. London: Routledge.

Malinowski, Bronislaw. 1922. "The Principle of Give and Take" in *The Gift: An Interdisciplinary Perspective*, edited by Komter, 15-18. Amsterdam University Press.

Masters, Tatiana, Casey, Erin, Wells, Elizabeth and Morison Diane. 2013. "Sexual scripts among young heterosexually active men and women: continuity and change." in *Journal of Sex Research* 50(5): 409-20.

Mazzoni, Lorenza. 2011. *Orgasm in Gendered. A Feminist exploration into the (hetero) sexual lives of young women* Univerisdad de Granada

Miller, Barbara. 2018. Interviewed on YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l-3uUaGP4II>

Mogilevsky, Miri. 2016. "5 Great Tips to Make Talking with Your Partner About Sex Easier". *Everyday Feminism*. December 23, 2015. Accessed June 30, 2019. <https://everydayfeminism.com/2015/12/discussing-sexual-desires/>

Mogilevsky, Miri. 2016. "5 Problems with Hookup Culture – And How to Take It Back from Sexism". *Everyday Feminism*. February 16, 2016. Accessed June 18, 2019. <https://everydayfeminism.com/2016/02/hook-up-culture-is-sexist/>

- Potts, Annie. 2000. "Coming, Coming, Gone: A Feminist Deconstruction of Heterosexual Orgasm." in *Sexualities* 3(1): 55-76. London: Sage Publications.
- Ramazanoglu, Caroline and Holland, Janet. 2002. *Feminist Methodology: Challenges and Choices*. London: Sage Publication.
- Scott, Joan. 1991. "The Evidence of Experience." in *Critical Inquiry* 17(4): 773-797.
- Stanchi, Anna. 2018. "Sex Taboos and Female Sexual Experiences in the Italian Society: The auto/biographies of my mother and my grandmother." MA Thesis, University of Granada, University of Bologna.
- Stanley, L. and Wise, S. 2002. *Breaking out again: Feminist ontology and epistemology*. London: Routledge.
- Willis, Paul, and Trondman, Mats. 2000. "Manifesto for Ethnography." in *Ethnography* 1(1): 5-16. London: Sage Publication.
- Weiss, Suzannah. 2015. "12 Reasons Why There's Orgasm Inequity (And No, It's Not That Women Are 'Harder to Please')". *Everyday Feminism*. Accessed July 3, 2019. <https://everydayfeminism.com/2015/12/orgasm-inequality/>
- Weiss, Suzannah. 2017. "3 Empowering Sex Tips We Should Be Giving Young Women". *Everyday Feminism*. Accessed July 2, 2019. <https://everydayfeminism.com/2017/02/sex-tips-we-should-give-women/>
- Valoy, Patricia. 2013. "In Pursuit of Sexual Pleasure Equality". *Everyday feminism*, July 23, 2013. Accessed 5th of June 2019. <https://everydayfeminism.com/2013/07/pursuit-of-sexual-pleasure-equality/>

