

# 'My Bed or Our Bed?': Gendered Negotiations in the Sleep of Same-Sex Couples

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## Abstract

Sexuality as well as gender can be added to the range of socio-structural factors that influence the social patterning of sleep. This paper draws on in-depth interviews with 20 women and men aged between 45 – 65 years in same-sex couple relationships to examine how they negotiate their sleeping arrangements. The paper contends that gender differences are evident in how these negotiations are played out in the bedroom with women and men in same-sex relationships mirroring some of the patterns demonstrated in the research about women and men in opposite-sex couple relationships. However there are also differences, both between the same-sex women and men, and also when compared with the research concerned with the sleep negotiations between opposite-sex couples. These differences relate to the strategies used in managing a same-sex coupled identity with sharing a bed part of this management.

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**Keywords:** *Sleep, Gender, Sexuality, Same-Sex Couples, Intimacy, Caring*

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## Introduction

1.1 The importance of sleep for health and well being is no longer questioned. Sleep disorders receive attention in the media and an industry, from bedding to special clinics, has arisen around their treatment. Where we sleep, how we sleep, and with whom we sleep have all received sociological attention (Williams 2004). Sleep is negotiated and Williams and Crossley (2008, 4-5) point out that 'our capacity to sleep requires the cooperation of others' with this right needing more negotiation in some situations than others. Shift workers may need to convince others in their household to keep the noise down while they sleep during the day, something that is taken for granted during the night time. That gender impacts on the social negotiation of sleep is also now firmly established in the sociological literature (Hislop and Arber 2003a). Recently Williams and Crossley (2008) identified gender, sleep and the life courses as one of the five key social scientific concerns that the study of sleep illuminates. The others are unconsciousness and consciousness; practices, interactions and networks; the politics of sleep; and cultures of sleeping. Williams points out that 'the key point of departure for the sociological study of sleep is the way that when, where and how we sleep are all, to a considerable degree, socio-cultural matters' (2002, 178). Central to these socio-cultural matters is the gender of the sleeper and how this results in differences in 'doing sleep' (Taylor 1993). However, what is not identified here is the way in which both gender *and* sexuality impact on the sleep of couples. This paper addresses the sexuality dimension of coupled sleep.

## Gender Differences in Sleep Negotiation

2.1 Foremost in advancing our understanding of gender differences in sleep have been the researchers from the Centre for Ageing and Gender at the University of Surrey (Hislop and Arber 2003a, 2003b, 2003c; Hislop 2007; Meadows 2005; Meadows et al. 2008a; Meadows et al. 2008b; Venn 2007; Venn et al. 2008). The gendered nature of sleep disruption for mid-life women (Arber and Hislop 2003a, 2003b) and the gendered nature of sleep disruption among couples with children (Elek, Hudson and Fleck 2002; Venn et al. 2008) signpost the way that the different stages of the lifecycle also influence sleep and gendered relationships with it. For example, gender differences such as the way that sleep may be disturbed by the physical and emotional labour of caring for others with this including the care of young children, waiting up for teenage children coming home late at night, or dealing with a partner's snoring or restlessness (Hislop and Arber 2003b). In 'It's okay for a man to snore' Venn (2007) argues that the gendered conception of snoring is problematic for women in three ways. First, women who snore may be embarrassed by what is perceived and stigmatized as an 'unfeminine' action by others. Second, the embarrassment women may feel is amplified by their partners speaking about their snoring outside the privacy of their relationship, and third,

many women in Venn's study were prioritizing their partners' sleep over their own, and therefore increasing their own sleep disruption (Venn 2007). At other stages in the life cycle, for example, the symptoms of menopause which occur at midlife or the impact of a partner's restlessness due to prostate problems with ageing may also lead to sleep disruption (Dzaja et al. 2004). Rosenblatt (2006) contends that couples need to learn to sleep together, and even once this is achieved other exigencies, may interrupt the learned pattern. Rules developed about sleeping include who sleeps nearest the door, are the windows open or shut and which side of the bed to sleep on. In keeping with this Williams (2007) identifies that there is social etiquette associated with sleep. At the beginning of a relationship, partners have their own notions of normativity regarding sleeping partners and themselves (Meadows et al. 2008b). They use prior knowledge of what is acceptable to establish notions of what makes a sleeping body unattractive or attractive. Hislop points out that while sleeping as a couple is considered by some to be symbolic of a loving relationship, 'it is fraught with the potential for sleep disruption' (Hislop, 2007, 3.5).

**2.2** Women's sleep has been subject to more study than men's sleep, and only recently has there been an attempt to address this lack (Meadows et al. 2008a). Through their focus on masculinity, Meadows and his colleagues, identify four core assumptions that underpinned men's discussions about sleep. The men in this study were described as heterosexual, white middle class men who were presumed to most closely align to conceptions of traditional masculinities. Their narratives revealed that the men thought of sleep as something that their body requires. However this requirement can change depending on the situation and indeed their body needs are specific to them as individuals. Thus their sleep is seen to be intrinsically linked to their functioning as men. Meadows et al. argue that 'in essence, for the men in their study, sleep is something which the body should worry about whilst they remained focused on trying to ensure that they got enough sleep to function but not so much that it prevented them having enough time to perform valued roles and responsibilities' (Meadows et al, 2008a, 13).

