

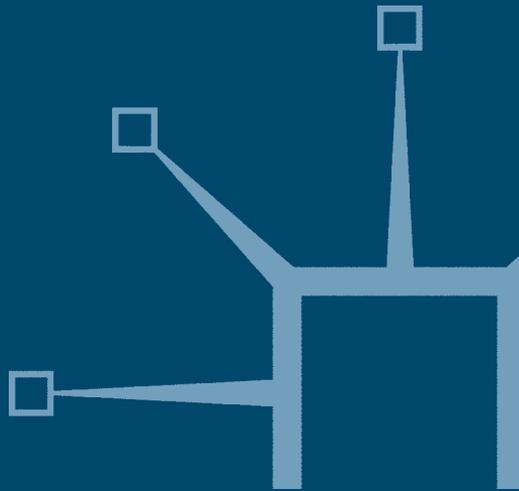
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# Sexual (Dis)Orientation

Gender, Sex, Desire and Self-fashioning

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Tamsin Wilton



# Sexual (Dis)Orientation

*Also by Tamsin Wilton*

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# Sexual (Dis)Orientation

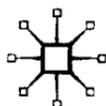
## Gender, Sex, Desire and Self-fashioning

Tamsin Wilton

*Professor of Human Sexuality*

*University of the West of England, UK*

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'Pure Morning'

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*For Steph Keeble, with love and in appreciation for her generosity in feeding mind, body and soul so excellently. Respect!*

*Never trouble trouble 'til trouble troubles you.*

(Traditional Cornish saying)

*...trouble is inevitable and the task, how best to make it, what best way to be in it.*

(Judith Butler 1990, *Gender Trouble*)

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# Introduction: What's All This About? Comments on Method and Language

Sex is a challenging subject to communicate about. Policed by social and cultural taboo, complicated by psychological, emotional and existential significance, and profoundly implicated in (probably) all hegemonic processes and counter-hegemonic struggles, it is dauntingly easy to say the wrong thing about sex.

By 'saying the wrong thing', I mean not only speaking about sex in ways which may offend (although it is not my intention to offend, only to challenge and disturb) but speaking without clarity. No author is able to control the ways in which a text is read, and the meaning of this particular text will, of course, be produced in the mind of each reader. However, it is important at least to be explicit about the intended meaning of specific terms if what follows is to be intelligible at all.

I shall, in most cases, try to speak intelligibly about this complexly woven subject by using 'sex' to refer to the biological state of 'being' male, female or otherwise, or to the activities generally labelled 'having sex'. I shall use 'gender' to mean the socio-cultural scriptings which cohere around our genitals – the state of performing masculinities or femininities – although I do so with the caveat that such performativities may not be cut away from the corporealities which are purported to produce them. I shall use 'the erotic' to refer to the field of human behaviours, signifying systems and cultural practices that coalesce around and produce notions of sexual desire, pleasure, arousal, action, interaction and relationships.

This is not, nor can it be, a rigidly applied system. There will be times when usage becomes more slippery, although my meaning will, I hope, remain clear.

It is not possible to speak of sex in a solely local context. In particular, in the global confines of postmodernity, it would be foolish to ignore

the geopolitics of the erotic. The various colonialising projects of modernity and postmodernity – firstly nation state imperialisms, latterly proliferating forms of capitalist free-market enterprise – have produced an hegemony of the erotic. This is not solely the result of the imperialist imposition of sexual mores on the colonised by the colonisers, although such impositions have had important effects around the world, it is also consequent on the nationalisms developed in resistance to colonialism and on other struggles to do with religious, ethnic, tribal or inter-generational differences. I shall speak, therefore, of ‘the hegemonic bloc’, by which I mean those nation states whose ideological and political reach has most powerfully shaped the social and cultural mores of those they have conquered. Loosely speaking, the hegemonic bloc includes the United States, Britain, France, Germany, Spain, Portugal and the Netherlands, all great colonial invaders and appropriators of foreign territories. The great influence which these countries exerted is as much religious (primarily Christian – although the distinction between forms of Christianity is important here) as it is political, and this has resulted in the spread of Judaeo-Christian ideologies to do with the badness or wrongness of sex over a vast area. Since that other Abrahamic religion, Islam, extends over much of the rest of the world, the notion that sex is a bad thing is a horribly common factor in various forms of both sexism and homophobia (Young-Bruehl 1996).

I would like to have written a real doorstep of a book on this subject. The book you are holding should, by rights, be three times as thick and twice as heavy. However, the horrible market forces that dominate contemporary academic publishing dictate that eighty to a hundred thousand words is the ‘right’ length for a book, so there is not room here to lay the kinds of strong foundations for my argument that I would wish. I want, therefore, to alert the reader to the unspoken context in which I am writing. In particular, the continued oppression of women around the world must not be forgotten. When we speak of ‘female sexual pleasure’ it must be borne in mind that the very concept is incomprehensible to most women. The material consequences of male supremacist political economy are such that women are excluded from the kinds of independent life which make sexual choice possible. It is, therefore, not possible to make any claims whatsoever for the sexuality of ‘women’ as a group, let alone ‘lesbians’ as a group. Indeed, ‘lesbian’ is an entirely contingent construct, produced by a highly specific set of material, social, cultural and political circumstances. It does not travel well, either across cultures or through historical time, so the claims made in what follows about ‘lesbians’ are not generalisable to very different populations.

This is, of course, one of the key reasons to dismiss essentialist accounts of both sexuality and gender. However, it inevitably impacts on social constructionist accounts too and, as such, must be regarded as the canvas on which the picture I am about to outline is drawn.

## Method

In order to trace the operations of discourse in the self-fashioning of women, a research process is required which involves many strands. One has to identify the discourses as they circulate in the wider culture, as well as in their impact on individuals. The conclusions I present, therefore, are based on my analysis of a range of data gathered by different means and from different sources. A full methodological discussion is contained in Chapter 2. However, I want here to offer a summary outline.

In order to identify the operation of discourses of gendered sexuality and sexualised gender as they produce and are produced by the construct 'lesbian', I used the following research strategies:

- examining the existing literature on sexuality
- distributing a short questionnaire
- holding in-depth, semi-structured qualitative interviews with women who had 'become lesbians' after 'being heterosexual'
- holding in-depth, semi-structured qualitative interviews with women who were, and were likely to remain, 'heterosexual'
- appropriating material about lesbians from a training workshop that I facilitated with a group of self-identified heterosexual women
- keeping a detailed research diary
- retaining and analysing accounts sent to me by lesbians in response to their reading of (a) an autobiographical article I published in lesbian magazine *Diva* and (b) *Unexpected Pleasures*, the first book that I published on my research findings, which was intended for a lay audience
- studying published autobiographical accounts of 'coming out' written by lesbians.

At the end of this process I had amassed an enormous amount of material. There is no way in which one book, or even two, can adequately present such a substantial body of data. Other books remain to be written, and I have had to be extremely selective about what is presented here. In what follows, then, there is little or no statistical data. For example, I have not made much use of the completed questionnaires. Where I have done, it

should be remembered that the respondents who completed these questionnaires are included in the sample who participated in interviews. They do not represent an additional sample. Not all interviewees completed a questionnaire, and not all questionnaire respondents participated in interviews, but about a third of the final total of interviewees also completed questionnaires. A list of participants can be found in the Appendix, together with the short questionnaire.

## **Absences**

Many issues which were raised by the research process I have no space to address here. I am planning to take some of these further in future, but it is, I think, important to mention them here, as their absence should not be taken as a sign that I think them insignificant. They include:

- **bisexuality:** three of the participants self-identified as bisexual and I have made use of their accounts, identifying them in the text. Bisexuality does, however, raise specific questions which do not fit easily into the present inquiry
- **transsexuality:** two of the participants were post-operative transsexuals. It was, in the end, simply not possible to incorporate their accounts into the research, since the issues which they raised were not comparable to those raised by the non-transsexual participants. I am in the process of exploring how to undertake further research into those issues, and have the permission of both participants to involve them in this.
- **men:** two men participated, one gay, one bisexual, and a further male respondent completed the questionnaire as a 'male lesbian'. This is another area that I hope to explore in due course, but these accounts are not presented here.
- **'race':** participants came from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds, and several of these were able clearly to identify cultural factors which had impacted on their experiences. Such moments of recognition are indicated in the text. However, there is not space here fully to engage with the racialisation of lesbianism, nor with the impact of racism in lesbian communities. I have not categorised participants by ethnic or racial background.

This book is intended (as is all my work) as part of a conversation. My thinking about lesbian sexual identity-fashioning is not definitive, nor would this be possible. I warmly welcome comments and feedback from

readers, whether these are broadly in agreement with my argument or strongly opposed. Please feel free to contact me at my email address: Tamsin.Wilton@uwe.ac.uk.

I want to leave the final word to Michel Foucault, who utters a warning to all of us who would speak about sex as if it were simply the case that it is a taboo topic:

... there may be another reason that makes it so gratifying for us to define the relationship between sex and power in terms of repression: something that one might call the speaker's benefit. If sex is repressed, that is, condemned to prohibition, nonexistence and silence, then the mere fact that one is speaking about it has the appearance of a deliberate transgression... we are conscious of defying established power, our tone of voice shows that we know we are being subversive, and we ardently conjure away the present and appeal to the future, whose day will be hastened by the contribution we believe we are making. (Foucault 1976, pp. 6–7)

I shall endeavour, in what follows, to avoid 'ardently conjuring away the present'.

# 1

## Of Models and Muddles: Disorientating Theories of Sexuality

... the books I write constitute an experience for me that I'd like to be as rich as possible. An experience is something you come out of changed ... I write precisely because I don't know yet what to think about a subject that attracts me. In so doing, the book transforms me, changes what I think.

(Michel Foucault, *Remarks on Marx* 1991)

### Location, location, location

Debates concerning sexuality have tended to polarise across the axis of essentialism/constructionism. This is, in effect, a slightly more sophisticated version of familiar nature/nurture arguments; are individuals sexually *orientated*, that is, somehow homo-, hetero- or bisexual in essence, or do they acquire a sexual *preference* at some point during their life course, in response to circumstance? There are, of course, additional complexities, since human beings are both reflexively self-aware and social, meaning-making creatures. Thus it is perfectly possible that an innate, biologically determined sexual orientation may or may not lead individuals to behave in specific ways, let alone to adopt a specific identity based on that orientation.

These additional factors provoke a proliferation of questions that are not amenable to scrutiny from within the technological or epistemological framework of the natural sciences since, as Mary McIntosh pointed out in 1968, 'The way in which people become labelled as homosexual can ... be seen as an important social process connected with mechanisms of social control.' In short, science tends as much to operate from an ideological standpoint as does any other socio-cultural institution (of

which, more below) and, moreover, tends to do so with remarkably little reflexivity.

From the perspective of the social sciences, the tiny word 'sex' stands for a particular bundle of experiences, desires, sensations and behaviours which is at once extraordinarily specific and contingent. Everything to do with 'sex' depends on location (in a generously chronotopic sense which incorporates historical moment, social and geopolitical place and cultural positioning), from the rules that dictate which classes of person may have what kinds of sex with which other classes of person right up to what 'counts' as sex in the first place (Tiefer 1995, Weeks 2003).

Sites for the cultural production of the erotic are infinitely various: mosques, pornographic films, advertisements, temples, locker rooms, gurudwaras, internet chat rooms, courtrooms, synagogues, weblogs, Hollywood films, Bishops' palaces,<sup>1</sup> grand opera, lecture theatres, hospitals, clinics, pop songs and so on. This is what is meant by the social construction of sexuality; a complex process that undoubtedly partakes both of the biological – inasmuch as human be-ing is itself inescapably biological – and of the psychological, but which requires that we pay attention to and take account of the social context within which individuals are embedded and by which they are produced as social actors.

It is important to state that social constructionist accounts, although demonstrably far more sophisticated and effective in describing the empirically observable phenomena of human sexuality than are essentialist accounts, do not themselves absolutely exclude essentialism. Thus, for example, there may indeed be a 'gay gene' (although the existing evidence is remarkably weak); however, the expression of any such genetic inheritance in and by any particular individual will depend on so complex a set of social and cultural factors as to make it radically difficult, if not impossible, to isolate its effects.

Thus, even if we accept that there may be an essential element in sexuality – such as the kink in neuroanatomy suggested by LeVay (1993) or the genetic component mooted by Hamer and colleagues (1994) – this is not at all the same as claiming that sexual orientation is an involuntary individual characteristic, nor that there are such 'things' as homo-, hetero- or bisexuality. Given the complicated socio-cultural constructions of both gender and the erotic, the notion that sexuality may be *orientated* towards men, towards women or towards both must be seen as a very large claim indeed. Moreover, to append to the notion of sexual orientation the further stage of sexual identity formation – the psychosocial process by which individuals name themselves lesbian, gay, bisexual or (less often) straight – is to enter theoretical territory of daunting complexity.

## Components of a sexual self

It seems to me that any individual who lays claim to a sexual identity must knit together the social, the cultural and the psychological in such a way as to produce *coherence* with local semiotics of the erotic, *consistency* within the narrative project of subjectivity and *legibility* to their significant others. Those 'significant others' take on, in this context, a dual 'significance'. Not only are they the individuals who are most significant (i.e. meaningful) to the person concerned, they are also those who signify (using the verb here in transitive mode), those who *make meaning* and hence construct the local semiotic or hermeneutic context necessary for coherent human being. These are the people who hold up for each of us the mirror whose reflection both reassures us that we exist and tells us who we are.

For the purposes of my argument here, the 'others' who are 'significant' in terms of an individual's sexual identity formation might include those at a wider remove than the kinship and peer networks usually regarded as such. For example, to a woman who asserts a lesbian identity, the 'others' significant to that process may include lesbian writers, television personalities, historical or even fictional characters, none of whom she may ever have met. As we shall see below, lesbian identity is proactively policed by a range of 'others', both homophobically and in reaction to that homophobia, and any woman engaged in constructing a self-identity as lesbian is obliged to negotiate with, and navigate amongst, conflictual strategies of exclusion and inclusion.

It becomes impossible to travel any further along this theoretical footpath without calling upon the notion of *discourse*, the currency of this extraordinarily complex set of hermeneutic transactions. My understanding of the relationship between the individual and the social is that the self is produced at and by a dynamic interface between the person (bodied, biological, sensate, electro-chemical) and the social realm (apprehensible only via the five corporeal senses). Because that interface is, in a material sense, literally the body's epidermis, it is both permeable and dynamic whilst at the same time seeming to be a solid (trustworthy) membrane maintaining the bodied self as a discrete entity. This produces the illusion, typical in contemporary cultures in the hegemonic bloc, that we are somehow contained in our bodies like electricity in a box. In the words of Thom Yorke, 'There's a gap in between/ There's a gap where we meet/ where I end and you begin.'<sup>2</sup>

I have referred to this dynamic membrane as a meniscus (Wilton 2000b), and characterise it as the sensory network which envelopes, is embedded in, and produces our corporeal selves; constantly fizzing with

trajectories of information travelling in both directions. Some of this information is primarily mechanical; it concerns our physical safety and continued survival and much of it we have learnt to absorb and respond to inattentively – such as general data about our location in the physical environment, which enables us to move around without bumping into the furniture or to turn over in bed without injuring the cat.

Another body of data is social. This data tells us who we may *be* in social and cultural terms; our gender, ethnicity, age and other culturally salient features. It alerts us to our social and cultural *location* on a moment-by-moment basis; what point we occupy on the local hierarchy in any gathering of people, to what extent we are able (or not) to exercise power over others, what reaction we are likely to meet from others and what elements of our selves need to be emphasised or concealed in particular circumstances. Clearly experiences such as desire, arousal and sexual pleasure, whilst self-evidently mediated through the senses, are as much mediated through the social and the cultural. Raw physical sensations require interpretation before they are recognised as sexual. This notion, counter-intuitive within the terms of our culture's dominant construction of sex as an overwhelming, irresistible, untamed force of nature, may be amply demonstrated by the rarity of women's orgasms relative to men's, or the phenomenon of sexual boredom in long-term relationships (Hite 2000).

The ceaseless transition of information across this boundary meniscus of the person constitutes the dynamic process of self-fashioning and its medium is, precisely, discourse. Thus, although the body is materially constituted and may, indeed, be subject to biological constraints whether these be instincts, drives, genetic inheritances or the simple fact of vulnerability to injury, disease and death, the *self* is produced by the dynamic interactions between the body and its location, in particular the social and cultural environment. Since discourse is the medium of culture and (for humans) of the social, this implies that the self is discursively produced by the social and the cultural acting upon and through the corporeal, a process which also, of course, in turn produces the social and the cultural.

In order effectively to theorise sexual identity formation, then, it is necessary to understand the local operations of discourses around sexuality. In particular, we must take account of how individuals discriminate amongst and draw upon such discourses in order to make sense of their own desires, sensations and activities and to fashion a coherent account of self-identity as sexed, gendered and desiring subjects, agents and members of identifiable collectives.

This, then, is the task of this book. However, it is neither a unitary nor a simple task, since the interpenetrations of 'sex' (meaning maleness and femaleness) and 'sex' (meaning desire, arousal and erotic activities) must be attended to on many levels – the corporeal, the social, the cultural, the psychological, the political – and their effects traced through multiple discursive fields.

## **Sex and disorientation**

This book is written less from a deviant perspective (although that is certainly the case) than from a disorientating one. Partly this is because, as a lesbian, the position from which I carry out my intellectual work – on whatever topic – is inevitably eccentric to the mainstream and, hence, orientated away from the hegemonic 'pole'. In the particular context of a scholarship of sexuality, however, the disorientation is more specific. Despite the advances of feminist theory it remains the case that biomedical research into sexuality – and this has been true of biomedicine more generally (Doyal 1995) – is a field still dominated by men, many of whose theories fail to take account of women and are consequently narrowly androcentric.

This is no small matter. It is not just that we know more about men's sexualities than we do about women's (outwith the restrictive parameters of obstetrics and gynaecology, wherein female sexuality is constructed as reproductively purposive). Rather, the explanatory value of such theories may be fatally undermined by their inability (or unwillingness) to pay attention to the experiences and behaviours of what is, after all, the numerically greater part of our species. As Edward Stein (1999, p. 251) concludes, in his thorough interrogation of what he calls the 'emerging research program' of the bioscience of sexual orientation:

Most notably, there are [few] plausible theories concerning how women develop sexual orientations. In fact, researchers and theorists inside and outside of the emerging research program have described women as having fluid sexual orientations and as having sexual orientations that are difficult to pin down.

For Stein, any theoretical claim about sexual orientation that is premised exclusively on men and male sexuality is fundamentally flawed. He suggests, indeed, that the existing apparatus for thinking about sexuality must, because it is shored up by this concealed dependency on an unproblematised masculine norm, be thereby weakened.

'If', he continues, 'women's sexual desires were put at the center of our theorising about the origins of sexual orientation, the case for multiple origins would be readily apparent' (Stein 1999, p. 252).

I believe that Stein is correct in this, but that he himself underestimates just how disruptive a gynocentric approach to sexuality would be. For, whilst it may be relatively straightforward to speak of *men's* sexual desires,<sup>3</sup> the notion of 'women's sexual desires' is itself profoundly complex. As Jeffery Weeks acknowledges, for example (1985, p. 203), 'Lesbians and gay men are not two genders within one sexual category. They have different histories, which are differentiated because of the complex organisation of male and female identities, precisely along lines of gender.' Writing as a feminist, rather than simply from a gynocentric position, therefore, I aim to expose that complexity and to integrate it into my account of the erotic. This is, therefore, an account which refuses to take its bearings from the occluded andronormativity which dominates thinking about sexuality and it is, therefore, radically dis/orientated in relation to the presumptive male/female axis.

My approach is disorientating in another respect, in that it is rooted in queer theory. That is, it departs in significant ways from most existing theories of sexuality produced within either the natural sciences or the field of lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) studies or, importantly, within feminist theory. Although feminist scholars laid the foundations for a critical scholarship of sex and gender (Cartledge and Ryan 1983, Snitow *et al.* 1984, Feminist Review 1987), sexuality has proved to be dauntingly difficult for heterosexual feminists to address.

Issues raised by lesbian feminists have been central to feminism, both in terms of the academy and the political/activist arena (e.g. Faderman 1981, Hoagland and Penelope 1988, Wittig 1992). However, the various kinds of lesbian feminism have tended to provoke a strongly defensive reaction on the part of non-lesbian feminists, splintering the women's movement in what became known as the 'sex wars' (Wilton 1996a).

It is certain that that these skirmishes drove lesbians away from engagement with feminism (Samois 1981, Nestle 1987, 1992) and arguable that they dealt a fatal blow to the capacity of feminist theory to engage productively with questions of sexuality. Thus, although many lesbian theorists – including Gayle Rubin, Pat Califia, Judith Butler, Joan Nestle, Dorothy Allison and myself – continue to assert that they are feminists, their exile from 'mainstream' feminism means that the body of work they have produced tends to stand aligned with LGB studies or with queer theory. It is this body of work, as I shall argue below, which constitutes the cutting edge of gender-aware sexualities studies.

The key factors distinguishing LGB studies from queer theory are that the latter takes heterosexualities to be as problematic and in need of interrogation as are homosexualities (Butler 1990, Jagose 1996, Spargo 1999), and that issues of masculinity and femininity (what used to be – and still is – called ‘gender’ in most feminist theory) are taken to be integral to theorising the sexual. Queer theorists take a radical step beyond both LGB studies and feminism, by insisting that it is possible to perturb the entire field of heteroerotic normativity by establishing a theoretical location, eccentric to the heteronorm, that is amenable to occupation by *anyone who wishes to position themselves as queer*. Such acts of self-location-as-queer, unlike the self-naming of women, gays or lesbians under the pre-queer rubric of identity politics, do not depend on gender affiliation or on allegiance to specific perverse pleasures. Rather, they are produced by pronouncing and enacting counter-hegemonic interventions in the erotic, and persist for the duration of any such intervention.

Thus, whereas an avowedly gay scientist such as Simon LeVay (1993, 1996) works from the premise of an unquestioned heteronormativity founded on equally unquestioned gender norms (of which, more below), and seeks to find a biological cause for homosexuality in the interests of a specific notion of gay rights, my own approach as a queer theorist is to take several steps back and to interrogate same- and other-sex desires *together with the gender paradigms which underpin them*, with equal vigour.

Given the complex interlocutions between discourses of the erotic and discourses of gender that are held in the word ‘sex’, it seems to me that only a consciously disorientated and unstable queer-feminist epistemology is adequate to the task of understanding sexuality and the processes whereby individuals come to fashion sexual identities for themselves.

## Theory queered

In the eyes of most social scientists, trying to identify a biological *cause* for homosexuality is a waste of time. Social constructionist theories of sexuality produce accounts of the erotic as far too complex, contingent and dynamic to be explicable in biological terms. The difference between the two sets of accounts is, of course, of great interest here. However, almost as interesting are the characteristic differences between the modes of production of the two competing paradigms. For, while the most important ‘names’ in the field of essentialism – Simon LeVay, Dean Hamer, Peter Copeland – are men, their counterparts in the

constructionist camp (with the important exception of Michel Foucault) are women – Mary McIntosh, Monique Wittig, Julia Kristeva, Judith Butler – and the intellectual catalyst for constructionism was feminist – in particular lesbian-feminist – political theory.

On one level this is perhaps an artefact of disciplinary gender politics. The natural sciences are a traditionally male-dominated field, and there have been interesting analyses suggesting that their traditional intellectual and technical praxis is intrinsically masculinist (see essays in Cowley and Himmelweit 1992, Mayberry *et al.* 2001). There is the additional question of the disciplinary and spatial locations of theory-building. Essentialist theories tend to be the product of lab work or computer-modelling within the narrow confines of a single ‘scientific’ discipline with assertive claims to objectivity (think stereotypical ivory tower). The social-constructionist camp, in contrast, spreads across a number of disciplines and consequently has produced something less like a single theory or a collection of theories, and more like an entire field of study (think, perhaps, of the fungal threads of wood rot).

Thus, social-constructionist accounts have been produced by, amongst others, Adrienne Rich (1981) who is a poet, Eve Sedgwick (1990) and Lillian Faderman (1981) who are both professors of English, psychologist Celia Kitzinger (1987), Monique Wittig (1981) a professor in a department of French and Italian, Mary McIntosh (1968), sociologist and Michel Foucault (1976), historian and philosopher.

With the exception of Foucault, these are all the names of feminists. Women’s studies is itself an exemplary interdisciplinary project, and feminist scholars are perhaps at home with the postmodern notion that disciplinary boundaries are both artefactual and intellectually counter-productive. This is theory in retroviral form, appearing unheralded in whatever disciplinary enclave suits it and bending the tools of the discipline to its own purposes. Not only does queer theory have its roots firmly in feminist praxis, so too does social constructionism, although neither tends to acknowledge the circumstances of its conception.

As long ago as 1968 Mary McIntosh published an article in *Social Problems* in which she argued that homosexuality is not a natural type, variation or state of being, but a social role. She suggested, in a memorable turn of phrase, that ‘One might as well try to trace the aetiology of “committee chairmanship” or “Seventh Day Adventism” as of “homosexuality” ’ (McIntosh 1968, p. 31).

It is to feminist theory – in particular lesbian feminist theory – that we owe the next stage in the development of constructionist accounts of sexuality. A couple of years after the publication of McIntosh’s article

came the first lesbian-feminist attempt to develop a social-political theory of sex. The Radicalesbians, a breakaway New York group of feminists, published a pamphlet *The Woman Identified Woman*, in which they put forward a strong set of claims for what we would now call a social constructionist approach:

...lesbianism, like male homosexuality, is a category of behaviour possible only in a sexist society characterised by rigid sex roles and dominated by male supremacy... Homosexuality is a by-product of a particular way of setting up roles (or approved patterns of behaviour) on the basis of sex... In a society in which men do not oppress women, and sexual expression is allowed to follow feelings, the categories of homosexuality and heterosexuality would disappear. (Radicalesbians 1970, pp. 17–18)

In making the claim that ‘homosexuality is a by-product of a particular way of setting up roles on the basis of sex’ the Radicalesbians both anticipated Foucault (although there is no suggestion that Foucault was familiar with this piece) and insisted on the primacy of gender in the social construction of sexualities. Above all, they make the claim – astonishing at the time – that sexual behaviour is socially produced and culturally encoded within a specifically political/ideological semiotic.

Some lesbian feminist theorists eventually went on to claim not only that any woman can be a lesbian, but that any woman calling herself a feminist had no other choice (Onlywomen Press 1981, Jeffreys 1990, 1993). Within this (extreme) discourse of political lesbianism sexuality was constructed as radically unfixed and amenable to individual choice. It must be said, however, that political lesbianism functioned by specifically and deliberately excluding such troublesome matters as desire, sexual pleasure or even sexual interaction. ‘A lesbian’ explained the Leeds Revolutionary Feminists, ‘is a woman-identified woman who does not fuck men. It does not mean compulsory sexual activity with a woman’ (Onlywomen Press 1981, p. 5).

In promulgating a model of lesbianism from which the erotic had been erased in entirety, revolutionary feminists managed effectively to bring to an end the development of feminist theories of sexuality. After all, if there is no desire, arousal or pleasure involved in ‘being a lesbian’, there is nothing for theory to explain. You are simply making a life-decision which transcends or mortifies the flesh, much as the Christian anchorites of mediaeval Europe who fasted or had themselves sealed up alive in the walls of nunneries.

The most significant development in theorising sexuality after McIntosh was Michel Foucault's still controversial assertion that the homosexual was an invention of the nineteenth century's obsession with taxonomic classification. This, in turn, he saw as an integral element of the development of disciplinary power (although the English word is not entirely adequate as a translation of the French *pouvoir*) and a hegemonic contestation seen as discursive in nature (Foucault 1976, Spargo 1999). This was a true paradigm shift, taking McIntosh's original argument much further. Rather than science developing the diagnostic tools for 'identifying' and 'categorising' something existing in nature 'the homosexual person', Foucault proposed that the need to police sexuality in particular ways resulted in the 'invention' of the homosexual person. Nothing that has happened since in the natural sciences has contradicted this proposal. Rather, as biologists make increasingly absurd claims for the symptomatology of homosexuality (of which, more below), it seems more and more likely that Foucault's key assertion is correct.

Foucault, however, has been criticised for ignoring gender in his work on sexuality and on power (Sawicki 1991). The most significant shift in contemporary theory-building to integrate gender and sex was initiated by Judith Butler, whose seminal work *Gender Trouble* (1990) proposed a radically distinct notion, that of gender performativity. Butler insists that she has never, as some critics claimed, suggested that the biological body is irrelevant to an individual's identity as female or male, gay or straight (Butler 1993). Nevertheless, she resolutely privileges the social and cultural semiotics of gender in her account of sexed and gendered identity and, crucially for our purposes here, insists on the collusive dynamic of gender- and hetero-norms:

What happens to the subject and to the stability of gender categories when the epistemic regime of presumptive heterosexuality is unmasked as that which produces and reifies these ostensible categories of ontology? (Butler 1990, p. x)

Taking the epistemological premises of Foucault and bending them to feminist political ends, she asks, 'What kinds of cultural practices produce subversive discontinuity and dissonance among sex, gender and desire, and call into question their alleged relations?' To the extent that this book problematises the 'alleged relations', and examines the discontinuities and dissonances amongst, precisely, sex, gender and desire in women's self-fashioning, my theoretical approach might as well be called 'Butlerian' as anything else.

## Faire vivre la différence

When confronting the various, currently hegemonic, theories of sexuality from within the queer-feminist paradigm, it becomes necessary, as Butler recognises and Foucault does not, to engage with the vexed (and vexing) question of gender from the outset. The so-called 'inversion' or 'gender inversion' model of homosexuality has a long history in the taxonomy of desire (Wilton 2000a, Birke 2002) and all extant bioscientific accounts are buttressed by assumptions about gender-atypicality. The taken-for-grantedness of this paradigm is exemplified by Simon LeVay (1996, p. 275) who, in his general account of what he terms 'a century of research on sexual orientation' concludes that, 'homosexuality is not an isolated phenomenon, but is linked with a broader collection of sex-atypical characteristics'. Indeed, he goes further, returning to Magnus Hirschfeld's notion of the homosexual as a third sex and insisting that, although his terminology might now seem archaic, Hirschfeld was correct:

It is very possible that, if Hirschfeld were living today, he would have used the phrase 'third gender' rather than 'third sex'... But the basic idea remains unchanged, namely, that homosexuality is one aspect of a broader sex-atypical development. (LeVay 1996, p. 275)

This is an extraordinary claim. LeVay here asserts not only that homosexuality is linked to gender-atypicality but that it is in some way characteristic or symptomatic of such a state. In short, gender-atypicality becomes itself the privileged state, with non-conventional eroticism merely one among many of its signs or markers. This is a clever (perhaps unconsciously so) rhetorical device, since it presents as a *fait accompli* the relationship between erotic preference and something LeVay calls 'gender'.

Science is, of course, a cultural practice as much as it is a set of epistemologies or technologies, and its practitioners are therefore as much driven and shaped by the constraints of their cultural location as are priests or prostitutes. As Lynda Birke (2002:55) points out:

... whether or not it is 'natural', homosexuality has also been a stigmatized behaviour; indeed, all non-procreative sexual practices are condemned and vilified by some people. That social/cultural context profoundly influences the choices scientists make to study one phenomenon rather than another: it is 'deviant' sexualities, not heterosexuality, which is [sic] called into question.

It must be acknowledged that the bioscientists who unquestioningly assume that gender-atypicality is essential to homosexuality are not alone in this. Rather, similar sets of assumptions may be traced in sexual cultures around the world and through recorded history. Anthropologists recognise gender-inversion as one of the various structural protocols by which same-sex eroticism is formalised in several cultures. The *berdache* or two-spirit traditions of some native American nations, the *k'toi* or ladyboys of contemporary Thailand, the *hijra* of Hindu India and the *fa'afafine* of Samoa are among the better known examples of ways in which biological male individuals are culturally sanctioned in taking on elements of the lexicon of female performativity, generally incorporating an erotic element (Herdt 1984, Mageo 1992, Ramet 1996, Bishop and Osthelder 2001).

Although same-sex eroticism is often culturally encoded within lexica of gender in this way, this is not inevitably the case. Nevertheless, the over-determined cultural significance of gender in scientific discourse (Mayberry *et al.* 2001) seems to have ensured that homosexuality, itself a taxonomic product of that discourse, is almost inconceivable outwith the gender-inversion paradigm. Thus scientific theories of homosexuality, including those developed within psychology, remain, at root, theories about gender (Stein 1999).

It is not my purpose in this book to rehearse the inadequacies of existing bioscientific theories of same-sex eroticism. Such inadequacies have been resoundingly identified by other critics, many of whom are better placed to assess the rigour or otherwise of their claims than I am (see Ruse 1988, Birke 2002 and particularly Stein 1999). However, I do intend to identify the (often occluded) part played by (generally unproblematised) notions of gender in these discursive constructs of sexual orientations.

Nor shall I propose an alternative theory of 'lesbianism'. Indeed, this would seem a foolish enterprise given the daunting complexity of human sexual orientations/preferences/identities and their fraught and complicated intersections with and within the social, cultural, psychological and corporeal fields. Moreover, as will become clear during the course of my argument here, I no longer believe that a theory of 'lesbianism' is either possible or desirable, since I no longer believe that there is anything to have a theory 'of'.

Rather, I hope here to complicate and to enrich our understanding of the dynamic – almost dialectical – play of meaning around the contested idea 'lesbian' within and between women (their bodies, their desires and the business of producing their selves), the social and cultural milieux which they inhabit and the discourses whose hegemonic

contests produce and reproduce the relations of power within which sex 'matters' (Butler 1993).

In particular, I want to map the trace of key *discourses of lesbianism* through the lived experiences of women who undertake the process of constituting a self-conscious lesbian identity. Much of what follows below is, then, an account of an empirical research process devised with this aim in mind. Here, I want to map out the characteristics of discourses of orientation, firstly because their cultural dominance obliges women who question their own desires to engage with them in some way and, secondly, in order to plant a few more spores in the rotten old timbers that buttress essentialist assertions.

### **A shred of scientific evidence**

Given the rigour and detail of social constructionist accounts of sexual identity, it is worth asking why the natural sciences continue to pay attention to what seems (certainly to a social scientist) a pointless search for the aetiology of homosexuality and (importantly) why their claims carry so much weight.

To a certain extent, this has to do with the relationship between the social and the natural sciences. The latter, often laying claim to the privilege of naming their efforts simply 'science', tend to pay little attention to sociology, anthropology or cultural studies. Indeed, they pay precious little attention to the social and cultural realms of human sexual behaviour at all, a shortcoming which means that much of what is written about sexuality by natural scientists seems naive and ill-informed from a social scientific perspective.<sup>4</sup>

I will turn again to Simon LeVay whose work, although seeming to encompass a certain familiarity with social science – he refers explicitly to what he calls 'social constructivist' accounts (LeVay 1996:55) – is exemplary in its cavalier attitude to evidence when it comes to the social and the cultural. Whilst arguing that 'gays and lesbians, on average (and in some characteristics only), are shifted away from the norms for their sex' (1996:277), LeVay is obliged to attack those gay men who reject the notion that male homosexuality is associated with effeminacy. His argument against them is as follows:

Many gay men have not fully recovered from a childhood history of teasing or physical abuse on account of their unmasculinity. They may have rejected homophobia, but they have not always rejected

'femiphobia', and this may lead to an exaggerated denial of gender nonconformity as an aspect of homosexual identity. (LeVay 1996:277)

As a speculative hypothesis, this account seems plausible. It would certainly be interesting to set up a research project to test it – perhaps by in-depth interviews with a number of gay men, with a matched sample of non-gay men to act as a comparator group. Of course, it would be a research project of some complexity. For example, one would have to ensure that the sample size was substantial enough to include significant numbers of gay men who were not teased about their 'unmasculinity' as well as those who were, and that the gender typicality/atypicality of the researchers did not bias the outcome.

However, LeVay is not presenting this as a speculative hypothesis. He is presenting it as 'fact', and sees no need to back it up with evidence of any kind, asking us to take his word for it. He is, in short, exploiting the privileged status of the natural sciences as disciplinary arbiters of the 'real' and his own status as a professional scientist.<sup>5</sup> I suggest that it is helpful to scrutinise bioscientific accounts of any human behaviour for such instances of what might be termed 'epistemological relativism'; that is, instances where the social and cultural arenas are presented as amenable to explication by conjecture, anecdote and speculation, as distinct from physical phenomena, which require all the panoply of scientific rigour. As McIntosh notes (1968:31), 'The vantage point of comparative sociology enables us to see that the conception of homosexuality as a condition is, in itself, a possible object of study.'

## **Genesis of a theory of genesis**

Biomedical science, then, currently claims hegemonic status as the source of authoritative discourses of human sexuality and, within this paradigm, the explanatory claims of genetics are especially strong. This does not make sexuality unique or even unusual. As Richard Lewontin points out;

There is, at present, no aspect of social or individual life that is not claimed for the genes... Every physical, psychic or social ill, every perturbation of the body corporeal or politic, is said to be genetic. (Lewontin 2000, p. 193)

Discourses produced by (and about) genetics share with those located within all the biosciences a characteristic praxis in relation to human

sexuality. They produce a strong construct of something called sexual orientation, a taxonomic tool by which human beings are subdivided according to three types – homosexual, heterosexual and bisexual – the third term being necessary in order to maintain the coherence of the original binary (since individuals demonstrably exist who engage in sexual acts with both women and men). I shall refer to these discourses as discourses of orientation. Once this typology has been accepted, observation persuasively suggests that heterosexuality appears to be the most common type, and this, in turn, suggests that some kind of explanation is required for the ontogeny of non-heterosexually orientated individuals. Barbara Ponse, one of the earlier theorists to critique this paradigm as it applies to lesbians, named it ‘the principle of consistency’ and commented that:

... the principle of consistency ... influences how people think of sexual identities on the level of folk theory and is ensconced in Judaeo-Christian religious and legal views of sexuality. It is the underlying construct in so-called scientific theories of sex-related identities ... The principle of consistency ... assumes that the elements of sex assignment, gender identity, sex roles (or gender roles), sexual object choice and sexual identity vary together. (Ponse 1978, p. 24)

Discourses of orientation produce an important epistemological problem which they generally fail (or refuse) to acknowledge; once human sexuality has been subdivided into three types premised on the foundational significance of object-choice as male or female it becomes necessary to reify maleness and femaleness in specific ways in order to maintain the cognitive coherence of the taxonomy that is being promoted.

