

Are We Having Sex Now or What?

Greta Christina

When I first started having sex with other people, I used to like to count them. I wanted to keep track of how many there had been. It was a source of some kind of pride, or identity anyway, to know how many people I'd had sex with in my lifetime. So, in my mind, Len was number one, Chris was number two, that slimy awful little heavy metal barbiturate addict whose name I can't remember was number three, Alan was number four, and so on. It got to the point where, when I'd start having sex with a new person for the first time, when he first entered my body (I was only having sex with men at the time), what would flash through my head wouldn't be "Oh, baby, baby you feel so good inside me," or "What the hell am I doing with this creep," or "This is boring, I wonder what's on TV." What flashed through my head was "Seven!"

Doing this had some interesting results. I'd look for patterns in the numbers. I had a theory for a while that every fourth lover turned out to be really great in bed, and would ponder what the cosmic significance of the phenomenon might be. Sometimes I'd try to determine what kind of person I was by how many people I'd had sex with. At eighteen, I'd had sex with ten different people. Did that make me normal, repressed, a total slut, a free-spirited bohemian, or what? Not that I com-

pared my numbers with anyone else's—I didn't. It was my own exclusive structure, a game I played in the privacy of my own head.

Then the numbers started getting a little larger, as numbers tend to do, and keeping track became more difficult. I'd remember that the last one was *seventeen* and so this one must be *eighteen*, but then I'd start having doubts about whether I'd been keeping score accurately or not. I'd lie awake at night thinking to myself well, there was Brad, and there was that guy on my birthday, and there was David and . . . no, wait, I forgot that guy I got drunk with at the social my first week at college . . . so that's seven, eight, nine . . . and by two in the morning I'd finally have it figured out. But there was always a nagging suspicion that maybe I'd missed someone, some dreadful tacky little scumball that I was trying to forget about having invited inside my body. And as much as I maybe wanted to forget about the sleazy little scumball, I wanted more to get that number right.

It kept getting harder, though. I began to question what counted as sex and what didn't. There was that time with Gene, for instance. I was pissed off at my boyfriend, David, for cheating on me. It was a major crisis, and Gene and I were friends and he'd been trying to get at me for weeks and I hadn't exactly been discouraging him. I went to see him that night to gripe about David. He was very sympathetic of course, and he gave me a backrub, and we talked and touched and confided and hugged, and then we started kissing, and then we snuggled up a little closer, and then we started fondling each other, you know, and then all heck broke loose, and we rolled around on the bed

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oping and rubbing and grabbing and smooching and pushing and pressing and squeezing. He never did actually get it in. He wanted to, and I wanted to too, but I had this thing about being faithful to my boyfriend, so I kept saying, “No, you can’t do that, Yes, that feels so good, No, wait that’s too much, Yes, yes, don’t stop, No, stop that’s enough.” We never even got our clothes off. Jesus Christ, though, it was some night. One of the best, really. But for a long time I didn’t count as one of the times I’d had sex. He never got inside, so it didn’t count.

Later, months and years later, when I lay awake putting my list together, I’d start to wonder: Why doesn’t Gene count? Does he not count because he never got inside? Or does he not count because I had to preserve my moral edge over David, my status as the patient, ever-faithful, cheated-on, martyred girlfriend, and if what I did with Gene counts then I don’t get to feel wounded and inferior?

Years later, I did end up fucking Gene and I got a profound relief because, at last, he definitely had a number, and I knew for sure that he did in fact count.

Then I started having sex with women, and, hey, howdy, did *that* ever shoot holes in the system. I’d always made my list of sex partners by defining sex as penile-vaginal intercourse—you know, screwing. It’s a pretty simple distinction, straightforward binary system. Did it go in or didn’t it? Yes or no? One or zero? On or off? Granted, it’s a pretty arbitrary definition, but it’s the customary one, with an ancient and respected tradition behind it, and when I was just screwing men, there was no compelling reason to question

But with women, well, first of all there’s no penis, so right from the start the tracking system is defective. And then, there are so many ways women can have sex with each other, touching and licking and grinding and fingering and fistfucking—with dildoes or vibrators or vegetables or whatever happens to be lying around the house, with nothing at all except human bodies. Of

course, that’s true for sex between women and men as well. But between women, no one method has a centuries-old tradition of being the one that counts. Even when we do fuck each other there’s no dick, so you don’t get that feeling of *This Is What’s Important, We Are Now Having Sex*, objectively speaking, and all that other stuff is just foreplay or afterplay. So when I started having sex with women the binary system had to go, in favor of a more inclusive definition.