**2.3** The literature identified here raises a number of reasons for the inclusion of sexual identity into the study of sleep negotiation. While the gendered nature of sleep disruption is now well established, how sexuality or sexual identity might influence sleep negotiation has not yet been explored. Occasionally mention is made of same-sex couples, with Rosenblatt (2006) noting the inclusion of some women who identified a lesbian in his study, but not of sufficient numbers to allow a separate analysis. A study of the construction of heteronormativity in stories about sleep in British newspapers found that very few articles mentioned gay or lesbian sexualities and the 'intertwining of sleep, heterosexuality and heterosex in the articles considered [in their paper] consistently reproduced stereotypical gender roles' (Lowe et al. 2007, 7.3).

**2.4** Despite this lack of systematic research about the sleep experiences of gays and lesbians enough is known to suggest that sleep, like so many other embodied practices, is structured in part by wider patterns of social inequality. This article explores two bases of social inequality, gender and sexuality, by focusing on the accounts of sleep negotiation of women and men in same-sex couples, and who are mid-life or older. A qualification about the terms 'lesbian' and 'gay' is important here as these may not be the terms some of the respondents used to self-identify with some people using the terms 'queer', 'dyke' and even 'homosexual'. However the common factor between all the respondents was that they were, or had recently been, in same-sex couple relationships. The terms 'lesbian' and 'gay' are used here in the knowledge that they are widely understood even if some same-sex couples might not choose them as descriptors for themselves.

## **Methods**

**3.1** This study is a qualitative study of the negotiations that take place around sleep for women and men in same-sex couples and is part of a larger study on ageing and sexuality. The twenty respondents were aged between 45 – 65 years, and were currently in or had been in same-sex relationships in the past 5 years. These relationships extended from 15 months to over 20 years in duration. Sixteen of the women and men who were in couple relationships resided together. The information sheet stated that being a part of a couple influences the quality and quantity of sleep a person gets and that this had not yet been explored with same-sex couples. The intention of the research was to undertake this exploration. It was not a criterion for participation in the research that respondents had 'problems with sleeping' although some of them did. All of the respondents were in paid employment, either full or part time, but a number were also anticipating or commencing semi-retirement from paid work. The respondents were recruited by advertising through the social networks known to the interviewers and while this meant that all respondents were similar in same-sex orientation they were not a homogenous group in terms of either socioeconomic status or ethnic identity. There were respondents who identified as Maori in the sample, as well as those who identified as working class. However because of the small numbers no analysis is made in terms of class or ethnic differences, although some speculative comments are made about the class position of men and women in same-sex relationships more generally in the paper.

**3.2** Early in the research design the decision was made for the interviews to be conducted by same-gender interviewers and both interviewers were explicitly identified as lesbian and gay in the recruitment material. There is now a long and large literature on gender congruence in qualitative interviews (Broom, Hand and Tovey 2009). From this literature it is apparent that in some situations, for example, sensitive topics like sexual violence, this congruence is ideal and in other situations not at all necessary. One of the reasons in the current research for the decision for gender and sexual identity congruence was because of the connection that is often made between bed sharing, sleeping and sexual intimacy (Hislop 2007). The author anticipated that a gay man or lesbian woman may not be as comfortable discussing this with either an opposite-sex or heterosexual interviewer.

**3.3** Another reason for this possible discomfort is the age and stage in the life course of the respondents. As Higgs and Jones (2009) note

‘the social transformations that occurred from the early 1960s onwards were fought for and experienced by women who are now entering later life. In order to understand their experiences of ageing we need a research framework that takes account of the period and cohort effects that contextualise their life courses’ (Higgs and Jones 2009, 60).

**3.4** All the men and the women in these interviews had, at the very least, lived through the feminist movement and the gay rights movement of the 1970s, and some had been actively involved in these social movements. This biographical experience influenced their current social networks and provided, at least for the women, a feminist understanding of what it means to be lesbian. This being the case suggested that a lesbian interviewer may be preferred by women and indeed some of the respondents stated this preference at the time of recruitment.

**3.5** The value of this decision became evident in the analysis of the interview transcripts where shared meanings between the interviewer and the respondent are apparent. Indeed in the interviews between the female interviewer and women respondents there was no explicit mention of sexual activity, although much discussion of intimacy, whereas in the male to male interviews there was talk about sexual activity, for example:

if there’s sex going on that will happen after the reading and then we’ll go to sleep and that’s usually...yeah, so it would be hard to say at the moment what that pattern is, how many nights because we’re more likely to...because he’s a morning person he’s more likely to want sex in the morning rather than at night, (male respondent).