This necessity has produced an unacknowledged (one suspects, unrecognised) sleight of hand, in that theorists of sexual orientation have concerned themselves with trying to identify markers of maleness-or-femaleness-out-of-place in (presumptively) non-normatively sexually orientated persons. In other words, theorists of sexual orientation have built their work around a core set of unquestioned assumptions to do with inversion. Briefly, the argument runs something like this:

- (1) Heterosexuality is an observable statistical norm, therefore it is normal for a woman to want sexual relations with a man and vice versa.
- (2) If it is normal for a woman to want sexual relations with a man, then this becomes a characteristic or sign that one is a normal woman.
- (3) If it is normal for a man to want sexual relations with a woman, then this, too, becomes a characteristic sign that one is a normal man.

- (4) Therefore, if one is a woman who wants sexual relations with another woman, or a man who wants sexual relations with another man, this is a sign that one is *not* a normal woman or man.
- (5) Not only do such wishes signal that one is not normal, they constitute evidence that one's abnormality may be precisely located in one's woman-ness or man-ness.
- (6) Homosexuality is, then, an abnormality or malfunction in some essence that determines whether one *is* a woman or a man.

This argument underpins all attempts to explain human sexual orientation. Indeed, it is not possible to construct an explanation for sexuality as orientation without doing this, since the very notion that there is such a thing as a sexual orientation arises from this argument in the first place.

The narrowly focused gaze of the biologist, peering into the screen of the scanning electron microscope, may be unlikely to look critically upon generally held social and cultural assumptions about what it is to be a man or a woman. Nevertheless, they remain just that – assumptions. Criticising this narrow field of focus, Lewontin warns that, 'human beings are the consequences not of internally fixed programs of the genes, but of a continuous psychic development *within a social structure*' (2000, p. 216, my emphasis).

It is, of course, this social structure and the failure to perceive it as contingent in any way, which makes sexual orientation such a fragile and tenuous construct. Social scientists have critiqued inversion models of sexuality in many different ways. They have pointed out that 'normality' is, itself a discursively produced (and, hence, socially and culturally contingent) construct and that statistical normality is not of the same order of being as social, cultural or intuitive-subjective normality (Ruse 1988, Tiefer 1995). Historians have drawn attention to what is known about earlier cultures where the social organisation of the erotic was not structured around a homo/hetero binary, and have identified sexual orientation as a product of the nineteenth-century taxonomic project rather than a generally shared human characteristic (Foucault 1976, Weeks 1985, Greenberg 1988, Duberman *et al.* 1989, McCormick 1997). Anthropologists, on the other hand, whilst acknowledging that there are cultures where recognised social roles have evolved for men and/or women who are drawn to gender nonconformity, insist that such roles may have a relationship to the erotic that is simple, complex or even contradictory (Herdt 1984, Dekker and van de Pol 1989, Garber 1992, Ramet 1996), but which is seldom direct. In other words, same-sex eroticism may, indeed, be coupled with other-sex performativity, but the two may also be quite distinct.

In summary of her own critical account, Ponse concludes that:

Assuming the universality of the principle of consistency means that efforts to explain variations in sexual behaviour and sexual identity must resort to the idea of mistakes, either on the level of biological gender [sic] or on the level of socialization or psychosexual development... Empirically, however, it can be shown that the relations among sex-related identities, roles and sexual activities are problematic. (Ponse 1978, p. 28)

The 'orientation' element of sexual orientation has, then, been vigorously problematised by social scientists over four decades. Yet, perhaps surprisingly, relatively little attention has been paid to the other element, to sexuality itself. Few, if any, critics of discourses of sexual orientation have asked, what does it mean to have a sexual orientation? What is it that an individual is assumed to experience in order to qualify as sexually orientated, whether heterosexually or homosexually?

These, then, are the key questions addressed in this book. To answer requires us to problematise the component elements of sexual orientation; desire, sex and gender and to do so both by identifying and analysing the discursive constitution of all of these and by tracing the threads of those (already intertwined) discourses in the warp and weft woven together by individual women as they fashion their sexual selves.

# 2

## Declaration of Self-Interest: Epistemological and Methodological Conundrums

The social scientist is in a difficult, if not impossible, position. On the one hand, there is the temptation to see all of society as one's autobiography writ large, surely not the path to general truth. On the other, there is the attempt to be general and objective by pretending that one knows nothing about the experience of being human ...

(Richard Lewontin *It Ain't Necessarily So: The Dream of the Human Genome and other Illusions*, p. 252)

This book is about the self. Specifically, it is about the ways in which sex, gender, desire and the erotic become available for incorporation into our self-fashioning. It is about women, and how we women do the work of building a sexual identity for ourselves where our habitus requires this of us. It is about persons, personas and personalities, and about how best to make sense of desire and erotic pleasure in relation to each of these.

This is, of course, an over-laden and contested lexicon. Words like self, sex, gender, person, desire, identity, gender and personality are, at the same time, both culturally weighty and semiotically slippery. They seem to beg more questions than they resolve. To construct a theoretical argument on such shifty foundation is to risk collapsing into incoherence. Of course, issues to do with sexuality are also profoundly political, it is important to strip away – at least, as far as possible – ambiguity, opacity and the possibilities for misinterpretation.

What, for example, do I mean by the phrase 'we women'? Given the extreme volatility which marks the entire semiotic field of sex and sexuality this has to be a closely delimited and contingent 'we'. I certainly make no claims for the existence of some generic constant of 'womanhood'. The illusory nature of such claims was exposed long ago, by political

struggles within the women's movement, by developments in feminist theory and, much later, by wider theoretical developments including poststructuralism and postmodernism. Julia Kristeva (1982, cited in Tong 1989, p. 230) is typical of what later came to be known as post-structuralist feminism in her insistence that 'woman' is not a stable ontological category:

The belief that 'one is a woman' is almost as absurd and obscurantist as the belief that 'one is a man' ... a woman cannot 'be'; it is something which does not even belong in the order of being.

One beneficiary of this epistemological history is queer theory (although, like all such children, it is disinclined to acknowledge its parentage), so it is a given that the various identity labels to do with sexuality are equally contingent and non-generic. From this position, a word such as 'lesbian' is spoken within carefully acknowledged parameters, since it carries radically distinct meaning(s), significance(s) and implications depending on site and location (Wilton 1995a, 2000b, Farquhar and Wilton 2000). Indeed, just how radical such distinctions may be is one of the key findings to emerge from the present inquiry.

The account presented here cannot, therefore, stand as a generalisable set of claims about the experiences of 'lesbians', still less of 'women'. However, this is not the task in hand. Rather, I hope to use the accounts of these individual women to interrogate existing discourses of sexual 'orientation', of gender-normativity and of identities, selves and their means of production.

This is why I prefer the term 'self-fashioning' to more widely used alternatives such as 'the project of self' or 'identity formation', since it implies both a working-with whatever materials come to hand (one fashions something out of something, often in an ingenious or serendipitous way) and an acknowledgement of the culturally fragile and transitory nature of what is produced, since it may come into or go out of fashion. All of these meanings seem to me to resonate productively with the troublesome – in the classic Butlerian sense (Butler 1990) – business of knitting our selves.

Sexuality is, perhaps more than most other cultural spheres, characterised by this kind of semiotic instability; it is privatised and yet saturates the datasphere, it is presented as the most transcendent of human pleasures and yet the most shameful, it is thought to be the last remaining 'refuge of the natural' (Weeks 1985) whilst being embedded in artifice and densely encoded in ritual. This, in turn, complicates the business of incorporating the erotic into a self.

An individual's sexual identity must be fashioned from whatever cultural matter is available if it is to have psychological, social and cultural utility. If, for example, a young Irish Catholic man with a primary erotic attraction to other men tried to adopt the identity of fa'afafine (Lang 1998), this would not be particularly effective in enabling him to occupy a meaningful 'ecological niche' in social and cultural terms, unless he emigrated to Samoa where the role was produced and where it is intelligible.

Nor are such culturally produced identities stable over time. Indeed, they demonstrate a marked tendency to shift and mutate in response to the impact of such cultural interpenetrations as colonialism, globalisation and new media (particularly what have been dubbed 'unstable' media such as the internet) or simply to the passage of time. In Samoa, for example, there is ongoing debate about the similarities and differences between fa'afafine and 'gay' Samoan men, a debate complicated by concerns about paedophilia (Jackson 2002). The thesaurus of available (and variously synonymic) sex and gender identities in twenty-first century Samoa is struggling to construct some meaningful synthesis between globally dominant western accounts, local tradition, the legacy of proselytising Christian colonialism and of-the-moment concerns about the sexual exploitation of children (Mageo 1992, 2002). Similar 'coherency struggles' are continually framed and reframed in all cultural locations.

My aims, therefore, is to try and observe the dynamics of this process, to track the spoor of discursive trajectories as they move across and are captured into accounts of the self. I hope that, much as the behaviours of subatomic particles become available for scrutiny through the wake they leave in bubble chambers (Parker 1977), so the effects of discourse will become legible in the ways in which they contribute to the fashioning of selves – particularly socially troublesome or disobedient selves.

Given that the matter under scrutiny is so intimate (sexual pleasures, desires, upheavals in the realm of the erotic), as well as so politically dynamic, it seems important to speak in as clear and unambiguous a way as possible. This does not mean launching into language of stripped simplicity – if you want a txt msg abt lesbian sexuality ask someone else – because the issues discussed here are dauntingly complex. 'Simple language', writes Watney (1987, p. 4), 'cannot always explain complex phenomena. You would not try to cut through welded steel with plastic knives and forks.' It does, however, mean that it is important to keep obfuscation at bay (emotional and political as much as linguistic) and, hence, to embrace transparency and an explicitness about values and investments.

## The interested self

I want, therefore, to make a triple declaration of self-interest. Firstly, as a woman who shifted into the desiring position 'lesbian' from the putatively 'opposite' position 'heterosexual' (though this perception will be dealt with in what follows), I am interested in making sense of that journey in my own psychic and embodied history. With Foucault, what I write is part of the reflexive process of my own self-fashioning.

Secondly, as a lesbian I have a political and social interest in undermining hegemonic discourse of the erotic, and the regimes of disciplinary power they produce and inhabit. I can, for example, understand why some of my queer contemporaries want to believe that homosexuality is 'real', that it is 'really' different from heterosexuality and that the difference is caused by something outside personal will or agency (LeVay 1993, 1996, Young-Bruehl 1996). The plea, 'we can't help it, so be nice to us' is a seductive response to the experience of oppression, perhaps especially for a group of people customarily bullied and excluded when young (Comstock 1991, Harbeck 1991, Kaufmann and Lincoln 1991, Epstein 1994, Mason and Palmer 1996). As a political strategy, however, history suggests it is unlikely to be effective. Most of the groups singled out for 'othering' or for social exclusion have no control over the characteristic from which their marginalisation is produced and takes its justification. None of us has control over our biological sex,<sup>1</sup> skin colour, ethnicity, dis/ability, nor the cultural and religious communities into which we are born. My second self-interested investment, then, is an avowedly political one.

The third of my interests is simply a continuing intellectual interest in 'the self'; in what 'it' is, how it is fashioned, how it functions, and to what extent it is possible (given the limits of our brains, our minds and the scientific tools at our disposal), to make sense of the knotted mesh of social, cultural, psychic and corporeal trajectories which produce and shape all our selves.

My interest focuses on the erotic, because it is here that particularly rich 'nodes' of signification form. The erotic is a locus through which and across which the power play of discourses may be traced with unusual clarity. Discourses around bodies, sex, maleness, femaleness, desire, ab/normality, disgust, sin, salvation, health, pathology and death coalesce around the erotic, and the sign *lesbian* not only participates in this complexity but stands as the pre-eminent location from which it may be unravelled (Wilton 1995a, 1997a). I continue to believe that *lesbian* is the only site from which to carry out a sufficiently radical demolition

job on the hegemonic apparatus of my time. What I mean by this will become clearer as my argument here progresses.

This expression of interested investment is not intended to undermine the rigour of my argument, nor to pre-empt its critical scrutiny by others. Rather, it is an attempt to make more permeable the interface between the writing and the reading of this text, to offer more information about the human activities involved in the production of the data, the theories and the conclusions written here. Of course, declaring self-interest in this way is not without risk. The reader whose allegiances lie elsewhere may decide that my involvement in the things I am trying to deconstruct invalidates what I say; that being queer and a woman has, for example, given me a chip on my shoulder or produced some intellectual incapacity associated with special case pleading. There really is not much I can do about this, beyond trying to ensure transparency about my motivations and methodologies.

### **On transparency**

It is one of the tenets of feminist epistemology that claims to scholarly objectivity are either naive or rhetorical. Key feminist theorists of the second wave, including Dale Spender (1980, 1981), Audre Lorde (1984), Kate Millett (1970) and others (see Humm 1989, Gunew 1991), pointed out that the tradition of scholarly objectivity was not an otherwise attainable goal that had been contaminated with the demands of male self-interest but was itself produced and driven by the masculinist hegemonic project. In short, the fantasy of objectivity is an intrinsic element of the masculinist technical/epistemological paradigm.

Postmodernist theory, which we may now see as the inevitable product of various new social movements or counter-hegemonic intellectual/activist projects (including feminism), has developed and enlarged this – initially political – distrust of objectivity. From within the postmodern paradigm, assertions of impersonal detachment appear as one among many semiotic strategies deployed to underpin truth-claims that are inevitably competing, contingent and permeable. Far from being merely complicit with regimes of superordination such assertions are, in Foucaultian terms, inevitably and inextricably part of the apparatus of power. What is required of us, then, is what Foucault termed an ‘archaeology of knowledge’ (Foucault 1972), that is, an enterprise that regards the apparatuses of knowing (*scientia*) as proper objects of scrutiny and would aim to disinter scientific objectivity from its embeddedness in practice and interpret it as no more and no less than a cultural artefact.

I therefore make no claims for objectivity but, rather, claims about it. Drawing on my training in feminist theory and epistemology, I want here to make explicit the likely limits of my objectivity in relation to the topic under scrutiny. Nor should this self-exposure be read as a form of theoretical seduction, an attempt to ensure that the text is read through the eyes of its author. It is, rather, intended to make the process of theory-building as transparent and accessible as possible, and to locate it in the psycho-social where I would suggest all such projects properly belong.

Perhaps it is particularly absurd to pretend that the study of desire could hope to be emotionally empty, sterilised, 'objective'. Many, of course, have claimed precisely this. Indeed many scholars within the field of sexuality studies have felt impelled to insist on their personal detachment from that which they studied, because of the very real and material risks of working in such a stigmatised and culturally over-significant area.

Thus, those exploring lesbian or gay desires have, until recently, blazoned their heterosexual credentials (even where tendentious) in the forematter of their books (e.g. Humphries 1970, Barron Barrett 1990) or have buried their more personal interest beneath a camouflage net of classical references or scientific cabbalism (e.g. Symonds 1928, Hirschfeld and Jennings White 1925). It is because these courageous individuals, and others like them, continued the struggle to speak about these muted desires – a love, after all, that dared not speak its name – that I and my queer academic fellows enjoy such freedom to play around with ideas about sex and the erotic. In particular, my ability to speak and write openly as a lesbian scholar is their legacy. When I reject as pretence the tradition of objectivity, then, I do so in the full understanding of what it meant to my forebears to be able to call upon that tradition to create a small place of safety from which to speak about the unspeakable. I do, however, think that the time for indulgence is past. Claims to impersonal objectivity made at this point in time are anachronistic and fraudulent, and I intend to deal with them as such in what follows.

### **The trouble with scientific objectivity**

Another of my motives for writing this book is my frustration with the inability or refusal of the physical sciences to engage with the social. It is little short of alarming to witness the ploughing of precious research funds into the laboratories of those trying to winkle out somatic signifiers of homosexuality when, from the perspective of a social scientist, the project appears both anachronistic and pointless.

It is, of course, the social, political and cultural power of the natural sciences that is at issue here, a hegemony which bestows authority and credibility to such an extent that science might be said to occupy a cell of immunity within mainstream culture in the west. Whilst it is certainly the case that postmodernity has brought a degree of cynicism about and willingness to challenge the truth-claims of, for example, biomedicine (Gabe *et al.* 1994), such critiques appear remarkably restricted. In the field of sex and the erotic, the physical sciences continue to command public credibility to an extraordinary degree, given the naivety and fragility of their epistemological premises (about which, more below). It may, of course, be the case that the fluidity and relativisms of postmodernism make the rationalist claims of (certain kinds of) science more seductive rather than less.

This cell of immunity is constructed on the foundational claim of the physical sciences to a dispassionate, impersonal objectivity from which individual investment and emotional content is systematically evacuated. The currently hegemonic nature of 'science' as arbiter of the real depends to a great extent on the continued acceptance of such claims to rational disinterest. So adept are scientists at asserting objectivity that the notion of 'science' is routinely deployed to mark a point opposite to acts of credulity or faith.

In part, natural scientists have reinforced the claims to objectivity of their praxis by 'othering' social scientists as naive and credulous. Thus Lewontin (2000, p. 251) implies that sociological research into sexualities is invalidated by the impossibility of verifying 'what people do "in the bedroom"':

It is frightening to think that social science is in the hands of professionals who are so deaf to human nuance that they believe that people do not lie to themselves about the most freighted aspects of their own lives, and that they have no interests in manipulating the impression that strangers have of them.<sup>2</sup>

In response, it is worth paying some attention to the ways in which the facade of scientific detachment has been deployed in the natural sciences in order to conceal or deny what may, from a different perspective, seem to be important personal concerns driving research in pre-determined directions. Bear with me, then, while I indulge in what seems like a detour into biography. For it seems that many famous scientists who have made influential claims about the nature of sexual desire and/or gender have deeply personal reasons for making the claims

that they make. Exposing this is fairly central to my project here, since it is a strategy for shoehorning science out of its accustomed disciplinary immunity, exposing the ideological content of essentialist narratives and (as McIntosh proposed) subjecting the scientific process to sociological scrutiny as a cultural and political praxis.

It is certainly, at least, worth asking whether the strength of an individual scientist's personal motives adds to or detracts from the legitimacy of their truth-claims. John Colapinto (2000), for example, finds much that worries him in the autobiography of John Money. Money was the leading advocate both of sex reassignment surgery and of surgical intervention to 'fix' the sex of infants born with a range of 'intersex' conditions. A firm believer in the power of nurture<sup>3</sup> (and medicine) to overrule nature, he is credited as the originator of the idea of core gender identity (Hausman 1995). It is, therefore, surely significant that, as Colapinto reports, Money appears to be profoundly troubled about the nature of masculinity, partly due to the brutality of his father and the circumstances of his family life in later childhood:

After his father's death, Money was raised in an exclusively feminine atmosphere by his mother and spinster aunts, whose anti-male diatribes also had a lasting effect on him. 'I suffered from the guilt of being male,' he wrote. 'I wore the mark of man's virile sexuality' – that is, the penis and testicles. (Colapinto 2000, p. 27)

It does not require training in radical feminist or Freudian theory to alert the reader to worrying implications in this confession of 'the guilt of being male'. Money's pre-eminence as a theorist and clinician resulted in widespread acceptance of his theories of core gender identity, upon which is premised the whole clinical apparatus of transsexuality and sex reassignment surgery, as well as the practice of carrying out major genital surgery on 'intersex' infants.

Money's account of core gender identity has also been extremely influential in reinforcing inversion theories of sexual orientation, and thus shores up the (otherwise rather weak) body of research evidence for biomedical aetiology of queer desires. In short, Money's theoretical work on the nature of gender brings the epistemological and professional power of medicine to bear on the policing of sex-normativity (Wilton 2000a). As Colapinto wryly concludes:

In light of Money's future fame in both adult and infant sex change, his next comment has an unsettling tenor: 'I wondered if the world

might really be a better place for women if not only farm animals but human males also were gelded at birth.' (Colapinto 2000, p. 27)

If it were widely known that the originary advocate of castration as a clinical 'solution' to the problem presented by men who yearn to be women held such views, it seems likely that the clinical argument for the existence of gender dysphoria as a medical 'condition' would have been received more critically. And this is precisely my argument; that 'scientific objectivity' works to conceal the psychological, emotional and political imperatives at work in theory-building. Hence, not only does the doctrine operate in the interests of hegemonic power, it also operates to disavow the impact of emotions as they operate within the masculinist paradigm. This, together with the construction of femininity as the cultural repository of excessive emotion (and thereby properly excluded from putatively rationalist fields of activity), sets up as the scientific ideal a model of masculinist rationalism from which emotion has purportedly been evacuated.

In Money's case, his lack of reflexivity and disavowal of emotional investment seems to have led him to conceal, misinterpret or simply lie about the results of his experiments on human subjects (Hausman 1995, Colapinto 2000). An enormous edifice of theory (and clinical practice) to do with his notion of 'core gender identity' remains in place, despite the fact that it is predicated on a great deal of obfuscation. Had Money been trained in the kinds of reflexive, self-aware research methodologies that are to be found in the social sciences (and that are routine in feminist epistemologies), it is arguable that this unhappy situation would not have arisen.

To refuse the cloak of this opacity is, then, to make the work of scholarly inquiry more, not less, rigorous. It is not that the researcher's excitements, anxieties, fears and pleasures contaminate the research or compromise their ability clearly to capture, assess, analyse and account for their data. Rather, intimate awareness and conscious integration of those emotional elements enables the reflexive social scientist to construct a more layered and explicit account. I am, therefore, going to locate my own experience in the domain of this study, in order to foreground the place of reflexivity and self-awareness in what follows. I hope, too, to complicate both the power relations between researcher and researched and that between author and reader.

## **What happened to me**

The notion of sexual orientation stopped making sense to me when, after 'being heterosexual' I became, at the age of 36, a lesbian. None of

the events and experiences routinely described in the theoretical or autobiographical literature on sexual identity formation were true in my case. I had been enthusiastic, rather than unhappy as a heterosexual. I had taken great pleasure in men's bodies, had found many men very desirable and attractive, and had enjoyed my sexual relationships with them. There was no sexual abuse lurking in my childhood, and I had not been especially tomboyish. I had enjoyed (and still do) wearing skirts and dresses at least as much as trousers, and decorating myself with jewellery. In particular, I always felt that a female body was greatly preferable to a male one as a vehicle for living in the world.

None of this ceased to be true about me when I became a lesbian. I had simply discovered that, if sex and intimacy with men were good, they were unimaginably better with women. I am fortunate enough to live in the right place and the right time to be able to take my own pleasures and emotional well-being seriously, to have a substantial degree of autonomy (culturally, materially, politically) and to have a sexual identity-label available to me that enables me to live my life according to this new discovery.

This personal history has shaped the way I carry out my research, and this should be acknowledged and made explicit. It is, of course, likely that it has an influence over and above what I am consciously aware of; none of us can claim to evade such influences and I invite the reader to be alert to this possibility.

What other epistemological assumptions underpin this research? The production of knowledge is a cultural process and, hence, inevitably located within certain parameters in terms of what may be scrutinised, how it may be scrutinised and how the results of that scrutiny may be presented. This account, therefore, pays attention to discourse (both as data and as a product of the research process itself) and to the relations of power within which the research takes place (both as they structure the field of what is to be researched and as they play out in the research process). More substantive details lead into the realm of methodologies.

## **Methodological problems and solutions**

Once the problematic nature of 'desire' is acknowledged, and in particular the significance of discourse in relation to desire, any theoretical claim about sexual identity formation requires the rigorous critical interrogation of these two (dynamic, mutually inflexive) elements. This presents the theorist of sexuality with a difficulty; how may the operations

of discourse and the experience of desire empirically be located within processes of sexual self-fashioning?

## **Deconstructing discourse**

Discourse is at least a complex an entity as is desire. As meaning-making creatures, human beings inhabit and are in an important sense generated by a discursive environment. For us, unlike okapi or slugs, there is no extra-discursive or pre-discursive 'reality'. Discourse is not material, although it may be so in its manifestations and its effects. Foucault, paying attention to the operations of power at the micro-level, recognised that the hegemonic process is discursive. Discourse is the currency of power.

There are many ways in which critically to engage with discourse. Discourses of sexuality, in particular, saturate popular and elite culture in the hegemonic bloc, as well as emerging from the most powerful social institutions such as medicine, religion and the legislature. Lesbian, gay, feminist and queer scholars have produced a vast body of work identifying the operations of discourses of sexuality as they act upon gender, sex and the erotic. I have undertaken such deconstructive work myself (e.g. Wilton 1996b, 1997). However, for my purposes here, I am interested not so much in the discourses themselves, but in theorising the discursive dynamic of self-fashioning as 'lesbian'. The operations of discourse are, to put it mildly, complex. As with any abstract idea, finding the right metaphor is half the battle, and I find myself drawing on terminology from the physics of electromagnetic radiation in order to think about the processes of discursive activity.

Discourse saturates the human sphere of cognition and awareness just as, in the twenty-first century, our physical sphere is saturated with various kinds of electromagnetic radiation encoded with information. We exist, for example, in a sea of broadcast radio waves encoding music, speech and other forms of data. Given the right equipment – a radio or television set – we are able to decode and interpret the data carried within a particular wavelength. Understanding the operations of discourses of sexuality, then, requires that we 'tune in' to the various sites broadcasting such discourses. The notion of 'broadcasting' is nice (in the original meaning of the word) since discourses may not be generated as such, merely produced by engaging in various ways with existing discourses. In the same way, radio broadcasts do not invent previously unknown languages.

Just as a media studies researcher will engage in audience research in order to understand the reception of cultural products (such as soap operas), we then need to engage with individuals and groups on the receiving end of discourses in order fully to understand the dynamic processes whereby they consume, digest, reproduce or challenge and thus make their own contribution to the development and circulation of the discourse in question. Reception theory and classic post-structuralism teach us that 'reading' cultural texts is an active process (hence the 'death of the author' argument) and that the text, in fact, 'occurs' during the act of reading. The same is true of discourse; inevitably so, since discourse is itself (generally) textually encoded. Individual 'consumption' of discourse produces that discourse for the individual and whatever that individual may do in response then contributes to the endless, subtle transformations by which the discursive dynamic is maintained.

The discursive dynamic of lesbianism is characterised by a (not untypical) complexity. Claims about the nature of same-sex desire, activities and persons are broadcast from a range of discursive locations; biomedical science, lesbian and gay communities, high and popular culture and religion, to name but a few. Typically, claims originating in politically powerful discursive locations will be regarded as authoritative and will achieve hegemony. Given the sources of information that are most easily accessible to the greatest number of people, almost all claims about minority sexualities will be mediated/filtered through the mass media (high circulation newspapers, television programmes and the internet).

Thus, the claim that male homosexuality is associated with an enlarged third interstitial nucleus of the anterior hypothalamus (LeVay 1993) was 'broadcast' from within biomedical science and was able to lay claim to dual status as authoritative, for the researcher involved was himself a gay man. Once broadcast, this claim itself contributed to reinforcing the discourses of orientation which dominate the biomedical sciences (a circular process whereby authoritative discourses may themselves act to reproduce their own authoritative status). It also contributed to discourses of involuntarism produced within gay community groups in the interests of lobbying for gay rights (another circular process, since LeVay is, himself, a member of that community) and, through its representation in the mass media, to what might be called 'informal mainstream', or common sense, understandings of gay identities circulating in lay communities.

Other sites for the production of authoritative discourse – including religious institutions, mainstream medicine, the legislature and other apparatuses of the state – were then obliged to engage with LeVay's

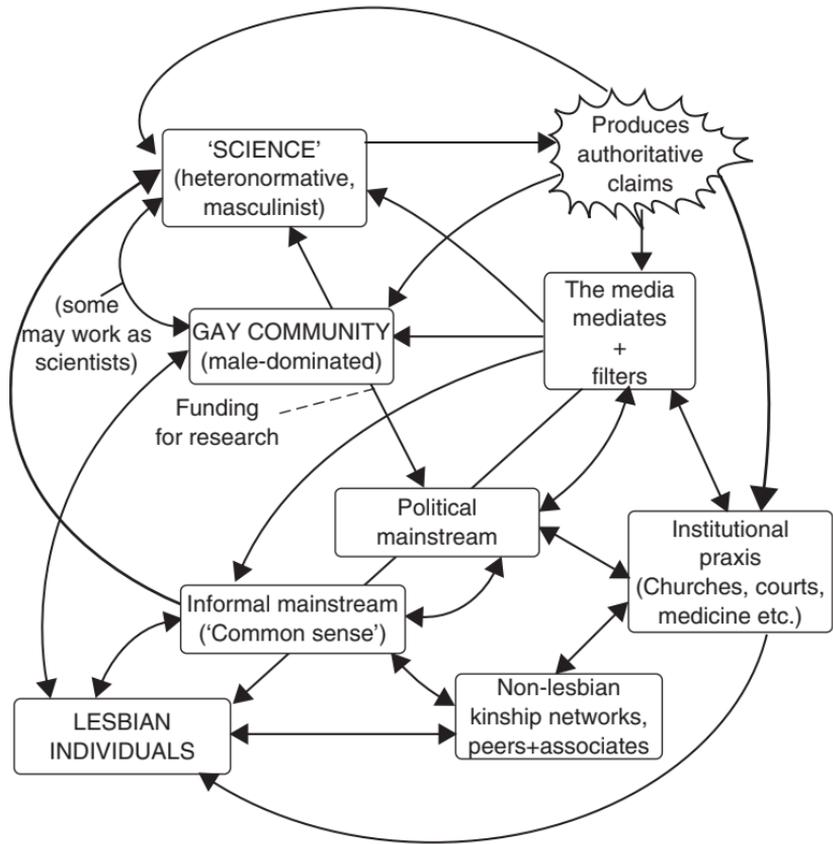


Figure 2.1 Tracing the trajectory of discourses of 'lesbianism'

claims and to integrate them (in an obedient or disobedient manner) into their own discourses of sexuality.

I have here reproduced the diagram (Figure 2.1) which I sketched out whilst tracing the discursive dynamic of orientationalist accounts. Note, importantly, that the trajectories of discourse between different sites are generally two-way. This is characteristic of the discursive dynamic. I have tried to distinguish between more powerful/authoritative and less powerful/authoritative forms of discursive production by the relative size of the arrow heads on the diagram. Thus, although lesbians contribute to the production of discourse which takes place in the gay community, this is far less powerful than is the impact of the (gay male-dominated) community discourses upon lesbians.

The task here is to scrutinise the operations of the discursive dynamic at key sites, in particular as they impact on lesbian individuals. Whilst

it should be relatively easy to gather information about this particular element during the course of interviews, this is not the case for other elements.

It is, of course, relatively straightforward to trace shifts in culturally dominant discourses of lesbianism by analysis of mainstream media representation of lesbians or by traditional assays of social attitudes, and such studies have been carried out (e.g. Armitage *et al.* 1987, Sanderson 1995, Mason and Palmer 1996). It is also not difficult to tune in to dominant discourses in the lesbian and gay community, and I have done this by examining textual output in the form of community websites, magazines and so on.

However, such techniques cannot tell us much about the ways in which discourses are accessed and processed by non-lesbian individuals during the ongoing production of either personal or social 'attitudes' to lesbians. Since such attitudes influence both the hegemony of discourses of sexuality and the daily lived experiences of lesbians, tuning in to them is important.

To do anything approaching this requires that classic of social investigation, the focus group. However, focus groups have many weaknesses; not least of which is that they require the researcher to recruit an inevitably self-selecting group of people for a stated purpose. Rather than setting up a formal focus group, then, I decided to take the risk (ethical as well as methodological) of appropriating some raw 'data' from my day-to-day professional activities.

I regularly run training workshops on sexuality. Participants in these workshops are generally voluntary sector workers, trainee health and social care professionals or students, and sessions are designed to allow an opportunity to reflect on personal beliefs about sexuality as well as on the attitudes and norms of the peer group/community and wider society. These are certainly not 'focus groups' in any formal sense. Indeed, the aim is to encourage participants not only to become self-consciously aware of their beliefs, but reflexively to question and (hopefully) to modify them.

Such aims are, of course, very different from those of much mainstream academic research, where the stress is precisely on how to ensure that researchers may avoid influencing participants and, hence, capture 'uncontaminated' data. Given the epistemological discussion above, it will be anticipated that I do not regard the capture of 'clean' data as an achievable or desirable task. This is unabashedly 'dirty' data.

Moreover, one of the key insights of feminist epistemology has been its recognition of the extent to which the socio-cultural location of the

researcher (in terms of gender, social class, ethnic/cultural/religious background and so on) informs every stage of the research process, from the development of the research question right through to the interpretation of data (DuBois 1983, Stanley and Wise 1983, Humm 1989, Hill Collins 1990). The innovation, however, was not merely to point to the extent to which this 'contaminated' a research process that might otherwise be 'clean'. Rather, feminists developed a research praxis which strove to identify, to make explicit and to exploit the ways in which this dynamic (inevitable, after all) enriched the process and the product of research. 'For example', concludes Humm (1989, p. 192), 'research must make explicit the everyday knowledge of the researcher as well as that of the researched'.

The implications of this for the feminist epistemological project are significant. Elizabeth Gross, tracing a paradigm shift from a feminism of equality to what she terms a feminism of autonomy (Gross 1989), summarizes them thus:

the struggle for autonomy, impl[ies] struggles for the right to different paradigms, theoretical tools, and possible even a reconceptualization of the entire system of knowledges and acceptable theoretical methods. (Gross 1992, p. 361)

In many ways, feminist theory is exemplary postmodern theory, insofar as it repudiates the illusory business of producing putatively value-neutral truth-claims by engaging in 'objective' research. Moreover, where the epistemological impact of postmodern theory – with its insistence on partiality, relativism, contingency and instability – has seemed to pull the rug out from under the feet of many scholars, the social and cultural marginality of the female scholarly gaze enabled feminist theorists to take full advantage of these theoretical developments.

... feminist theory no longer seems to seek the status of unchangeable, trans-historical and trans-geographic truth in its hypotheses and propositions. Rather, it seeks effective forms of intervention into systems of power in order to subvert them and replace them with others more preferable. (Gross 1989, p. 361)

I want, therefore, to clarify my strategy in drawing upon material garnered, explicitly, outwith the formal parameters of my research project. Ethically, this process is analogous to taking any other form of data generated for other purposes (newspaper articles or gay community websites for example). The data, in the form of flip-chart sheets salvaged from the workshop, together with the usual handwritten notes I made at the time, do not compromise the confidentiality of participants, none of

whom is identifiable. I make no claims for these workshops as 'valid' research tools, indeed I am not interested in validity, generalisability, replicability nor any other ritualistic trappings of traditional social-scientific research.

I do suggest, however, that these gatherings may be considered as events which offer an interesting glimpse of patterns of interaction/intersection of discourses to do with sex and sexuality as they play out in lay culture. It is in the spirit of such informality, and in full recognition of the serendipity of my claims, that I begin this research journey by paying attention to something that caught my interest during the course of one of these training workshops.

### **Lesbians: a cause of confusion**

Participants in this particular workshop, eleven self-declared heterosexual women, were asked, *inter alia*, to reflect upon three things: what lesbians are like, what lesbianism is and what being a lesbian is like. The aims of the workshop were, of course, to encourage critical engagement with these three themes. For our purposes here, however, I suggest that this group can function as a window onto, or snapshot of, mainstream cultural constructs of sexuality. The 'raw material' produced by the group is very revealing, although what it reveals is limited by the usual parameters – age, social class, ethnic and cultural background, geopolitical location and so on – that constrain more formal research using groups.

The 'data' captured during the course of this particular workshop offered rich insights into many facets of the socio-cultural construction of lesbianism, including; mainstream perceptions of and beliefs about lesbians and lesbian life, lay and expert discourses on lesbianism, the degree to which the competing claims to authority of such discourses are legitimated or contested and the status of lesbians (socially, culturally, morally, politically) as a minority with certain claims to human and civil rights.

This is not the place to examine these data in detail. For my purposes here I want to draw attention to three sets of views that the group expressed and which seem to me to flag up something interesting and important about key contradictions in hegemonic claims about the 'nature' of sexuality, and about lesbian sexuality in particular.

I have always thought it must be much nicer.

When asked to consider the possible advantages for women of choosing other women as their sexual partners, members of the group seemed to

have no problems imagining what these might be. Their list stressed key relationship issues such as; a greater possibility of intimacy and trust, greater likelihood of sexual satisfaction, greater equality between partners, a more equitable division of domestic labour, greater likelihood of sympathy/empathy when in the throes of pre-menstrual tension or the menopause and avoidance of problematic aspects of male behaviour such as poor personal hygiene, obsession with sports/computer games or over-indulgence in alcohol.

Of course, since none of these women had direct personal experience of a lesbian relationship, this list tells us nothing about what such relationships are 'really' like. It does, however, reveal these non-lesbian women's fantasies about lesbian life. It also says much about their perceptions of and frustrations with heterosexual intimacy, something richly documented in the literature (see Hite 2000 for a summary of some of this literature).