Which meant, of course, that my list of how many people I’d had sex with was completely trashed. In order to maintain it I would have had to go back and reconstruct the whole thing and include all those people I’d necked with and gone down on and dry-humped and played touchy-feely games with. Even the question of who filled the all-important Number One slot, something I’d never had any doubts about before, would have to be re-evaluated.

By this time I’d kind of lost interest in the list anyway. Reconstructing it would be more trouble than it was worth. But the crucial question remained: What counts as having sex with someone?

It was important for me to know. You have to know what qualifies as sex because when you have sex with someone your relationship changes. Right? *Right?* It’s not that sex itself has to change things all that much. But knowing you’ve had sex, being conscious of a sexual connection, standing around making polite conversation with someone while thinking to yourself, “I’ve had sex with this person,” that’s what changes things. Or so I believed. And if having sex with a friend can confuse or change the friendship, think how bizarre things can get when you’re not sure whether you’ve had sex with them or not.

The problem was, as I kept doing more kinds of sexual things, the line between *sex* and *not-sex* kept getting more hazy and indistinct. As I brought more into my sexual experience, things were showing up on the dividing line demanding my attention. It wasn’t just that the territory I labeled *sex* was expanding. The line itself had swol-

len, dilated, been transformed into a vast gray region. It had become less like a border and more like a demilitarized zone.

Which is a strange place to live. Not a bad place, just strange. It's like juggling, or watchmaking, or playing the piano—anything that demands complete concentrated awareness and attention. It feels like cognitive dissonance, only pleasant. It feels like waking up from a compelling and realistic bad dream. It feels like the way you feel when you realize that everything you know is wrong, and a bloody good thing too, because it was painful and stupid and it really screwed you up.

But, for me, living in a question naturally leads to searching for an answer. I can't simply shrug, throw up my hands, and say, "Damned if I know." I have to explore the unknown frontiers, even if I don't bring back any secret treasure. So even if it's incomplete or provisional, I do want to find some sort of definition of what is and isn't sex.

I know when I'm *feeling* sexual. I'm feeling sexual if my pussy's wet, my nipples are hard, my palms are clammy, my brain is fogged, my skin is tingly and super-sensitive, my butt muscles clench, my heartbeat speeds up, I have an orgasm (that's the real giveaway), and so on. But feeling sexual with someone isn't the same as having sex with them. Good Lord, if I called it sex every time I was attracted to someone who returned the favor I'd be even more bewildered than I am now. Even *being* sexual with someone isn't the same as *having* sex with them. I've danced and flirted with too many people, given and received too many sexy, would-be-seductive backrubs, to believe otherwise.

I have friends who say, if you thought of it as sex when you were doing it, then it was. That's an interesting idea. It's certainly helped me construct a coherent sexual history without being a revisionist swine: redefining my past according to current definitions. But it really just begs the question. It's fine to say that sex is whatever I think it is; but then what do I think it *is*? What if, when I was doing it, I was *wondering* whether it counted?

Perhaps having sex with someone is the conscious, consenting, mutually acknowledged pursuit of shared sexual pleasure. Not a bad definition. If you are turning each other on and you say so and you keep doing it, then it's sex. It's broad enough to encompass a lot of sexual behavior beyond genital contact/orgasm; it's distinct enough *not* to include every instance of sexual awareness or arousal; and it contains the elements I feel are vital—acknowledgment, consent, reciprocity, and the pursuit of pleasure. But what about the situation where one person consents to sex without really enjoying it? Lots of people (myself included) have had sexual interactions that we didn't find satisfying or didn't really want and, unless they were actually forced on us against our will, I think most of us would still classify them as sex.

Maybe if *both* of you (or all of you) think of it as sex, then it's sex whether you're having fun or not. That clears up the problem of sex that's consented to but not wished-for or enjoyed. Unfortunately, it begs the question again, only worse: now you have to mesh different people's vague and inarticulate notions of what is and isn't sex and find the place where they overlap. Too messy.

How about sex as the conscious, consenting, mutually acknowledged pursuit of sexual pleasure of *at least one* of the people involved. That's better. It has all the key components, and it includes the situation where one person is doing it for a reason other than sexual pleasure—status, reassurance, money, the satisfaction and pleasure of someone they love, etc. But what if *neither* of you is enjoying it, if you're both doing it because you think the other one wants to? Ugh.

I'm having trouble here. Even the conventional standby—sex equals intercourse—has a serious flaw: it includes rape, which is something I emphatically refuse to accept. As far as I'm concerned, if there's no consent, it ain't sex. But I feel that's about the only place in this whole quagmire where I have a grip. The longer I think about the subject, the more questions I come up with. At what point in an encounter does it *become* sexual? If an interaction that begins nonsexually

turns into sex, was it sex all along? What about sex with someone who's asleep? Can you have a situation where one person is having sex and the other isn't? It seems that no matter what definition I come up with, I can think of some real-life experience that calls it into question.