**3.6** Despite the lack of talk about sexual activity for some of the women there was an expectation and apprehension that they might be questioned about their sexual lives as the following excerpt reveals:

Now is there anything I haven’t asked you, that you think, you thought I was going to ask you (Interviewer).

I thought you might ask us about how much sex we have or whatever, but I’m grateful you haven’t (female respondent).

**3.7** The concern about the question of ‘how much sex is had’ is reflected in previous studies about same-sex couples with Solomon, Rothblum and Balsam (2005) finding that the lesbian women in their study had less sexual activity than heterosexual men and women, and gay men. This supported Loulan’s (1988) earlier research which suggested that ‘sex’ may be defined differently by lesbian couples, as more romantic and less genital. Lesbians in both these studies (Solomon et al. 2005; Loulan 1988) also tended to value monogamous relationships more than gay men. Conversely previous research on same-sex male couples has revealed that nonmonogamy is often an accepted part of gay men’s culture (Peplau et al. 2004). Given this perhaps it is not surprising that the men in this study appeared to talk freely about sexual behaviour.

**3.8** A number of researchers have pointed out the difficulty of asking people about sleep. For example, Williams suggests that ‘much of our daily life is predicated upon practices which we carry out unthinkingly’ (cited in Meadows et al. 2008b, 79) and therefore people have not reflected on the issue of sleep. The situation is somewhat different in this study because, while many gay men and lesbian women may not have thought much about the act of sleeping, they had thought about sleep in the context of sleeping together with another person of the same-sex. Even so this may not be something that is talked about with others:

...it’s quite interesting to quite consciously think about your sleep patterns. And I mean, since your little piece of paper went out, when we’ve been having gatherings we’ve been talking about this thing that you’re doing amongst our friends and things. And, one of the things has been interesting that has come out of that discussion is the number of our friends who sleep

separately, in separate rooms, much, much more than I thought. I knew a couple of friends who do. Heaps of them do. And one of them made a comment to us the other day, she said, "It could be because you were both married to men, and you got used to sleeping together then. But we've never, we were always single women and we've never had to share our bed with anybody, all the time." I did think that was an interesting comment, and it directly came out of your survey, you know the fact that your survey's being done. And I thought "Hmm"

So sleep wouldn't have been something that had ever come up in conversations with friends before? (Interviewer)

Not really, apart from people saying "Oh I'm at menopause. I'm finding my sleep's really disturbed. So I'm, you know, I'm not, I'll move out into another bed so I don't disturb my partner" Apart from saying that. And we do know, you know, we do have a couple of friends who have separate rooms and sleep separately. And they've always been quite open about that. But no, we hadn't talked about sleep patterns and sleep issues (female respondent).

**3.9** The research entailed an ethnographic method which involved in-depth recorded and transcribed interviews of individual's sleep biographies. Prior to the interviews two focus groups with both men and women were undertaken to sensitize the researcher to how New Zealanders might think about sleep. Before, during and after the interview process informal discussions with lesbian women and gay men added to the picture of sleep negotiation that is portrayed in this paper.

**3.10** Once transcribed a thematic analysis was undertaken of the interviews, and in particular, a comparative analysis between the narratives of the male and the female respondents (Braun and Clark 2006). In addition to this comparison, a further comparison was made between the data corpus and the sociological literature on the sleep negotiation of opposite-sex couples (e.g., Hislop and Arber 2008a, 2008b; Meadows et al., 2008a; Venn 2007). The identified themes were then linked to larger political, economic and social trends in New Zealand society in order to develop themes beyond those found in individual narratives and observations. Having claimed in the introduction that sleep is patterned in sociocultural ways then taking account of the particular society in which these narratives are located is an imperative.

**3.11** The ethical agreements entered into with the respondents means that no identifying characteristics are included apart from the gender of the respondents. All respondents were assured of confidentiality and the only people with access to all the interviews were the researcher and the two transcribers; the latter having signed confidentiality agreements. The male interviewer only had access to the interviews he conducted with men. While many respondents were 'out' as lesbian and gay in as many situations as possible, given the heteronormative assumptions made on a daily basis in New Zealand society, some respondents did not want to be publicly identified as either gay or lesbian. Tolich and Davidson (1999) have written about ethics and the 'small town' nature of New Zealand society, and how difficult it is to completely guarantee confidentiality, and this is one of the reasons for not identifying individuals within the paper. If this were done then it might be possible to build up a profile of a particular respondent through tracing extracts from their interview. Despite this care to take quotes from different respondents it may still be possible for those close to the respondents to identify some people if they happened to know that they were being interviewed for this research project. Because sleep between couples has been a little researched topic in New Zealand the author is aware that this topic was discussed in social settings and some women openly referred to their participation in the research. This reflected the feminist impulse referred to earlier where some women, and also men, felt that participation in this kind of research was one of the actions necessary to challenge a heteronormative society and increase gay and lesbian visibility.