In a cultural context where the social structuration of sexual intimacy is going through swift and radical transformation (Giddens 1992, Adkins 2002, Charles 2002, Haywood and Mac an Ghail 2003) and where the burden of expectation placed on the romantic/erotic dyad grows ever greater in response to the wider cultural fluctuations of late capitalism/postmodernity, these women seemed to perceive lesbianism as a refuge from the disappointments of heterosexuality. Moreover, the lexicon they drew on to validate this shared perception was one of individual fulfilment and personal 'growth'. From this position – arguably the paradigmatic discursive locus of postmodern self-fashioning – for a woman to select another woman as her sexual and intimate partner appears as nothing more nor less than an act of rational self-interest.

This is an interesting, perhaps even an extraordinary, position, since it constructs sexuality in a relatively value-neutral way as one among a series of variables (components, almost) from which the good life may be constituted. Individualistic and privatistic, this account sits well with the general commodification of sensation and emotion so characteristic of late capitalism (Jencks 1996). It is extraordinary since it is so radically disharmonious with key elements of otherwise hegemonic accounts of sexuality, as becomes apparent when we consider the second element to emerge from this workshop.

Scientists have found the gene, haven't they?

When asked to reflect upon what they believed to be the nature of lesbianism, participants became confused. All were aware of one or more of the key essentialist theories of sexual orientation and specific

mention was made of hormonal theories and the putative discovery of a 'gay gene'. Some of their confusion had to do with the complexity of the hypotheses themselves and this is unsurprising, since the sources cited for this information were tabloid newspapers or television news reports. Nevertheless, despite their acknowledged difficulty in fully comprehending the bioscientific theories, all participants expressed the belief that scientists had identified a 'cause' for homosexuality.

This acceptance of the legitimacy and authority of essentialist bioscientific theories of homosexuality seems directly to contradict the post-modern self-fashioning position which informed participants' discussion of the reasons why women might have a strong preference for other women as sexual partners. After all, something cannot be a rational choice and at the same time an intrinsic malfunction of an individual's biological makeup. However rational it might be to be, say, white-skinned in a white supremacist culture, individuals may not change their skin colour at will, since it is biologically determined. The biomedical paradigm proposes that sexual orientation is a biological characteristic of the same order as skin or eye colour. Participants gave a substantial degree of credence to this paradigm; yet at the same time they seemed to believe in the potential for individuals to express a sexual preference on the grounds of rational self-interest.

This paradox becomes more complex and, for my purpose here, more suggestive, when faced with the third set of beliefs to emerge from this workshop.

It's not that I'm saying they want to be men, but ...

Participants made a range of statements about the presumptive link between being a lesbian and being in some sense manly or masculinised. There was keen and interested debate around the question of whether the masculinity of lesbians was 'real', or some kind of cultural artefact. Two kinds of cultural artefact model were proposed. Firstly, that lesbians may tend to look manly because, since they do not have to attract a male partner, they 'let themselves go' (this phrase was used repeatedly, by different participants, during the discussion, and is clearly resonant). This process of letting themselves go was said to involve becoming fat and slovenly, wearing 'comfortable' clothes and 'sensible' shoes and not using grooming products.<sup>4</sup>

The second suggestion was that the butch/femme stereotype originated in US bar culture and, although it was necessary to 'act butch' in order to survive in such a ritualised environment, such behaviours did

not indicate that there was anything intrinsically or 'really' masculine about all lesbians.

The sophistication of these arguments suggest a fairly well-honed awareness of the ritualised and highly coded nature of urban social interactions, as well as a working familiarity with feminist theories around gender performativity and the policing of women through dress codes and a kind of compulsory femininity. However, there was less certainty when considering the extent to which any kind of 'real' masculinisation might be associated with lesbians in general. When faced with trying to decide whether or not a lesbian would be likely to have more body hair than a heterosexual woman, for example, the group tended to fall back upon the biological sciences, recalling in particular the hypothesis that lesbianism is of hormonal origin.

### Cutting the Gordian Knot

The debates engendered by this workshop offer strong evidence for the relative legitimacy accorded within mainstream lay culture to the competing discourses of sexuality. The wider cultural and social hegemony of the 'hard' sciences make it unsurprising that the biosciences speak with such authority on this issue, despite the fact that essentialist discourses of sexual orientation appear to contradict the discursive construction of sexual preference within the postmodern self-fashioning paradigm.

It may, of course, be argued that the group's inability to reconcile their conflictual stance in relation to the biosciences simply demonstrates Lyotard's suggestion that 'an important current of postmodernity [is the fact that] science plays its own game; it is incapable of legitimating the other language games' (Lyotard 1986, p. 40). However, the sheer detail which group members had retained from popular and mass media accounts of scientific theories of sexual orientation suggests that science retains its hegemony in this arena.

As a stolen snapshot of the *zeitgeist*, then, the material produced by this workshop is richly suggestive of the immensely complex problem that is sexuality in the postmodern. Any attempt to theorise lesbian desire and identity is obliged to engage with precisely those elements that so unsettled the participants. The postmodern self-fashioning paradigm, produced by and collusive with a more general commodification of the self, the body, desire and (I would suggest) gender itself, gives rise to an account of lesbian sexuality as an individual choice, prompted

by rational self-interest. Moreover, this rational self-interest model of lesbianism, albeit in more explicitly political guise, has long been promoted by certain sections of the women's movement as one solution to the problem of patriarchy (Hoagland 1988, Douglas 1990, Cruikshank 1992, Card 1994).

The proposal that any woman can be a lesbian, wielded as a political slogan by radical feminist groups in the 1970s and 1980s (Kitzinger 1987, Wilton 1996), is unambiguously implied by the rational self-interest account of sexuality. Yet there are good reasons for suggesting that such an account cannot adequately support a theory of sexual desire. For a start, despite widely acknowledged dissatisfaction with heterosexual partnerships (Hite 1987, Giddens 1992), the proportion of the female population who self-identify as lesbians remains tiny, whatever measure is employed by researchers (see essays in Richardson and Seidman 2002). The women who took part in my workshop all agreed that their fantasy of lesbian life was immensely appealing. Nevertheless, and whilst admitting that they did not fully understand why, all retained an unshaken identity as heterosexual women, and all rejected the suggestion that any woman can become a lesbian as 'nonsense'. It seems likely that rational self-interest, however appealing, is inadequate as the sole explanation for sexual desire.

The material scavenged from this workshop, then, offers an interesting snapshot of the currency of key discourses of lesbianism in a particular stratum of the heterosexual mainstream. The next stage is to examine the ways in which these discourses variously impact upon, and may be appropriated by, women who make the transition out of that heterosexual mainstream and fashion a new identity as 'lesbian'.

## **Starting with desire**

My decision to work with women who describe themselves as having shifted from heterosexuality to self-identification as lesbian was motivated by a series of assumptions about the lived experience of heterosexuality, about the process of lesbian identity-formation and about the likely nature of the transition between the two. These assumptions are supported by the literature (see, among many others, Ponse 1978, Kleinberg 1980, Clark 1987, Hall Carpenter Archives 1989, Isay 1989, Klaich 1989, Barron Barrett 1990, National Lesbian and Gay Survey 1992, Cassingham and O'Neil 1993, Wilkinson and Kitzinger 1993, Markowe 1996, Richardson 1996, Whisman 1996, Clausen 1997) and by 'common sense' understandings circulating in lesbian subcultural milieux in the hegemonic bloc (e.g. Eisenbach 1997,

Bechdel 1998). They are:

- (1) That the given-ness of heterosexuality largely exempts heterosexually active individuals from the need to question their sexuality.
- (2) That the normative status of heterosexuality means that it tends to be experienced as a *de facto* state of being, rather than an achieved identity.
- (3) That the implication of specific regimes of gender within patriarchal social structures makes it particularly difficult for women to experience themselves as desiring agents.
- (4) That the heterosexual imperative acts to anchor women's sexuality within a reproductive paradigm.
- (5) And that the experience of rejecting heterosexuality and adopting a lesbian identity puts women in a position where they are obliged to question all of the above and to develop a more critical and reflexive account of sexuality than is usual.

Women who have transitioned from heterosexuality to self-identification as lesbian are, for my purposes here, privileged informants. They are unlike always-lesbian women in that their history gives them a lived insight into the operations of heterosexuality, and unlike always-heterosexual women in their lived experience of lesbian identity, life and sexuality. Moreover, as members of a sexual minority, they are likely to be able reflexively and critically to comment on discourses of sexual orientation. As Barbara Ponse found in the 1970s, 'Women and men in the gay liberation movement tend to be quite conversant with the literature on homosexuality' (Ponse 1978, p. 21).

An exploration of the place of *desire* in sexual self-fashioning is a complex undertaking. Since desire is produced in the intersections between the social, the cultural and the subjective/psychological, it is unlikely to be amenable to quantitative inquiry. Rather, such complexity requires the well-established qualitative methodologies, with their focus on narrative, self-accounting and the 'conversation' between researcher and researched. I decided, therefore, that I would start my interrogation of desire by interviewing women about their experiences and their interpretation of those experiences. Since an important aim was to establish the key differentials, for women, between sexual partnerships with women and with men, my first cohort of interviewees was to be previously heterosexual lesbians. Using an open-ended methodology premised on the principles of grounded theory (Ekins 1997), I anticipated that this element of the research would undergo further development in response to the data being generated.

## **Serendipitous method: an account of happenstance**

When this research was originally planned, the intention was that it should be a small-scale pilot project, whose findings might reasonably be expected to offer a sound foundation for the development of further work (and further applications for funding). Although it seemed likely that interesting things might be learned by exploring the experiences of women whose sexual 'orientation' had undergone some kind of transformation in the course of their adult life, I had no idea whether or not this would prove to be the case. I hoped to find out whether this was likely to be a fruitful avenue of exploration by trying out several different approaches (in particular, different data-gathering instruments) whilst working with a small number of women.

### **'Sampling': forget generalisability and representativeness**

The social sciences have, arguably, matured out of anxieties about quantifiability inherited from the physical sciences. The development of robust and rigorous qualitative methodologies has powered debate about many of the hoary old shibboleths of science, including the dubious desiderata of sample generalisability and representativeness.

Nevertheless, as we have seen, the physical sciences currently enjoy hegemony when it comes to authoritative claims about the nature and meaning of human sexual behaviour. One of the (many) troublesome consequences of this dominance is a general expectation that anyone claiming to speak about sex from a position of authority or expertise should produce reams of statistical evidence in support of those claims. When speaking about my own research, for example, I have at various times been asked to state what proportion of the female population is lesbian, what percentage of lesbians have been heterosexual or what proportion of ex-heterosexual lesbians report having enjoyed sex with men.

While it should swiftly become clear why such an approach is nonsensical, it is perhaps less obvious why other issues of quantifiability still cogent in the social sciences – such as sample representativeness and generalisability – are not appropriate in a study of this kind. I want to address these quite reasonable questions here.

Lesbians are a famously 'hard to reach' group in the experience of social science researchers, so the first problem to confront anyone wishing to explore lesbian experience is recruitment. This is complicated by the very nature of lesbian identity and lesbian communities. A woman will arrive at the point where she wishes to name herself 'lesbian' only if the label as available to her is felt to be an adequate descriptor of who

she is, and if she is inclined to adopt it. This is an enormously complex process, which touches on the social, the cultural, the political and the psychological arenas. Indeed, one of the impulses motivating this piece of work was to understand more about these complexities, and how they inscribe themselves in the lives and selves of individuals.

The word 'lesbian' is variously produced, across many discursive trajectories, in and between different discursive communities (from bio-medicine to queer counter-cultures) and is culturally and historically contingent to an extraordinary degree (Wilton 2000). Moreover, it is actively policed, contested and subject to revision within and by lesbian communities and distinct subcultural groupings within those communities. Any researcher who puts out a call for 'lesbians' must be prepared to engage with and accept the almost total lack of consensus about what the name means and who may (or may not) properly lay claim to it (see discussion in Wilton 1995).

The power imbalance which must always be addressed in academic research with human participants is of particular significance when working with sexual minorities, and there are reasons to suggest that the issue may be particularly acute with lesbians. The continuing stigma attached to same-sex eroticism means that lesbians need to protect themselves from potentially hostile contact with others. This is, of course, also true for gay men, but the relative flimsiness of women's cultural and political status (as citizens, service users, community members or individuals with fully recognised human rights) means that lesbians are likely to be more vulnerable than their gay male peers. This vulnerability is two-fold; firstly, women's socio-cultural embeddedness is more fragile than is men's, such that their employment status, for example, is more likely to be insecure (Dijkstra and Plantenga 1997). Secondly, women are more likely to have primary responsibility for the care of children and/or vulnerable others in the family. They are, consequently, more likely to be on the receiving end of statutory services (the health and social services, education, public housing and so on), all of which have a strong tendency to be organised around the unquestioned expectation of heterosexuality in their clients and users (Wilton 1995, 2000, Gluckman and Reed 1997).

These socio-political realities make it likely that a woman will need to conceal the fact that she is a lesbian in some or most of her interactions with the world, and with the official world in particular. A request from a university researcher that lesbians 'out there' should kindly identify themselves and make themselves available for interview may well sit uneasily in this context.

Sexuality is a 'different difference' for other reasons, too. A strong erotic preference for members of one's own sex only becomes the organising principle for a self-defining social cohort under conditions where such a preference is unacceptable to the majority. Where sexual preference is as inconsequential as food preference, there is no need to seek out like-minded others, nor to group together for social protection and safety. It is hard to imagine the formation of a 'gay community' in classical Athens, for example, where adult, free male citizens were at liberty to enjoy sexual contact with anyone of lower social status, pretty much regardless of gender (Halperin 1989). This has consequences for the nature of the lesbian and gay 'community', and in particular for the ways in which that community is represented in mainstream and counter-hegemonic cultural production.

While members of, for example, the Jamaican community in Britain might be expected to share a quite substantial amount of cultural capital, there can be no such expectations of lesbians (or gay men). The lesbian 'community' is characterised by its diversity. Lesbians are found in every socio-cultural niche; at every socio-economic stratum, in every age group, in every sector of the labour force, from all ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds. Lesbians have every possible shade of political affiliation, stand in every possible relation to feminism (from the most radical to the most uninterested or hostile), and are present in all other activist communities from disability rights to anti-globalisation.

In the light of this, there seems little point in trying to build a 'representative sample' of lesbians. Nor does this seem a worthy aim, since any claims to representativeness would become *de facto* claims about the lesbian community itself, and this is arguably not the business of researchers. I began, therefore, by gathering an entirely opportunistic sample and carrying out a small number of open-ended, unstructured interviews with them.

### **Opportunities to sample**

There is opportunistic and opportunistic of course. This sample was as serendipitous as I could make it. I did not want to end up interviewing half a dozen close friends in my inner circle and basing methodological development on my findings. So, although I did include interviews with several friends, I diversified and enlarged the pilot sample by the simple expedient of carrying a small tape recorder everywhere I went and capturing data on the hoof, requesting interviews of any woman I encountered whose account of her life and sexual identity seemed relevant to my research.

Since my work at this time took me to several cities in England and to Cape Town in South Africa, I was able to capture a remarkable diversity of location and experience. This stage of the research resulted in sixteen in-depth interviews, transcribed verbatim. The simple process of repeat interviews tended to produce a pattern. One topic would lead very naturally on to another and specific issues moved to the foreground, whilst others which I had hypothesised might be important (such as sexual abuse or assault) faded into the background. To allow the human interaction of interviewing, and the data that emerge, to shape the data-collection instruments as research progresses is one of the more productive elements of a research method broadly premised on the grounded theory paradigm. In this case, it enabled me to reassess my informal hypotheses, to identify on reflection those which had been covert or unconscious, and to sketch out the four or five key questions that would most effectively underpin a flexible semi-structured interview schedule.

These were:

What word are you happiest to use to describe your sexuality?

What does that word mean to you?

Has that word always applied to you?

What would you say to people who believe that we are born gay or straight?

How does your present life/relationship(s) (as a lesbian) compare to your past life/relationship(s)?

In addition, I always concluded by inviting the person I was talking with to speak about anything which had not been covered in the interview but which they felt might be important, or that they simply wanted to say.

Of course none of the interviews stopped at just these questions and it was crucial to retain the flexibility to be responsive to whatever direction the interviewee wanted to take (otherwise the risk is that a pre-existing or developing hypothesis conceals what might actually be emerging from the research) and to offer reassurance and reinforcement to participants who were shy, embarrassed or otherwise felt constrained.

Rapport, always important when interviewing, is especially so if people are being questioned about something as intimate as sexuality. When that sexuality is stigmatised and culturally dangerous, the importance of rapport is magnified still further. I have been astonished, throughout this project, by the frankness and generosity of those who took part, and by the trust they placed in me. In part this was down to unusually elaborate protocols for consent and confidentiality (see below), but I have no

doubt that my willingness to reveal my own history as a previously heterosexual lesbian was also a factor. Indeed, interviewees frequently told me as much, and this issue is further discussed below.

### **Post-pilot recruitment: the floodgates open**

Having collected, transcribed and analysed the data from the pilot interviews, I wanted next to carry out two distinct but related steps. Firstly, it was important to recruit as many additional interviewees as possible and begin the second stage of collecting qualitative data. Secondly, I wanted to test out the potential effectiveness of a rudimentary quantitative tool, to assess the extent to which quantitative data might or might not contribute to greater understanding of the experiences under investigation. I was as interested as anyone else to know whether transitioning from one sexual identity to another was a relatively rare or common occurrence.

Accordingly, I devised what was intended to be the first version of a number of (reflexively evolving) questionnaires (see Appendix). This was to be self-administered, anonymously, in hopes of capturing some snippets of interesting data. I then approached the editor of *Diva*, the only British lesbian magazine with a significant national (and international) circulation, and asked for their help in recruiting further participants. Gillian Rogerson, the editor, agreed to publish a short article explaining the research and asking readers to volunteer to be interviewed. Neither of us could have predicted the outcome!

The article was duly published (Wilton 1999), along with a very primitive first version of the questionnaire. I had fairly low expectations that women would bother to respond. Doing so would, after all, require them either to cut up their copy of the magazine (this among a readership that tends to keep their back issues for months) or to photocopy the questionnaire form (assuming they had access to a photocopier). They would then have to fill it in, find an envelope, buy a stamp and post it to the address given (in very small print) on the form itself. Given that the questionnaire itself was intended to trial various ways of eliciting useful information, it was far from user-friendly. It combined a basic ranking scale, a couple of multiple choice tick-box questions and a couple of more open questions with requests for standard personal information (age, ethnicity, occupation etc) in a very small space indeed. Since I really was not expecting more than a dozen (at most) to be returned, I had given no thought to pre-coding for SPSS or any other data-analysing software. I was to regret this!

It seemed unlikely that this article-as-recruitment-device would produce much in the way of a response. The request for more interviewees was slipped in, almost invisibly, in the preamble to the questionnaire and said, simply; 'If you'd like to be interviewed, drop me a line and I'll get in touch. Thanks!' If I had set out deliberately to flout the rules of participant-recruitment, I could hardly have done it better.

Yet the publication of this article turned out to be a turning point in the research. I received a total of 136 completed questionnaires and 86 women volunteered to be interviewed. What is more, questionnaires and requests to participate arrived from all around the globe, and women also sent me cards, poems, life stories, newspaper clippings which they thought might be of interest and many e-mails. Even before I began interviewing these women, many sent letters containing frank and revealing accounts of their life experiences. The article had been far more effective than I had anticipated. Why?

From comments made in those first communications, and from pre- and post-interview conversations with interviewees, it became clear that two factors were in play. Firstly, the article struck a nerve with women who had long believed that their previous heterosexual history made them anomalous within the lesbian community, or even unique. There is, unsurprisingly, little space within lesbian subcultures for acknowledging or celebrating heterosexual desire or relationships. With no cultural permission to speak about such things, women reported that they felt as if past heterosexuality was uncommon amongst lesbians (in fact, it is extremely common), and that this was something to keep quiet about. Many wrote to me with a palpable sense of relief. The phrases that occur repeatedly in their letters, cards and e-mails are 'It is so good to know I am a real lesbian' and 'such a relief to know I am not alone'. When, in 2002, I published a second article in *Diva* reporting on the findings of the completed research, I received still more letters and e-mails from women saying very similar things. This, in itself, constitutes the first 'finding' of the project; that dominant discourses of sexual identity act to police not simply access to lesbian communities, but (in a more complex and undertheorised way) the felt authenticity of an individual's lesbian identity.

### **Safety first: securing participants**

From my point of view, such frankness about my own experiences was only possible in the 'safe' context of a small-circulation lesbian publication where I could be reasonably confident of a respectful hearing.

The risks attached to being a self-declared lesbian are, as we have seen, considerable. This made it potentially uncomfortable or even dangerous for women (including myself) to participate. Recruiting potential interviewees through a lesbian magazine was one way of reducing discomfort or risk for myself and them.

Issues such as confidentiality and security are of key importance in social scientific research, for reasons that are both ethical and pragmatic. In this instance there was a particularly strong responsibility not only to secure confidentiality but to do so in a way that was explicit enough to reassure every participant, some of whom took very real risks in telling me their stories. I also wanted to allow as much control as possible, and for as long as possible during the research process, to remain in the hands of the women themselves. Accordingly, I developed a set of procedures which departed from customary practice in some key ways.

It is not unusual to conceal the identity of research participants by means of some form of coding or the use of pseudonyms. I asked everyone to choose a name for herself and suggested that it should be something memorable, so that they would be able to identify their own contribution if they wanted to read any of the published findings. There were a few instances of individuals choosing the same pseudonym, which I resolved post facto by referring to each participant's age at the time of interview, as well as her pseudonym. Some made a positive decision to use their own name although, since I have not distinguished real names from pseudonyms, these remain as effectively anonymised as any other participant.

The issue of consent was something I thought about for a long time. Since women had volunteered to be interviewed on the basis of considerable information (a fairly full account of a pilot study) it seemed reasonable to assume their initial consent to the process. However, there was really no way for them fully to know and understand in advance what being interviewed would involve. Nor did I want anyone to give consent at the time of the interview, only to feel on reflection that they might have said the wrong thing or revealed too much. Accordingly, I decided to send each participant a full, verbatim transcript of her interview, to explain in writing how I intended to use the material and to include the consent form with the transcript. It seemed to me that only at that point would the idea of 'informed consent' become meaningful.

### **Do I really talk like that?**

Sending off full verbatim transcripts quickly turned out to produce complications of its own. It was intended to offer an (important) opportunity

to fill in any gaps, to request that certain material not be used, to ensure the anonymity of others mentioned during the interview (e.g. devising pseudonyms for friends, lovers or family members) and to correct any mis-heard phrases. However, the difference between language as spoken and as written is far greater than most of us realise, and a verbatim transcript is full of grammatical 'errors' in consequence. Of the first four transcripts sent out, two were sent back with each such 'error' corrected. Moreover, one was so heavily edited and annotated as to constitute an entirely distinct bundle of data. This left me with an insoluble problem; clearly I was ethically obliged to use the edited version and to discard the original. This meant that I could not make use of the most interesting and revealing material produced by this interview. I decided on some modifications to the consent process.

Each participant was still sent a full, verbatim transcript of the interview, together with a consent form. In addition, I wrote up a brief set of guidelines 'Making Sense of Interview Transcripts', which was included with each transcript and which made it clear that grammatical corrections were not required. These guidelines also suggested that, whilst there might be good reasons to return transcripts, participants should feel free to retain them for their personal interest. A reply-paid envelope, pre-printed with the return address of my University, was also included. These envelopes were A6 in size, exactly the correct size to return the signed consent form but too small to contain a corrected transcript. Anyone wishing to return the whole thing could easily do so, by fixing the reply-paid envelope to a larger one, but this additional task served as a gentle discouragement from so doing.

The guidelines proved to be extremely effective, and I received no more edited transcripts. Several women did attach letters or notes to their signed consent form, to the effect that they had, indeed, been startled by the 'ungrammatical' way in which they spoke, and welcomed the reassurance of the guidelines. In addition, since they explained 'technical information' about a specific aspect of the research process normally concealed from non-specialists, these simple sheets may have contributed (in however minor a way) to empowering the participants and increasing their understanding of the process in which they were involved.

For a total of three years I gathered my data. For the first 30 months I interviewed women who identified as lesbians. Interviews were carried out face to face, in a range of locations. A handful took place in respondent's homes, although various safety/security concerns meant that these were kept to a minimum. Many others took place in whatever public meeting-place was most convenient to individual interviewees and

possible for me to travel to. I interviewed women in the cafe of the British Library, in restaurants and gay bars, in art galleries and department stores. It was, of course, essential to find a location which was quiet enough for the interview to record clearly and private enough for both participants to feel uninhibited about what we were saying. Though inhibition was not always an issue; I remember the clear voice of one interviewee as she recounted her early sexual experiences, causing fascinated silence to descend on the other occupants of a small coffee shop!

Inevitably, it was not possible to interview everyone face to face, and many interviews took place over the telephone. It is difficult to pinpoint the difference this may have made to the success of the interview. It seemed to me that, once a mutually convenient time for the interview had been agreed (after children were in bed, husbands at work, friends or partners elsewhere; in short, once privacy could be guaranteed), women were, if anything, able to be slightly more uninhibited in speaking to me. Certainly it is not possible to tell from the transcripts which were face-to-face and which not.

As this tranche of interviews drew to an end it became clear, from ongoing analysis of the transcripts, that it would be necessary to interview a group of non-lesbian women in order to answer some of the questions raised. For example, several of the lesbians spoke of being tomboys in childhood and this, of course, is a finding routinely mentioned in essentialist accounts. I wanted to discover whether these lesbians were any more likely to have been tomboys than their non-lesbian peers. I had, therefore, rapidly to assemble as large a group of non-lesbian interviewees as was feasible in the time left (somewhat less than six months).

This last was, perforce, a snowball sample. I drew up a recruitment sheet briefly describing the work and asking interested women to get in touch. I distributed these via the lesbian participants (each of whom was sent a couple of forms attached to a letter updating them about the progress of the research) and through friends and colleagues. The response rate was, of course, dramatically lower. After all, these were women who may never have had to think about sexuality and there had been no magazine article to spark their interest. Nevertheless, I was able to interview a total of 20 women and, although fewer in number than the lesbian interviewees, these produced much useful material.

At the end of the formal research process, I had amassed a body of data. Apart from my own research diary, this includes:

- 33 verbatim transcripts of face-to-face interviews
- 73 verbatim transcripts of telephone interviews

- 136 completed questionnaires
- other, unsolicited material received from interested women, including nine written life histories (largely sent from lesbians living abroad, in the form of either letter or e-mail), five poems, four newspaper clippings and one compilation tape of music.

However, it appears that this process of data-collection is potentially infinite. Since publication of the first book about my findings I have received a further 11 e-mails, six letters and two postcards, all of which contained enough personal information about the sender to constitute additional data. I have gained permission from those senders to include that material here.

The event-driven, serendipitous development of this research seems to have been productive. This success highlights the need to adopt an open, responsive, reflexive and creative approach to sexualities research. Furthermore, it suggests that qualitative tools – whilst time-consuming and tending to produce unwieldy data – are well-suited to establishing the kinds of openness, trust and flexibility that must be established between researcher and researched when exploring sensitive issues.

# 3

## What is Sex? Asking the Impossible Question

*sex*: sexual instincts, desires, etc., or their manifestation; (colloq.) sexual intercourse (*have sex with*)

(Concise Oxford Dictionary)

What do you have to do, sexually speaking, to be a “real” lesbian? Do you have to *do* anything? ... how do you know you’ve had sex with a woman? Is it sex only if you have an orgasm?

(Diane Richardson 1992, p. 188)

It is a peculiar anomaly of scholarship in the field of sexuality – within whatever disciplinary paradigm – that terms such as *sexual orientation* or *sexual preference* are deployed without prior definition of the concept *sex*. In this, academe merely reflects and reproduces the discursive anomaly that is sex in the wider culture(s) of the hegemonic bloc. Even the dictionary seems able only to offer a tautological definition of sex as ‘sexual instincts, desires, etc., or their manifestation’. This curt monosyllable, already complicated by being made to stand for a definitively contested biologics of maleness and femaleness, crumbles into incoherence at the lightest of deconstructive touches. Given its quite extraordinary significance – socially, culturally, psychologically and politically – sex seems to be an alarmingly fragile sign. It is worth putting this fragility to the test here, since it is the foundation stone of the entire edifice of the erotic, by asking, what *is* sex?

It is a hard question to answer, at least partly because of cultural constructs of the erotic as exemplar of the ‘natural’ in the flight from artifice to authenticity that characterises the classic romantic narrative. It is not so much that our common experience of sex is of an overwhelming, overpowering physicality resistant to textual or linguistic inscription

(although this may be the case), it is, rather, that there exists a cultural fiat that this is so. Whatever the 'realities' of our sex lives, sex is supposed to be at once vociferously spoken-about and unspeakable (Foucault 1976).

Nor can we assume any *lingua franca* of bodily acts and sensations. Far from being the universal experience implied by its status as 'natural', what counts as 'doing sex' varies between cultures and historical moments and, within those cultural and historical locations, between generations, formal or informal subcultural groups (including the professions), 'tribal' formations, genders and individuals (Caplan 1987, Smith 1992, Parker and Gagnon 1995, Tiefer 1995, Fradenburg and Freccero 1996). Any definition of sex, if it is to carry effectively across such a proliferation of cultural mores, is obliged to incorporate this instability. We may end up by concluding that any act or experience is sex if the person(s) involved agree that it is.

Unhappily for even this catch-all (some would argue, evasive) definition, it is not clear that persons must be involved at all. Must 'sex' involve some form of interaction? If so, to what alternative category must we assign masturbation? Must it involve action and, if so, where does that leave fantasy, pornography or wet dreams? When I watch people 'having sex' on video, it would seem absurd to suggest that those people are involved. Patterns of pixels on my computer or television screen have formed and shifted in ways that the visual cortex of my brain has been trained to interpret as sexual or erotic imagery. When and where was the 'sex', and what can we call the semiotic interaction between me and the 'real' people involved? If they are long dead, does the 'sex' become necrophiliac? What if they are animated characters in a Japanese anime feature?

Introducing gender and notions of homo or heterosexual object choice makes things still more incoherent. For example, researchers have found that it is quite common for women to have erotic fantasies about other women whilst engaged in sex with a male partner (Friday 1976, Hite 1987, 2000). In such circumstances, is the woman having heterosexual or lesbian sex? If a man meets a woman in a club, discovers that the woman he was attracted to is, 'in fact' a man, and goes on to have sex with him, is the sex homosexual or heterosexual? Is it the same kind of sex for both parties? Does the kind of sex change, during the course of the encounter, from hetero to homo, and if so, for whom and at what point?

When one person thinks that what they are doing is having sex whilst the person they are 'having sex with' thinks of it as abuse, rape or violence, whose definition should take precedence? Indeed, what are

the implications of a definition of sex that foregrounds desire, arousal, pleasure or orgasm when the majority of female people around the world seldom or never experience either, thanks to the constraints of the disparate social and cultural forces which continue to underpin male supremacy (Doyal 1995)?

This last point flags up the third, and final, complicating element in the study of sex; its relationship to gender. Of course, 'sex' does not only mean the erotic howsoever defined. It also means the state of being male or female. It has become something of a taken-for-granted theoretical strategy to distinguish between sex (as a presumptively biological property of maleness or femaleness) and gender (as the supposedly psycho-social construct of masculinity or femininity), with the underlying assumption that gender is mapped onto or produced out of the pre-existing biological 'reality' of sex by social processes (Oakley 1972, Fuss 1989, Adkins 1995). This position, although it has come to dominate much feminist thinking, has never been without its critics, who have pointed to the implication of sex in gender and vice versa and have concluded that it is simply untenable to speak of the two as separate or even separable (Martin 1987, Gatens 1991, Shildrick 1997). As Moira Gatens warns (1991, p. 150):

Masculinity and femininity as forms of sex-appropriate behaviours are manifestations of an historically based, culturally shared phantasy about male and female biologies, and as such, sex and gender are not arbitrarily connected... to treat gender, the 'symptom' as the problem is to misrecognize its genesis.

The enmeshing of sex (meaning maleness or femaleness), gender and the erotic has particular effects on the phenomenology of embodiment and hence, on such fundamental sexual matters as desire and pleasure. It is the interstices of this (dynamic, contingent) mesh of signification that produce what we call 'sex' and are thereby themselves reproduced and transformed. A definition of sex that has the coherence and flexibility to enable us to speak intelligibly of the erotic might have to look something like this:

Sex: individual corporeal event involving sensations and/or behaviours coded as erotic within and by the cultural matrix inhabited by the individual and accepted as such by them.

Such a definition, unwieldy as it undoubtedly is, must surely underpin any attempt to speak about sex within a particular theoretical paradigm.

Since I speak about sex as a social scientist, mine is a social scientific definition. I would, however, argue that any and all claims to theorise *human* sexuality must acknowledge the distinctive nature of humanity, namely the unarguable fact that we are not only social creatures (as are wolves, prairie dogs or wildebeest for example) nor simply language-using (as are whales, birds, chimpanzees and others) but 'encultured'. By which I mean that human be-ing is inevitably produced by and productive of human culture. As with any 'rule', there may be exceptions; feral children or the severely brain-damaged perhaps; but such exceptions are emphatically not among the kinds of persons who tend to be studied by those who make claims for human sexuality as biologically driven. In short, such claims have largely ignored the observable realities of human existence in presenting human 'sex' as of a kind with the instinctual copulations of non-human species. We are not lab rats.

It should here be acknowledged that there have been, and continue to be, socio-cultural and psycho-social motivations for this project of 'biologising' human sexuality. Many have observed that the hegemonic struggle between religion and science has had a liberalising (if not liberating) impact on sexual norms and mores (Weeks 1985, 2003). The sexologists who strove for general acceptance of homosexuality as a biological condition rather than a sinful behaviour did so in order to improve the lives of 'homosexuals'. In the 1960s, Desmond Morris's best-selling book *The Naked Ape* played an important part in the sexual revolution of the times; the book helped to challenge sexual guilt by asserting that sexual pleasure was an intrinsic element of human biology and, moreover, one which conferred evolutionary advantage. Nevertheless, the hegemony of medical science over human sexuality is at best a mixed blessing for women, queers and others marginalised by the doctrine of heteronormativity (Tiefer 1995, Young-Bruehl 1996, Rosario 1997).

## **Boys, girls and the rest of us**

In order to speak about sexual preference, of course, it is not enough simply to have developed a definition of 'sex'. Discourses of sexual orientation both reproduce and are predicated upon discourses of gender inversion. In other words the tripartite model of human sexuality (homo, hetero, bi) is organised around very specific claims about the sexual nature of maleness and femaleness. This is problematic for two reasons. Firstly, because the argument is tautological. To be a normal woman is to be attracted to men, hence to not be attracted to men is to

not be a normal woman. Second, because such normative claims are only able to achieve coherence by speaking of 'sex' as if it were something taken for granted and semiotically robust.

The relationship between being a 'man' or a 'woman' and the kinds of sexual activities and relationships an individual 'prefers' is not, however, at all straightforward. Indeed, in the context of the complicated regimes of ordination framed in the word 'gender', the very notion of *preference* itself becomes troublesome. In this chapter, sex itself is unpacked and its significance to processes of self-fashioning excavated. This is, of course, an inextricably political undertaking, and the critique developed here is explicitly feminist and queer.

Any and all individuals within the hegemonic bloc are obliged to construct their subjectivity in negotiation with authoritative claims about proper femaleness and maleness, as these are made manifest in culture. Each one of us is, from the moment of our birth, subject to a dynamic and continuing process of gendering. The process cuts across paradigms; it is social, political, cultural, psychological, individual and collective. It both produces and constrains each of us, it polices whilst at the same time providing a matrix for intelligibility within which we are obliged to experience our embodied and time-bound be-ing. Not only does it include the erotic, it both depends upon and produces particular discourses of the erotic.

The necessary project of self-fashioning requires that we constitute our selves as sexed and gendered – as female or male, womanly or manly, feminine or masculine – and as somehow 'sexual'. Our experience of that project is always inevitably both aware and unaware (conscious or unconscious, to use the heavily nuanced lexicon of Freudian psychoanalysis). The lived experience of certain individuals makes it (psychologically) imperative that they interrogate hegemonic discourses of gender and the erotic in relation to their own (generally disobedient, usually political) self-fashioning. Feminists (e.g. Spender 1985, Fuss 1989, Moscucci 1990), feminist lesbians (e.g. Lorde 1984, Wittig 1992, Grosz 1995, Halberstam 1998), anti-racists (e.g. Lorde 1984, Ware 1992, McClintock 1995, Lewis 1996, Young 1996) and anti-masculine men (e.g. Reynaud 1981, Stoltenberg 1989, Edwards 1994, Simpson 1994, MacInnes 1998, Haywood & Mac an Ghail 2003), have all struggled to denaturalise words like 'female' and 'male' and to expose the artefactual and ideological nature of both gender and sex as well as their structural complicity in other vectors of ordination. Most, although not all have acknowledged the complicity of discourses of the erotic as well.

It is a foundational (and ironic) contradiction of feminism that, as an oppositional discourse, it tends to reproduce the constitutional elements of the very paradigm it seeks to undo. As Judith Butler puts it (1990, p. 2), 'the feminist subject turns out to be discursively constituted by the very political system that is intended to facilitate its emancipation'. It is to queer theorists, then, differently and more complexly located in relation to the gender binary of heteronormativity – which I have elsewhere termed 'heteropolarity' (Wilton 1996, 1997) – that we must look for an alternative, more radical, account of 'gender'.