For instance, a couple of years ago I attended (well, hosted) an all-girl sex party. Out of the twelve other women there, there were only a few with whom I got seriously physically nasty. The rest I kissed or hugged or talked dirty with or just smiled at, or watched while they did seriously physically nasty things with each other. If we'd been alone, I'd probably say that what I'd done with most of the women there didn't count as having sex. But the experience, which was hot and sweet and silly and very, very special, had been created by all of us, and although I only really got down with a few, I felt that I'd been sexual with all of the women there. Now, when I meet one of the women from that party, I always ask myself: Have we had sex?

For instance, when I was first experimenting with sadomasochism, I got together with a really hot woman. We were negotiating about what we were going to do, what would and wouldn't be ok, and she said she wasn't sure she wanted to have sex. Now we'd been explicitly planning all kinds of fun and games—spanking, bondage, obedience—which I strongly identified as sexual activity. In her mind, though, *sex* meant direct genital contact, and she didn't necessarily want

to do that with me. Playing with her turned out to be a tremendously erotic experience, arousing and stimulating and almost unbearably satisfying. But we spent the whole evening without even touching each other's genitals. And the fact that our definitions were so different made me wonder: Was it sex?

For instance, I worked for a few months as a nude dancer at a peep show. In case you've never been to a peep show, it works like this: the customer goes into a tiny, dingy black box, kind of like a phone booth, puts in quarters, and a metal plate goes up; the customer looks through a window at a little room/stage where naked women are dancing. One time, a guy came into one of the booths and started watching me and masturbating. I came over and squatted in front of him and started masturbating too, and we grinned at each other and watched each other and masturbated, and we both had a fabulous time. (I couldn't believe I was being paid to masturbate—tough job, but somebody has to do it . . .). After he left I thought to myself: Did we just have sex? I mean, if it had been someone I knew, and if there had been no glass and no quarters, there'd be no question in my mind. Sitting two feet apart from someone, watching each other masturbate? Yup, I'd call that sex all right. But this was different, because it was a stranger, and because of the glass and the quarters. Was it sex?

I still don't have an answer.

Would You Say You "Had Sex" If . . . ?

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The current public debate regarding whether oral sex constitutes having "had sex" or sexual relations has suffered from a lack of empirical data on how Americans as a population define these terms.^{1,2} The data reported here were originally collected in 1991 for their relevance to sexual history information gathering and to specifi-

cally examine the need for behavioral specificity to avoid possible confusion.³ These findings also serve as an indication of attitudes regarding definitions of having "had sex" among college students [at a large Midwest State university] assessed prior to current media publicity about this issue.

Almost everyone agreed that penile-vaginal intercourse would qualify as having "had sex." Approaching this level of common perspective and yet importantly dif-

ferent is the fact that while 81% of participants counted penile-anal intercourse as having "had sex," 19% did not. In contrast, few individuals considered deep kissing (nearly 2%) or breast contact (nearly 3%) as having "had sex" with a partner. . . . Approximately 14% to 15% indicated that manual stimulation of the genitals (either given or received) would constitute having "had sex." Only 40% indicated that they would say they had "had sex" if oral-genital contact was the most intimate behavior in which they engaged (60% would not). For the behaviors less frequently included as having "had sex," men were slightly more likely to incorporate them into the "had sex" category.

Among the behaviors assessed, oral-genital contact had the most ambivalent status. Overall, 60% reported that they would not say they "had sex" with someone if the most intimate behavior engaged in was oral-genital contact. Additionally, we found evidence of belief in "technical virginity." Compared with others, those who had experienced oral-genital contact but had never engaged in penile-vaginal intercourse were less likely to consider oral-genital contact as having "had sex."

The virtually universal endorsement of penile-vaginal intercourse as having "had sex" in contrast with the diverse opinions for other behaviors highlights the primacy

of penile-vaginal intercourse in American definitions of having "had sex." The lack of consensus with respect to what constitutes having "had sex" across the sexual behaviors examined herein provides empirical evidence of the need for behavioral specificity when collecting data on sexual histories and identifying sexual partners.

NOTES

1. *The Starr Report Referral to the United States House of Representatives Pursuant to Title 28, United States Code §595(c)*. Available at: <http://icreport.house.gov/icreport>. Submitted by the Office of the Independent Counsel, September 9, 1998.
2. Baker, P., Marcus, R. Experts scoff at perjury loophole proposed for Clinton. *Washington Post*, August 15, 1998:A6.
3. Reinisch, J. M., Sanders, S. A., Ziemba-Davis, M. The study of sexual behavior in relation to the transmission of human immunodeficiency virus: caveats and recommendations. *Am Psychol* 1988;43:921-927.

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