### **Talking about sleep biographies**

**4.1** All the women and men in this study had reflected upon their sleep identities and biographies prior to the interview. Some had been prompted to do this by the recruitment information sheet, while for others their thinking about sleep was more longstanding. An individual's sleep biography is influenced by the sleep biographies of their parents and other family members as well as experiences across the life span (Rosenblatt 2006). Whether we think of ourselves as 'night owls' or 'early birds' and how much sleep we need are socially and culturally located.

We had a set bedtime, which I always thought [as a child] was far too early. But I think that went with that whole thing about it needing to be, you know, it was important to have adequate sleep. That was always a priority. In my growing up yes, make sure you get enough sleep, must have enough sleep. And I think, yeah I think so, I've certainly had that attitude with my children too (female respondent).

**4.2** The same woman says about sleep now 'I see it as a necessity. If I don't get enough sleep, I can't function' a view mirrored by another woman

No, I've thought how I think about sleep. For me, it is an absolutely necessity. I need 8 hours, at least, a night. I look forward to going to bed to sleep. I absolutely, intrinsically know that if I, that it can impact on my mental and physical health hugely, if I don't get adequate sleep.

**4.3** She also has a wider societal perspective on sleep, perhaps reflecting the increased coverage that sleep disorders and their treatment have received in the media, when she says

And in a bigger picture for me, I think the chronic fatigue, lack of sleep, a conversation that we're about to head into, as a culture and as a western world I think, is probably one of our biggest problems that is going to come out in the 21st century. I think most of us are operating on not enough sleep. You know. And our workaholic processes are pushing it around big time really. Hence we make, we're making bad decisions and doing things that we wouldn't be doing otherwise if we were better rested and had better time to do some thinking. Yeah so, I have thought about it. Yes.

**4.4** She is not alone with this view. That we are a 'sleep-deprived society' is reinforced by the scientific literature on sleep and Dement states that half of us 'mismanage our sleep to the point where it severely affects our health and safety', and that on average 'each of us sleeps one and a half fewer hours each night than our grandparents did a century ago' (cited by Williams 2002, 187). Research in New Zealand which surveyed 10,000 adults drawn at random from the electoral roll revealed that 37 percent said they rarely or never got enough sleep (Gander 2003).

**4.5** Past experiences were drawn upon to show the significance of present arrangements such as sleeping together in a double bed. Many of the women and the men had previous heterosexual relationships and some had been married prior to identifying as lesbian or gay. Sleeping biographies included this reference to past relationships as well as the experience with current relationships

No option there (sleeping in separate beds when married). It wasn't part of your thinking. Just wasn't part of your thinking. Got married, laid on your bed and made, you know, made your bed and lay on it. And I was pregnant, that's what my grandmother said to me "You've done it now, you make your bed and you lie on it." And that's, taken literally, that's exactly what it means (female respondent).

**4.6** But in contrast to the taken-for-grantedness around sleeping in a shared bed in a heterosexual marriage, these same expectations were not available to lesbian women and gay men.

I mean it's that whole socialisation thing, really...of which is just being in the world as lesbians is a hard enough thing in itself without all the other, without having, with being in a situation where we don't have the role models or the social structures to follow (female respondent).

**4.7** Even today this lack of role models can be demonstrated through the media with a study of newspaper articles showing how by constructing the marital bed as the ultimate space for intimacy, the articles examined, act to exclude other relationships and the possibility of either 'true' intimacy and meaningful relations (Lowe et al. 2007, 7.4). Given this lack of acknowledgement of relationships, other than those between opposite-sex couples, how do non-heterosexual couples construct and make sense of their sleeping arrangements? The next sections explore four central themes which address this question; those of bed 'ownership'; avoiding sleep disruption; caring through the night; and sex, intimacy and sleep.

### **'My bed or our bed'**

**5.1** A couple relationship can be described 'as the meeting of composite selves' (Hislop 2007, 3.1) where each person brings to the relationship a sleep identity developed over their life time to date. A consequence of a couple relationship is that an individual's desire for sleep may be in conflict with the needs of their partner and compromises will need to be made. As Hislop (2007, 3.2) so aptly points out 'to embrace the role of a partner is to dilute to some extent the choices and control we have as individuals over the sleep environment'. The bed then is one site where this negotiation takes place.

**5.2** How sleeping arrangements are negotiated vary depending on the stage of the relationship. At the beginning of any couple relationship there is more potential for 'both embarrassment and conflict' (Meadows et al. 2008b, 83) as couples get to know each others' sleeping patterns. In same-sex relationships this potential is even greater in terms of the possibility of reputational embarrassment. For those men and women whose partnerships are now between 25 to 30 years in length their initial sleeping together was in

the 1970s which was prior to the 1985 Homosexual Law Reform which decriminalised sexual acts between men in New Zealand. For men, then, in this time period there were very sound reasons for not openly showing that they were sharing a bed with a same-sex partner. However for women there was also the possibility of reputational stigma. Sleeping with a same-sex partner signals a sexual relationship to any others who might have the opportunity to see the bedroom, and to that end couples may ostensibly have their own bedrooms as one strategy of 'passing' as heterosexual. In the following quote a woman talks about her first (and ongoing) same-sex relationship where at the beginning she and her partner both had separate bedrooms. She qualifies this by the fact that they had five children living with them at this time.