Butler's book *Gender Trouble* (1990) remains the catalytic text of queer theory. Her account of the performativity of gender both refuses to indulge in the Cartesian folly of deracinating gender from sex and opens up a space for making the hegemonic apparatus of gender incoherent (or, as she terms it, incredible). In particular, she claims that sex is as much a discursive product as is gender. She argues:

It would make no sense ... to define gender as the cultural interpretation of sex, if sex itself is a gendered category. Gender ought not to be conceived merely as the cultural inscription of meaning on a pre-given sex (a juridical conception); gender must also designate the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established. As a result, gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which 'sexed nature' or 'a natural sex' is produced and established as 'prediscursive', prior to culture, a politically neutral surface *on which* culture acts. (Butler 1990, p. 7 original emphasis)

Within the terms of heteronormativity, it is most certainly the case that gender (culturally hegemonic notions of femininity and masculinity) produces sex, and that to identify the dynamics of that productivity, including those which rely on the production and circulation of specific discourses of the erotic, is to expose sex as *no more than* culturally hegemonic notions of femaleness and maleness. Any such theoretical project requires careful steering, however, if it is not to hole its bottom on the reefs of the body.

It is counter-intuitive (and theoretically unsustainable) to propose that the corporealities of bodies-named-female and bodies-named-male are not significantly distinct, and that their erotic capacities are indistinguishable. Masculinity may be a social construct, but men are not multi-orgasmic and cannot menstruate, give birth or breastfeed. Being unable, for whatever reason, to do one or more of these things does not

'make' a woman into a man. At the same time, since there can be no extra-discursive grounds for (sentient, meaning-making) be-ing, there is little point in trying to flense the semiotics of sex/gender from the 'natural' body like so much meaningful blubber from the flesh of a whale.

Many theorists of gender, sex and sexuality have engaged with the somatic (e.g. Rubin Suleiman 1985, Featherstone *et al.* 1991, Butler 1993, Grosz and Probyn 1995, Shildrick 1997, Price and Shildrick 1999, Wilton 2000), and there is little point restating these complex issues. Nevertheless, what follows is predicated upon the explicit assumption that sex, gender and desire, whatever else they may come to mean, are always as much somatic as they are psychic, social or cultural. This is, perhaps, the social scientist's version of Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, a conundrum which we must accept as insoluble; corporeality is discursively produced, yet discourses do not lactate, ejaculate, menstruate or gestate.

What, then, is the task at hand concerning sex/gender and the erotic? It is to explore what may be established or suggested by scrutinising the narratives of femininity/femaleness or of masculinity/maleness given by individual women when asked to account for the gendered nature of their desires. Under the social and cultural conditions that prevail in the hegemonic bloc, where regimes of ordination are organised around a gendered sexuality and a sexualised gender (Wilton 1996, 1997), it seems likely that points of discursive instability will be (if only momentarily) produced by the experiences of individuals whose desires cannot easily be made to fit normative parameters.

Women whose desire has altered from heterosexual to lesbian have, whether wittingly or no, undergone a subject-transition from one discursive location to another. In particular their subjectivity has mutated, from one that is culturally legible/inscribed as unproblematically feminine to a different femininity marked as profoundly problematic. Lesbian femininity is variously asserted to be inauthentic, inadequate, simulated, diseased, damaged, disobedient or simply oxymoronic, depending on your paradigm of choice (Castle 1993, de Lauretis 1994, Wilton 1995, 2000, Innes 1997, Waites 2002).

Lesbian sex is specifically and complexly marked and does not stand in any straightforward relation to lesbian identity. In particular, heteroerotic discourses of the sexual tend to produce 'lesbian sex' as oxymoronic. As many lesbian scholars have pointed out, the (heteronormative) mainstream understands 'sex' to mean a specific event; penile ejaculation inside a vagina. Thus lesbians do not, cannot, have sex. As Marilyn Frye (1991, p. 4) perceptively notes, this phallogentricity operates to erase

*all* female sexuality:

I'd say that lesbian couples 'have sex' a great deal less frequently than heterosexual couples; by the criteria that I'm betting most of the heterosexual people used to count 'times', lesbians don't have sex at all. No male orgasms, no 'times'. (I'm willing to draw the conclusion that heterosexual women don't have sex either, that what they report is the frequency with which their partners have sex.)

The erasure of lesbian sex is, however, more than a semantic by-product of heteronormative discourses of sex. Rather, it has been a strategic element in two putatively antagonistic political projects, the homophobic and the feminist, both of which have drawn on assumptions about heteropolarity in one of the most ironic ideological struggles played out in the field of the erotic (Wilton 1996b). The heteropolar ascription of sexual desire and agency to men means that women are constructed as being incapable of either. Thus, the potential threat to male supremacy implied by lesbian desire has been effectively neutralised by constructing women as erotically 'harmless' and lesbians as impotent. There is abundant evidence of an old-fashioned patriarchal conspiracy to this effect. In the 1920s, the British Parliament voted not to criminalise lesbianism, since to do so would, in the opinion of one peer, put ideas into the heads of innocent women:

It would be made public to thousands of people that there was this offence; that there was such a horror... Is there any necessity for it? How many people does one suppose are really so vile, so unbalanced, so neurotic, so decadent as to do this? You are going to bring it to the notice of women who have never heard of it, never thought of it, never dreamed of it. (Saraga 1998, p. 179)

This quite explicit strategy of silencing lesbian sex could not be maintained through the liberalisation of sexual attitudes and a global revolution in information technologies. It was replaced by the authoritative assertion of lesbian impotence by those such as right wing commentator Roger Scruton, who insisted that lesbians cannot have sex at all, since sexual agency is the property of biological males:

The lesbian knows that she desires someone who will not typically make those advances that are characteristic of a man, even if she wants to... She can only wait, and wish, and pray to the gods with... troubled fervour. (Scruton 1986, p. 308)

This strategy for recuperating phallic masculinity by asserting sexual agency as definitively male and then discursively 'castrating' lesbians seems ridiculously, even pathetically, transparent. However, as Anne Marie Smith (1992, p. 207) points out, it retained currency even within the putatively rational world of health care institutions:

A similar erasure of lesbian sexuality has taken place in the United States in the context of AIDS research. When asked why the Center[s] for Disease Control has not carried out any research on woman-to-woman transmission of the virus, an official replied, 'Lesbians don't have much sex'.

Many lesbian activists, struggling to develop a counter-hegemonic account, have foregrounded the need to insist on the 'realness' of lesbian sex. Marilyn Frye (1991, pp. 6–7) describes this project as embedded in a broader struggle to recapture sex for women:

In our efforts to liberate ourselves from the stifling woman-hating Victorian denial that women even have bodily awareness, arousal, excitement, orgasms, and so on, many of us actively tried to take these words for ourselves and claimed that we do 'do sex' and that we are sexual and we have sexuality. This has been particularly important to lesbians because the very fact of 'sex' being a phallogocentric term has made it especially difficult to get across the idea that lesbians are not, for lack of a penis between us, making do with feeble and partial and pathetic half-satisfactions.

With painful irony it must be acknowledged that feminists – in particular some lesbian feminists – responded to the celebration of lesbian sexuality with as much hostility as men (if not more). The 'sex wars' that raged within feminist circles in the 1970s and 1980s have been well documented and need not concern us here. It is, however, important to note that women have been just as guilty as men of trying to insist on the non-sexual nature of lesbianism for their own ideological ends.

If 'sex' is a complex and slippery sign, then, 'lesbian sex' is a veritable battleground. Moreover, the political processes outlined above mean that, until very recently, it has been a silent sign, a most inarticulate form of sex:

Lesbian 'sex' as I have known it most of the time I have known it is utterly inarticulate. Most of my lifetime, most of my experience in

the realms commonly designated as 'sexual' has been prelinguistic, noncognitive. I have, in effect, no linguistic community, no language, and therefore in one important sense, no knowledge. (Frye 1991, p. 6)

I have tried to answer, as a theorist of the erotic and as a social scientist, the question 'what is sex'. It seems, however, that the further question 'what is lesbian sex' requires a more than merely theoretical answer. So knotted are the discursive strands linking gender to biological sex, both to the erotic and all of these to larger socio-political hegemonic and counter-hegemonic projects that any answer must, surely, emerge from an engagement with the empirical if it is to have any chance of resisting entanglement.

### **Asking women about sex**

During the course of this research I at no time asked women to describe what they 'did in bed'. Nor did I ask them to define sex. Indeed, one of the key strengths of qualitative research methods, perhaps especially the open-ended, in-depth, semi-structured interview is that it allows the interviewee to set the agenda, thus making it more likely that issues of importance to the interviewee will come to the foreground whatever the hypothesis-related bias of the researcher. Whenever it became clear that a woman wished to talk about sex, it was possible to facilitate that with (sensitive, responsive) questioning. The specific question differed from interview to interview, and any woman who seemed uncomfortable talking about sex was not asked about it. This was, however, a tiny minority, and most research participants gave variously detailed accounts of the sexual aspect of their lesbian relationships/identities/partnerships/lives. In particular, many were keen to explain the 'differences' between women and men as sexual partners.

Women who have self-identified as lesbian from an early age might be expected to have capitulated in some sense to heteronormative discourses of lesbianism, simply in order to fashion a coherent narrative of self. Indeed, autobiographical accounts tend to support this presumption (Lorde 1982, Nestle 1987, Faderman and Eriksson 1990, Allison 1994). On the other hand, women who have lived as heterosexual for a substantial period of time and who, in consequence, may have been able to fashion a coherent sense of themselves as successful in relation to culturally legible performative 'femininity' might be expected to engage differently (one would anticipate, more critically) with hegemonic

accounts of the lesbian erotic as perversely gendered. This would apply both to always-heterosexual and to previously heterosexual lesbian women, albeit in distinct ways. Indeed, the distinctiveness might, in itself, offer insights into the dynamics of this process.

Towards the end of *Gender Trouble* Butler asks:

What performance, where, will compel a reconsideration of the *place* and stability of the masculine and the feminine? And what kind of gender performance will enact and reveal the performativity of gender itself in a way that destabilizes the naturalized categories of identity and desire? (Butler 1990, p. 139, punctuation corrected)

My aim here, then, is to interrogate the accounts of sex and of the erotic given by my interviewees (both lesbian-identified and not), in order to find out the extent to which 'being in transit' may (or may not) offer a location from which to begin destabilising 'the naturalized categories of identity and desire' as called for by Butler. I am interested in tracing the semiotic threads of femininity and masculinity as sexual characteristics and practices through these accounts and, in particular, in unpicking them from the warp and weft of women's self-fashioning.

### Occupying a desiring position

It has become a truism of gender theory that erotic agency and sexual subject-status are characteristically masculine while to be normatively feminine is to exhibit erotic passivity and sexual object-status (Greer 1971, Baynes 1972, Oakley 1972, Wilton 1996). Thus, the desiring gaze is (in)famously male and it takes as its object others whose being, whatever their actual sex, is thereby rendered feminine. As John Berger put it (1972, p. 47), 'One might simplify this by saying: *men act* and *women appear*'.

In terms of desire, and in particular the scopic nature of the erotic in a pre-eminently visual culture (Barthes 1957, Sontag 1973, Chaplin 1994), this masculinisation of the desiring gaze has profound implications. In particular, as Berger recognised, it produces femininity as a desiring position characterised by a kind of radical narcissism:

Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an

object – and most particularly an object of vision: a sight. (Berger 1972, p. 47)

Feminists and, to a certain extent, lesbian and gay theorists as well, have developed a scholarship around gender and sexuality that is premised on Berger's claim for a structuration of the gendered erotic around a scopophilic agency seen as always-only masculine and its objectification and othering of the optically consumed person of the desired, seen as always-only feminine. Thus not only is sexual agency the province of men, but the exercise of sexual agency is seen as masculinising.

There is a substantial body of evidence (no pun intended) to support such claims. From twentieth-century medical discourses of uncontrollable male potency and female sexual anaesthesia (Moscucci 1990, Wilton 2000) through to the informal policing of female sexuality in schools, the workplace and other public spaces (Cockburn 1983, Lees 1986, Wise and Stanley 1987) to the distinctive relationship between women and the 'beauty industry' (Chapkis 1988), to the representation of sexualised bodies in both popular and elite culture (Clark 1956, Shearer 1987, Gamman and Marshment 1988, Chadwick 1990, Nead 1992) it is not difficult to perceive this rigidly gendered dynamic at work.

This gendered dynamic of scopophilic agency is, however, neither static nor monolithic. There can be no doubt that women, as well as men, may experience themselves as subject of the desiring gaze rather than its passive object. Indeed, women are privileged consumers of specific elements of popular culture (Gamman and Marshment 1988) and, as such, are the target audience for texts which address them as desiring subjects. Once this is acknowledged the problem becomes not 'may the scopophilic agent be a woman' but to what extent scopophilic agency produces as masculine those individuals (whatever their 'real sex') who acquire it. In short, is there an occluded qualifier here, such that the scopophilic gaze is in fact 'heteroscopic'?

Luce Irigaray is in no doubt that this is the case. 'The masquerade', she writes, '... is what women do ... in order to participate in man's desire, but at the cost of giving up their own' (Irigaray 1985, p. 131). The only space for desire, she suggests, is a male space. Women may 'participate', but there is no cultural and semiotic space for a desire that is women's. A similar position was famously taken by Laura Mulvey in her seminal essay on female spectatorship of film (Mulvey 1975/1989).

This unforgiving theoretical structuration of erotic agency as definitively masculine becomes diffuse and incoherent when confronted with lesbian desire. Lesbian film theorists have roundly criticised Mulvey's

insistence that women must insert themselves somehow into a phallic position in order to get pleasure from spectating films (Stacey 1994, Wilton 1995b). Butler, in a close reading of Lacan and Joan Riviere, concludes that, from within this phallogocentric paradigm, 'the lesbian is ... signified as an asexual position, as indeed, a position that refuses sexuality ... What is hidden is not sexuality, but rage' (Butler 1990, p. 52).

It would seem that this dilemma is a theoretical artefact, merely semantic. As Butler puts it (1990, p. 53):

This is the predicament produced by a matrix that accounts for all desire for women by subjects of whatever sex or gender as originating in a masculine, heterosexual position. The libido-as-masculine is the source from which all possible sexuality is presumed to come.

Since heterogeneric theories simply collapse when we require them to 'hold' lesbian desire, it is undoubtedly time to take steps back into the empirical and gather some data from which to fashion sounder theory. Indeed, social scientists have begun to do this, to explore what appear to be novel manifestations of female desire by empirical means. Thus, women's consumption of male burlesque shows (Smith 2002), soft-core porn (Sonnet 1999, Hardy 2001), sex articles in women's glossy magazines (Boynton 2003) and other such sex sites have been examined in order to build a theory of female sexual subjectivity. Such work has demonstrated the daunting complexity of the task that faces (heterosexual) women in fashioning narratives of self around erotic agency when such agency is discursively pre-ordained as masculine.

The 'new' discourses of women's erotic empowerment supposedly manifested in the texts examined by these researchers are emerging less as radicalising (or even liberalising) and more as discursive strategies for reasserting traditional constructs of feminine sexuality in response to feminist challenge. Two themes emerging from recent feminist research literature are relevant here. One is that this discourse of erotic empowerment strongly underscores the primacy of 'looking good' in female sexuality. Boynton's analysis of sex articles in mass market women's glossies concluded that:

Rather than focus on enjoying sex and forgetting everything else, the articles told the reader how to hide body 'flaws' ... It was assumed most bodies probably wouldn't be good enough to be shown, so strategies for enhancing them were suggested: 'the best way to disguise a generous gluteus maximus is to put that derriere in the air and do it doggy style'. (Boynton 2003, pp. 9-12)

The article cited by Boynton also exemplifies the second key element in this discourse, that women's desire is not itself to be taken seriously. The advice to have sex 'doggy style' in order to disguise her (too) large bottom simply ignores whether or not a woman finds this kind of sexual activity pleasurable. It is, implicitly, instructing her to prioritise her male partner's scopophilic pleasure over her own positional preferences. Similarly, Clarissa Smith's research into *The Chippendales*, a male burlesque show aimed at heterosexual women, finds that the act of offering eroticised male bodies for female consumption is tightly scripted and therefore produces a gendering of scopophilic relations which is heteronormative rather than subversive. Smith's conclusion appears to present the show as counter-hegemonic:

The Chips offer a space in which the mother of four I spoke to could experience herself as sexual without any of the attendant worries about offending friends, family or partners. (Smith 2002, p. 83)

It is, I would argue, important to acknowledge that this woman has to pay a lot of money and attend a public theatrical performance in order, not even to be aroused or to experience desire, but to 'experience herself as sexual'. Moreover, outwith that artificial and costly context, experiencing herself as sexual would *offend* her 'family, friends or partners'. Smith stresses that the show itself is carefully devised in such a way as to make it impossible for women to gain scopophilic pleasure:

[the show] never seems to work in that way – if to work in that way is to encourage members of the audience to stare or gaze upon a sexual object. The music is too loud, fracturing the concentration that seems to be so necessary in, for example, film theory's objectifying gaze; the audience is too loud, again a distracting element; the stage is too 'busy' with as many as 12 performers on stage at one time (where and who to look at?).

It seems safe to conclude that, although important shifts do seem to be underway in gendered scopophilic relations, such shifts are both tentative and liable to be co-opted back into hegemonic discourses of heteroerotics.

### **The lesbian gaze – escape from the scopophilic norm?**

Many lesbian scholars and cultural activists have tried to establish a space for a specifically lesbian sexual agency outwith hegemonic

discourse. They have examined lesbian performativity (Burana *et al.* 1994, Yamaguchi *et al.* 1995, Volcano and Halberstam 1999), sexual practices (O'Sullivan and Parmar 1992, O'Sullivan 1997, Ussher and Mooney-Somers 2000, Bolso 2001), co-option of space (Califia 1994, Johnston and Valentine 1995, Rothenberg 1995) and various forms of lesbian participation in the erotic marketplace (Shrage 1999). Again, this body of work exposes the complexity of lesbian self-fashioning (Yamaguchi *et al.* 1995, Rust 1997, Schneider 1997), and of the part played by sex and by desire in that complex project.

Here, the accounts of lesbian participants include much that is interesting in relation to the possibilities of fashioning a specifically *lesbian* sexual self in opposition to discourses of heteroerotics. Some described taking scopophilic pleasure in looking at women, others stressed that they could take a different kind of pleasure in looking at beautiful men and the accounts of some make it clear that the self-scrutiny identified by Berger and criticised by Boyton and other feminists may impact in various ways upon women who go awol from their proper location in the heteroerotic.

### **Turning (the desiring gaze) on women**

Several of the lesbians who took part in this research were conscious of the homophobic slur that lesbian sex is not 'proper' sex. Their (angry) response was to describe their own erotic responses to women's bodies. Sue (44), for example, identifies what is, for her, a key distinction between her heterosexual past and her lesbian present:

I look at blokes, and there is just no way I am physically attracted to them now, so I just think, no, I don't think there is any way I would want a man now ... because I just love being with a woman ... a man's body never really did an awful lot for me. So, if I think about [my girlfriend's] body, I love the softness of her body and I love the curves and I love the fact that she has got breasts. So, yes, I must be an out and out lesbian! Because, it is her that is special, but yes, I do love a woman's body. I can quite honestly say that it is so special for me compared to a man's.

For Sue, this experience of a proactive, agentic desire for, and eroticisation of, women's bodies seems to act as the foundation for her self-identification as a lesbian. 'I must be an out and out lesbian!' she says, contrasting this experience with her earlier inability to eroticise men's

bodies. Katie (26), who made a 'conscious decision to go and try' sex with a woman, explains that she knew she would like the experience because, 'I just like women. I like looking at them. I want to grab hold of them and kiss them.'

Interestingly, however, she identifies relatively few *physical* differences between women and men as sexual partners, 'all I remember thinking was, haven't women got small mouths; that was the only difference, and that they had smoother skin, no stubble!' Her enjoyment of looking at women, which makes her want to 'grab hold of them and kiss them' seems not to be as driven by the physiological differences between men and women that are culturally freighted as erotic. Unlike Sue, for example, she makes no mention of breasts. This is, then, a scopophilic agency which resists incorporation within the narrow parameters of heteroerotics. These women, in short, do not seem to look at women with the same kind of desire as men are presumed to experience.

Kerry (34) describes her desire for women as profoundly erotic. She says, for example, 'I wanted to touch women's bodies. I never wanted to touch men's bodies.' It is, however, an eroticism in which the physiological and the social are tightly interwoven. When asked, 'what is the significant difference which makes you prefer women?', she answers:

It's the deep serious stuff and the frivolous stuff. There is a whole gamut of things, running from softer bodies and no cold, hangy bits and no hair to they talk about things, they open up more, they allow you to say your stuff, they actually will ask you rather than talk at you, they will treat you like an equal.

Being treated like an equal and listened to with respect are behaviours not generally presented as 'erotic'. Nevertheless, in this account they seem to be of equal importance to more obviously physical markers of femaleness such as lacking a (cold, dangly) penis or body hair.

### **Watching all the boys: lesbians appreciating men**

Turning a desiring gaze onto men is, as we have seen, a complex and contradictory project. Mainstream discourses of the heteroerotic assume and reinforce a unidirectionally gendered deployment of the gaze such that it becomes phallic. Turning this phallic gaze onto creatures whose claim to masculine status depends upon their own possession of the phallus threatens to effeminise them. Elements of what Smith describes as the 'busy' stage performance of the Chippendales, for example,

appear from this perspective to be (hysterical, paranoid) strategies to recuperate their own hold on phallic masculinity which would otherwise be fatally compromised under the medusa gaze of the desiring woman. Within the parameters of heteroerotic discourse, then, men are not supposed (in both senses of the word) to be scopophilically desirable. Men are not eye candy.

Some participants, both lesbian and non-lesbian, expressed a conviction that men's bodies were simply not attractive. Lesbian interviewee Michelle (22), when asked how she responded to men as sexual partners said, with real feeling, 'Eugh!' and suggested that this meant she was 'naturally' a lesbian. She went on to say:

I have met enough straight women who get the same yukk reaction with a woman that I do with a guy, so that would surely indicate that they were naturally straight?

This account is consistent with discourses of orientation, which assume that heterosexual activity is repugnant to the point of impossibility for non-heterosexually orientated individuals. Michelle was, however, in a minority. Far from routinely expressing physical revulsion for men, lesbian participants were more likely to stress that they had enjoyed sex with men (see next chapter) or that they were able to gaze with appreciation at men's bodies. Those who made such statements were generally keen to stress that their appreciation was aesthetic rather than erotic. Claire (24), however, was able to admit to an attraction which she was not prepared to act on:

I am able to look at particular men and think, yes, I think he's attractive. And I definitely wouldn't want to sleep with them, or have a relationship with them, but I'm relaxed enough to be able to look at a man and think, yes, that's a beautiful human being ... and it's not just this neutral looking. There is, I guess, a little bit of desire there. But it's hard to explain to people. Particularly to heterosexual friends, because they can't understand that you can look at someone and think they are attractive but have absolutely no desire to want to do anything more.

Claire has not only laid claim to scopophilic agency, she has been able to fashion a lesbian identity with such confidence that she is able to acknowledge the erotic pleasure she gets from looking at attractive men without compromising that identity. There is no place within discourses

of heteroerotics, of inversion, or of orientation for the desiring gaze she describes.

This account is rather different from that given by most other participants who acknowledged their pleasure in turning an evaluating gaze on men. Lenna (29), who worked as a camera assistant in film, gives a typical description:

Yes, [I can appreciate a man's body], but maybe from the way an artist would look at it. I really mean that I find them extremely beautiful at times. And the play of light, and things like that. And how you can work with light on a body, which is possibly also an intellectual exercise.

It seems, then, that scopophilic pleasure resists containment within the heterosexual paradigm. After all, there is no space within that paradigm for the pleasure that Lenna is able to take in looking at beautiful men *as a lesbian*. Indeed, it seems to be the case that the radical incoherence of this particular scopic pleasure makes many people uncomfortable. Lenna was far from being unique in her ability to take pleasure from looking at men's bodies. Claire (39) was among several others who gave similar accounts:

I mean, I can look at people like George Clooney and think, he's gorgeous, he's got those lovely eyes and a great body. There are men down at my gym who are in really great physical shape and you can't help but look at them. You think, wow, the guy's got a really nice body. I have a good look around the gym and think that the blokes are really, some of them have got great bodies.

The significant thing, from the point of view of a lesbian turning an appreciative gaze on a beautiful man's body, is that pleasure in looking is enough. There is no desire to engage in sexual contact. This is reserved for female partners, and many participants were eloquent when explaining the differences between women and men as sexual partners.

### **A shifting erotics: from men to women**

If it is difficult to answer the question 'what is sex', it is almost impossible to define the differences between heterosexual and lesbian sex. Rather, the nature of this erotic differential is arguably best arrived at by exploring the many and various experiences described by different individuals.

For women who have 'had sex' with both male and female partners, and who have a strong sexual preference for one over the other, particular insights may be gained. For the lesbian-identified participants in this research, reasons given for rejecting men as sexual partners were certainly not simple. Rather, just as fashioning one's self as gendered involves the social, the psychological, the cultural and the physiological, so too does sexual self-fashioning.

Several gave strikingly powerful accounts of the pleasures of lesbian sex. Robbie (48) is typical in offering a description which involves the emotional as much as the physical, and which also touches on gender:

[lesbian sex] was like coming home. It just felt so right. It was the first time for sexual desire and sexual satisfaction and feeling that I was doing what I wanted to do in the right place with the right person ... The smell, the absence of a dick and the presence of breasts and a clitoris, and, basically, everything turns me on. [I] fall into it, plunge into it, thoroughly immerse myself and enjoy it. Rather than it being this alien thing that one does because it is the thing to do and one should be enjoying it, I guess, which is how it always was with men ... Generally, the actual sexual acts with men were at best boring.

Having given this enthusiastic account of what she prefers about sex with another women, she goes on to say what she likes about being a lesbian, and this is framed in quite different language:

I like the feeling of autonomy and personal power it gives me. Not power over somebody else, but power over myself I guess. The independence and the freedom to be more as I want to be. The rules don't apply to me ... if I talk about my partner, automatically people would use the pronoun 'he' and it is good just to be able to say 'she'.

Robbie's account makes explicit that the link between preferring 'lesbian sex' and being a lesbian is far from straightforward. Although her enjoyment of sex with a woman partner is far greater than with men, sex is not something she mentions when discussing the pleasures she gets from her lesbian identity. Rather, her 'identity pleasures' are social. They are to do with independence, freedom, rule-breaking.

Other lesbian participants were just as enthusiastic about sex between women, and their enthusiasm tended to incorporate explicit accounts of taking pleasure in women's bodies. Virginia (44) gives an account which

is typical in its joyfulness, if unusually rich in its articulation:

She was a very passionate woman. I have had quite a few sexual relationships with men ... but I have never experienced anything like this in terms of possibilities for a sexual, passionate relationship ... [interviewer asks: What was different?] ... Well, I mean, the sense of the responsiveness, these wonderful breasts that you could put – this wonderful body and these amazing responses that one's own body felt, and that the other person's body felt, and I have never experienced such a passion really. Such a passion that was *sustained* in a very physical way. It's very hard to describe, you know? I felt very passionate with her. I have felt passionate with men in the past and had lots of sexual experience [with them], but this was something else.

It is, at this point, worth stressing the significance of these accounts. There is, arguably, a globally hegemonic heteroerotics, produced in and by the colonial reach of the hegemonic bloc. This regimen structures the erotic such that 'sex' is something done by men to women, desire and sexual agency being assigned to men in what might best be thought of as the phallic mandate. Worldwide, enormous political (and often physical) force is expended to preserve this status quo, with the result that 'sex', for most of the world's women, is more closely associated with pain, danger and risk than it is with pleasure (Morgan 1984, Brekke *et al.* 1985, Gilbert and Roche 1987, Smith 1989, Panos 1990, Sasson 1992, Berer and Ray 1993, Allen 1997, Doyal 1995, Bowker 1998). The erasure of lesbian possibility is an integral element of this heteroerotic regime (Rich 1981, Young-Bruehl 1996). The fact that the women who participated in this study are able to recognise, acknowledge and act on sexual attraction at all is thus worthy of note. Moreover, most of the lesbian participants were able not only to validate their own sexual attraction to women but – since these women were previously heterosexual – to prioritise their own sexual happiness and well-being over the social and cultural imperatives of heteronormativity. That they are able to do so represents an unprecedented social transformation in the realm of gender as well as the erotic, and that some were unable to act on their desires indicates the residual strength of heteropatriarchal hegemony.

The accounts given by lesbian participants who were able to act on their desires identify a deliciousness and sensuality about sex between women which they had not been able to find with men:

The wonderful bit I always read about and I had expected when I had sex with my husband was that we would be entwined as an emotional

thing and on a zingy level when we were actually together and having sex ... it never happened. (Zara, 39)

I'd never felt desire before. I'd never felt any of that before. It was mind blowing that you could touch somebody and practically make them faint with wanting them. I had never felt like that in my whole life. I couldn't believe it ... I just felt like an alive person. That's how I felt; suddenly I was me! (Catherine, 38)

There is a strong impression, running through these accounts, of having escaped from a kind of prison, of having burst confining bonds. For these women, slipping over the hetero/homo boundary seems to equate to slipping the social and cultural leash of the heteronorm. It is also of interest – in the light of fairly taken-for-granted notions that sexual excitement must, like static electricity, discharge across a differential – that respondents reported *similarity*, not difference, as a key source of excitement and pleasure:

It's almost an intuition ... it's about bodies, it's about minds, it's everything. Our bodies are the same, we know where to touch, it's like reading a familiar map. (Pippa, 49)

One of the biggest turn-ons for me is the fact that what I am touching I am used to touching. I touch myself and I touch my partner and it feels like I have become two people and – all of that lovely fluidity! Being so physically intimate with a body so similar to mine is just extraordinary. I can't find the words for it. It really is. (Adie, 29)

What I wasn't expecting was this kind of feedback loop, you know? I touch her body and I *know* what it feels like to be touched like that, so my body responds in the same way that hers is responding. And then she makes little turned-on sounds and I know what *they* mean, and her getting turned on just, well, it just makes me go off the scale. It's like this marvellous, rushing, exploding spiral of sensation. Unbelievable. (Sally, 46)

It is difficult not to conclude that it is only the historical silencing of such accounts which has enabled the development of theories of desire premised on the need for a polarity of 'opposites'. It seems likely that giving voice to such experiences deals a powerful blow to much of what has been regarded as the 'truth' about women's sexuality. Far from being the purely *responsive* creatures imagined by Roger Scruton (1986:308) as suffering from 'an extremely poignant, often helpless, sense of being at another's mercy', these women are fully sexual agents, delighting in

their ability to 'touch someone and make them practically faint with wanting' (Catherine, 38).

Nor is this a feeble, trivial kind of sexuality which puts up with sexual activity in order to fulfil a reproductive need. Rather, it is joyful, hedonistic, pleasure-seeking:

It was brilliant. It was everything I wanted and more. I never wanted anything else. It was earth shattering. (Hilary, 37)

I realised that this is what sex can be like. And it *can* be good, and yes, it's fun and comfortable and all the things it had never been before [with men]. (Florence, 44)

Those with a major investment (whether personal or professional) in orientationalist accounts are likely, at this point, to suggest that the pleasure experienced by these women is greater than that they were able to get from their sexual encounters with men simply because they are *really* lesbians. A woman who 'is' a lesbian all along cannot, after all, be expected to enjoy sex with a man, since it is against her essential self, her nature. It is, therefore, important to pay more rigorous attention to what, according to these women, distinguishes men from women as sexual partners. That is the subject of the following chapter.

# 4

## Telling the Difference: Desire, Safety and Sameness

A friend in need's a friend indeed

A friend who bleeds is better

A friend with breasts and all the rest ...

(Placebo: 'Pure Morning' from *Without You I'm Nothing*)

In contrast to what seems to be the dominant account of sexual identity formation amongst self-identified gay men (Whisman 1996, Stein 1999), it is not uncommon for women to be heterosexually active for a substantial period of time before becoming sexually active with female partners and adopting a lesbian identity (see Table 4.1).

Table 4.1 Incidence of past heterosexuality in lesbian autobiographical accounts

Source	Number of women	Total	Per cent
Hall-Carpenter Archives (1989) <i>Inventing Ourselves: Lesbian Life Stories</i>	10	15	66
Bradstock and Wakeling (1987) <i>Words from the Same Heart</i>	7	18	38
Stewart-Park and Cassidy (1977) <i>We're Here: Lesbian Women Speak</i>	9	13	69
Holmes (1988) <i>Testimonies: Coming-Out Stories</i>	8	22	36
Neild and Pearson (1992) <i>Women Like Use</i>	11 (all married)	19	57
Whisman (1996) <i>Queer by Choice</i>	32 (‘some experience’)	39	82
	28 (‘meaningful experience’)	39	71

RANGE: 36–82%

MEAN: 59.8%

Such a transition, from the culturally hegemonic and validated to the marginal, derogated and stigmatised, inevitably carries significant social, psychological and emotional costs. It is clear that, for individuals who make this heavily freighted transition, the benefits of so doing must outweigh the considerable drawbacks.

Theories of desire premised on orientation make the assumption that only an essential element of the self – a drive, an instinct or a genetically programmed impulse – can be powerful enough to push an individual against the hegemonic tide. In fact there is no need to call upon essentialist explanations. There is ample evidence that many factors may lead people to behave ‘out of character’ and against locally or generally accepted norms. Romantic love, political conviction, an outraged sense of injustice or a sense of personal threat are among the many circumstances that may have such an impact. Consider the social and cultural forces ranged against Romeo and Juliet, for example, or the traditional acceptance by French courts of overwhelming emotion as a valid defence against a murder charge.

Notions of essentialism are, then, not needed when considering what might motivate individuals to engage in socially marginal or reprehensible sexual activities. However, it is important to acknowledge that laying claim to a lesbian identity is a potent and radical step, and one which goes far beyond the relatively simple act of engaging in stigmatised sex. To name one’s self ‘lesbian’ is to make a public statement about identity, values, life choices, ways of being in the world. In some sense, ‘lesbian’ functions as a statement of intent. To adopt it is to take risks, many of which are unpredictable or beyond personal control. What, then, motivates women to claim this identity label for themselves? Specifically, what are the *differences* between women and men as sexual partners which lead women to make such a radical claim about their intention to organise their lives around erotic intimacy with one sex rather than the other?

### Unpicking desire, unravelling orientation

Discourses of orientation seldom engage with the problematic of sexual desire. By definition, of course, claims for the essentially orientated nature of sexuality are claims for the essential nature of desire. Yet, at this epistemological stratum, such claims generally remain occluded. Thus, desire may be an instinct, a (biological) drive or a genetic imperative towards species survival. The nature of the relationships amongst sex (maleness or femaleness), gender (masculinity or femininity) and

desire is seldom addressed. Yet it is an enormously tricky and troublesome set of relationships, as indicated by the way in which those scholars who have attempted to theorise the links so swiftly descend into farce (Stein 1999).

Given that the overwhelming majority of human sexual acts are not reproductive in intent at all, any strong erotic preference premised on the sex of one's partner requires explanation. What does it mean to prefer to engage in sexual activities with individuals of only one biological sex? Given the complexity and multi-faceted nature of human sexuality, it might be hypothesised that such a preference may be premised on one or more of the following:

- A fetish for male or female genitals. This has been an assumption guiding at least some theories of sexual orientation. One such, for example, claims that lesbians enjoy sucking on the clitoris because they suffered weaning trauma and the clitoris becomes a homologue for the nipple (Ruse 1988). However, were heterosexual desire primarily provoked by the *genitalia* of the opposite sex, then cultures where nudity is prohibited – such as Victorian England or certain Moslem states – ought to demonstrate a dramatic decline in fertility.
- A fetish for male or female bodily characteristics more generally. It is possible to imagine an erotic response to musculature, distribution of body hair, hand size and so on. Nevertheless, the statistical distribution of any such characteristic across either sex is wide enough that this explanation seems rather weak as an explanation of preferences based on a binary sex-divide.
- An obedient or docile personality, which might encourage a positive response to social and cultural norms, including religious ones, and which would effectively preclude sexual self-determination or agency and result in compulsory heterosexuality.
- A desire for particular kinds of intimate relationship – one that is socially acceptable and free from stigma, for example (or, indeed, one that is rebellious and stigmatised).
- A desire for particular forms of emotional engagement within intimate relationships, in terms of degree of intimacy, egalitarianism within the dyad, gendered or non-gendered division of domestic labour, family forms and so on.
- A preference for erotic play premised on (physiological) difference or sameness. This, in turn, might be influenced by personal history, the cultural gendering of particular erotic acts, behaviours or scripts or by the extent to which one is 'at home' in one's own body.

- A preference for erotic play based on or involving emotional difference or sameness. This is likely to be significant in cultures where emotions are strongly gendered such that, for example, men are stigmatised for 'weakness' and women for being 'hard' or 'cold'.
- A desire premised on divergence or convergence of political views, cultural capital or other elements of ways of being in the world.
- A desire for material security and/or advantage. This is demonstrably so for women in many parts of the world, for whom the simple ability to survive is dangerously compromised outside a relationship with a man (as husband, father or brother). It is also the case for 'trophy wives'; young, conventionally attractive partners of old, wealthy and powerful men.
- A need for psychological/emotional security premised on the wish to replicate in an intimate dyad the dynamics of an earlier relationship with a parent or other figure of childhood significance.

