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"Turn the lights down low"

Women's experiences of intimacy after childbirth

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Abstract

Women navigate many social changes when they become mothers, often including considerable changes to intimate and sexual relationships. While maternal health care attends to various physical and emotional changes for women, it has emerged that many women experience dissatisfaction in their intimate relationships after birth. A literature review revealed that while many studies had investigated the sexual experiences of women postpartum, none had looked at the effect of dominant discourses within Western popular culture. This research aimed to explore how women make sense of changes to their intimate relationships following childbirth. Norms and assumptions about the effects of childbirth on women's bodies and the implications of change to intimate relationships were examined. Six women between the ages of 25-45 who had given birth to a child in the last 10 years were interviewed in a conversational style about their experiences. A feminist post-structuralist discourse analysis was applied, attending to the dominant discourses and gendered power relations that enabled and limited positions for women. The analysis showed that normative discourse shaped not only how women experienced their bodies and intimate relationships, but every aspect of their lives including pregnancy, labour, mothering, unpaid and paid work. Furthermore, women were positioned through discourse and a gender binary as responsible for the household and childcare, as well as responsible for regulating and managing the intimate relationship. Ultimately the overriding experience of women in this research was that body changes and changes in the sexual relationship (overwhelmingly one of dissatisfaction) postpartum resulted in feelings of responsibility and guilt on the women's behalf for failing the expectations of femininity and the obligations of neoliberalism. Instances of resistance and challenge to the dominant discourses were expressed, as were alternative discourses. This research provides an understanding of the effects of dominant discourses and the power relations implicit in them on women's lived realities. This piece of research provides knowledge around contextual factors impacting on postpartum sexual health and postpartum body image. It may also provide the platform from which both professionals and women can discuss female bodies, including genitalia, and female sexuality in less 'troublesome' ways.

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