And when you first got together, you mentioned that you had separate rooms (interviewer)

Yes, well it was, it was a way of easing into the whole thing, you know... which was all very foreign to me. But, you know, I think we did have separate rooms. We had 5 kids though... and the possibility was there if, if you needed that time out. And I found all that (sleeping with a woman) very foreign, you know. That was a foreign concept to me.

**5.3** It might be anticipated that having five children between a couple would have meant that all available bedroom space would be needed for children, rather than two rooms for the women. This highlights how the socioeconomic circumstances of a couple can influence sleeping choices with the availability of spare bedrooms and beds an important consideration (Hislop and Arber 2003b, 707). It also highlights in the above couple's situation the significance of having separate room 'if you needed time out' either from each other's children or each other. It seems here also that the statement 'we had five kids though' is claiming that for the children's sake the couple should be seen to be sleeping in separate beds.

**5.4** The issue of separate rooms featured in all the interviews with women and a major difference from the 1970s and the present is that deviating from sleeping in a double bed today requires explanation. Sometimes this explanation can be as mundane and everyday as the reported need for women to have more space for clothes than men:

[at the beginning of the relationship there] was a period of time when we did have a room each. But that was actually for other reasons, it was more to do with clothes and where your stuff was. We didn't have a study, and we needed to have a room for things and stuff like... I think it lasted about 2 years, 2 or 3 years, yeah. But we've never slept separately.

I've certainly noticed that for myself and for other lesbian couples too, that actually, as women we actually need lots of room in our bedroom. Kind of need all that space to put all your stuff. And if, if there's both, both of you in the bedroom I just find it really impossible to actually share the space in that manner. When I was married, it was simple, because he didn't, he just, he didn't have any stuff around. I had the stuff. That's how heterosexual couples work I think, and that's, the guys they just don't have stuff, whereas we do.

**5.5** None-the-less gay men were also concerned about too much 'stuff' in the bedroom with one man describing his ideal bedroom in detail:

my idea of a bedroom is an empty space filled with light, ideally surrounded on all four sides with French doors probably, with verandas around that and then beyond all of that, the ocean, but my idea is a completely empty space and there's nothing there except what you sleep on, I hate having anything else in my bedroom, I think of it as a place to go to sleep.

**5.6** On the other hand men with male partners did not see the same need to justify sleeping separately with one man clearly identifying his bed as his and his partner sleeping in the 'spare room':

Well we don't sleep together, I don't like sleeping in the same bed with someone, he sleeps in the spare bedroom... Oh, no, no, we sleep together occasionally, if we're visiting friends.

**5.7** However even this man was aware that there might be some expectation from a partner of shared sleeping when he describes how the decision not to share was made:

We very quickly didn't want to sleep together, and didn't need too, and it was a real eye-opener for me that we could talk about it in a totally non-sentimental, non-drama-queeny kind of way, I just said, "I don't really like it" and he said "I don't really like it either"

**5.8** This distinction between 'my room' and the 'spare room' may also be connected to home ownership. Many of the men and women referred in the interview to whether their home was a jointly owned home or belonged to one of them. In the previous case a man has moved into a home already owned by one man and in talk about an earlier relationship, where there was the same home ownership, the difference in bed

selection was even starker:

we never slept together, almost never slept together, we had an arrangement like a middle-class or upper middle-class couple in the 19th century, I had a bedroom and off it was a dressing room, so he slept in the dressing room and I slept in the main room, so very much like in the 19th century, with the woman in the bedroom and the man in the dressing room

**5.9** Again when some of these partnerships were established the norm for those in heterosexual marriages would be for the couple to move into a home of their own. Today the situation is more fluid with serial relationships in both the heterosexual and homosexual world often leading to one of the partners in a couple moving into a home already owned and established by the other. However, regardless of the nature of home ownership, once co-residing the work of caring for one another becomes apparent and, as we will see in the next section, this too is gendered.

### **Caring through the night**

**6.1** Previous research by Kurdek (1989) described how lesbian couples comprise two partners who have been socialised as women to be relational, caring, and nurturant, whereas gay male couples comprise two partners who have been socialized to be independent and autonomous. These gendered ways of being female and male were also evident in this study, and here the focus on how to avoid sleep disturbance and caring through the night illustrates this difference.

**6.2** For some respondents the need for separate rooms related to avoiding disturbances resulting either from their partner's behaviour or their own behaviour, and the risk of disturbing the sleep of their partner if they were sleeping in the one room.

My partner's a night person. I'm a morning person. So we've had to come to some arrangement, in that we do have our own bedrooms. Ah, we've been together 23 years. And I, I just can't cope with sort of flickering TVs and... And, and I like to go to bed early and get up early. So, she goes to bed late and gets up late. So, we came to an agreement quite some time ago and we've very happy with it. It's, having our own space but still time to come together as well too.