This list is not exhaustive, nor would it be possible for it to be so. Given the complexity of the social, cultural, psychological, physiological and political processes which produce sexuality, it seems likely that more than one of these factors will be influential on any individual, together with others not listed here. A quick glance at the list reveals just how complicated the relationship between bodies, selves and behaviours implied by the categories 'male' and 'female' is. The stimulus/response model of human sexuality which underpins most theories of orientation is, therefore, unlikely to prove adequate as an explanation for sexual preference based on anything, let alone anything as intrinsically complicated as maleness or femaleness. Furthermore, if we accept, as we must, Lewontin's framing of human beings *within a social structure*, the complications begin to multiply exponentially.

### **A man's a man for a' that**

What, for example, makes a person male, and what makes that male person sexually desirable? It may be that being born with a penis is an adequate definition of what it means to be male (though even this requires us to gloss over the definitional problems associated with inter-sex infants or those whose penis is amputated for whatever reason). However, it is clearly not the case that possession of this organ is enough to make someone desirable, or 90 per cent of popular songs would have no meaning.

The social division of human persons into two sexes seems to be universally important, albeit that the degree of import may vary between cultures. 'Every society in every era has used the anatomical and reproductive dichotomy between male and female as a basis for a dichotomy in social order along productive and ritual lines' (Lewontin 2000, pp. 203–4). It is precisely *because* this duality, blurred and inexact as it may be in biology, has such marked social and cultural significance, that it becomes almost impossible to identify with any certainty what it is about men-in-general or women-in-general that any individual would find erotically pleasing, stimulating or repugnant.

## Desire

This leads us to the question of desire itself. If we accept that a failure to problematise maleness and femaleness undermines discourses of sexual orientation, a second significant weakness lies in a similar failure to interrogate the notion of desire. Biological theories of desire, as stimulus–response or as instinctual drive motivated by the reproductive imperative of the species, are difficult to take seriously, since they generally fail to take account of the observable complexity of human behaviour and social organisation.

It is not even tenable to claim that the body is the unproblematic producer of desire nor, indeed, that it is the unmediated producer of sensations experienced as erotic. Acts regarded as deeply sexual in one culture – for example, mouth kissing – are seen as shocking or disgusting in others. Certain areas of the body may be eroticised by some cultures, or even by some individuals within a culture, to the bafflement of others. The editor of *The Daily Mail* was 'appalled and incensed' when Cherie Booth, wife of British Prime Minister Tony Blair, breastfed her infant son in his presence (Leigh *et al.* 2002), a response that only makes sense in a culture where the breast is so strongly fetishised as sexual that its primary function is erased. Bodies, then, may hardly be said to produce desire as an uncomplicated, pre-cultural set of sensations.

Desire is complexly implicated in emotion and in the phenomenology of corporeality, as well as being inextricably embedded in a plethora of social and cultural factors such as status, material circumstance and geopolitical location. It is pre-eminently shaped by gender as well as by sex – in other words, by masculinity and femininity, not only maleness and femaleness. Were this not so, there would be no erotic niches labelled 'butch lesbian', 'ladyboy' or 'machismo'.

The notion of desire is resistant to definition. There are additional problems for anyone trying to build a theory of women's desire, since it

is a characteristic of patriarchal social organisation that sexuality is produced as rigidly gendered and that women's sexuality is constrained in specific ways.

### **An erotics of constraint**

Heterosexual activity is, in any case, more problematic for women than for men, for the straightforward reason that the fluid dynamics of penis-in-vagina intercourse exposes women to the possibility of conception and to the risk of a range of sexually transmissible infections as well as other physical harms (Doyal 1995). Even in cultures where women have achieved a degree of autonomy and acknowledgement of their human and civil rights, they are generally obliged to take responsibility for managing the inherent risks of heterosex. Thus what Lesley Doyal (1995) terms 'biological sexism' gives rise to and is compounded by societal sexism/misogyny with the result that, for women, heterosex is always already freighted with anxiety.

Women's experiences of desire, arousal, sexual activity, sensual and erotic pleasure and sexual relationships are, then, not only dauntingly complex and complicated, they are profoundly hedged about with prohibitions, stigma, sanctions and dangers. Indeed, so bewildering and multifactoral are the social and cultural processes whereby the erotic capacities of women are boxed in that the consequences are widely perceived as 'natural' to the state of being female. It seems, therefore, important to explore the ways in which women engage with and make sense of discourses of desire-as-gendered and the extent to which they are able to appropriate elements of such discourses in fashioning their own sexed, gendered and variously desiring selves.

### **Desire made flesh: about bodies**

Well, I think this is probably text book...but I had a succession of best friends, there was always one that I was always intensely good friends with, and the one that I was friends with in my sixth form, we were very, very close friends. And when I went to university it did become something incredibly intense, whereby she expected me to write to her and ring her every day. It was like the most passionate love affair. And yet, both of us, in fact, someone did say that they thought we were lesbians and we were both very outraged about that! And yet there was at least one occasion I can remember when it did almost become a physical relationship... I just remember this electric sexual moment and we either did kiss or we nearly kissed.

This account does not come from one of the lesbians in the study, but from one of the heterosexual women, Kate (47). The relationship she describes was clearly freighted with a strongly erotic charge, and left her aware that her sexuality might have developed in a different way. She goes on to say:

Certainly I remember it intensely as an important moment in my life that sort of shocked me. Because of the electricity of it, not in the sense that it was something wrong necessarily, but just that it was a very emotionally intense moment, and I still don't know whether, if the other woman hadn't come in, whether we would have said, oh dear, that was a mistake, or whether we would have pursued it ... Both of us had boyfriends at this stage, and yet it seemed that they were somehow slightly peripheral to the intensity of this female relationship ... It's certainly a moment at which I perhaps could have taken a different direction.

Kate's account highlights some of the key areas of difficulty in trying to fit women's sexuality into a clear structure. The first problem is, as several interviewees commented, that women in the hegemonic bloc are permitted – almost expected – to engage in friendships where same-sex emotional intimacy is physically expressed. Such intense intimacy, particularly in adolescence, may be reflected back to them as a normal part of growing up or even as a 'safe' form of preparation for the 'real thing', heterosexual activity and relationships. Kate introduces the account of her youthful same-sex intimacy as 'probably text book' and repeated this at a later point in the interview: 'I think maybe it's a fairly text book thing, but at a young age perhaps you might go through a stage of experimentation of not knowing which way your sexual identity is going.' Such interpretations of early same-sex intimacy were frequent among lesbian interviewees:

I think what I was doing with straight women all that time was what happens for a lot of straight women. Maybe all straight women. I was sort of getting crushes on women. And we used to flirt and joke about it, but that wasn't seen as weird or deviant or like it was homosexuality rearing its ugly head. That's what straight women *do*. (Sally 46)

Umm ... I really, when I was a teenager ... oh yeah, we used to, I do remember! I don't know how I interpreted it; just we were girls messing about together I think. To prepare ourselves for the real thing. Not that we were lesbians, but that we were girls messing around together. (Lilly 45)

As Lilly's account suggests, the very fact that such experiences are culturally encoded as a 'normal' stage on the road to heterosexual maturity acts to make it *more* difficult, rather than less so, for women to name and act on their desires for each other. Grace (47) reports that:

When I was a nurse I remember having crushes on various nurses, but it was just a case of, as far as I was aware then, that this is something you'll grow out of. You just haven't grown out of that crush on the school mistress yet, the gym mistress. So that's alright! And I was still actively involved in going out and looking for boyfriends.

Her experience is shared by Gala (45) who realised on reflection that her lifelong attraction to women had been misinterpreted by her at first:

I think I have always been attracted to women, even when I was at boarding school. But all the girls messed about to a certain extent, and then I certainly never thought of myself as a lesbian.

Lillian Faderman, in her historical account of passionate friendships between women, suggests that the advent of Freudian sexology and women's struggle for economic and political equality, made it less easy for such relationships to avoid being labelled sexually perverse. She writes (1981, p. 240):

Love between women was metamorphosed into a freakishness, and it was claimed that only those who had such an abnormality would want to change their subordinate status...the sexologists' theories frightened, or attempted to frighten, women away from feminism and from loving other women by demonstrating that both were abnormal and were generally linked together.

Evidence to support this interpretation is not hard to find. Films such as the sympathetic *Madchen in Uniform* (Russo 1987), nineteenth-century anti-feminist propaganda (Dijkstra 1986, Koetzle and Scheid 1994) and early lesbian novels such as Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* all present adolescent same-sex attraction as symptomatic of lesbianism. However, the account given by interviewees strongly suggest that things are not as clear-cut. For example, it seems to be the case that the normalisation of adolescent same-sex desires as 'crushes', 'pashes' or a training-ground for heterosexuality acts to *prevent* young women taking these experiences seriously.

For Karen (23), this normalisation of adolescent 'messaging about' was powerful enough to enable her to engage in quite significant sexual encounters without questioning her eventual heterosexuality:

But most of the girls I had relationships with were straight girls as well. I think both of us considered ourselves straight, and it was two girls getting it on, rather than two gay people ... it went a little deeper than just a bit of fun. But we didn't really stick the labels on ourselves, we considered ourselves outside of those labellings. We were quite young, and didn't consider we could be a lesbian until we were eighteen.

Nor was it only the lesbian group who reported this kind of experience. Elizabeth (46) acknowledges that 'I suppose I was 12 or 13 and there were older girls that I had a bit of a crush on' and 'when you are younger, you get a bit drunk, and you fool around [with women]'. She represents such experiences as fairly trivial, as does Georgina (21), who says, 'I think, with growing up especially, you do experiment to a certain extent with friends'. Not all of the heterosexual women were able to dismiss these encounters so easily. Linda (51) remembers feelings of confusion sparked by teenage feelings for another girl:

I think actually, when I was growing up, I think, I don't know about you, but I found that, when I was about 14 or 15, and you are just becoming aware of your own sexuality, I sometimes sort of thought, oh, I wonder? Wondering if, you know, because you have school friends and you get very close to them, and you love them. And sometimes I used to get a bit confused because I wasn't sure whether the feelings that I had for another girl friend as such, should I be feeling like this? Or is this natural? Yes, and that can be a bit confusing ... It didn't make me anxious. I just thought, should another female love another female. Like you do, you're best friends.

Linda's uncertainty came through very strongly in the way she reported this aspect of her story. In contrast to the confident and articulate way in which she speaks during the rest of the interview, at this point she uses familiar conversational ploys to check out whether what she is saying is OK. Her sentences become more halting and she uses 'you know' a lot, at one time strengthening it to 'I don't know about you' in an implicit appeal for validation. Clearly she still feels that this is something risky. The sense of riskiness may have been strong enough to

prevent her fully acknowledging what she now does, that she was unable to find in her heterosexual relationships the kinds of closeness her female friends offered:

I think that, because women tend to be – I could never understand people not feeling the same as I did. And, because people weren't sort of as loving and caring and maybe as thoughtful sometimes, particularly men. You know, you think, hang on a minute!

Later in the interview, she expresses sadness and disappointment that her marriage has not been a passionate one:

Sometimes I think, oh, I wonder. Maybe it's because I'm a bit of a softie and I see all these films on the telly, and they fall in love. And you think, oh, it was never quite like that for me. Although I love him dearly and I wouldn't change him. I sometimes think I wish I could experience that real sort of passion.

Donna (37) is another heterosexual woman who found it less than easy to manage her intense feelings for another woman. For her the normalisation of adolescent experimentation didn't 'work', because she was well out of adolescence at the time:

I know that my friends have said that they have experienced that with school teachers and things like that. But I hadn't, and I just experienced that a few years ago, and it wasn't until then. And I was really worried about who I was and what was going on at the time ... because I found her physically attractive as well as – oh, I don't know. And I think I've only found men physically attractive, not women.

It is certainly not the case that the normalisation of adolescent same-sex 'experimentation' is shifting or undergoing substantial modification. Indeed, examination of self-help material targeting adolescents shows that their same-sex desires are routinely reframed within the paradigm of this discourse. Exemplary of this genre is the British website [www.teenagehealthfreak.org](http://www.teenagehealthfreak.org), which archives several online interchanges between young people concerned about their sexuality and the resident sexpert 'Dr Ann'. Typical of such interchanges is this one:

Q: Dear Dr Ann – Am I a lesbian? I am 12 years old and I think I might be a lesbian. I like the look of women's bodies and I don't know what's wrong with me! Help!!!

A: Dear Person Who Likes the Look of Women's Bodies -? Liking the look of women's bodies absolutely does not make you lesbian so don't worry. There doesn't sound to be anything wrong with you at all ... Lots of girls at around the time of puberty develop 'crushes' on other women but few of them decide that they are lesbian when they get older.

Another reply from 'Dr Ann' hammers home the same point:

Teenagers quite often go through a period when they find their own sex attractive ... but that doesn't make you gay.

Behind the reassuring mateyness there is a clear and unambivalent message, to be a lesbian means that there is something 'wrong' with you. What appears, on superficial reading, to be a permissive discourse of female sexual 'fluidity' emerges on more critical scrutiny to be a discursive strategy to police women's sexuality in the interests of heteronormativity. This discursive strategy is reinforced by punitive sanction, as Karen (23) makes clear in her description of the process she had to go through in incorporating her same-sex desires into her self-fashioning:

... it was a couple of years ago, when I had my first serious long term relationship with another girl. This was when I realised that this was more than just something you did, you had to take the consequences that came with it. There are consequences. How you deal with things, telling people, your friends, parents, the *traumatic other stuff that goes with it*. That's when you realise if you want to do this you have to take the identity that comes with it. (added emphasis)

This is a very clear and reflexive account of a *social* process whereby an individual experience of same-sex desires, activities and relationships is first of all *not taken seriously* and then must be managed in a punishing regime of 'traumatic other stuff'. For women of an earlier generation, who grew up before the communications revolution and the achievements of feminism and gay liberation, the hegemony of the heteronorm was far more complete. Heterosexuality was not just the only viable sexuality, it was the only *visible* sexuality, particularly for women. Jodie (50) describes her adolescent sexuality thus:

Yes, there was something about me at the age of, say, 15, that definitely was attracted to boys and wanted a physical relationship with them. Now whether that was just a way of putting clothing on a sexual drive,

I don't know, because that was the only one I knew was possible. I didn't, from my own imagination or physical makeup, conjure up this idea that I could have a relationship like that with a woman. I was socialised completely and with no other choice at all but to have sex with a man, and my sex drive became quite strong, so I focused it onto what I had been told was the right thing to focus it onto. And there was nothing creative in me to say, well, you could go out and do this, because some women do that.

Evidently, the processes of what Jodie here calls 'socialisation' are classically Foucaultian in that they exemplify modalities of micro-deployment of relations of power through discourses of gender-as-(hetero)sexualised in the interests of an existing hegemony. Women's sexuality appears in these accounts not as an innate, 'natural' bundle of attributes and automatic responses to sensory stimuli but as *produced in them* by forms of disciplinary power which simply saturate their 'world'. In this sense the social world is a world of discourse and 'woman' a discursive construct, albeit as embedded in notions of corporeality as are discourses of 'race'.

One theme that may be clearly traced through these accounts is that of female sexuality as something slippery, unstable, barely 'real', and certainly not to be taken seriously. Thus Claire (24) describes her bewilderment at recognising that she was simply not able to question her lack of pleasure in heterosexuality until she encountered feminism:

I needed the feminism in a way to be able to allow me to make that kind of analysis, that, sexually, sleeping with a man just wasn't doing anything for me. And I couldn't *see* that without feminism to cut that path and open that debate up for myself. Which was really strange, that I couldn't just think, well! It was almost like; I was so, as a woman, brought up to *not* have a sexuality and to *not* have sexual desire that the fact that I was having a relationship with a man and not finding it at all pleasurable, I couldn't think about it. I couldn't think, well, this is bad, this is wrong. (her emphasis)

Once she was enabled to question her sexuality in this way, Claire made what she describes as a conscious decision to be a lesbian, 'Absolutely, totally absolutely, really explicit [I] sat down and worked out the pros and cons and decided this is what I want to be.'

This ability to make a conscious decision is one which Claire herself recognises as running against the grain of mainstream thinking about

sexuality:

Absolutely [conscious decision], yes, and that weirds people out. They can't believe that you can actually make such a conscious decision ... But the actual decision was really conscious, and really kind of explicit, and I announced it to one of my friends, 'OK, so I've decided, and I've been thinking about it for ages and I've decided this is what I am, this is what I am going to be.'

As a relatively young woman, Claire has been able to draw on a range of discursive 'tools' in re-fashioning her identity. Hers is, however, an unusual account. Far more common amongst these women was a pattern whereby they were unable to take seriously their own – sometimes deeply felt – sexual unhappiness. This strong sense of *lack of entitlement* to sexual happiness was associated with very low expectations of heterosexual relationships and of men. For some women, simply finding a man who was not abusive, violent or a drinker was enough. One such is Charlotte (30), who married at 17: 'I suppose there was things about him that attracted me to him; the fact that he was a nice bloke, he wasn't a drinker, he wasn't an animal, yes, I suppose I was attracted to him in that way.' Elizabeth (45) reports a similar experience:

I had lots of relationships with men, none of which have been particularly satisfactory. And [my husband] was just a nice man, he was mature and he was nice to be around and he was interesting.

It is important to stress that it is only recently that women's well-being in their relationships with men has been taken seriously at all. Within most nation states of the hegemonic bloc, it was only during the latter part of the twentieth century that women's human and civil rights were formally recognised. Before that time, women were legally the property of their male kin, and were obliged, within wedlock, to submit not only to unwanted sexual activities but to physical abuse. Such attitudes, ingrained over many centuries, may not be erased in one generation. Study after study has shown how common it is for men to abuse women, sexually and physically (Bowker 1998, *The Guardian* 29.11.03). In this wider context it is not surprising that, for many women, a man who is *not* violent or abusive seems to be a rare find. Robbie (48) reports that, after having been raped at the age of seventeen and:

after a pretty awful year, involving drugs and abuse of various kinds, I met my husband, who was kind and gentle, so I married him.

I don't think that I felt much in the way of sexual desire and I have never had sexual pleasure with men, but I kind of assumed I was heterosexual ... I was married for ten years.

On the face of it, to assume that one is heterosexual in the absence of heterosexual desire or pleasure seems absurd. Yet, for women, failure to experience desire or pleasure in their relationships with men is still best described as a global cultural norm, since it has been identified by researchers across the world (Doyal 1995, Hite 2000). Such expectations, at least for educated women in advanced post-industrial nations, conflict with more recent discourses of individual sexual fulfilment produced by, and circulating within the context of, notions of personal growth (Kitzinger 1983) and what Lupton (1995) calls the 'imperative of health'.

Participants in this study were aware of this conflict, and came up with many explanations for their sexual unhappiness in relationships with men. Some thought there was something physically wrong with them, others wondered if perhaps they had not met 'the right man' yet, some wondered if they had been 'put off' sex by earlier experiences of abuse, still others remembered accounts of mundane heterosex from their mothers, friends or other sources and simply lowered their expectations. For Florence (44), the possibilities of lesbian sex came as an amazing revelation after years of pleasureless marriage:

[Sex with my husband] was never spectacular, it was never something that I particularly enjoyed. I had never had an orgasm with him at all. It wasn't until I went to bed with a woman that I knew what an orgasm was ... For me it was about not realising that there was something better out there ... it was just, well, that is what you expect, it's one of those things.

Elizabeth (45) was attracted to her husband initially, but:

I didn't feel, particularly once we had been together, that it was anything worth writing home about really. It was just like nothing, and I did feel uncomfortable.

May (39) thought that the sexual unhappiness of her married life was a sign that there was something wrong with her:

I don't know, because sex was never good between us really, you put up with it really, more than actually wanting it ... I never enjoyed it,

but I never expected to really. I was never very good at it, I just thought there was something wrong with me, I thought I was just frigid or prudish or whatever the words are. I thought there was something wrong with me and my body.

Having discovered that sex with her girlfriend was intensely pleasurable, she deeply regrets the lost years; 'I wish I had known a long time ago. I am getting old and past it now.' Some of the older women had approached sex with men, and marriage, with no expectations of sexual satisfaction. Ruth (58) remembered that:

I had been a struggling heterosexual. I had had lots and lots of relationships, some of them quite long – five, eight years – lived with men. I had always been looking for Mr Right, as you do when you are heterosexual, and I actually thought I had found him.

She is clear that, although she loved and was in love with some of her male partners, and although desire was not always absent – 'there were one or two men that I did desire' – sexual pleasure was almost an alien concept:

I am talking about love now. I mean, of course, all of that time and also historically, women of my generation at that time were not naturally orgasmic. It hadn't been invented. If you were orgasmic you were a very lucky freak. So, at that time, occasionally I had an orgasm, but it kind of happened and I thought, 'funny, what was that?' It was hardly even enjoyable. That didn't happen until much later, probably in the last fifteen years. Sex [with women] has suited me much better, it has obviously been much better.

For women of a younger generation, such as Zara (39) there were a different set of expectations. Women are now expected to enjoy sex, and there is an entire self-help literature available which promotes the notion that technical proficiency is the key to happy heterosex:

Sexually it wasn't [good]. It never worked with men, not even with my husband. I thought, oh, that's just my luck, I am not very good at this. And books seemed to imply that, yes, some women aren't, it's just one of those things that you do, and you cope with ... It was very disappointing, extremely disappointing. We thought that it must get better at some point, we are just out of practice. And we literally got

books out of the library and brought books and went into sex shops to try to – we tried very hard at making it better for both of us.

Hegemonic discourses of gendered erotics, then, have allowed women to ‘explain away’ their sexual unhappiness in heterosexual relationships. Moreover, social pressures on women to be married seem, from these accounts, to have valorised the married state for its own sake as well as for the familiar reasons to do with economic security and the material and emotional well-being of children. Thus, for example, Carol (55) says of her married life, ‘I was bored, terribly bored, but boredom is not enough to stop a marriage, especially when it is basically a solid marriage’. Phrases such as ‘a solid marriage’, ‘a good marriage’ or even ‘a happy marriage’ were used by women to describe married lives which were empty of sexual pleasure. Jenny (48) gives the following account:

... we had a happy married life. The only thing that was lacking was the sex. I never enjoyed having sex with a man whatsoever... I mean, now [with my female partner] it’s just amazing, absolutely amazing! ... I couldn’t believe how I felt. I have never felt this elated about anything in my life, and I thought, do I really deserve to have these feelings? Here I was, living with a man all these years! And I found it wonderfully exciting, and I still do, and it gets more exciting by the minute. But I just find it very scary at the same time because, here am I, I’m 48 now and I think, god, I’ve had to wait until I was 47 before I ever had those feelings in my life!

It would be easy to interpret these accounts as demonstrating that these women were unable to experience sexual pleasure with men, because they were somehow ‘really lesbians’ all along. Rather than making use of leftover remnants from discourses of female sexual anaesthesia in order to explain the erotic emptiness of their heterosexual experiences, they should recognise that some characteristic intrinsic to their sexuality, ‘lesbianism’ acts somehow to make it impossible for them to enjoy heterosexual. In short, it might be expected that they would draw on discourses of orientation to make sense of their experiences, particularly since these are women who have refashioned their identity from ‘heterosexual’ to ‘lesbian’.

Such an interpretation would be plausible, were it not for the existence of two alternative kinds of account amongst the interviewees. For, not only is it the case that heterosexually identified participants also reported similar experiences – something that is, of course, repeated

throughout the literature (Wilkinson and Kitzinger 1993, Doyal 1995, Hite 1999) – it is also the case that many lesbian participants reported *positive* sexual experiences with men. The non-lesbian interviewees certainly did not speak of heterosexuality in glowing terms. Indeed, it became clear that, for each of them, different elements of heterosexuality were experienced as variously more or less positive. Elizabeth (46) was unimpressed by adolescent heterosexual encounters:

I suppose, you had to have a boyfriend. You were nothing without a boyfriend, and I went along with that. But I didn't like them much a lot of the time. I thought they were horrible! But you did meet the odd nice one, you know, that kept you going.

Mary (54) expresses more strongly negative feelings towards men than any of the lesbian participants. Indeed, so strong is her dislike that she began her interview by saying: 'I would love to be a lesbian. Wishing won't make it so. I would give anything to be attracted to women but I am not. It's a great pity.' For Mary, the power of her own heterosexuality is made manifest by the very dissatisfaction she feels with it:

I think it would be much easier to have a female companion, life partner, having tried men ... I know it's not their fault, I know they are hard wired too, but I do despise male sexuality. The poor things can't help it, can they? But they are penis driven, and that's what I don't like about them ... I just find them insensitive, I suppose. Well, I can't say, it's difficult for me to say, I know that there are some very happy marriages, so they can't all be selfish.

Although able to accept that there are 'some happy marriages', however, she is quite unable to accept that this might include women's desire for men: 'No. I'll never believe that women are attracted to men's bodies. Never believe that.' From a younger generation, Georgina (21) simply comments that 'I suppose the more I sleep with men the more I am disappointed'. For Georgina (43), marriage was something to be put up with, despite a sense of disappointment. She says, '[There's] never been any romance, never been any great deal of passion really ... I did what my mother did and put up with it'. Again, age makes a difference. Sarah (27) demonstrates the reflexivity of a generation influenced by feminism: 'I think women are kind of told, or kind of encouraged to think, that men's sexuality is important and theirs isn't, they're just for men.' In her experience, men have to be taught about women's sexuality

by their partners:

I think I was used by a lot of men. I never understood my sexuality until, say, I was maybe 20 or something like that. And I had sex with lots of men, you know, and I thought that I would have an orgasm by them just penetrating me. I didn't understand that, you know, actually my important sexual organ is a clitoris. I didn't come to terms with that ... until I started reading feminist literature on sexuality ... and I think, every man I have met since then, I have had to educate them about it ... [which is] kind of OK, but I just kind of think I shouldn't have to.

Linda who, aged 51, seems far less sexually assertive than Sarah, describes marriage to a husband she loves, but with whom she cannot experience passion:

My first sort of sexual experience, I thought was absolutely awful. It was a bit, you know, wham bam, and that was it. I think it's maybe because I am not a particularly sexual person ... then I met my husband, and he was different. Very kind, very considerate, not particularly sexually demanding ... Although I love him dearly, and I wouldn't change him, I sometimes think, I wish I could experience that real sort of passion.

Linda, although wistful, clearly locates the reasons for her disappointments in herself. She is 'maybe ... not a particularly sexual person'. Fiona (47), on the other hand, is less forgiving:

... some men are so shallow and so crass. Some don't even know what the word emotion means, and are just so hurtful without realising it ... men just get physical satisfaction from sex, whereas a woman, to her there are so many other things involved ... I haven't come across a man yet who has had that depth of feeling, it's just been purely physical for them and has not involved their minds at all.

Despite such strongly negative experiences of heterosex, Fiona went on to get married, and paints a sad picture of her marriage:

I had no desire at all. In fact, the sex side really went down quite rapidly after the honeymoon, I have to say. Sex, as far as I was concerned, was only to conceive children ... I was old fashioned enough to think that

once you are married then that's your duty as a wife to provide sex for your husband. And I never refused him, but there was no desire, and it was very much a lie back and think of England thing. And I was thankful that he was a sleepy head and wasn't too demanding.

Women who have remained heterosexual, then, tend to draw upon the same explanatory accounts as do those who have rejected heterosexuality. For them, too, hegemonic discourses of gendered sexuality which differentially assign particular aspects of erotic capacity to women and to men, are appropriated to give meaning to disappointment and allow them to maintain their heterosexual relationships and identities.

Many of the lesbian participants, as well as those women who identified as bisexual ( $n = 3$ ), reported pleasurable experiences of heterosexuality. For some, heterosexual encounters were described as enjoyable, but as lacking some vital ingredient. Women described heterosex variously as physically exciting but lacking intimacy or closeness, as comfortable but not exciting or as pleasurable in a narrowly mechanical sense. Thus Fiona (35) said of her heterosexual life: 'as I became more mature, I always found sex was fun, but it wasn't particularly satisfying'. Gala (45) reports that: 'I have had good sex with one or two men, although I have slept with many who are useless!' Nicky (37) gives a similar, if somewhat kinder, account: 'Yes, I had some bad sex and I had some good sex with men, and that wasn't an issue.' She goes on to stress that:

Also, not all sex with a woman is good sex, so I can't say that I would prefer to have bad sex with a woman for the rest of my life rather than good sex with men. The ideal for me is to have a good relationship, sexual and otherwise, with a woman.

Some of the lesbian participants, however, referred to men in far more strongly positive terms. For example Zara (39) stressed that she really fell in love with her husband: 'I know that I was in love with him, and he lit up my life, he made things worthwhile, he got me out of the house. I could have fun [with him] and he certainly turned me on something rotten for a while.'

Margaret (53) fell deeply in love with a man whilst doing voluntary work in an African country: 'I just saw this local chap, and he was absolutely gorgeous, and we just immediately clicked, he and I. We just, I don't know, the chemistry was just right, the relationship just blossomed from there.' Sally (46) was also anxious not to misrepresent her

heterosexual past:

I know that is what some women say when they come out, that they were attracted to women all along but society forced them into heterosexual relationships. That may be so for them, but I would be lying if I said it was like that for me. I was *very* strongly attracted to members of the opposite sex. I had lots of male lovers and I really used to enjoy sex with them ... I really did have some wonderful sex with these blokes ... [there was] a boy in my class who I was in love with for years. I used to stare at the back of his neck in assembly and feel faint with lust. He was so beautiful.

For some women, even when they had been successfully heterosexual, the sense of something being missing in heterosex was strong. Some initially dealt with it by moving onto other, heterosexual, relationships. Katie (23) describes her heterosexual relationships as 'never bad relationships. They were OK emotionally; sexually as well.' She goes on to explain that:

There was just something missing. I just knew I didn't want to spend the rest of my life with these people. I think it was more the fact of 'with these people' rather than the fact that they were men, and I just moved on from them and moved onto the next one.

Eventually, however, she discovered that sex with women was much more to her liking. The sense of something missing went, and she tries to explain the key differences:

[women] are more aesthetically pleasing. I trust them more. I put trust in a woman more. I think women get more emotionally involved, whereas men are very physically based. I wouldn't trust them for two seconds. I think they would run off with anything presented to them. You just get more emotional involvement with a woman. Yes, and I think that you can do everything together. You can go shopping together, you get the whole friendship and you get to sleep with them too!

This is an extremely complex picture. For Katie, sexual relationships are enhanced by factors which are social, cultural and emotional rather than simply physiological. She does not mention sexual technique once during her interview, nor does she express disgust for men's bodies.

Indeed, she is adamant that her preference cannot be reduced to the level of simple physical attraction: 'at the end of the day I think it's the person's personality that counts. So, most of the personality types I go for tend to come in a female body.' This sense of corporeality downplayed may feed into a particular strand of 'old school' homophobic discourse, exemplified by conservatives such as Roger Scruton (1986), which constructs lesbianism as a kind of impotent hyper-feminine asexuality, empty of desire, arousal, excitement or orgasmic pleasure. It is important to stress here that the desire for intimacy, closeness or friendship so often expressed in these accounts runs in parallel with powerfully voiced feelings of desire and of pleasure in women's bodies. For example Sally (46) describes how she began the relationship with her first girlfriend: 'I chased after her for months, and my feelings were so strong, and it was so clearly being really in love, and really sexual, that I just thought, oh, so I'm a lesbian now.' She goes on to say:

But it was really just the sex. No, not *just* the sex, it was the different emotional content as well as the sex. But I just really, really fell in love with women's bodies. Oh, gorgeous! And what I felt was, well, this is like the most wonderful gourmet feast imaginable, why on earth should I want to go back to fast food? ... Ah! Women! Fine wine, the most succulent and nourishing meal you can think of!

At this point, traditional discourses of female sexual disinterest, of inversion or of normatively gendered sexuality lose purchase altogether, as women try to account for the interwoven-ness of the somatic and the emotional.

### **Back to the body**

Discourses of orientation situate desire in the body. Moreover, they construct 'desire' (the word most often used within this paradigm is 'attraction') as being a response to specific kinds of body. This taken for grantedness of the embodied character of 'attraction' is problematic since, unlike animals, the corporeality of human beings is radically mediated by the social and the cultural (as well as the psychological). Scholars and activists within feminism, anti-racism and disability rights have revealed the body as the terrain for hegemonic contestation and have identified sex and sexuality as intrinsic to those contestations as they pertain to 'gender', 'race' and dis/ability (Terry and Urla 1995).

For the women I interviewed, not surprisingly, embodiment was central to their accounts of desire, sexual activity and their self-perceptions as sexual agents. Of particular interest are the accounts given by many of their responses to the male or female bodies of those they assign to the category of 'preferred sexual partners', as well as their imagined or predicted responses to the bodies of those other-sexed people not in that category.

As we have seen, some of the lesbian participants reported negative feelings about men's bodies, forming a continuum from mild disinterest to strong revulsion. For some, this negative response seemed to have been present from an early age, and might be taken as evidence of some intrinsic element in their sexual makeup. Thus Kitt (44) muses: 'Well, for me it's really hard to say I was born a lesbian. I think from my earliest memories I have always had an attraction to women and an aversion to men in a very physical way.' She goes on, however, to stress that she believes her sexuality is 'more to do with social than being born [lesbian]'. Moreover, despite having characterised her 'aversion to men' as being very physical, her explanation soon moves away from the bodied to the social and emotional:

I don't know. I don't know, I mean, maybe it's something about contact between the opposite sexes. People talk about the opposite sex as if that's an unproblematic statement. Actually it seems to be to encapsulate the problems that there are in heterosexual relationships and to be a very tragic statement really. Because, where is compatibility in opposites, you know? There is nothing complementary about that, there's nothing that's going to, what is the basis for communication, what is the basis for respect if you come from that kind of opposite? [-] I think that maybe what I'm saying is that I would have always wanted to have a relationship that was equal and tender.

This is a many-stranded and nuanced account. Kitt's erotic and intimate preference for women comprises many elements, to do with gender socialisation (and her keen awareness of this), sensuality, trust and disgust. She seems to suggest that a successful love relationship requires 'communication ... respect ... equal(ity) and tender(ness)', and to believe that it is prohibitively difficult for women to achieve these things with men. Importantly, she does not imply that this is to do with any essentialist characteristics of either women or men, rather, that contemporary constructs of gender are at the root of the problem.

## **Conclusion: love is a many-splendoured thing**

Analysis of the accounts of desire provided by both lesbian and non-lesbian participants reveals a complexity and variousness in women's experiences that does not easily lend itself to generalisation. Nevertheless, a handful of key themes emerge and many of these are expressed across the divide of sexuality. In terms of the social construction of female sexuality, it is clear that gendered heteronorms act to render women's sexual well-being inconsequential and trivial. A picture emerges of a kind of famished, excluded desire. Women find it difficult to take their own desires and pleasures seriously, since the heteroerotic norm is, simply, that women are not supposed to care about sexual pleasure. Although this represents an advance on early twentieth-century discourses of female sexual anaesthesia, it still constructs 'sex' around penile penetration and ejaculation.<sup>1</sup>

Also problematic, it seems, are discourses of female sexual fluidity or flexibility. Stein (1999, p. 251) concludes that:

... there are [few] plausible theories concerning how women develop sexual orientations. In fact, researchers and theorists... have described women as having fluid sexual orientations and as having sexual orientations that are hard to pin down.

This 'fluidity' is hardly surprising, given the general status of women's desire as inconsequential. Here, we have seen that intense love-relationships with other girls during childhood, adolescence and early adulthood – the kinds of relationships which a boy or young man might interpret as evidence of his nascent 'gay' identity – are routinely dismissed as a normal 'phase'. It may, of course, be the case that this permissiveness protects girls from the kinds of homophobic abuses commonly reported by young gay men, but it is at best a very mixed blessing. Several participants explained that they had been encouraged not to take these deeply emotional experiences seriously, and that this had in some cases prevented them from recognising their own desires. I would argue that this dismissiveness in effect steals women's sexuality from them. It is at least as damaging an assault on the integrity of self as the name-calling and bullying experienced by young gay men, for whom such 'crushes' mark something of a point of no return on the path to homosexual identity.

Alongside the heteroerotic construction of women's desire as trivial stands the problematic nature of hegemonic masculinity. Many participants reported that they got married for no other reason than that the

man who asked was 'nice'. Women's accounts frequently betray extraordinarily low expectations of men, of heterosex and of marriage. For many, the fact that a man is neither violent nor a drunk is good enough reason to marry him. Expectations of male sexual proficiency were also low for many women, and there seemed to be a tendency to accept that men's physical presence – their bodies, hygiene and personal habits – was unlikely to be a source of pleasure.

Here, it is interesting to note that, of course, it is the female body rather than the male which routinely stands for 'sex' in both elite and popular culture in the hegemonic bloc. Although there is some (far from straightforward) evidence of a re-eroticisation of masculine heteroperformativities, this is relatively recent. A woman who leaves heterosexuality for a lesbian relationship, then, acquires for herself a member of the class of persons traditionally marked as erotically enticing. When one is accustomed to intimacy with others not so marked (indeed, marked to a certain extent in reaction to the sexual objectification of the feminine), the change may be heady indeed.

Not only are women members of a sexualised class, they are also not dangerous in the way that men are dangerous. Several participants used words and phrases like 'comfortable', 'safety', 'at ease' and 'coming home' when referring to the unfamiliar aspects of lesbian sex. It is not that women do not abuse each other in intimate relationships; they do – although nothing like to the extent that men abuse women (*The Guardian* 29.11.03). Rather, it is that a bundle of social, cultural, psychological and physiological factors intersect to produce 'woman' as soft, nurturing, comforting and sensual, a construct which men, of course, define as *other* to themselves.

