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# Condom use and the missing discourse of desire: the view from the girls

The poor sexual health record of young people in the UK continues to cause concern and condom use has been defined as a core strategy to address the problems. Researchers and practitioners are well aware of the difficulties of influencing the 'choreography' of condom use (Brook 2005, Flood 2003, Ramazanoglu et al 2004, Williamson 2008). This article describes data obtained using peer interviewing strategies with 12 young women, aged 19-22 years old, who interviewed each other about the way they had all behaved when they were much younger.

### Dislike of condoms

The idea that young men resist condom use and their wishes frequently prevail is familiar (Pleck 1993, Gelder 2002). The data in this study however, suggest young women do not like using condoms, "...for their own reasons of passion and pleasure" (Measor 2006).

*Amy: We did initially want to get a condom. It was like, yes, right, condom, we need condoms so we got some but, "Oh, you know what it's like."*

*Interviewer: No tell me?*

*Amy: It was very passionate. It was great sex.*

*Interviewer: So why didn't you use protection?*

*Amy: It was a very rah - full on experience. It's when you're on a bender. It's like I don't care. If I get drunk, I'm sick, I'll lose my shoe and the plot and sex. We just got carried away with ourselves.*

Other interviewees too, emphasized being overwhelmed by the intensity of mutual feelings and 'voiced' their body's reaction. They talked to the peer interviewers about the strength of their own sexual reactions, describing the intensity of the 'buzz', the 'high,' being 'carried away.' They communicated their sense of the

'specialness' of sex, their welcome for the 'romance' of 'being in the moment.'

### Valuing the sexual opportunity

Data in the study show how much value young women place on their sexual opportunities and how significant good sex is to them. Young women described themselves as prepared to prioritise passion and desire over sexual safety. The data allow for the development of our theoretical understandings of the 'missing discourse of female desire' (Fine 1988). Young women find in our culture all kinds of limitations and prohibitions on the concept of the existence of female sexual desire let alone its expression. Much feminist literature argues for a silenced, masculinised, alienated female sexuality in young women (Fine 1988), although there are the beginnings of a discussion of "desire" (Hollway 1984, Tolman 1994).

In this study young women can find their own desire overwhelming - and value it as so precious that it determines their actions. When young women discover the strength of their own sexual desire in relationships, they are not well prepared for it. It confounds their ability to make good quality decisions about relationships, and contraception and safer sex.

The data offer insights into some of the difficulties involved in ensuring routine and effective condom use. The data imply that we need better knowledge of the sexual cultures of young women and greater willingness to discuss their experiences, perceptions and values to develop effective SRE and to improve the sexual health record of the UK.