**6.3** However she also acknowledged that she was aware that the 'normal' way to be a lesbian couple would be sleeping together in a double bed:

I think I, I probably, I felt a bit, yeah I felt a bit funny about it because the traditional thing is that you sleep together if you're in a relationship.

**6.4** Previous research on coupled sleep demonstrates that couples are prepared to deprioritise their own sleep needs to maintain shared sleeping arrangements. As Hislop points out:

'Sleeping together is considered central to the health and well-being of the couple relationship; a morally right 'thing to do': part of the marriage contract; and a behaviour passed down from parent to child over the generations (Hislop, 2007: 5.6).

**6.5** This is where a difference appears between women in same-sex couples and women in opposite-sex couples. When some of the women interviewed for this study began sleeping with a same-sex partner this was not the morally right thing to do, nor was it something that was encouraged and supported by parents and other family members or even friends. Great lengths may have been taken to ensure that this sleeping together was hidden from others (a process colloquially called 'de-dykeing the house'). The fact that there is no possibility of a marriage contract to legitimize sleeping arrangements is still a point of grievance for some of these women today.

**6.6** The women in same-sex couples not unexpectedly draw on the gender expectations of women more generally when they attempt to make sure that their partners sleep well and therefore caring occurs in the bedroom as well as elsewhere. Hislop and Arber (cited in Dzaja et al. 2005, 70) found that women in their studies continue to see sleep disruption as an inevitable part of their roles as mothers, wives, partners, workers and carers. What was evident in the interviews with the women in this study was the symbolic importance of the double bed and sleeping together. This sleeping together extended to going to bed at the same time:

Occasionally if I am really tired but she still wants to stay up, I will go to bed and watch the tele in there. I don't like going to bed at different times. I like us going to bed together.

**6.7** For women in this age group strategies for sleeping together needed to take into account problems of

the menopause which both women might have concurrently, those of hot flushes, sweats, and restlessness:

We've adjusted our bedding so that we can manage it (night sweats and restlessness). So we have 2 single duvets on the bed. So she has a 350 gram woollen duvet, and I have a, I'd say it's probably like a, 50 gram cotton duvet. And that works perfectly. It's made a huge difference actually. We sleep much better with the 2 single duvets.

Kicking feet and, tossing and turning and snoring and all the stuff that goes with menopause, has sort of reared up as well too. So she has problems with her feet, and you know, can be up half the night with them in a bucket of cold water

#### **6.8** Men also discussed the sleep disruption associated with getting up to the toilet during the night.

I find now, I used to, for most of my life, sleep right through, say 10 to 7 or whatever, but now I will wake once, if not twice during the, and that's for a toilet...I suppose that's part of getting older.

#### **6.9** Apart from the symptoms of menopause, or needing to use the toilet, the other disturber of sleep was the snoring of one partner. As Williams (2007) notes snoring is an involuntary activity and the snorer may be unaware of the disturbance they are causing. Here the strategies were gendered with women who thought they may snore devising ways to avoid disturbing their partners:

There was a period of time where I thought I was going to become a snorer ... And so, I read somewhere or heard somewhere about this technique of putting tape across your mouth. Piece of paper, tape, you know that paper?

Yes, yes, micropore ? (interviewer)

So I started to do that, and actually I slept better.

Really (interviewer)

Because I was breathing through my nose. So if [partner] did happen to be awake and I made some funny little clicking noise or something, that stopped as well because I had this tape over my mouth you see. But I would have started that probably 8, 8 or 9 years ago and I still to this day use it. I sleep better with it...

And you read about that somewhere?(interviewer)

I did. I can't remember. *Woman's Weekly* or heard it on the National Radio, I did, there was a period of time where there was quite a lot about snoring and quality of sleep... And interestingly, my mother does snore. And she heard about it too and she now uses the tape and it really helps her snoring.

#### **6.10** In another couple's situation a sleep disorder had actually been diagnosed and treated with a CPAP machine (Continuous Positive Airways Pressure) which had improved the quality of both women's sleep:

So was there a time when you first got together when she wasn't using the CPAP machine? (interviewer)

Yes. And it was, it was so noisy. And I would have to tell her roll over or move or something like that. But I did get used to that as well. I did get used to the snoring. But it was more ... what kept me awake was when she would stop making a noise. And then a sudden kind of thing which would scare me and make me anxious. And I'd be waiting – is she going to breathe, is she going to breathe, is she going to breathe – nudge her

#### **6.11** Men were much more direct in their ways of dealing with a snoring partner:

Oh, well I just give him a kick, it does, it's very annoying, it's the thing that keeps me awake possibly if I'm trying to go to sleep, he instantly goes to sleep and will lie on his back, and I push and kick him until he turns over, that certainly keeps you awake

However for men in this age group there were other reasons for sleeping apart and this includes HIV/AIDS

We slept apart for about 6 years or more, part of the reason for that was because of his health, constant night-sweating and lack of, well lack of ability to sleep was too difficult for me

to cope with

**6.12** What both these two preceding quotes demonstrate is how these men are concerned about their own sleep, a point also made by Venn in her study of opposite-sex couples where she found that 'male respondents are more concerned with achieving their own good night's sleep than disturbing that of their wives' (Venn 2007, 5.3).