The differences between same-sex and opposite-sex intimacy for women are, then, profoundly different to the equivalent experiences of gay men (Whisman 1996, Stein 1999). They are to do with bodies, emotions and skills and with the social construction of all of these. In short, gender runs through the field of the erotic like words through a stick of rock. In the next chapter I shall examine the impact of orientationalist notions of 'gender-atypicality' on women's fashioning of their sexual selves.

# 5

## Haunted by the Gynander: Disruptive Genders

The androgyne ... is the virginal adolescent male, still somewhat feminine, while the gynander can only be the woman who strives for male characteristics, the sexual usurper; the feminine form aping the masculine! ... The first originates in the Bible and designates the initial stage of human development; the Graeco-Catholic tradition has consecrated its use, whereas I have taken the other from botany, and with it I baptize not the sodomite but any tendency on the part of woman to take on the role of a man

(Josephin Peladan *The Gynander*, 1891,  
cited in Dijkstra 1986, p. 273)

'Feminine' was a test, like some witch trial she was pre-ordained to fail.

(Barbara Kingsolver *Prodigal Summer*)

Josephin Peladan was a Rosicrucian whose book *The Gynander* was, as Dijkstra points out, written in the closing years of the nineteenth century and thus 'inevitably full of Darwinian clichés' (Dijkstra 1986, p. 273). One of a substantial body of texts produced in that era in response to the first wave of the women's liberation movement, it is representative of the genre in its anxious attempt to recruit *all* the authoritative voices of the age to its cause. By appropriating both religion (Catholic Christianity) and science (albeit botany!) and tying these together with historical fantasies about classical Greece (a cultural ideal for his peers), Peladan is laying claim to the most unyielding of foundations for discourses of inversion. As we have seen, contemporary science has yet to outgrow this intellectual legacy of the nineteenth century.

It is also noteworthy that Peladan, writing as the twentieth century approached, distinguishes so clearly between androgyny (effeminacy in male persons) and gynandry (masculinity in female persons) and that he regards the former as a *superior* way to be male and the latter as an *inferior* way to be female. Gender and its variations here plays out very differently for men and for women. Interestingly, this is so precisely because the conjunction of two men doubles, as it were, the available amount of masculine 'essence' (something of high positive value), whilst that of two women doubles the amount of femininity (something of strongly negative value). Dijkstra explains the logic of the time thus: 'a physical encounter between males, unlike the encounter between a man and a woman, results in a strengthening of the male's higher faculties, of his "soul-force"'. Peladan's view of lesbianism simply follows this logic:

Since she has no more reason or brain than a child of thirteen, the gynander will, in her conjunction with another woman, be no more than an idiot joined with a fool, and no elevation, no amelioration, can ever be expected to come from such detestable mixtures. (Dijkstra 1986, p. 273)

It is clear that the operations of masculinist ideologies, here expressed as bitter misogyny, produce precisely gendered forms or kinds of homophobic discourse which construct homosexualities as distinctly and distinctively gendered. This is not a new observation (Connell 1987, Lucia-Hoagland and Penelope 1988, Pharr 1988, Edwards 1994) but it is one which biomedical science has failed to acknowledge and account for and it is something which I intend to draw attention to here.

In tracing discourses of gender inversion through the self-fashioning of contemporary women, therefore, several points must be borne in mind. Firstly, gender is not an unmodifiable variable; the 'masculinity' putatively observed in certain women is not comparable with the 'masculinity' proper to men (otherwise female inverts would be 'better' than their non-invert peers, for they would exhibit positively valued masculine 'soul-force'). Secondly, discourses of inversion contain an internal contradiction, in that lesbians are at the same time excessively feminine and unnaturally masculine. Finally, such discourses have traditionally elided sexuality and gender in specific ways such that 'masculinity' stands for (pun intended) a bundle of characteristics to do with the *presence of erotic capacity*, whilst 'femininity' signifies a putatively 'opposite' bundle of characteristics to do with the *absence* of that

capacity. Sex, in short, is the property of men and any woman laying claim to any kind of sexual capacity is thereby masculinised.

Dijkstra, tracing this convoluted discourse back to its originary expression at the cusp of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, cites pathologist Harry Campbell's well-known assertion that women had evolved into a condition of absolute sexual anaesthesia. 'The sexual instinct of civilised woman' declares Campbell, 'is, I believe, tending to atrophy' (Dijkstra 1986, p. 119). The sexuality of women was unlike that of men in being reproductively, rather than erotically, driven. Erotic stimulation, therefore, tended to masculinise women, as Dijkstra (1986, p. 157) explains:

One popular theory held that by abnormally stimulating her properly sexless physical being, woman tended to grow more and more masculine, tended to take on ever more virile characteristics, thereby destroying the delicate balance, created by nature between the active male and the passive female.

This masculinisation of women by sexual sensation might cause them to indulge in other manly behaviours and might, in the worst cases, lead to inversion. In short, the unnatural enjoyment of sex led to the enjoyment of unnatural sex. This discourse of inversion constructs the lesbian as a woman who has manly desires and behaves in stereotypically manly ways.

She neglects her dress and assumes and affects boyish manners. She is in pursuit of boys' sports. She plays with horses, balls and arms. She gives manifestations of courage and bravado, is noisy and loves vagabondage. (Dijkstra 1986, p. 157)

Dijkstra's work is important in that he demonstrates the process whereby the paranoid masculinist fantasies about women (which circulated in the nineteenth century in response to the crisis in masculinity produced by industrialisation), were initially expressed in literature and fine art and went on to set the agenda for the natural sciences and, importantly, psychoanalysis. He concludes:

... the artists and writers of the late nineteenth century who developed the sexual symbolism that was subsequently declared to be archetypal were in turn influenced by the prurient speculation and suggestive lucubrations of the scientists of the period. These scientists, in consort with the artists, planted a full-grown tree of sexual imagery

in the minds of the psychoanalysts, who had grown up with these ideas and images all around them, and who now sought to prove the archetypal nature of these images by pointing to the unconscious symbolism of the very generation which had, to a large extent, quite consciously created that imagery. (1986, p. 319)

Psychoanalysis, of course, became the hegemonic discourse of the erotic and penetrated lay discourses of sexuality to quite a remarkable extent (Weeks 2003). Only since the spectacular rise of genetics has Freudian psychoanalytic theory been supplanted as explanatory account of the sexual and, as we have seen, claims for a genetic origin for sexuality are themselves rooted in nineteenth-century discourses of inversion.

Given this epistemological history it might be anticipated that such discourses would leave a clear trace in the self-fashioning of lesbians and non-lesbians alike, and this proved indeed to be the case.

### The tomboy as baby lesbian

Essentialist theories of homosexuality-as-inversion identify childhood gender-atypical behaviours as symptomatic of adult homosexuality. For boychildren this is manifested as stereotypically sissy behaviours and, for girlchildren, tomboyishness. For essentialist accounts this represents a problem since, as this putative symptomatology is so well known, it is simply not possible to exclude retrospective reinterpretation on the part of individuals or their families. A relatively common event – perhaps sex-play with a same-sex peer – may not loom very large in the memory of a heterosexual adult but may take on powerful significance in the memory of a homosexual adult. For those seeking to establish a rigorous evidence-base for essentialist theories, this is an insurmountable problem. It is the opposite of problematic for my purposes, since the aim of my research is, at this point, to identify *the operations of discourses of tomboyishness* in the accounts of individual women. This chapter compares the accounts of lesbian and non-lesbian participants quite closely, moving back and forth between the two. To avoid confusion as to the sexual identity of individuals, I will indicate heterosexual respondents with the letter 'H' after their age, lesbians with the letter 'L' and bisexuals with the letter 'B'. Thus a 30-year old heterosexual participant named Bonny would be represented thus: (Bonny: 30L).

The first thing to establish is whether or not tomboyishness emerges as commonly present in women's life-accounts and, indeed, it does. Out of 74 transcripts of interviews with lesbians, 13.5 per cent (n = 10)

reported tomboy behaviour in childhood. However, this group is substantially fewer in number than the lesbians who did not report tomboyishness (86.5 per cent). Moreover, a greater proportion of the non-lesbian sample – 47 per cent ( $n = 8$ ) – reported tomboy behaviour in childhood, whilst only 23 per cent of this group ( $n = 4$ ) described themselves as having been ‘typical girly girls’. It would be inappropriate to generalise from these findings, or to present them as statistically significant. Other sampling flaws aside, the number of non-lesbian participants was around a quarter of the number of lesbians. However, what it does indicate is that tomboyishness is an experience common to many women and that it is recalled in adulthood and interpreted as significant by both lesbian and non-lesbian women. This suggests that most, if not all, women must engage with discourses of childhood gender-atypicality as part of the process of fashioning their identity as gendered sexual selves. Indeed, Stein (1999, pp. 247–8) finds that:

the retrospective studies of women have the odd result that more than half of the women surveyed said that they had been gender-atypical (that is, tomboys) as children ... suggesting that it is gender-typical to be gender-atypical.

Of equal importance is the finding that the identity ‘tomboy’ is retrospectively appropriated and interpreted in complex and often contradictory ways. One lesbian participant, Sarah (23L), believed that she had used the gender-identity ‘tomboy’ as a safe way to conceal the sexual identity ‘woman who liked women’. She said:

I was always a bit of a tomboy, having an elder brother and hanging around with him and his friends playing football etc., so coming from the tomboy thing, thinking that maybe I would rather be a boy, which for me has always been the way I wanted to be – the man with the woman. I used that [tomboyishness] to hide the truth behind. I use it to push out the true fact that I was happy being a woman, and I was happy being a woman who liked women.

This was very different from the experience described by Karla (26L), who successfully combined tomboyish behaviours and childhood heterosexual activity:

I used to play with Lego, dolls and all sorts of things, I didn’t stick to one toy, but I was a tomboy. But I did go out with lads when I was really really young, holding hands and kissing.

Although she is keen to identify the contradictions in her account – she stresses that she played with traditional girls’ toys as well as Lego – Karla seems to have integrated the tomboy aspects of her experiences relatively firmly as she consolidated her gender performativity and her lesbian identity:

I looked like a little boy and, when I was growing up, blokes used to shout ‘lesbian’ and I used to think, what are they on about? Why are they saying I’m a lesbian? And I wasn’t sure if I was... when I first came out it was, like, cropped hair, dungarees, drank a lot and swears a lot, and I was that way for quite a while. And I thought I was really, really hard and really, really clever, and my [lesbian] friends were like that... [Then] the hard look went and *I was back to myself again*. I was trying to find myself, I suppose, but all the different kinds of styles of lesbians, I think I have been! (emphasis added)

Karla has clearly had to struggle with what seems to have been a culturally imposed task – making something meaningful out of the discourses of inversion circulating in her cultural environment. She stresses that this ‘hard look’ was not comfortable for her; it ‘went’ and she was ‘herself’ again. Yet it was the boyish gender performance of her younger self which first exposed her to the idea that there was such a thing as a lesbian.

The discursive link between tomboyishness and inversion, although no longer as unquestioned as it once was, continues to circulate both in the cultural mainstream and in lesbian subcultural locations. Unsurprisingly, some women’s experiences seem to confirm the link and this, in turn, may lead some towards genetic explanations. Claire (39L) says, ‘I have always been a tomboy and I think a lot of gay women were tomboys’. When asked a few minutes later how she reacted to the ‘gay gene’ theory, she replied:

I really don’t know whether it’s something that’s actually inside you that’s born with you or whether it’s the environment of whether it’s a little bit of both... Do I think I was born with the gay gene? Possibly, because I was such a tomboy. Now I don’t know whether this was because I was an only child, but I never wanted to dress in dresses particularly. I always wanted to play with boys. I was mad about climbing trees, being in boats, playing football (I could play football all day long!), ride my bike, build tree houses, make a tent and sleep in the orchard, all that sort of stuff. I wasn’t a girly girl. I wasn’t particularly brilliant academically and I was quite good at sport, so I naturally veered to all the sporty things and I’d play netball

all day long if I could have done, so I don't know whether that side of things is kind of inbuilt... Having talked to so many dykes, that seems to be a very, very common denominator between all the dykes I have ever known... Maybe that's just the people that I associate with, and there are plenty of tomboys who turned out to be incredibly happy straight women, so I don't know if that proves a point.

This is extraordinarily complex. Claire makes sure I understand that she could have been happy playing either a traditionally male sport (football) or a traditionally female one (netball) all day long. She is clearly tempted to label her athleticism as tomboy behaviour indicative of lesbianism, but is too aware of alternative interpretations (and the experiences of women outside her social circle) to allow herself to present this as an unproblematic narrative.

A further complicating factor is that, for some women, tomboyishness seems to be linked to a more or less conscious rejection of a certain kind of traditional female role exemplified by their mothers. Where the role taken on by their mother seemed to them to be frustrating, unfulfilling or simply not what they wanted for themselves, such women might throw in their lot with their male peers. Zara (39L) was one such:

As a child [I recall] not feeling comfortable with other girls. I suppose, a bit of it is how I see the male/female gender thing; that after a stage [in childhood] you divide out in your gender groups and I was never comfortable with that... I identified more with the boys and was very tomboyish, which totally upset my mum. And living up trees and playing football was great until they decided that they couldn't really be seen, it wasn't cool to be seen, with a girl. So I was thrown out of their group. And I didn't want to be a girl, a female, having seen what my mother was and did... Certainly the parental expectations were that the woman was there to look after the men, raise the children. And she chose a career for a little while but it was definitely only until she got into her proper job of child rearing and looking after the house and doing all the cooking and ruling the roost. I didn't want that, so the alternative was being a boy.

Tomboyishness, for Zara, seemed to promise an escape from the confines of a particular female role. It does not seem to have carried any associations of lesbianism for her at the time and she went on to be sexually active with men, to fall in love and to marry. Intriguingly, what she thought of as the 'more masculine' side of her personality seems to have

been *more* present in her relationships with men than in her later lesbian relationships:

... a few years ago, before I came out, if I'd thought about lesbians I would have said, yes, it was because of the slightly more masculine [side of me], but it freed my feminine side. I denied my feminine side. I wouldn't wear feminine colours, I hated skirts and dresses. As a heterosexual woman I was a very masculine one. I made my own way in the world and I was going to sort stuff out and I was in charge and I didn't like being a woman! But since I have been able to accept my identity as a gay woman I wear pink, I sometimes wear skirts and I am more comfortable with them and I really like being a woman. It's a grand place to be! It balanced me out. I just became totally balanced, which is part of the wonderful feeling, I could be a complete person ... So yes, I am a woman. I am very glad to be a woman.

Far from enhancing or reinforcing her self-perception as masculine, adopting a lesbian identity had the opposite effect for Zara. Nor was she alone in this. Julie (35L) reports a similar shift:

When I was straight I remember really competing with men ... I always wanted to be on equal status with them. I didn't want to be treated as a girl, someone who couldn't sort the car out or wasn't able to put shelves up. I was always competing with the male partners I had. I always wanted to be treated equally and not be regarded as the person who did the washing up and the cooking, I used to always resent that. It wasn't until I became gay that I actually went, 'No, I can't sort the car out, I'll take it to a garage'. It wasn't until I came out or discovered my sexuality or whatever, I could then go, 'No, I'm a girl. If I don't know something I'll go ask somebody' ... I wore more female clothes. I was more effeminate. I could say, 'Yes, I enjoy cooking'. I became more female. I just felt real. I just felt me. I didn't have to pretend anymore.

For Julie the only way to resist heteronormative scripts of gender, and the unequal power relations which she feared they would introduce into her relationships with male partners, was to appropriate stereotypically male characteristics such as mechanical competence. Once she started having relationships with women she felt liberated from power inequalities rooted in traditional gender roles, and was able to be, as she puts it 'more effeminate', something which felt more authentic to her nature.

Discourses of inversion do, indeed, seem to have an impact on the self-fashioning of some lesbians. This is, however, further complicated by the very complexities of gender itself. It may be, for example, that competence at specific practical tasks is associated with masculine performativity. However, even this is not as simple as it seems. Nicky (38L) reports that:

I am more likely to wire a plug and stuff like that, and I do moan at women who do not know how to change a light bulb and can cook an amazing meal and that's it. But then, I haven't got a clue where the oil goes in my car but my girlfriend does and [she] is more feminine than me.

Being able to wire a plug demonstrates, Nicky suggests, a traditionally manly competence which is undermined by her 'more feminine' girlfriend's greater competence around cars. Furthermore, she expresses impatience with women whose competence is restricted to traditionally feminine areas. This suggests the de-coupling of skill from gender which has been one of the projects of feminism (see below).

### **Always climbing trees: heterosexual tomboys**

As indicated above, a greater proportion of the (smaller) non-lesbian sample reported having been tomboys in childhood. As with their lesbian peers, this was often associated with a preference for the company of boys and a rejection of stereotypical girls' pursuits as uninteresting. Kate (47H) reports that:

I played with the boys all the time and was very tomboyish in the sort of things I wanted to do. We went off over the fields doing cowboy and Indian type things or bows and arrows type things. I don't think at that stage I had a very strong sense that I was a girl and maybe I shouldn't be doing those things or that I didn't fit in with the boys. I wanted to be with them and I think, if anything, I was something of a leader amongst them. I enjoyed being with them.

Later on she elaborates on her strongly hostile feelings towards a much more 'girly' peer who lived locally:

I can still see her in her frilly dresses. Because I did actually wear sort of girls' clothes. I can remember; the things I used to wear was a kilt,

a woolly knock-about jumper with the elbows going through and a pair of welly boots. But they were practical female clothes and I was able to go out and about in the fields and get muddy. And luckily my mum didn't care about me getting dirty and it didn't matter that I didn't look pretty and I had a sort of 'Just William' haircut that was not particularly feminine and I couldn't be bothered with this girl who was, at an early age, fussy about her clothes and her hair and couldn't get dirty. And all of that I found incredibly irritating and prissy and precious and silly. I liked being with and identified with the boys, I think because they were more robust and fun to be with.

A clear picture emerges from this account, of a traditional femininity perceived as stifling, restricting and marked by a kind of self-consciousness and self-attentiveness that could hardly be more different from the freedom and 'robust fun' permitted to the boys. From this perspective, boyishness emerges as a rational choice for those children drawn to energetic and active forms of play. For male children, such boyish pursuits mark them as properly and appropriately masculine whereas, for girl children, they are permitted only insofar as they meet the criteria for tomboyishness – childish rough-housing that will be grown out of with encroaching maturity.

However, some women may retain a rejection of traditional femininity in adult life and this seems to be as true of non-lesbians as it is of their lesbian peers. Maureen (43H) says she has hung onto the tomboy side of her nature from childhood:

I didn't like dolls, I didn't like tea sets and I didn't do girly things ... I wanted to be up the lane, climbing trees, playing hide and seek in the ghost field ... it was all trees and fields behind us and there was one field with an old shed in it and, of course, when you are young there was a ghost in it! So we used to have dares and things like that and I loved all that. But of course that was where my brother would be and, because I was the girl I had to help in the house and my brother was playing cricket or football and I wanted to be there with him ... and I think it is the same sort of thing now, really. I prefer to do tomboy things. I know it sounds weird, women don't like to see horror films or ghost films, or they don't like to do the roller coaster rides and I do. Dares to myself!

This account shares many key characteristics of the gender-atypicality traditionally associated with discourses of inversion. It is not hard to

imagine that, had the speaker gone on to identify as a lesbian in adult life, she would be likely to interpret her continuing preference for such bold behaviour in such terms. This is important, since it suggests that gender-atypicality is primarily about *perception*. This heterosexual woman has no reason to perceive her gender-atypicality as especially significant, so has not integrated it into her gendered sexual identity.

Gender-atypicality is about perception in another, equally important sense. A behaviour is only gender-atypical in relation to specific discourses of gender. Thus, for example, Sarah (27H) reports a mixture of gender-related behaviours which she implicitly divides into typical and atypical:

Ummm, I was a bit of a mixture actually, because I was kind of quite a tomboy, because I was quite athletic. I mean, you know, climbing trees and getting all messy. Yes, I think when I was a lot younger, yes, I was more like a tomboy. Although I did like pretty things ... I liked dolls and things. But I was, kind of, you know, I wasn't shy or anything. I was quite kind of boisterous and athletic.

According to this implicit taxonomy, athleticism, tree-climbing, being boisterous and getting messy are tomboyish. In short, they are gender-typical for boys and atypical for girls. On the other hand, liking pretty things, liking dolls and being shy are presented here as being typical for girls. Donna (37H), on the other hand, regards herself as unfeminine despite her shy nature:

I still am [a tomboy] really. I'm not very feminine. You know, I don't dress feminine or think I'm feminine in any way ... [as a teenager] I was unhappy; I was quite shy, as well. I had lots of difficulties, not much confidence. I'm still the same now, really.

Shyness, a clear sign of femininity for Sarah, is no such thing as far as Donna is concerned. The notion of gender-typical behaviour is starting to appear less stable and coherent. Nor is there any consensus about the behavioural content of the tomboy label. Sue (40H) describes her childhood as 'fairly typically girlie':

... we had the Cindy dolls and Barbie dolls, Tiny Tears and things like that. Most definitely ... I can't ever remember being given a boy toy, as it were. So, yes, we had very much that influence and were in

dresses, and home made dresses and things. It was quite girly. But I think we did [climb trees], actually, even in the frocks.

Having explicitly rejected the label 'tomboy', Sue goes on to describe the sorts of behaviours which other participants presented precisely as evidence that they had, indeed, been tomboys:

... we used to live in a rural area and we quite often used to go up to the fields ... collect frog spawn and newts and didn't even think about differences then. I still don't, really, on that sort of thing. That was just a normal growing uppy thing. And, yes, we climbed trees and things like that. And, when I was in school I used to play cricket with the boys ... in the village where I come from there were an awful lot of boys as well, so they were very much my friends. I had a lot of male friends and we sort of grew up like that, really, integrated in that way within the child setting. That didn't matter so much, and I don't think we were dragged away from it at all. I can't honestly remember that it wasn't the acceptable thing to do.

Sue describes what others might see as tomboyish behaviour as being an integral element of a 'quite girlie' childhood and she seems to be able to do so because rigid gender-division seems not to have been imposed upon her peer group by adults.

### **The heterosexual script and the policing of gender**

Of course, the degree to which childhood gender roles are policed varies from culture to culture and generation to generation. Sue, aged 40, is among the oldest participants to report a relatively non-segregated childhood. More typical of the older women is Margaret (55L) who recalls the way in which her freedom of movement was restricted by conventional clothing:

You had this ridiculous thing really that little girls wore quite short dresses and yet there was a great thing about, no, you must never show your knickers. And so, if they really wanted modesty you would have worn trousers, or shalwar kameeze or something effectively similar. They didn't really want you, as it were, to be safe from ever showing your knickers, they wanted to put the fear of god into you about it. So you had to keep your knees together. I remember being very much aware of this, and very much aware that boys had freedom

of movement and that trousers were wonderful, and those shorts that my brother had!

Margaret reported that she actually stole a pair of her brother's trousers at one point, because 'I sort of felt you could climb trees in those!'

Both lesbian and non-lesbian women reported feeling constrained by expectations that their dress and behaviour would conform to the heteronormative semiotics of femininity particular to their culture, and religion was mentioned by some as an element in that constraint.

A still further element of complexity is introduced by the fact that discourses of inversion do not necessarily run in parallel with other discourses of gender-normativity in women's accounts of refashioning themselves as lesbians. The account of Catherine (40L) is typical of the ways in which the two may operate – sometimes in synchrony, sometimes not. Catherine, the daughter of an Indian father and English Catholic mother, reported that her life had been steered by family assumptions about the role of women: 'When I was 23 I got married, because I'm half Indian. My father's Indian and he likes his daughters married off really.' She didn't enjoy the sexual side of her married life but, as she explained, this seemed normal to her, since it was consistent with her expectations:

Well, it sounds really weird, and I have only talked about things like this recently, but I didn't realise that women actually fancied men. I knew that they liked their faces, and I know that sounds so naive, but I didn't realise that they actually fancied their bodies, so I just assumed that they didn't. And because my mum had never talked about sex with me, and only ever said that she didn't really like the sex.

Here it seems that at least two factors are at play. Firstly, the legacy of the doctrine of female sexual anaesthesia; Catherine was not expecting to enjoy the sexual side of her marriage, because attraction to men's bodies was simply not part of her understanding of female sexuality. Secondly, she grew up in the Catholic tradition – not only was her mother Catholic, but she attended a Catholic convent school. The famously erotophobic Marian discourses of female sexuality seem to have reinforced both the notion that sex was not to be spoken of ('I have only talked about things like this recently') and that women should not find it pleasurable.

In this context, the impact of discourses of inversion was to prevent her from considering that she might be, or become, a lesbian, despite

'always' experiencing erotic dreams about women:

I always dreamt about them, and had sexual dreams about them. I didn't quite know what I was going to do, but I always dreamt about loving a woman and kissing her and being intimate. I never had a dream like that about a man. But I was very naive really, because I thought maybe most women thought that. And because I didn't have any urge to shave my head or be a stereotypical [lesbian]. I'm really girly. I love dresses and lipstick and shopping. I was a real 'ladies who lunch' woman ... so I didn't equate myself in any way with the stereotypical [lesbian] women out there!

Catherine was therefore able to fashion a robust and functional heterosexual female self, drawing on available discourses of femininity to explain as 'normal' her total lack of sexual interest in men and her explicitly sexual interest in women. Furthermore, once she 'came out' as a lesbian and started venturing into her local lesbian community, she found that the discourses of inversion circulating in that milieu (discourses which seem in this instance to be further complicated by social class) operated to exclude or invalidate her as a lesbian:

I still actually find that hard because even when I come into [this gay coffee-shop] or go to the other gay bars, they say 'you don't even look gay', and you think, 'Oh, should I?' and I don't actually fit in because I am very – you know – I like going to Harvey Nicks and that, and most of them are very much more political or just more into the scene thing.

Catherine's failure to conform in any way with community norms of gender-performativity position her as marginal amongst these lesbians. She comes close to acknowledging that this may also be to do with her privileged background; she likes to shop at 'Harvey Nicks' and her married life was 'very kind of stable; kids, beautiful flat, private schools'. There appears to be a good deal of conflict in her account between discourses of 'authentic' lesbianism and discourses of 'authentic' femininity. The discourses of lesbianism which not only informed her earlier assumptions about her own sexuality but also predominate in her local lesbian community seem to foreground notions of inversion. The invert is the authentic lesbian. As such, these discourses of lesbianism actually reinforce normative discourses of femininity by casting them as explicitly, distinctively 'the other', and vice versa.

Catherine has been able to fashion a lesbian identity which disregards what might be termed the 'inversion imperative'. She has done so in the end, quite simply, by discarding any notion of essentialism. After all, essentialist theories are all inversion theories, so demonstrably cannot account for this very feminine woman's lesbian sexuality. She concludes:

To me, I could say I was meant to be a girlie girl! I loved pink, I went to ballet, I played with dolls. But I feel that I haven't changed at all. So I don't know how you can say that you were born 'like that', I think, because I was never a tomboy.

Her experience is mirrored by that of Theresa (35L), brought up Italian Catholic, who was also thrown off the scent by her own lack of resemblance to the stereotypical invert:

I had some preconceived ideas what a lesbian was, and I think that had a large influence on how I totally dismissed my own sexuality ... some of the preconceived ideas was that a lesbian was somehow connected to a gender thing, you know? If you felt that you were a woman then you can't possibly be a lesbian, which sounds mad, but I did have these preconceived ideas. Because, for me, I don't have any sort of gender questions, I am fully a woman. So at that time I didn't think I could possibly be a lesbian.

Discourses of inversion, as Theresa's use of the phrase 'gender question' suggests, go beyond tomboyishness in childhood. Unlike the effeminate or 'sissy' boy, tomboy girls find that their behaviour is tolerated up to a certain age and, as we have seen, rejection of the circumscribed 'feminine' role is very common among girlchildren, whatever their adult sexuality. From puberty onwards, however, gender norms are policed with increasing anxiety. Unlike tomboyishness, then, gender-atypicality once out of childhood tends to be far less acceptable.

### **Mannishness: 'I'm not like that!'**

Of course, discourses of inversion no longer dominate mainstream cultural constructions of 'lesbian' as they did for most of the twentieth century. The stereotypical mannishness exemplified by Beryl Reid's Sister George and James Bond's uber-dyke adversary Rosa Kleb seem anachronistic to a younger generation of consumer exposed to a broader and more complex representational lexicon. Nevertheless, the construct of

'lesbian' as a woman who envied men, preferred the company of men, behaved like a man and yearned (futilely) to be a man seems to have been extremely powerful. As described above, this discourse of lesbian mannishness tended to confuse participants in the workshop group, standing in contradiction to their 'rational choice' notions. Analysis of interview transcripts also indicates that women making sense of their desire for other women may have to engage with notions of mannishness. For some women, it is almost as if they try mannishness on for size. Initially, some may find it a more or less comfortable 'fit', although this was so for only two of the interviewees. A more common experience among these women was to reject mannishness as uncomfortable for them; even the two who initially incorporated elements of mannishness into their self-fashioning later revisited this aspect of their gendered sexuality and rewrote it.

For Grace (47L) there was a fairly typical process of initial confusion; lesbians were manly and, since she was not, her desires could not be lesbian. Contact with feminism eventually enabled her to make sense of what seemed to be an impasse:

I think [feminism] was very important. I'm not sure I would have come to the point [of calling myself a lesbian] if it hadn't been for that... it felt like, yes, there are other women out there like this. I'm not a freak. You don't have to have a sex change or anything like that. Because all those misconceptions were about, weren't they? It did feel before that as though it was a freakish thing to happen, and you had to... look like a man and pretend you were a man, and the reason for doing it was because you wanted to be a man, not because you wanted to be with women *per se*, but you wanted to be a man. So that's all the fears and horrors that were at the back of my mind that I didn't dare engage with because I didn't really think that was me at all. I'm not like that, so I can't be a lesbian.

Discourses of mannishness cut both ways. Not only may they work to delay (or prevent) women acting on their desires for other women, they may also cause women whose gender performativity is not consistent with cultural norms to be perceived as lesbians. Dilly (42L) reports that, 'a lot of people used to assume I was a lesbian anyway, I think, just because I was a feminist and I didn't wear makeup and I behaved in a slightly more assertive way'. It seems that, just as the kinds of behaviours labelled 'tomboyish' in childhood are more to do with a freedom and practicality which might best be thought of as genderless, so behaviours

labelled as 'mannish' or 'lesbian' in adult life are less to do with imitating men and far more to do with a refusal to adopt the behavioural restrictions of femininity. Here, it begins to look as if a certain type of performativity to do with practicality, freedom and (importantly) an undecorated appearance has been strongly gendered as masculine. To allow oneself to wear clothes that are impractical, uncomfortable and restrictive, and to decorate one's face, hair and body (in short, to behave as if one were only ever the object of the desiring gaze, rather than subject or agent) is paradigmatically 'feminine'. This is why David Beckham's willingness to be decorative (and decorated) has led to his being hailed as an icon of new masculinity or even of queer (Rahman 2004).

Anna (35L), was interestingly reflexive about the gendering and ungendering of sexualities, identifying the permission to 'cross dress' that mainstream fashions allow women, and characterising femininity as a set of 'extra stick-on frilly bits' to a genderless norm that thereby becomes masculinised. Her account is sophisticated:

I think the gender thing is a huge part of it, because I think, with the gender thing, I identify with being male in a lot of ways. Like, sometimes I just think, well, I'm a transvestite but nobody notices because I am a female/male transvestite. I cross dress all the time, but I don't really think about it because it's really acceptable... I suppose, in my 20s I did dress quite girly, although I think, for me, it's about wearing functional clothes really. And, all that stuff about male being the norm, and female being signified by extra stick on frilly bits. And, if you stopped wearing the extra stick on frilly bits... then by default you would become male. So it's about going into that space and it could be, apart from being a gender issue, it's about going, *by default*, to masculinity. Because masculinity is the norm and, if you don't adopt the frilly bits, that's where you get put.

The notion that masculinity is a 'default state' is an interesting one, since it implies that femininity is in some sense an *additional* element of self. Of course feminists have long argued that femininity is about 'packaging' a sexual product that will be acceptable to men (Greer 1971, Shearer 1987), and Butler (1990) characterises masculinities and femininities as forms of performativity. However, analysis of these women's accounts suggests that there is a pre-existing cultural process whereby a specifically non-self-conscious, agentic state of be-ing has been co-opted as 'masculine'.

There remain two further points of interest in relation to discourses of mannishness; the extent to which individuals are able to challenge or inflect such discourses by a range of performative strategies and the intersections between mannishness and an individual's relationships with 'real life' men. Here, several women described the ways in which they had been able to undermine the assumptions about lesbian mannishness held by friends and family. April (45L), for example, reports:

One of my sisters-in-law said, when I first went up to London, she said, 'Don't cut all your hair off, don't wear dungarees and don't drink beer out of a bottle.' So I go back every now and then and say, 'Look! No dungarees, no beer out of a bottle!'

Jodie (41L) came from a family with 'very traditional' attitudes to homosexuality and her approach has been that they needed to understand that butch performativity, although clearly an important element of identity for some of her lesbian peers, is not the only important thing about them:

They did in the beginning [have traditional attitudes], basically because the couple who live very close ... their daughter at that time was also a lesbian and she has partner that ... was the stereotypical lesbian and extremely butch and, when my family thought of lesbians they automatically thought of this person. And through meeting my friends and other people that I work with they can see that not everybody is like that or, even if they are (to look at) rather butch, they are still some wonderful people. I think I've taught them not to look at the outside of the person; to re-educate them to look at what's inside, what the true person is, not their clothes or their hair or their hobnail boots and the pint of bitter and the fag.

Finally, in terms of relationships with 'real life' men, there was enormous variation. Several women expressed deep-seated dislike or even disgust for men. Of those who did not, some felt that their enjoyment of men's company implied that they themselves were 'butch', whilst others interpreted similar experiences as indicative of heterosexuality. Louise (32H) chose a career which brought her into contact with many men; 'I studied sciences and was surrounded a lot of the time by men, most of my friends are male and so it was quite natural to spend a lot of time with men really'; however, she does not see this as significant to her sexuality in any way. Pippa (49L), on the other hand, sees her

lesbian identity as very much bound up with being, as she put it, 'one of the boys'. She says, 'It's just I feel my whole identity is sort of an in-between somewhere, and that's just where I slot in'.

Some of the lesbian participants reported that, at one time or another, they had wanted to be men, or had envied men. However, such 'envy' tended to be fairly trivial, as exemplified by Jenny (48L) 'I used to envy men from the point of view that they never had periods, but nothing else!'. Other women seem to have grown out of wanting to be men once they moved out of young adulthood. Kitt (44L) is clear that her desire to be a man was very much to do with a cultural devaluing of women, and the limitations of the female role:

I didn't think very much about lesbianism or lesbians, and when I did I was rather repulsed. And that was a lot to do with my feelings about myself as a woman, and generalising from that. And I know, although I didn't go down the road of being a transsexual, I actually much preferred men. I didn't like them as people at all, I think. I couldn't bear them. But I wanted to be one, I wanted that power, I wanted the muscularity, I wanted the sort of ... yeah, yeah, I wanted to be a man. And I despised myself and other women, so it wouldn't have entered my head to have been attracted to women.

This confusion about gender and sexuality, which made Kitt unhappy for many years, was eventually resolved by feminism. In particular, she joined a (heterosexual) women's group:

But I slowly began to like women and slowly began to realise that they were actually much stronger than men, and to feel very moved by that. That kind of tension between their vulnerability and their lack of power and their strength and, umm, subversiveness and humour and all the things that are really tough, and I really liked that. Tension which isn't there with men, they're not very *full*, and that's sad, and that's because they haven't had to be because they just make the assumption that they own the world. I think it sort of impoverishes them.

Although this is a clear story of growing to value women and to find them stronger and more attractive than men, there is nothing here to suggest hostility towards men. Indeed, Kitt seems sympathetic towards them, expressing sorrow at an 'impoverishment' which she sees as produced by patriarchal relations of power.

The impact of masculine gender-norms, whether tomboyishness or mannishness, is clearly complicated, subtle and nuanced. To squeeze this complexity into the narrow framework of the inversion model is to do it real violence. Moreover, discourses of femaleness and of femininity have a similarly complex impact on the self-fashioning of this group of lesbian (and non-lesbian) women.

### **The bountifully female lesbian**

Whilst some women, whether lesbian or not, react against (hetero) normative femininity, others have a quite different reaction. A small group of lesbian participants, for example, expressed quite negative reactions to 'butch' lesbians. Such reactions ranged from a simple failure to understand through to hostility. Margaret (46L), whose sister is also a lesbian, has what seems to be a strong aversion to women who do not present as feminine:

What does bug me is when I see a gay woman who is masculine and looks like a man, because I can't see whom she is trying to attract. Because I don't find butch women attractive. What attracts me is the fact that she is a woman, that she is soft and feminine, just the average woman who looks like every other woman, normal for want of a better word. There are women who like to be butch, but I can't understand who they are trying to attract – do they think they look attractive to other women? I don't think they do. I am definitely a feminine woman.

It is interesting that the feelings expressed here seem to be so powerful. Margaret seems unable to accept that there may be a continuum of gendered performativity attractive to different women, and it is clearly important to her that this aspect of her own attraction to women be unambiguously understood:

Yes, to me that [being a woman] is what it is all about. I don't want to be with anybody that looks like a man, I can't see the point. My sister is attracted to boyish women, though, funnily enough. Her girlfriend is very boyish... I have met women through ads and I do specify a feminine woman. I look for ads that say they are feminine. And they have told me over the phone that they don't look gay and I have met them and they are really quite butch. That amazes me, that their self-concept is so different. Do they really think they are feminine when they are not? They *do* look gay; dykey even.

It seems also to be the case that Margaret is made uncomfortable in the presence of women who, according to her codes, 'look gay; dykey even'. Explicitly opposing femininity to looking gay, she seems to be struggling with discourses of inversion. Knowing that they do not make any sense of her own experience, she is nevertheless discomfited that other women incorporate elements of masculinity into the ways they express their own gendered sexual selves.

Nor is it simply the case that, at 46 years of age, Margaret has had a lifetime of more traditional discourses of gender to contend with. Marie (28L), expresses just as much discomfort around butch lesbians:

There is something I really hate, women who try to be men, who set themselves up as very butch and very masculine. And I ask them, why do you reject yourself as a woman? Yes, it is [a kind of self-hatred].

On the other hand, those lesbians who were happy to describe themselves as butch or tomboyish were just as concerned that this should not be misinterpreted as wanting to be male. For some, this distinction crystallised when they came across Radclyffe Hall's famous lesbian novel, *The Well of Loneliness*, whose central figure is an upper class manish lesbian called Stephen Gordon. The book, written in 1928, argued that lesbians, as members of the 'third sex' deserved pity rather than censure, and it has to be seen as one of the key texts of inversion. For a long time, reading *The Well* was a kind of rite of passage for lesbians in the English-speaking world, as Elizabeth (45L) acknowledges: 'actually the first lesbian novel I read was *Well of Loneliness*, but I decided, having read *The Well of Loneliness* that I wasn't one! Which loads of women must have thought when they read it, "Oh no, I don't think so!"'

When Virginia (44L) first came out, her girlfriend, Simone recommended a reading of this lesbian classic as part of her education in the new life:

Simone, unfortunately, wasn't very well read and her advice to me was that I read *The Well of Loneliness* which ... was just an awful book, and I thought, well, this doesn't help things at all! I am not a man in a woman's body. I am not this angst figure, I am very delighted.

Other lesbians stressed that the butch elements of their identity coexisted with equally important feminine elements. Often this was expressed as a delight in or active enjoyment of female corporeality.

Jodie (50L) reflects:

I know lots of very butch women but I also know lots of very feminine women. I know a complete cross section of heterosexual and lesbian women who are butch and fem, so I don't fall down anywhere with that one, I just don't jump on one side or the other... I *love* being a woman.

Michelle (30L) stresses the importance of both aspects of gender to her and overturns the stereotypical pairing of butch/fem:

In many ways I would say I was butch, you wouldn't see me in skirts. But I am a very maternal person, I go goo goo over babies... I love being a woman. My partner is butch as well, she is manlier than I am!

The account given by Anna (35L) is shot through with particularly complex trajectories of seemingly contradictory discourses of gender:

All the way through my 20s what kept me going was maybe not being quite so boyish or butch or manly in my dress code, because I had a very close friend who was into goddess worship and female power, and I loved my female body and I loved my menstrual cycle, I thought it was wonderful... I think women are better in a lot of ways; biologically they have got the edge over men. But, at the same time, any opportunity I get to identify as male, I take it. Like, when I go to the gym and I'm doing the fitness test and I have got more upper body strength than I should have, like my grip strength and my press up strength is off the record sheet for a woman, I'm really chuffed!

She goes on to explain that she was so delighted with her ability to breastfeed that she breastfed her daughter up to the age of three:

Yes, I did. Yes, and I absolutely love my female sexuality, and it's absolutely amazing that women can give birth. I think that's a whole view to patriarchy, men are completely miffed because they can't give birth and so we end up with patriarchy. But I think my body is just incredible! I would love to have loads of children... I couldn't see the point in doing anything else [except breastfeeding], using a bottle is like making work for yourself. I think it's brilliant that your body can do that actually.

Here, traditional discourses of gender which ascribe characteristics such as strength and physical power to men sit alongside counter-hegemonic discourses of female power appropriated from cultural feminism to enable Anna to fashion an exuberantly 'queer' self.

The rejection of the mannishness implicit in discourses of inversion was, of course, rather differently expressed by those participants who experienced themselves as feminine. This group identified a kind of femininity (or perhaps more properly 'femaleness') which, far from being compromised by lesbianism, was *enhanced* in the context of relating sexually to other women. For Catherine (40L), the unease about her body which she had felt in heterosexual relationships was not present during sex with women.

I [used to] just lie there, but now I am more sexy and I'm not embarrassed. I used to hide under the bedclothes and I'm not worried about my body now with women, because I trust them more. I don't know; it's easier. It's easier to talk about sex as well, it's just easier, like girl talk really.

This sense of being able to be relaxed and to enjoy being sexual once freed from the scrutiny of the male gaze is also present in the description given by Elizabeth (45L) of her local lesbian community:

I am not into the butch/fem stuff at all, I am just me ... But my experience of lesbians is that they are very feminine, more feminine perhaps, because they are very conscious how they appear to other women and they are very appreciative of what other women look like, whether they are big, small, tall, dark, whoever they are. Some of the places I go to in Manchester, somebody comes in that's a knock out and everybody looks, and it's like 'Oh, gosh, *she* is gorgeous!', and it's a real appreciation of that woman. It's not a sexist thing, it's just, she is a beautiful woman, and look at her.

For Elizabeth, one pleasing difference about being a lesbian is being able to access a kind of scopophilic lexicon which she describes as distinctively *feminine*. She is at pains to stress that this lesbian desiring gaze is different from the way in which straight men appraise women. It is, she says, 'not sexist'. Rather, it is able to take pleasure in how any woman looks, 'big small, tall, dark, whoever they are'.

Suzanne (37L), on the other hand, experiences her lesbian community as having norms which are to do with being perceived as different from

straight women. As a 'very feminine' woman, she is aware that she doesn't fit the stereotype associated with discourses of inversion. She takes great pleasure in the capacities of her female body but, as someone who is sexually attracted to boyish women, expresses no hostility towards less feminine lesbians:

I mean, I class myself as a very feminine woman. I still like to wear skirts and makeup, and I sometimes find some of the [lesbian] women find that a bit funny. They seemed to have this uniform when I came out, that you had to wear certain things. And I found that hard, because I liked to wear – if you passed me in the street I would look like an ordinary straight woman. I don't have a shaved head or anything. I class myself as a lipstick lesbian... I've met women who have said, 'Oh, no, I want to be a boy' or "I was wearing this, or that". I was your typical, wear mum's high heels, and Barbies, and doll's prams, and lipstick at 13. I never felt anything masculine about me at all... I *love* being a woman. I like the fact that I've had babies. I don't understand why, but I like butch women. I just seem to attract them. I wouldn't dream of going out with a feminine woman.

For Suzanne, there is a strong sense of gender-coherence moving through her account, which seems not to have been affected by her transition from happily married heterosexual woman to lesbian. She is confident about her own sexual attraction to and for 'butch' women and, although she doesn't claim to understand it, nor does she seem to feel the need to. For Karen (23B), on the other hand, part of the pleasure of her lesbian life is bound up with a sense of mutual comfort she describes as feminine. Although currently thinking of herself as bisexual, Karen stated that her preference was for women, because:

There are a couple of things. The comfortability of it, the kind of the girliness of it all, being able to swap clothes and makeup together. The other thing is sex, which is very different.

So, far from feeling the need to engage with discourses of inversion and align herself in relation to the tomboy/mannish lesbian, this young woman is happy to enjoy the 'girliness' of her lesbian sexual relationships.

## **Conclusion**

The discourses of inversion which continue to buttress bioscientific theories of sexuality do not appear, in these accounts, as monolithic or

even linear. The extent to which women feel obliged to engage with them at all seems to depend on many other factors. It is not surprising that age is significant, since social attitudes towards sexuality have shifted very rapidly in response to the activism of the women's movement, lesbian and gay rights groups and the HIV/AIDS pandemic. It is not, however, the case that younger women are inevitably less concerned with or about 'gender-atypicality' than are their elders. Other factors, particularly to do with family of origin, may mean that discourses of inversion have a currency which they might otherwise lack. Religion, ethnicity and culture, rural or urban upbringing and the general level of awareness in one's family about issues to do with sexuality are clearly influential.

It is also important to remember that there are no women in this group who are 'gold star' lesbians – women who have never had sex with a man and who have never thought of themselves as heterosexual. It is likely that women with such a distinctive history might engage in equally distinctive ways with discourses of inversion and with discursive constructs of gender more broadly.

Nevertheless, it is clear from these accounts that what we think of as 'gender' and what we call 'sexuality' do not fit together in the way claimed by LeVay (1996, p. 275) when he says that, 'homosexuality is not an isolated phenomenon, but linked with a broader collection of sex-atypical characteristics'. Women who have never been, and are never likely to be, lesbians are at least as likely to report a tomboy childhood as are lesbians. Indeed, behaviour seen as typically tomboyish by one individual, or in one context (say, an urban upbringing) is described as merely ordinary childish behaviour by another or in a different context (particularly, a rural upbringing). Similarly, characteristics deemed 'masculine' to one seem nothing of the sort to another; whilst some argue that, since what we think of as masculinity is simply an ungendered human norm, the terminology is fatally flawed in any case.

Some lesbians love being 'feminine' and see butch performativity as a rejection of womanliness or even as self-hatred. Others reject the restrictions of the female role and embrace a masculine performativity. Still others reject that role whilst stressing that, in so doing, they are emphatically not wanting to be men. Some express a desire to outperform men in feats of strength or power, others delight in their womanly bodies and the unique capacities of those bodies. Some report both manly strivings *and* womanly delight.

We live in a culture where a kaleidoscopic iconography of gender and sexuality saturates the datasphere and where both are continually

problematised, recuperated, re-inscribed and co-opted. We also, according to Foucault (1976), live in a culture which insists that we tell 'the truth' about our sex, and about ourselves through our sex. It seems appropriate to leave the last word on gender to Hannah (26L), who seems to say that her attraction to women is somehow linked to the fact that the process of gender socialisation she experienced remained silent about lesbianism. For her, paradoxically, lesbian invisibility constituted a liminal space of possibility:

As a female, if you grown up with an implicit training to be obedient or please other people or be accommodating or that kind of thing, it can be quite hard to tease apart what your own feelings would have been without all of those influences. In the last couple of years I have realised how numerous all those influences are. It's not just, oh, I wanted to please a man and now I can get rid of that and now I know what I think. Because there are so many influences from all different angles. So, the only people that I can be sure that I fancied were women.

# 6

## Stand by Your Man? Telling Heterosexual Stories

I thought, from the impression that I got from other women, that what my marriage was like was probably what marriage was like, and there wasn't much out there that was that much better than that. And that made me quite cynical, because it disappointed me. But I thought, on well, I suppose that's what life is like. You have to grit your teeth and get on with it. And I had been deluded by reading too much literature into thinking that it's possible to have a rich, fulfilling companionate marriage that is actually exciting, and sexually exciting and all the rest of it.

(Kate 47)

Heterosexuality occupies a strange position in the scholarship of the erotic. As the norm against which deviant sexual behaviours and identities are measured, it has been (until recently) both unmarked and unproblematised. Nevertheless, precisely because of its unmarked, unproblematised status, it comes to stand for any and all sex and sexualities which are not specifically identified as non-normative. For example, most of what passes for feminist writing on 'sex', 'families' or 'relationships' is no such thing. Rather, it is feminist writing on *heterosex*, on *heterosexual* families and on women's relationships *with men*. This is a perversely anomalous situation; that form of sexuality most commonly subject to scholarly scrutiny is studied *without being named for what it is*. There have been recent developments in psychology, queer studies and feminism whereby the study of heterosexuality *qua* heterosexuality seems at least to have begun (Segal 1992, Wilkinson and Kitzinger 1993, Richardson 1996). However, this literature remains sparse, and it continues to be the case that heterosexuality remains unnamed as such in much of what is written about it.

This is, of course, a product of the hegemonic status of heterorelations. Indeed, it offers a clear demonstration of the way in which heterosexism utterly saturates both academic and lay discourse. Just as the hegemony of gender-normativity mandates that 'doctor' means 'man' and 'nurse' means 'woman' unless qualified ('lady doctor', 'male nurse'), so the hegemony of erotic norms means that 'sex' means 'heterosex' unless similarly qualified. Moreover, the embeddedness of gender in the erotic and vice versa produces heteronormativity as simultaneously presiding over gender and the sexual.

The relationship between hetero- and homo-sexuality for women contains an additional problematic, in that feminist critiques have positioned heterosexuality as contributing in important ways to the maintenance of male supremacy and the structuration of patriarchal gender relations (Abbott and Love 1972, Onlywomen Press 1981, Wittig 1981, Kitzinger 1987, Jeffreys 1990). Although logically sound, this strand of feminist political theory historically led to mutual hostility and suspicion between lesbian and non-lesbian-identified activists in the women's movement and to an extraordinary degree of defensiveness on the part of avowedly heterosexual feminists (see essays in Wilkinson and Kitzinger 1993). Such debates are, of course, unlikely to have much impact on the majority of heterosexual women outwith the context of the feminist academy.

Given the foundational significance of heteronormativity to social and cultural regimes within the hegemonic bloc (and, of course, elsewhere), it is not possible to understand, describe or account for any aspect of lesbian experience without reference to the non-lesbian equivalent. As we have already seen in this study, for example, non-lesbian women are as likely to report gender-atypicality in childhood as are lesbians. Any research which takes as foundational the claim that tomboyishness is somehow associated with lesbianism must therefore pay equal attention to lesbian and non-lesbian women or be dismissed as flawed and baseless.

The complex picture of lesbian sexuality, identity and relationships which seems to be emerging from this study must, therefore, be set alongside its non-lesbian equivalent if it is going to be possible to make any claims whatsoever for 'lesbian', as opposed to 'female' experiences. Accordingly, a group of non-lesbian women was recruited and invited to take part in tape-recorded interviews; the tapes were transcribed and the transcripts analysed. Since this is a comparator group, it is important to note here the extent to which different elements of the research process were similar and dissimilar for the two groups.

## The strangeness of normality: methodological surprises

It was my aim to ensure that the research process was as near identical as possible across the two groups. Where differences emerged as inescapable, I devised strategies for compensating for or trying to minimise their impact. The most obvious difference from the outset was, of course, that there is no equivalent of the lesbian glossy *Diva* for non-lesbian women. Indeed, there are no magazines, glossy or otherwise, targeted at heterosexual women *qua* heterosexual women. The hegemony of the heteronorm produces a generic textual address to 'women' alongside an obscured, unrecognised set of assumptions to do with heterosexual activity. Thus, for example, 'women's magazines' may carry feature articles about lesbians (they do so with remarkable frequency), but such articles always address (and, hence, construct-as-normal) a presumptively non-lesbian reading position (Wilton 1997). Similarly, any content to do with sexual health or improving one's sex life takes heterosexuality utterly for granted (Moore 2003). Lesbians may read these magazines, but they must read against the grain. Importantly, the hegemonic status of heterosexuality means that their readers are never required to position themselves as *heterosexual* women, they are simply women. It would therefore not be possible to use such magazines to recruit non-lesbian women, even were the editors happy to allow this.

This was the first difference; where the greater part of the lesbian sample was recruited from the readership of a specialist lesbian publication, the non-lesbian equivalent was recruited using a pragmatic mix of methods. I composed a short letter, outlining the aims of the research and asking for interviewees, with a tear-off reply slip and pre-paid return envelope attached. This was distributed in three main ways. Since I was sending each existing participant a copy of their own interview transcript for comment, I included one copy of the recruitment letter together with a covering letter. Participants were thanked for their time, given permission to bin the recruitment letter without question, but invited to send it to a friend or acquaintance if they wished to do so.

A second batch was distributed via colleagues at work – both academic and administrative staff were asked to help by handing the letters out to women they knew. In this way, I could avoid interviewing women I knew personally, but was able to recruit a small local sample to 'match' the local sample of lesbians. The final batch was more widely distributed, by the simple strategy of carrying a bunch of letters around with me everywhere I went and leaving small piles in likely places as I travelled around the country.

Not surprisingly, greater effort was required using this method, and the response rate was modest. Out of 160 letters distributed, 23 reply slips were returned, and I began telephoning those who had agreed to take part.

At this point, a further difficulty emerged. A small number of women wanted to take part but were prevented from doing so by their male partners. This was unexpected, and worrying. On three occasions I rang a phone number given on a reply slip, at the time specified, only to find variously unhelpful men at the other end. One insisted on knowing what I wanted to speak to his wife about, another told me 'She's not doing anything unless she asks me first' and a third said 'Oh, you're the sex research lady. Well, we don't need to talk to you' and put the phone down.

This was an ethical dilemma. I could not tell a third party what the interview would be about, since that would compromise the confidentiality of my interviewee. The man who said that he and his wife didn't 'need' to speak to the 'sex research lady' had clearly been told something about the research and had got entirely the wrong idea (so, perhaps, had she, but there is no way of knowing). Nor did I want my request to become the catalyst for any kind of difficulties in the lives of respondents. An entry in my research diary for one evening reads:

Hmmm. I am not going to get as many straight women as I expected. Ringing potential interviewees tonight, got through to 2x husbands who were *extremely* proactive and persistent in wanting to know who I was and what it was about. This is a new experience for me!

I therefore decided, on reflection, not to continue telephoning households where I had received a hostile response of this kind. In addition there were a few technical problems; one telephone produced an 'engaged' tone on every one of the 13 times I tried to get through, and the tape recorder chewed up the tape of a further interview. Nor was it practical to use cellphone numbers, as the sound quality on taped cellphone interviews turned out to be so poor as to be untranscribable. These problems resulted in the 'loss' of five interviews, so the final total (including one interview from the initial pilot stage of the research) was 19.

### **Questioner, questions and questioned: talking to a lesbian**

A further difficulty was to do with the hegemonic status of heterosexuality. Not only were women unaccustomed to questioning their sexuality, they were simply not equipped to name themselves in relation to their

desire. The loose interview schedule which had proved so productive with lesbian interviewees opened with a simple question 'What word do you prefer to use to describe your sexuality?' When non-lesbian women were asked this question, they simply did not understand what I was asking, and tended to assume that it was a question about gender:

We're born with a certain path, I'm born female, is that what you mean? (Desiree 26)

Oh, the only problem I have is something like, is my level of understanding of what is meant by sexuality ... because I could never get my head around the sexuality and the gender bit. So, could you elaborate a bit more on that? (Sue 40)

Not only was this an unproductive opening, it also acted to reinforce the difference between me, as a lesbian interviewer aware of such matters, and the non-lesbian interviewees who had never had to ask such questions of themselves. Accordingly, I decided to open the interviews by asking women whether theories which claim that our sexuality is biologically determined 'felt accurate to them', and giving quite a substantial explanation. When interviewing Georgina (21), for example, I asked:

I'll start by asking you the question that I start all the interviews with, really, which is about, you may have heard about all the current scientific theories that sexual orientation, who you are attracted to, particularly the gender of the people you are attracted to, is somehow programmed into us, is something that we are born with. On a sort of gut level, how does that feel in terms of your own sexuality. Does that feel accurate?

This approach was far more productive, and enabled women to start discussing their own sense of their sexual orientation towards men. It remained, however, immensely problematic for all these interviewees to name their sexual identity:

I think the only word I can think of would be 'straight', and I don't know, I don't think I would ever actually use that word. But it's the only word that I can think of. So, er, heterosexual? (Kate 47)

Some of the interviewees clearly knew that they were speaking to a lesbian (usually those who had been recruited by lesbian participants),

and this seemed to introduce different kinds of anxiety into their responses. Some, for example, gave me a fairly thorough interrogation about the research, my motives and intentions, before agreeing to me turning on the tape recorder and beginning the interview. This never happened with lesbian participants, although some lesbians were eager to talk after the interview, wanting to know how I might be able to use the research to shift social attitudes or make life easier for other women going through similar processes. In short, my own lesbian identity was an enormously significant factor in the brief relationships I formed with all the interviewees and, as might be anticipated, it tended to impact differently depending on the sexual identity of the interviewee.

Moreover, whilst it seemed likely that the lesbian (and bisexual) interviewees shared a number of motives for participating, it was less clear why heterosexual women would want to be interviewed about their sexual identity. A number of women in the lesbian group stated that they wanted their account to be of some use to other women who might be going through similar experiences. For others, simply having their experiences recognised and reflected in the research process was validating. Without such motives, it is hardly surprising that interviewees in the heterosexual group needed to get more information from me in order to make the final decision to participate.

For women, such as Kate, who had some awareness of a politics around sexuality and/or gender, there was also a wariness of using implicitly offensive or homophobic language.

I think it probably is that, I suppose I am trying to avoid saying something like 'normal'. Because that isn't right, and yet I suppose that I think it's not very often necessary to say to anybody what your orientation is. Because if people know you've got a male partner then they sort of assume they know. And I can't think of a time in my life when people would have questioned me about what my orientation was. I think it would have probably always seemed obvious by my behaviour and company of men probably, although I didn't actually have a partner. (Kate 47).

This, then, emerges as one key difference between lesbian and non-lesbian participants. Whereas the lesbians were accustomed to a degree of reflexivity about all aspects of their sexuality, the non-lesbian women were not and some of them clearly found it quite challenging to think about such issues.

## Same difference?

With this key exception, there were more similarities than differences between the two sets of accounts. Like their lesbian peers, and as the existing literature might well lead us to expect, this group of women generally found men to be less than satisfactory intimate partners (although there were exceptions). They described familiar experiences of sexual disappointment, lack of communication or emotional literacy, and identified a range of social and cultural pressures on them to marry. Indeed, one of the most surprising findings of this research is the extent to which the account of heterosexuality given by formerly heterosexual lesbians is faithfully echoed by that given by women who continue to identify as heterosexual.

It seems that intimate relationships with men are problematic for the great majority of women. Some of those women go on to find more pleasurable and fulfilling kinds of intimacy in same-sex relationships, others develop strategies for survival within the parameters of heterosexuality. There are, of course, contented exceptions to this 'rule'. Another note from my research diary reads:

This nice woman says 'we are like a pair of comfy slippers' about her and husband. There are a lot of happy marriages around tonight!

Importantly, as we shall see, both groups – those women who quit heterosexuality and many of those who remain – rely heavily on other women for their emotional well-being. Indeed, the key distinction appears to be that, whilst some women are able to incorporate the erotic into their same-sex intimate relationships, others are unable or unwilling, for whatever reason(s) to do so.

## Men's bodies

When asked to reflect upon what they found attractive about men as sexual partners, very little mention was made of physical attractiveness. Indeed, some women admitted to finding it difficult to see men's bodies as desirable as we have seen. Mary (54) expressed this with particular vehemence: 'No. I'll never believe that women are attracted to men's bodies. Never believe that.' Mary lived out a heterosexual life despite very strongly negative feelings towards men:

I know it's not their fault. I know they are hard-wired too, but I do despise male sexuality. The poor things can't help it, can they? But they are penis driven, aren't they, that's what I don't like about them.

Indeed, so strong is her dislike of male sexuality that she expresses a strong – albeit thwarted – wish to be a lesbian:

Much as I would like to be a lesbian – I would love to be a lesbian, wishing won't make it so. I would give anything to be attracted to women but I am not. It's a great pity.

Mary seems to be expressing an almost fatalistic view of sexuality. At one point, invited to identify what it is that she prefers about men as sexual partners, she responds: 'I just don't know. Would a lesbian be able to say what it was about being with women? ... You might as well say, why is blue your favourite colour.' Explaining why she believes that her heterosexuality is innate and unchangeable, she says that she finds the thought of lesbian sex:

Both frightening and repellent... If I had half a bottle of Tequila I could just manage it above the waist. But not below. Ooohh, no!

What seems to be emerging here is a deep-seated revulsion from sexual activity *per se*. Mary seems almost as revolted by men's bodies as she is by women's. She describes her adolescence sexuality as very passive: 'I just hung around hoping to be fancied by anyone, just to confirm that I existed I suppose' and admits to getting married for reasons that had to do with parenting rather than emotional or sexual fulfilment:

I knew I probably shouldn't [get married] but I wanted a child and I didn't have the courage to have one on my own ... there was social security, there was single parent benefit, I probably could have, but I didn't want to, for the sake of the child ... I wanted the child to have two parents.

She did, indeed, ensure that her child had two parents. The cost, however, was high, and the marriage did not last long: 'I think', she reflects, 'we would have killed each other if we had stayed together'.

Of course, this is not a typical account, and none of the others in this group expressed such strongly negative feelings towards men's sexuality. Also untypical is Sarah (27), who expresses more warmth and appreciation, whilst seeming uncomfortable with her objectification of men's physical characteristics:

I like hairy chests. Yes, I like men's torsos. I like them to be nice and lean, though I don't like the muscly image thing that women are

supposed to like ... But I do like muscley arms. Not like, really muscley, just that they look kind of, it's really horrible, that they look fit and healthy I guess.

She goes on to describe a (probably not uncommon) process of learning to enjoy men's genitals as her sexual confidence increased. Significantly, she was among a tiny number of heterosexual women (3) who mentioned men's genitals at all, and the only one to do so with evident enthusiasm:

Yes. Umm, yes, and I do, I mean, I never used to, I didn't use to like men's penises. I used to think it was just a strange thing. But, I think, as I have become more aware of my own sexuality and kind of, you know, become at one with my own sexuality, I think that's maybe what it is, but now I actually really desire men's penises in a way that, before that, I didn't. Because, before, they were just a kind of object that was kind of a thing that I kind of played around with a little bit or something ... I mean I can think back to, I mean, I am 26 now, only in maybe this past relationship, two relationships I've had I kind of really, really decided that I desire his penis. But before, I mean, I had lots of long-standing relationships and I didn't really look at penises, even boyfriends' penises and think, you know, phwoar!

Neither Mary's powerfully negative response to men's bodies, nor Sarah's ability to take real pleasure in penises, is typical. Participants were more likely to express a relatively low-key appreciation of men's bodies, coupled with a strong sense of sexual disappointment and an acknowledgement (more or less forgivingly expressed) that men tend to be emotionally unskilled and to have an instrumental, mechanistic, sexuality. Typically forgiving accounts of male sexuality are given by Donna (37) and Linda (45). Donna reflects that:

I feel that sexuality is not something that, always, a partner appreciates. Men don't, do they, they don't seem to work that way ... I think to them it's just – I don't know quite what the words are – machine-like? Mechanical? No, that's not right, that's not the right phrase, but ... it's more like a switch that can be turned, and they can just move from one thing to the next. And they go to bed, and maybe want sex, and that's fine. For them, that's perhaps fulfilment. But I think there's a difference between having sex and making love.

Despite her unease with this aspect of male sexuality, Donna experiences her marriage as a good one, and sees herself as happily married:

Oh, it has its ups and downs, doesn't it. But, yes, I mean, with two children we're still together so I guess. How do you constitute what's a good marriage? But, yeah.

Linda (45), admits, 'I don't feel that I've ever debated with myself what my sexual orientation is', and describes her experience of learning to come to terms with the differences between men's and women's sexual and intimacy needs. She describes sexual contact as a necessary resource for dissipating emotional conflict:

I don't see sex as something either you put up with or a central role. It's part and parcel of the relationship. I would think of it sort of as the grease that lubricates the friction that can build up in a relationship.

Although she clearly does experience sex as being 'much less complicated to my male partners than it has been for me', she stresses that her heterosexual relationships have been very happy: 'I have been so happy in the relationships I have had. It seems an ideal way to live, to me.' Linda describes her ability to forge harmonious relationships with men as the result of learning to lower her expectations about romantic relationships:

I think initially, in my first relationship, I thought it was going to be like Disney, live happily ever after and one day your prince has come, and that's it, you don't have to make any effort. And then you go through tough times and you realise that having a relationship with anybody, whether it's children, parents, friends, lovers or whatever, it's quite hard work.

She also describes learning to accept human fallibility in her partners:

I think I don't expect men to be everything, and I don't view them with infallibility, and then I am not upset when they make a huge mess of things.

Importantly, she stresses that her relationships with her women friends are essential to this strategy:

I wouldn't say [men] were perfect. And I tend to have good relationships with women friends as well. So, perhaps the parenting side

I have discussed with them when I have gone through ups and downs. But relationships with women have a central role in the functioning of [my marriage].

As we shall see below, the centrality of women friends to the maintenance of heterosexual relationships was a common theme.

### **Elephants and giraffes: unequal intimacy**

It is a truism of heterosexual relationships that women struggle with men's emotional illiteracy and their lack of skill in building intimacy. As we have seen, many women who leave heterosexuality for a lesbian life do so because they reach a point where they are simply no longer prepared to tolerate this emotional inequality. For these women, the desire to experience deeper intimacy, enhanced communication and greater emotional equality in their sexual relationships is strong enough to propel them out of the safety of the mainstream. What, then are the experiences of women who remain in heterosexual relationships? Is it the case that they have been able to build the kinds of intimacy and emotional closeness which their lesbian peers were unable to find?

This was certainly so for one of the heterosexual participants. Jane (52), describes herself as 'very conventional', whilst at the same time acknowledging that her much-loved father played an unusually close role in her upbringing:

I think I had an enormous amount of attention from my father, because I think he looked after me a lot ... I think that, right from the start, I sort of felt a kind of bond with him, you know ... it represented security and safety.

Jane went on to describe her heterosexual relationships in terms strikingly similar to those used by some of the lesbian participants:

I think friendship and understanding ... along with being able to sit and talk for hours. Or not!

[interviewer: So, a kind of intimacy and closeness? And you've found men to be good at that?]

I have, yes. I've found a lot of men. In particular, when our children were young, we used to go away on holiday, with stereotypical families together, camping in France. I always found the men much more conversational. Two men, particularly, who I could chat a long time to.

Jane's account is unusual in that she seems to find men easier to communicate with than women. She is not entirely alone in this. Catherine (42) describes a 23-year marriage which continues to offer her emotional fulfilment:

Yes, there's tenderness, and the way somebody demonstrates how they really care for you deeply, things that they do. Even the little things, arriving to meet you from work with a rose, the romantic side. Oh, gosh, he's the most incredibly romantic person. You know, a couple of months ago I went out to the car to go shopping. I opened the boot and it was full of flowers! He does loads of things.

Catherine seems strongly to prefer the company of men to that of women. Indeed, she describes women as 'too whingey', although she does conclude that there may be valid reasons for this:

I think women are too whingey. You have got an office full of women, and it's just, they moan about everything. Whereas men just have, seem to have, more grown up conversation. I mean, there's the football men, which I wouldn't be interested in, but on the whole I feel that it's – I don't know – they come across a bit more positive in the work environment than women. But maybe that's because we have two jobs to do, and not the one.

Like Jane, Catherine suggests that her sense of ease around men (which she recognises as unusual), has its roots in her early childhood:

I went into work with my mum and she worked for a dairy, where you are surrounded by men, milkmen. So I was brought up in a male environment. And even now I usually end up in a lot of trouble, because I form better relationships with men than I do with women! ... I do get myself in trouble, because men, I think men take it the wrong way.

Young gay men fulfil an interesting role for Catherine, acting as chaperones when she goes out on the town with a woman friend, and enabling her to have fun without getting hit on by other men:

I know they are not [sexually] interested in me, and when you go out, I have the most brilliant nights out with them. A [woman] friend and myself, we go out with a couple, both male, who are gay. And, when we go out, they are the most attractive men in the room, and everybody

is thinking, 'why is this 42 year old' (they are only young, they are only about 25, 26), 'what is this woman, this older woman, doing with these dashing young men?' And nobody approaches you, and you can get up on the dance floor without other men coming up to, you know, the old corny things, 'Haven't I seen you in here before?'. You don't get any of that, and I feel absolutely safe.

Catherine and Linda's accounts are untypical. The majority of the heterosexual respondents described problems trying to achieve and maintain intimacy and emotional communication with male partners. Unlike those lesbian participants who preferred to give up the unequal struggle and to look for their intimacy and emotional closeness with other women, those who remained heterosexual developed various strategies for dealing with men's poor intimacy skills. One such strategy was to acknowledge that such gender differences were an inevitable part of heterosexuality:

I haven't read that book [Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus], but in our front room we have a joke, elephants and giraffes, when we can't understand each other. The joke is, well, if you get elephants and giraffes to live together, you can't expect them to communicate, because they speak different languages. (Linda 45)

Whilst Linda is able to deal with this gendered differential in emotional capacity by means of humour, other women's accounts were more freighted with sadness. Donna (37) offers a reflexive and insightful account of her experiences of heterosexuality as lacking in affection whilst at the same time providing something which she feels she needs:

I've never been on my own, you know, and I've never been strong on my own, or been a strong woman on my own. Do you know what I mean? In touch with who I am as a woman and able to handle the opposite sex, or my sexuality really, I don't think... I mean, I won't say I don't care and love, because I do. I just don't know whether I am fulfilled... [in terms of] affection, communication, closeness. There's not a closeness there.

In common with many others in this group, Donna is able to compensate for the lack of emotional closeness in her marriage by

drawing on her women friends:

I think it's about how a man and a woman are different. Because I can get that love and affection and communication when I am with my friends, when I am with my female companions. You know, I can get all that. But not with my partner. Because I think women are more emotional than men, or so say ... You still have needs, don't you, even though you can sort of understand that somebody is that different from you. You still have needs that can be fulfilled. You've still got needs, I think.

For others, the kind of emotional hunger so touchingly described here is presented as a kind of blandness, a lack of passion. As so clearly expressed in the account which opens this chapter, these women may feel that their initial expectations of marriage were too high. They may, like Kate, think they were deceived by reading too much 'literature' (Kate is an English teacher), or may simply conclude that passion is something which they can live without in return for the other benefits of a successful marriage. There remains, however, a tangible sense of disappointment, as exemplified by Linda (51):

I think a lot of people, (and this is only my opinion, for what it's worth, it's probably worth nothing), but a lot of people do go into relationships purely for the sexual side of it. Which in a lot of cases is real, it's very intense and what have you. Whereas, for me, we're good friends. My husband has an extremely good sense of humour, and we get on well, and I can talk to him about anything and we're mates, and I think that is important. Because it's all right having a wonderful partner in bed, I assume, but if you've got nothing else, you know.

Linda's pleasure in her companionate marriage is evident. Only later does she reveal a little of the wistfulness which accompanies that pleasure:

I do look at him and then, as I am getting older, I think, I wonder, it has crossed my mind and I've thought, I wonder if I should have had more partners? Yes, I do sometimes think, oh, I wonder? Maybe it's because I'm a bit of a softie and I see all these films on telly and they fall in love. And you think, oh, it was never quite like that for me! Although I love him dearly and I wouldn't change him, I sometimes think I wish I could experience that real sort of passion.

The tentativeness of the language used here is poignant; 'I think, I wonder, it has crossed my mind and I've thought', suggesting that Linda hardly dares allow herself even to mention her yearnings. For Sue (40), the question is different. Rather than wonder whether she should have experimented more with male partners, she sees heterosexuality as intrinsically disappointing. For her, women's expectations of men are unlikely to be met, simply because those expectations are based on experiences of intimacy between women. Hers is a complex and thoughtful account of gendered intimacy and erotics:

I do believe that you can't just sustain a relationship on the physical level without all the other things. Because, if the other things weren't there, you wouldn't want to have sex with this person. Because if that were the case you would have sex with the bus driver... Here's a chance to find me bitter and twisted! The [men] that I have met, even some of my male friends, I think, no, I don't know what it is with them, it's still that inability to communicate, I think, with members of the opposite sex... I think women demand more on that. We do demand to be spoken to, talked to and all those things. I think the difficulty is, that what you have with your female friends, you expect to have with your male partner. And I don't think that is altogether possible. We are two very different species and we expect the other one to be like ourselves.

Although the sense of disappointment here is powerful, to the extent that she describes herself as 'bitter and twisted', Sue draws on discourses of innate difference in order to excuse men's 'inability to communicate'. After all, members of two different species cannot reasonably be expected to communicate.

Other women, more forthright, expressed more strongly their sense of dissatisfaction with their male partners, or their disappointment with marriage. Kate (47) describes this sense of disappointment as extending beyond the confines of her marriage to include the experiences of other women in her friendship network:

I know there was a time when the children were little when I felt exhausted and fed up, and despairing of virtually all the men I knew. It was like, all the women I spoke to seemed to be contemptuous of their useless husbands, and I felt much the same about mine.

The strength of her despair led Kate to think about the possibilities of a life that might not be organised around the traditional heterosexual

routine:

I thought a lot about the way we live and about how isolated women nowadays tend to be, living at home with their children waiting for the husband to come home ... and I thought, wouldn't it be nice to live in some more community sort of way, where you shared the responsibility of looking after the children with other people?

Interestingly, for our purposes here, she went on to imagine the possibilities of establishing this more egalitarian kind of household within the parameters of a lesbian relationship:

I could imagine myself choosing to be in a relationship with a woman as a conscious choice. I think I could imagine that it wouldn't be impossible.

This does not seem to be a strong possibility, rather one which she could 'imagine wouldn't be impossible'. Nevertheless, Kate was not the only heterosexual participant to have considered the possibility of a lesbian relationship, however fleetingly. This is significant. These heterosexual women seem to have found men just as difficult to relate to as did the lesbian participants. In particular, and importantly in terms of discourses of orientation, they seem just as unhappy with male sexuality as do their lesbian counterparts. For the lesbians, the solution was to leave heterosexuality and explore the possibilities offered by same-sex intimacy. Given that a number of the heterosexual group expressed interest in this possibility, the question that now emerges as significant is, why do they not act on their expressed interest?