**6.13** Not all men were insensitive to the sleep needs of their partners but these were the minority and associated with relationships of long duration rather than the rule:

one of my problems [as a child] was sharing a room with my brother who objected to me reading in bed and sometimes quite violently, and so I've always been aware of other people's sensitivity to light and try to minimise it and sometimes if I can't sleep I'll get up and read in another room rather than turn the light on, but I've also got this little travel book-light thing that just spotlights the book which I recently dug out of a suitcase and that's a lot less impact

No, never [turn the light on and read in bed] because that would disturb [partner], I always get up and come out unless it's very cold in the winter then I tend not to.

### **Sex, intimacy and sharing a bed**

**7.1** For couples, sleeping together is a feature of modern life and as life becomes busier and more rushed the time couples spend in bed at night might be the most time they spend together, and the place where they do most of their talking (Rosenblatt 2006). This is no different for gay and lesbian couples and both the women and men talked about the importance of bed sharing for intimacy in their relationship:

I see us sleeping together as a statement around intimacy. But I do find it interesting, that a lot of women who don't sleep together, also, they're fundamentally lacking in commitment to the relationship. At a very deep level. They might have been together for years, but you start to scratch the surface a wee bit, and you find a conversation going down around, not a way out, but other options ... So that whole commitment thing with the intimacy thing overlaying it, then what does that look like in a daily life? And part of that for me, looks like, you actually do share the same bed.

**7.2** As indicated earlier in this paper this is where there was a distinct gender difference with women talking exclusively about intimacy and men talking about sex and intimacy.

We've got a relatively small bedroom, we don't have a large master bedroom in our house and we only use it for sleeping and sex and a place to keep some clothes (male respondent)

**7.3** Sex was even seen as a promoter of sleep by one man

Sleep a lot better after sex, you know I don't know if it's the chemicals that are released or whatever but wow, just slept after that, doctors shouldn't prescribe sleeping pills they should prescribe sexual relations and it's wonderful and sleeping with someone you love is just so much nicer too.

**7.4** This reference to sleeping with 'someone you love being much nicer' signals the importance of intimacy, something that the following man was prepared to compromise in other areas to achieve the intimacy associated with sleeping together.

especially having been together for 5 years, it doesn't bother me (going to work at different times), at times it's been an issue, partly because we miss out on intimacy time because we're not going to bed together and I'm getting up when he's still asleep in the morning, for me there's...I mean I'll talk about certain things when you're lying in bed cuddled up with the lights out that I probably wouldn't talk about in the full light of day, I just tend to be more open as a person then, so I miss that, and miss the kind of cuddles that go with it but I suppose because I'm secure in the relationship that doesn't bug me the way that it did maybe 2 or 3 years ago

and as you look back over the 5 or 6 years do you think that your patterns of sleeping have changed (interviewer)

Yeah, we've both compromised a bit, I go to bed a bit later and he goes to bed a bit earlier, or I'll stay in bed on a Saturday morning when otherwise I would get up

**7.5** Hislop ( 2007 ) suggests that sleep in the presence of an intimate bed- partner is back stage, where an

individual is free from role demands and expectations. The stage of the relationship can influence how free from expectation a person may be with one man drawing a distinction between an intimate partner and a one-night stand.

I don't find it difficult to sleep with someone else... it's been a long time since I've had a one-night-stand so...sometimes that was difficult, going to sleep with a stranger (male respondent)

**7.6** As Meadows and others point out 'the longer the duration of the relationship the greater the potential that couples 'routinize' their experience of the other's bodily functions' (Meadows et al. 2008b, 84). But for some men in this study this 'routinizing' does not occur and not all men had developed strategies that made it easy to sleep with an intimate bed-partner and they remained conscious of how their bodies may become 'unruly' when asleep.

I still feel I have to retain some sexual desirability and the thought of combining that with just wanting to zone out, it just feels like a task ... I still feel that I really have to make myself loveable, by looking good, not snoring, farting, blah, blah, blah, there's probably something of that, it keeps me feeling a little bit tense (male respondent).

**7.7** In the case of women, Crossley, citing Young, argues that they 'cannot be comfortable "in" their bodies in the same way as men are, and cannot enjoy the same freedom of movement, because their bodies are objectified in a patriarchal culture and are experienced as such' (Crossley 2001, 158). In contrast to this objectifying tendency sleeping with an intimate bed-partner for women in this study actually involved a freeing up of expectations about bodies and how they should be presented to the male gaze.

we both sleep naked and always have done. And I can't imagine ever wearing pyjamas of any sort. So we both prefer, prefer to sleep naked. Which is interesting because we didn't do that within previous relationships [which were opposite-sex marriages]. But I can distinctly remember no longer having nighties or things. I think it might, I think actually when I came out as a lesbian, I think I probably, I think that's when I stopped wearing night clothes.

**7.8** And as another women says:

I not only wore pyjamas, I wore undies in my marriage. And, I have never worn pyjamas, I've never worn anything here. The first night I went to bed with (her partner) I was naked. Yeah, never even thought about it.

**7.9** It may be then that the bedroom and the shared bed is one space where lesbian women can resist the need to conform to societal ideals about the female body, and where the gaze is consistently female. That they wore pyjamas in their marriages is also not surprising given codes of conduct relating to behaviour in the bedroom. Norbet Elias (2000) points out in his work on the civilizing process, going to bed naked was the norm in Europe prior to the 16 century and over the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries much more inhibition about the naked body became evident in the bedroom. In part this related to the development of shame associated with the naked body, but also because sleeping moved from the public to the private sphere and the bedroom became one of the most intimate and private areas of human life. This inhibition around nakedness even with sleeping partners continued in New Zealand into the 1950s and it was only with the social movements of the 1960s and 70s that the naked body became more acceptable for some people, although not all. The lingerie shops full of glamorous nightwear for women, and often suggested as an appropriate gift from male intimate partners, attest to the idea that for women looking attractive in the bedroom still requires a clothed body (at least while the lights are on).

## **Discussion**

**8.1** This article has argued that there is utility in exploring the sleep negotiations of same-sex couples for the insights that it demonstrates about gender relations. Gendered expectations about sleeping behaviour remain deeply embedded with women in same-sex couples reflecting many of the patterns of women in opposite-sex couples. Taking into account the limited literature on men and sleep negotiation there are some similarities with men in opposite-sex couples and the same-sex coupled men in this study.

**8.2** Women in same-sex couples expected to sleep in the same bed as their partner. This was more than for the convenience of sexual relations but was viewed as symbolizing the commitment and intimacy in their relationship. Those women who did not share a bed felt that an explanation for this deviation was necessary. This was a shift from when many of them first shared a bed with another woman and when, because of potential stigmatization, they felt compelled to disguise this bed sharing often through having a bedroom of their own as well as the room where they slept as a couple.

**8.3** To achieve coupled sleep the women were prepared to make compromises to their own individual sleep preferences. These compromises ranged from agreeing to go to bed at the same time, attempting not to disturb a partner's sleep by relocating to another room, or by taking measures to prevent snoring. For women then, the ideal was coupled sleep in a shared bed even if in some cases they couldn't achieve this. In making some of these compromises women also demonstrated how they were involved in caring for their partner. This caring extended beyond the bedroom, and could be a reflection of the way in which women, generally, are socialized to be nurturant and caring, but also the focus in lesbian relationships of this age group to strive for an egalitarian relationship (Dunne 1997; Peplau et al. 2004).

**8.4** For men there were some compromises made such as going to bed at the same time but there was little talk of the importance of sharing a bed, or what bed sharing symbolized. In some cases the bed was explicitly not shared or seen as 'our' bed but rather as 'my' bed. In discussions about sleep disruption the focus was often on how they could prevent their sleep being disrupted rather than how they could prevent disrupting their partner's sleep. As Meadows and his colleagues point out in their study of men and sleep 'men's belief about sleep centred on assumptions that sleep is an (individualised) necessity, a bodily need, which is pliable(to an extent) and which is intrinsically liked to function' (Meadows et al. 2008, 8).

**8.5** However despite these differences and similarities there is evidence of some blurring of the boundaries between male and female same-sex couple's negotiations around sleep and sleeping arrangements. There were some women who emphasized the importance of themselves getting enough sleep, rather than ensuring that their partner did, and there were some men who relocated to another room to avoid disturbing their partner's sleep. But even so these were not the dominant narratives.

**8.6** Of particular note for women was the freedom from the patriarchal gaze. This contrasted with both research with women in opposite-sex relationships and some of the gay men in this study. Hislop (2007, 4.3) points out that couples' sleep is 'characterized by the emergence over time of a set of interactional rules, conventions and behaviours that bind the couple together'. The value placed on intimacy was at the forefront of the women's narratives about the reasons for sleeping together; an intimacy promoted by the freedom women felt about their bodies in the private space of their bedrooms.

## Conclusion

**9.1** While the study of sleep itself is important the light that is shone on other aspects of relationships through the lens of sleep is illuminating. In this paper we have explored how sleeping arrangements are negotiated between same-sex couples who are mid-life or older. In addition gender differences between same-sex female couples and same-sex male couples have been identified. While the gender lines are not a rigid as they once were gender differences remain evident, and as has been demonstrated in the research on sleep negotiation in opposite-sex couples, sleep is gendered. What comes into play when sexual orientation is added is the legacy of 'the closet' and the gendered managing of sexual identities. This is particularly the case because of the lifecourse experiences of this cohort of lesbian women and gay men. As societies like New Zealand become less discriminatory towards homosexuality then it might be anticipated that the need to manage a stigmatized identity will lessen, as will some of the differences in sleeping arrangements and negotiations between same-sex couples and opposite-sex couples.

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