### **Tempting, but no thanks: reasons to remain heterosexual**

The simple fact that it was not at all uncommon for participants to express interest in the possibility of lesbian relationships represents an enormously significant social and cultural shift. The increasing liberalisation of social attitudes towards same-sex partnerships means that women are now aware that there is an alternative to heterosexuality. Thus all women, whatever their individual circumstances, are positioned differently in relation to same- and other-sex possibilities. It is interesting to observe the extent to which essentialist beliefs about sexuality act, in such fluid circumstances, to restrict individual fluidity and reinforce the status quo.

Thus Fiona (41) describes a complex mix of resignation and disappointment in her heterosexual life, stressing the inability of male partners to communicate on an emotional level:

I am terrible for making sweeping statements, so I apologise for that, but some men are so shallow and crass. Some don't even know what the word emotion means, and [they are] just so hurtful without realising it. They haven't the vaguest idea of what they have done. We are from different planets, definitely. It's just a shame that we don't talk the same emotional language. There is a complete breakdown of communication as far as I have been concerned with all my relationships, and it's such a shame.

Apologising for making another 'sweeping statement', she goes on to express disappointment with her experience of male sexuality:

There was no meeting of minds at all, and I had thought it could have been or was, but it wasn't. It was purely physical for him, and I found it completely shattering. Men just get physical satisfaction from sex whereas, a woman, to her there are so many other things involved. As I say, myself as an individual, I haven't come across a man yet who has had that depth of feeling. It's just been purely physical for them and has not involved their minds at all.

Fiona's deep sense of disappointment and hurt makes her 'very scared, very very nervous of getting involved again' with a man. She has lesbian friends, so is aware of the existence of this alternative, but draws on both her religious beliefs and biological determinism to pre-empt the possibility of exploring it for herself. Initially she blames a lack of 'chemistry':

I did say to [my lesbian friend] that I was thinking of becoming a lesbian, because I am fed up with men. They are all awful! And I think women are so lovely, and so much nicer, but the chemistry is wrong ... I wish I could control it. In some ways I would enjoy a relationship with a woman, because I think women are so much nicer. But the chemistry is not there, you see.

Later on in the interview, she shifts from 'chemistry' to 'wiring'. This is still a metaphor taken from the hard sciences and its use here strongly implies essentialism:

... as much as I adore women and I love their company, and I have a huge number of girlfriends now ... I adore women's company, but

I could not imagine getting intimate with a woman. Not that it repulses me. It doesn't repulse me at all. I almost wish that I could, because I think possibly it would bring great fulfillment but, yes, the chemistry doesn't work, the wiring's wrong.

Finally, and a little wary of offending me, she draws on her religious beliefs as further justification for her continued heterosexuality:

I think [my religion] does come into it. In other words, having said I sort of would like to have a relationship with a woman, actually, to be completely honest, I suppose my christian beliefs tell me that it's not right. I hesitate to say this, because I am very happy to talk to you, and I have a lovely relationship and friendship with [my lesbian friend] ... I suppose if I wasn't a christian then perhaps I might allow myself the indulgence of even testing the temperature of the water.

This is really rather extraordinary. Here is a forty-one-year old heterosexual woman seeming to feel that she needs to justify her continued heterosexuality. What is more, this is no half-hearted justification. Rather, it calls up the powerful forces of both science and religion to erase the uncomfortable possibility of choice. Of course Fiona's approach is, demonstrably, influenced by a wish not to be rude or offensive about a valued friend or to an interviewer known to be lesbian. Nevertheless, it is a telling account which seems to reveal traces of extraordinary shifts in the sexual *zeitgeist*.

For Kate, who 'could imagine that it wouldn't be impossible' to have a lesbian relationship, there is a much weaker sense of prohibition:

I couldn't see myself having a huge physical attraction and a huge chemistry, but more in a sort of cosy, companionable way. It wouldn't be a huge jump for me to imagine being with a woman and at least seeing what it was like to have a sexual relationship as well as companionship with a woman.

She also describes herself as having become 'more cynical' about women than she once was:

I think I'm now more cynical about women as well. I used to think that women were wonderful and men were just hopeless but, actually, now I think maybe I'm more cynical about *myself*. I think if I lived with a woman I would probably end up falling out with her over the

same sort of things ... So I'm not sure women are actually as magical as I once thought and men are probably not so completely hopeless.

Kate was going through her period of thinking that women were 'magical' and men 'completely hopeless' at a time (the 1970s and early 1980s) when the influence of the women's movement on university-educated women of her generation was at its strongest. A somewhat similar account is given by Sue (also 47), who acknowledges the impact of feminism more explicitly:

I was in the university in the early 1970s, which was a very exciting time to be a student. And the women's movement was kicking in, and I was active in the women's movement. And there were quite a lot of women who were exploring a whole range of issues about, you know, their sexuality etc., and I think I happened to meet up with a man and developed a long term relationship at that point in my life. But there were women in the group who I also had a very good relationship with and I think, if things hadn't worked out with this particular man, I might have explored other aspects of my sexuality.

Nor is this an avenue which she feels is completely closed to her. Although her sense of frustration with her male partner is mediated by her awareness that, 'living with another person, a one-to-one relationship, is fairly demanding in itself, really, with either men or women', Sue stresses that there are specific difficulties inherent in heterosexual relationships:

I would think long and hard about wanting to get stuck into another relationship with another man I'd have to say. So in that sense, I'm open to all possibilities ... I mean, I would like to think that there is such a thing as a new man, but, frankly, I think we've got a long way to go ... I think, primarily, their lack of emotional literacy, that's my key issue ... I think one of the things I learnt, painfully ... was that actually there's no way that a man could ever meet or might meet all my needs in a relationship, and that it's a dangerous thing to do, to over-invest, to put all one's eggs into one basket as it were.

The consequence, for Sue, has been that the possibility of lesbian relationships seems to have become re-shaped for her into a more familiar kind of female intimacy. As for most of the other women in this group,

her women friends compensate for the inadequacies of her heterosexual relationship:

I want to keep things that help sustain me, such as having a network of supporting women friends, who can offer the emotional literacy that I don't think a lot of men can offer.

Some of the younger women, for whom the impact of the women's movement is more attenuated and implicit, seemed to attach less significance to the hetero/homo divide. For example, Georgina (21), presented the possibility of lesbianism almost as a socially neutral alternative.

I am reasonably attracted to the idea of a partnership with a woman as well, because I think that would be something really special as well, and I suppose the more I sleep with men the more I am disappointed ... I suppose they are not always aware of things that women would notice ... I think, more than anything else, them loving you as much as you love them. And I think you can only understand men to a certain extent and they can only understand women to a certain extent. Perhaps the perfect partner is someone where you can understand each other perfectly, and in that sense I think that can only be achieved with a woman.

Georgina goes on to make a clear distinction between the intimacy of a friendship and that of a sexual relationship. She is also able to be clear and explicit about her heterosexuality, stating that her enjoyment of penile sex is an important element:

So, from that point of view in terms of a partnership, and not so much sexual (that's not really that important) but in terms of a close friendship with a woman ... I am open to the possibility of both, but I suppose the main thing is that I want to have children. I think I will need a strong male figure there, but I don't know ... I suppose, too, it's their willies. That's the main thing, I suppose. You can't have that sort of sex with a woman. That's the overall thing.

On balance, the emotional and sexual disappointments of heterosexuality are outweighed by the unique pleasures of heterosex and by the discursive construction of parenthood as requiring a 'strong male figure'.

Two of the 'heterosexual' group described themselves as having had sexual relationships with both women and men, although both were currently in heterosexual relationships. For these two, naturally, the differences between lesbian and heterosexual relationships were particularly apparent, being based on experience rather than fantasy. Desiree (26) suspects that she will end up with a female partner, but is appreciative of the similarities and differences, both emotional and erotic:

I remember when I first started to go out with [my first girlfriend] I was going, 'oh God, I miss the genitalia type thing', and then I realised as I developed my love and fell in love with her, that's when I discovered 'that's love'. And now I know it's not about the penis and vagina, it's about this person ... and, I mean, sometimes sex with both [men and women] has been phenomenal, and I have had such interesting, incredible experiences with both that I know now I can't compare, because I feel the same deep passion for both. It's so the same but it's so god damn different, you know what I mean? It's just wonderful.

Desiree's equally powerful erotic enthusiasm for her female and male partners is an interesting account to set against that given by Mary (54) who could 'never believe that women are attracted to men's bodies', and seemed equally repulsed by the idea of sexual contact with women's bodies. For some women, it seems, strongly positive or strongly negative feelings about the erotic may override the maleness or femaleness of potential partners.

Having said that she imagines that, 'I will be with a woman when I'm older', Desiree explains that it is the emotional, rather than the erotic, aspect of lesbian relationships which draws her to this conclusion:

Yes, and it's wonderful with women, and I love what we have in terms of feeling and this intense emotion we can have. I am not saying men don't have it, they have it differently and they tend not to be as expressive. I don't know if they can't *be* as expressive or if they don't *feel* as expressive. I don't know what it is with them, but there is a definite difference there. I feel that as I get older I can be with women because, I don't know, I do really appreciate the emotional depth. And I am such an emotional person myself, and sometimes that can be so overwhelming for a man, and then I find their way of not dealing with emotions, well, I get pissed off with that!

For Sarah who, at 27, is significantly older although still too young to have experienced at first hand the impact of the women's movement, the conclusion is rather different. She, too, is enthusiastic about sexual intimacy with women, but imagines herself continuing to have relationships with both women and men:

I had a few sexual experiences with women and they were all amazing, because it was like I didn't have to use words ... I didn't have to say, 'oh, do this'. It's kind of like there's an understanding. And that's probably because your bodies are similar ... so, in my head I would choose a woman, I think, as a gut reaction. Yes, I would, yes, just because they are far superior beings (laughter) no, I just think a woman would be more in touch with my desire ... I think women are just more sort of caring, and more kind of perceptive about things without you actually having to say things.

When asked what she might miss about men, Sarah replies that their failings have value in themselves:

I think, with a man, I guess it is quite interesting that you don't have that kind of understanding. It's kind of a bit of a challenge, and I don't know whether that's good or not. It's kind of interesting I guess. And I guess I would miss, you know, a man's body.

There are, of course, social and cultural prohibitions against lesbian sex and relationships between women. Although the younger women in this group seem less affected by stigma and prejudice than do the older women, it would be foolish to take this as implying that such stigma and prejudice has been eradicated from British society. Apart from any other considerations, this is a self-selecting group of women who have volunteered to take part in research into sexuality. This, on its own, would suggest that they are likely to be more than usually relaxed about, interested in or confident about their own sexuality.

It is, nevertheless, the case that it was the older women in this group who made explicit reference to anti-lesbian stigma. Kate (47), example, wondered about the impact of the taboo against same-sex eroticism on her own avoidance of lesbian relationships:

I suppose there are still things that I would get from a relationship with a woman that would be different. There is this barrier about having a physical relationship with a woman, because it's a taboo thing,

isn't it, and I just don't know, actually, whether if I overcame the taboo, what it would be like. I don't know whether it's just that I don't want to, or that I've never pushed myself into thinking that way, or to be open to that possibility.

She goes on to conclude that it is unlikely to be solely a consequence of social pressure, imagining that a sense of sexual attraction might be strong enough to break through the 'barrier' she attributes to taboo. She also feels a strong sexual attraction to the second husband she has recently married, and believes that this is 'genuine', rather than the result of social pressures to be heterosexual.

I think, probably, by now I would have met a woman who triggered a strong enough relationship that I would have at least experimented a bit more. And I know that I do still feel that thrill of excitement about my relationship with my new husband which I think isn't something that is routine or down to conditioning. I think it is something that is genuine, but whether it is social or biological in its roots, I don't know.

Jane (52) seems to feel something similar. She is adamant that she has no sense of revulsion at the thought of lesbian sex, but that it simply doesn't feel like a possibility:

It doesn't feel alien. I mean, sort of looking at women and thinking about women and the idea of, you know, women, friends of mine who are in relationships with other women, is lovely, I think. I don't think it's awful or alien ... No, not at all. In fact, I feel drawn to it. I'm interested in it ... It's not completely out of my mind. It's not something I think, oh God, I couldn't cope with that. But, I can't really imagine myself having a sexual relationship with a woman.

It seems that, whereas heterosexuality is problematic for the majority of women, individual women differ greatly in the extent to which they are willing and able to make allowances for the gender differences which import problems into their relationships with men. Similarly, whilst many heterosexual women are able to recognise that a lesbian relationship might offer the possibility of different kinds of intimacy and sexual pleasure, relatively few women go so far as to explore this option. It seems that social stigma is not enough, on its own, to account for this. Some women simply do not feel able to countenance lesbian sexual

activity and, of these, there is a continuum of response ranging from strong revulsion to a kind of helplessness in the face of what seems to be an insuperable (rather than willed) failure of desire.

### **Taken to another world: social and material pressure to marry**

In addition to sexual preference *per se* there are, of course, social pressures on women to engage in heterosexual activity and to marry. Such pressures may be both strong and subtle. Discourses of what might be termed heterosexual propriety saturate almost every element of women's life course, and this was also apparent in the accounts given by the heterosexual participants.

Some drew attention to the material inequalities which make solitary living and, in particular, solitary parenting, difficult options for women. Others simply said that it was difficult to contemplate bringing up children without a father figure, whilst still others described men's greater social and cultural freedom and how that gave them the power to take their female partners to what one woman called 'a different world'. Another common theme, also echoed in the lesbian women's accounts, was the peer pressure to be heterosexually active which comes into play during adolescence. For Elizabeth (46), such pressures led to a disastrous early marriage:

I suppose you had to have a boyfriend, you were nothing without a boyfriend. And I went along with that. But I didn't like them much a lot of the time. I thought they were horrible! But you did meet the odd nice one, you know, that kept you going... But there are other pressures as well, the kind that make you want to get married... I was 18 years old, and of course it was a total disaster. I was much too young, I didn't know what I was doing, but I did it anyway.

When asked to say more about the pressures making her 'want to get married', Elizabeth responds that what she was looking for, perhaps ironically, was independence:

It was more I wanted to be independent. I wanted to not be a child, to be an adult in my own right and to have my own home and do whatever I liked. It was more about that; getting away from my parents, really.

Such accounts serve as a timely reminder that it is only very recently that transformations in the labour market, social attitudes and state policies have made it possible for women to live independently of men. Prior to this major social transformation it was only possible for exceptional women – most usually those with independent wealth – to survive outside the material enclave of heterosexual marriage. This is, of course, one important reason why lesbian partnerships appear to have become more common in recent years.

Nor are the privileges of heterosexuality merely monetary under such circumstances. A hegemonic order which differentially polices access to the public and domestic spheres along a gendered binary will produce ‘masculinity’ as outward-orientated, agentic and competitive and ‘femininity’ as inward-orientated, objectified and restrained. Elizabeth offers something of a sense of this complexity when she concludes that, although ‘men’s bodies are alright’, her attraction to them is based on something other than the corporeal:

I think a lot of it, with men, is kind of material things. I had a low paid job, no education, and men have things like cars and money. They can take you out of your life into their life. It’s a way of getting experience at the same time as having the love and the sex. They take you to another life ... and it’s like you get swept into their life, you leave yours behind.

Whether being swept out of your own life into someone else’s is a positive or a negative experience depends, of course, on the value of the different lives in question. It may be the case that women’s demands for a re-evaluation and de-gendering of public/private spatiality suggests that younger women are less likely to enjoy this as much as Elizabeth clearly does.

For Maureen (43), heterosexual marriage has been a somewhat bleak experience. Moreover, she gives a moving account of her mother’s experience of marriage as something so emotionally damaging that only years of tranquilliser consumption made it endurable:

The only thing that I didn’t do that my mother did was go on tranquilisers ... My mother lost probably thirty years of her life because she was on tranquilisers. Then it took her five years to be weaned off them. But she was 60 when she took her last tranquilliser and she is a new woman.

For Maureen, from a low-income family and in low-income employment, the material pressures to marry were very real. However, the thing

which she identifies as being most significant is the example of her own mother:

[There's] never been any romance, never been any great deal of passion really, I don't think. Can I say what I think? I think that I just fell into the role that I saw in my mother. Which was, home maker, peace maker, carer, comforter.

The arrival of her children seems to have jolted her into self-recognition. Ironically, it also reinforced her belief that remaining in her marriage was essential to her children's security:

What changed it for me, really, was when I had children. It made me really look at myself and what I expected for them. And by looking at myself I could see what I had done. Really, it sounds like I committed a terrible crime.

[Interviewer: Well, is that what it felt like?]

Yes, it did really. I felt like I had wasted quite a lot of my years in thinking it was what I wanted when, really, I should have understood myself more... I did what my mother did and put up with it. I brought these children into the world and must give them the stability of a home. Although I always said to my mum, when I was young, don't put up with it, mum, you are not doing us any favours. Why don't you go? Why don't you leave?

At the time of the interview, Maureen stated that she was planning to leave her marriage. From this vulnerable position, she spoke with extraordinary clarity about the pressures on her to remain:

It's something that I know I must do. I know I must do it because it's a waste for both of us. But I feel really, in a way, that I have failed myself and if I had looked at things closely earlier, or even just been braver earlier, I could have had years where I wouldn't have felt this stress and oppression, really ... It's so difficult. Like I said to you earlier, this is the year 2000 but women still find it difficult to financially survive on their own. Plus I want to be a good mother. The children are older now so, of course, that does make it in a way easier, I hope. But you know, I wanted to be a good mother. When I committed myself to motherhood and a relationship I wanted it to work. I was loyal to that.

Her closing words expose just how complicated the heterosexual 'package' can be for women. Rather than being dupes of simplistic 'stand by your man' rhetoric, women must try to negotiate the well-being of themselves, their children and their partner within the rapidly shifting social, cultural and political parameters of a 'family unit'. In this, they are no different from women whose families are structured around same-sex partnerships. However, the external and internalised pressures on the two kinds of family are very different indeed, and parenting issues will be explored in more depth in the next chapter,

### **Conclusion: clap your hand if you believe in heterosexuals**

Many of the themes which crop up repeatedly in the lesbian women's accounts are mirrored in the transcripts of their heterosexual counterparts. From a feminist perspective this is hardly surprising; all women are obliged to share the social, cultural and psychological consequences of their positioning as subordinate within the hegemonic regimen of gender. Certain feminists have protested that this is not, in fact, the case. Monique Wittig (1981), for example, insisted that:

Lesbian is the only concept I know which is beyond the categories of sex (woman and man), because the designated subject (lesbian) is *not* a woman ... what makes a woman is a specific social relation to a man ... a relation which lesbians escape by refusing to become, or to stay, heterosexual.

Whilst it may be the case that lesbians are able to escape *certain elements* of their gender location by leaving heterosexuality, they cannot escape entirely. They are, for example, more likely than are gay men to have caring responsibilities (for children or incapacitated family members), and are likely to earn less than their male counterparts as well (Gluckman and Reed 1997) – although there is evidence to suggest that being a lesbian acts to improve women's relationship to the labour market and, hence, their earning power (Dunne 1992).

Any attempt to theorise the sexual self-fashioning of women, then, must start from the social construction of gender and engage with the mutual intersections and co-dependency of gender and the erotic. In short, a queer theoretical perspective is required. Queer theory is characterised by a commitment to problematising *all* forms of the erotic.

In particular, queer theorists regard heterosexualities as being as much in need of explanation as homosexualities (Spargo 1999). Note the use of the plural – homo/heterosexualities. Certainly it seems, from the accounts of heterosexual participants, that experiences of heterosexuality, although markedly less heterogeneous than experiences of lesbian sexuality, are far from uniform or homogeneous.

Perhaps the central exception to this – or, at least, that element of heterosexual experience where this claim is demonstrably weakest – is in relation to ways of becoming heterosexual. For, whilst lesbians each relate a distinctively unique story of their journey towards lesbian life and the process of fashioning a lesbian self, the hegemony of the heteronorm is such that the notion of becoming heterosexual is simply incomprehensible to heterosexuals (although it takes on meaning if applied to women who were previously lesbian). Thus, it proved unproductive to ask this group of participants to explain the origins of their sexualities.

It must be concluded, then, that heterosexuality is problematic for most, if not all women. Some women are able to negotiate heterosexual lives which are largely positive, provide the kinds of support which they need, and which make them happy. Others are able to tolerate heterosexual relationships only by drawing on the support of close women friends or family members, and others are made extremely unhappy by their experiences of heterosexual relationships. Still others are able, drawing on a variety of discourses, to leave the heterosexual locale altogether and to fashion new lives, new forms of intimacy, and new sexual selves.

Whichever of these paths an individual woman may take, she is likely to find her self-determination compromised by dominant heteroerotic norms which construct her desires, pleasures and sexual well-being as inconsequential and trivial. The extent to which a particular woman will be able to challenge this heteronormative account of her self depends on a great variety of factors, many of which have emerged in these sets of accounts. As we shall see in the next chapter, discourses of reproductivity are foundational to heteronormativity and these, too, must be challenged by women leaving heterosexuality.

# 7

## Your Mum's an Oxymoron: Sexuality and Reproductivity

The womb is an animal which longs to generate children. When it remains barren for too long after puberty, it is distressed and sorely disturbed, and straying about in the body and cutting off the passages of the breath, it impedes respiration and brings the sufferer into extreme anguish and provokes all manner of disease besides.

Plato *Timaeus* (cited in Ussher 1997, p. 331)

If someone had said to me, you are going to be falling in love with this woman that you know and you have known since you were at toddlers together, I would never have believed it in a million years, because you don't expect to find a lesbian in a toddler group.

(May 39)

The socio-cultural construction of gender and of the erotic within the hegemonic bloc depends upon and is interwoven with discourses of reproductive heterosexuality. This is perhaps inevitable, since each one of us owes our existence to an event at once insignificant and momentous – the successful merging of two gametes, sperm and ovum. Since it is the testes which produce sperm and the ovaries which produce ova, it is unsurprising that the reproductive potential of certain behaviours dominates the socio-cultural construction of sexualities, nor that the erotic tends to be perceived as an innately ('naturally') gendered arena of human social behaviour. Whether the reproductive imperative is understood to be primarily biological, primarily socio-cultural or produced by some interaction between the two, the implications are that the construction and policing of sexualities will, themselves, be

gendered and, importantly, that the policing of gender norms will be sexualised.

Thus, discourses of maternalistic femininity have long been identified as an important element in the policing of cultural norms of gender which produce and reinforce the subordination of women to men (Rich 1977, 1980, Dijkstra 1986). Such discourses produce women's same-sex eroticism as the abjected and stigmatised 'other', as existing utterly outwith the parameters of proper femininity – and, indeed, of proper femaleness for this is, as we shall see, a profoundly naturalised and 'biologised' discourse.

Within the parameters of dominant discourses of orientation which originated in the nineteenth century, heteroerotics are purposively (if not purposely or intentionally) reproductive. Within this paradigm, what might be thought of as the heteroerotic impulse was, itself, gendered; such that normal men were impelled towards and by the pleasures of intercourse whereas normal women were impelled towards motherhood:

From the cradle woman is a mother, and longs for maternity. To her everything in nature, animate or inanimate, is transformed into little children. (Jules Michelet 1859, cited in Dijkstra 1986, p. 18)

Indeed, it was the responsibility of women to act as the (chaste, sexless) spiritual source of domestic redemption for their men. August Comte, founding father of Sociology, spelt out in *System of Positive Polity* the 'mission of woman' as being 'to save men from the corruption, to which he is exposed in his life of action and of thought' (Comte 1852, in Dijkstra 1989, p. 14). Wifehood and motherhood were, therefore, constructed as 'pure' domains from which all taint of the erotic was absent. Comte even proposed developing non-sexual methods of insemination, so as to ensure that women might bear the children for which they longed without having to subject themselves to the horrors of the erotic (Dijkstra 1989).<sup>1</sup>

The patriarchal construct of 'woman' as a kind of ambulant uterus is, as the lines from Plato at the head of this chapter indicate, long-lasting and deeply rooted. It produces an unwieldy skein of discursive strands which, as we shall see, continue to script and to constrain the sexual potential/potency of contemporary women. Of course, the marginalisation and abjection of same-sex desires and behaviours is gendered as radically as any other aspect of human sexuality, such that heterosexism and homophobia impact very differently on lesbians and gay men. It is

important to unpick the discursive skein of reproductive heteroerotics, not only to establish the distinctive nature of anti-lesbian homophobia, but also to demonstrate the specific impact of such discourses on women's ability to fashion coherent accounts of themselves as sexed and sexual. If 'female sexuality' is properly subjugated to the reproductive drive, and if 'motherhood' is constructed as erotophobic and asexual, what are the social, political and psychological implications for lesbians?

What follows here is an analysis of the nature of discourses of reproductive heterosexuality, together with an exploration of how such discourses are integrated into the self-fashioning and sexual histories of the two groups of women who participated in my research; previously heterosexual lesbians and never-lesbian heterosexuals. When looking at accounts of reproductivity, familiarity and parenting it is not solely the women themselves whose experiences are at issue. So, too, are the experiences of any children involved. The lives of such children are likely to be touched – sometimes trivially, more often profoundly – by the extent to which their families are either contained within or exceed social and cultural norms.

I did not interview any children during this project. Others have done so, and the accounts of children of always-lesbian and previously heterosexual lesbian mothers are fairly widely available (e.g. Alpert 1988, Rafkin 1990). It was, however, often the case that the lesbian women taking part in this research initiated discussion about their children, or the children of their partners. Most were extremely concerned about the potential impact of their own sexual identity and key life-choices on those children, in a wider social and political context of anti-lesbian prejudice and discrimination. The always-heterosexual group, on the other hand, only mentioned children in passing, usually as a reason for wanting to marry. Such silences are, of course, as significant as volubility.

### **God or nature? Discourses of reproductive femininity**

There is a view, widely held among social scientists, that science 'took over from' religion as the hegemonic explanatory paradigm for cultures of European origin during and after the enlightenment (Foucault 1965, Szasz 1971). It is in the nature of the hegemonic process that such paradigm shifts are seldom absolute, tend to remain incomplete, and that the 'boundary layer' between competing paradigms remains both shifting and permeable. In this sense, discourses of reproductive femininity are exemplary, in that 'science' and 'religion' continue to demonstrate a

rather strong form of co-dependency. In particular, political activist groups that are avowedly anti-gay draw freely from the rhetoric of both institutions in ways which contrast markedly with the mutual antipathy between advocates of 'science' and 'religion' around other issues such as stem cell research or the evolution/creation stand-off.

It is, therefore, necessary to interrogate both these sets of institutionally produced discourse and to identify the extent to which each provokes, colludes with or nuances the other. This is not a simple task, but neither is this the place for a full-scale deconstructive analysis. Rather it is most appropriate to our purpose here to identify a relatively small number of thematic areas where the discursive dynamic may be observed and its implications demonstrated. Broadly stated, these themes are; the patriarchal imperative to control female corporeal productivity, ideological (and political) concerns to do with family structure and a kind of pervasive, deeply rooted erotophobia which appears to be culturally mandated and inscribed.

Practices and ideologies concerned with the policing and control of women's bodies have been widely and rigorously documented by feminist scholars (Terry and Urla 1995, Price and Shildrick 1999), and some have suggested that the response of men (as a class) to the reproductive capacity of women (as a class) underpins the patriarchal hegemonic project. Theorists differ in their explanations for this. Some stress a sociobiological analysis whereby men, relatively unencumbered by their reproductive biology, need to restrain women in order to ensure that their own expenditure of resources (whether these be energy, time, money or even blood) is in the interests of their biological progeny. Others suggest the roots lie in psychological factors such as envy of women's reproductive and nurturing capacities or the existential imperative to construct a quite literal *raison d'être* for what is, after all, a relatively trivial biological role. Whatever the arguments – and no debate about pre-literate, pre-historic cultures is likely to be resolved with existing scholarly resources – what is of interest here is the extent to which contemporary discourse reflects such traditional patriarchal concerns.

The discursive mainstream, within both 'science' and 'religion', produces clearly enunciated claims concerning the need for symbolic male authority figures to control the reproductive potency of women's bodies. Thus the mostly Protestant Christian<sup>2</sup> rightwing in the US coheres around an ideological framework which identifies key issues to do with sexuality as primary targets for (extremely well-funded) lobbying and activism. These issues are: contraception, abortion, sex education and homosexuality. The Roman Catholic Church, under the papacy of John

Paul II, has stubbornly continued to prohibit abortion, to denounce homosexuality as a sin, and to prohibit all forms of contraception other than abstinence or the 'rhythm method'.

The stated aim of activists and lobbyists for these ideologies is that no individual should engage in sexual acts outwith marriage, nor should any individual engage in any form of sexual activity that lacks reproductive potential. Such dictats apply equally to all. However, they inevitably impact differentially on women and on men. The unavailability of contraception or safe abortion, for example, may have direct and immediate consequences for women, depriving them of bodily autonomy and leading to emiseration, ill health and diminished life expectancy (Doyal 1995), whilst having no direct impact on men. Moreover, such discourses of reproductive matrimonialism construct sexuality as something innately wrong or sinful (indeed, the 'original sin'), whose only justification is the continuance of the (believing) human race:

God created *male and female* and told them to reproduce. God's natural order is for male and female to mate and reproduce. Fundamental human anatomy confirms this. But homosexuality is an unnatural abuse of reproductive mating. These are the undeniable basics.<sup>3</sup> (The Gospel Way 2003, p. 2)

... there is a fundamental difference between procreative sexuality and non-procreative sexuality. Reproduction is the only human act for which the two genders indisputably require the other. A woman can do everything in her life without a man except reproduce. Vice versa for a man. Thus, the sexuality that unites a man and a woman is unique in kind. This uniqueness, in fact, is the very basis of the religious, human and metaphysical notion that 'marriage' indeed joins two flesh as one. (United Families International 2003, p. 3)

In short, the non-reproductivity of homosex justifies its cultural, spiritual and political devaluation because the divine will for natural creation is that sex has a purpose and that purpose is the propagation of the species. These discourses of reproductive heterosex tend to produce women as non-persons, their be-ing subjugated to their reproductive function. As Katha Pollitt (2003) has pointed out, the proliferation of legal precedents to do with 'fetal rights' exemplifies this tendency.

Also important is that particularly unpleasant homophobic slur that homosexuals are not to be trusted around children and young people.

The increasing readiness of avowedly lesbian and gay people to establish families, and to parent children within those families, continues to meet a virulently homophobic response. In Britain, the right wing government of Margaret Thatcher passed the now-notorious Section 28 of the 1987 Local Government Act in an attempt to prevent such families receiving social sanction or support.

The Section (repealed in England only days ago, as I write, after 16 years on the statute book), makes it an offence for any local authority to: 'promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship' (Colvin and Hawksley 1989, p. 1). It was followed by other laws attempting to prevent lesbians and gay men from adopting or fostering children and to prohibit clinics offering fertility treatment to lesbian clients. In the US, attempts have been made in some states to prohibit individuals known to be lesbian or gay from teaching in schools or from retaining care of their children.

Of course, this produces a paranoid vicious circle. If the abjection of homosexuality is justified by its non-reproductivity it becomes necessary to ensure that it remains so. Furthermore, in order to conceal the tautological nature of such interventions, it is necessary to claim that lesbians and gay men must be denied access to children because they are intrinsically dangerous to them. As Elisabeth Young-Bruehl (1996, p. 151) concludes, in her study of the nature of homophobias:

... one ingredient of homophobia is the tendency to imagine that homosexuals seduce and molest children, despite the well-established fact that the vast majority of child abusers are heterosexual.

The whole unstable discursive edifice of reproductive heteronormativity is characterised by a familiar kind of homophobic sloganeering, for example, an early written statement from 'Save Our Children', an American evangelical Christian anti-gay campaign group, claimed that:

Homosexuals cannot reproduce – so they must recruit. And to freshen their ranks they must recruit the youth of America. (cited in Varnell 2002, p. 1)

However, such slurs tend almost exclusively to refer to gay men, routinely elided with paedophiles in homophobic rhetoric. Young-Bruehl argues that there is not one homophobia, but many homophobias, since homosexuality as a category is a taxonomic strategy to demarcate and protect heterosexuality. She claims, in an important development of the

familiar Foucauldian argument, that 'the homophobes *have* invented the homosexuals' and that 'Homophobia is an assertion of control over the category "homosexual"' (Young-Bruehl 1996, pp. 142 and 143). As with all other theorists of homophobia, Young-Bruehl admits that the social and cultural marginalisation of women in what remains a sexist social order makes it very difficult to theorise the forms which homophobia takes when applied to lesbians. 'In many cultures', she writes (1996, p. 146), '... lesbianism is much less apparent, more hidden and silent, than male homosexuality'. There have been few attempts to engage with the particular impact of reproductive heteronormativity on lesbians; Adrienne Rich's (1981) model of 'compulsory heterosexuality' comes closest but, as a wide-ranging critique of the relationship between gender and sexuality, has too broad a focus properly to theorise lesbian mothering.

It is likely that anti-lesbian homophobias will be informed by a familiar discursive construction of what might be termed anerotic maternity. A familiar object of feminist critique, this discourse of motherhood is identified by Young (2003, p. 157) as containing the promise of 'an awesome power' which, she suggests, has locked women into patriarchal relations of ordination:

For centuries identification with that power has bonded women to the patriarchal order, and while today its seductive hold on us is loosening, it still provides women a unique position with which to identify.

As Young recognises, however, this maternalistic power contains a dilemma for women, since it requires that they relinquish all claims to sexual autonomy; 'it is bought' concludes Young, 'at the cost of sexuality'. She goes on to identify the uncritical reproduction of what is, after all, an ideologically driven construct, by putatively 'scientific' disciplines such as psychology:

... patriarchal logic defines an exclusive border between motherhood and sexuality. The virgin or the whore, the pure or the impure, the nurturer or the seducer is either asexual mother or sexualised beauty, but one precludes the other.

Thus psychoanalysis, for example, regards motherhood as a *substitute for sexuality* ... Helene Deutsch, for example, identifies normal motherhood with feminine masochism; the true woman is one who gets pleasure from self-sacrifice, the abnegation of pleasure. (Young 2003, p. 157)

One of the strategic elements of anti-lesbian homophobia is to characterise lesbian identity in reductive terms, as a self entirely constructed around perverse sexual indulgence. Unlike gay men, representations of 'lesbians' circulating in the datasphere are overwhelmingly produced within heteropornography and are intended for consumption by straight men (Wilton 1996a, 1997a). It is as if the pursuit of sexual pleasure for its own sake has been so effectively evacuated from hegemonic discourses of femininity that to attribute such behaviours to lesbians is, *per se*, a homophobic slur. Within the terms of this discursive paradigm, 'lesbian mother' is, simply, an oxymoron.

How, then, do the discursive strands of reproductive heteronormativity make their mark in the sexual self-fashioning of contemporary women?

### What lesbians say about mothering

As indicated above, none of the interviewees was asked whether or not she had children. A total of 42 lesbians spoke about their children, some during the pre-interview discussion but most during the interview itself. This cannot, however, be taken to represent the number of lesbian interviewees who actually had children, as it is possible (even likely) that others simply chose not to mention their children. Indeed, it is interesting that none of the non-lesbian sample mentioned their children at all, although many did report that they had responded to social pressures to marry and have a family.

Of the lesbians who did mention their children, none reported any sense of conflict between the two facets of their identity, as lesbian and as mother. It was not, for example, the case that women reported thinking 'I cannot be a lesbian, since I am a mother and lesbians lack maternal feelings', although some participants appear to have used marriage and motherhood in an attempt to deny or escape from their attraction to other women. Charlotte (30) consciously set aside early lesbian desires in order to get married, and seems to have had strong associations between married motherhood and what, for her, was a much desired sense of normality:

Up until 14 months ago I was confused and straight. I always had [lesbian] feelings, but I wasn't having none of it...I wanted babies. I wanted to be normal, and he was a nice bloke.

Hers was, however, an unusual account. Most of the mothers in the study appear not to have drawn any association between the social

construction of motherhood as an exemplary marker of successfully achieved femininity and the homophobic construction of lesbianism as parallel marker of failed femininity.

One interviewee did recount a history of gender confusion, which seems to have haunted her, and which was inevitably bound up with anxieties about fertility:

I was supposed to be a boy in that my parents didn't want a pregnancy and, when they adjusted to the pregnancy, I was destined to be a boy ... a girl's name was not even thought of ... I was very conscious in my childhood that I was not wanted, I should have been a boy ... but, instead of it being a desire to be a boy ... it was the terror that I was a boy, even though, biologically, clearly I was a girl, and that I would wake up one morning and find that I had transmogrified into a boy ... I was terrified I may not be able to have children ... I know that at least in part the reason I had the first one was because I was terrified I couldn't and it was proof that I was really a woman. (Robbie 31)

Robbie's account is unique, in that she clearly identifies the ability to give birth as something which was, for her, desperately needed proof that she was, indeed, a woman. However, her torment and uncertainty are associated not with her lesbian identity but with her awareness that she 'should have been a boy'.

None of the other participants reported such a strongly felt conviction that having a child somehow 'proved' a femininity otherwise in doubt. There was, however, some acknowledgement that social and cultural sites of mothering are presumed to be empty of a lesbian presence. May (39), for example, comments that 'you don't expect to find a lesbian in a toddler group'. Insofar as this presumption reflects and reproduces the discursive construction of lesbians as non-mothers, such acknowledgements must be interpreted as tangential references to the potentially oxymoronic status of 'lesbian mother'.

Others described different ways in which the expansion of familial heterosexuality into all available space made the possibility of lesbian desire unavailable. Tina (43) explains how difficult she found it even to recognise desire for what it was, amid the cultural paraphernalia of heterosexual normality:

I ran the playgroup that her little boy attended; she was on the committee. We spent a lot of time together, and then I realised that

I really fancied her, and I got the impression that she was flirting with me as well. But I thought, no! This went on for months, and we both felt the same about each other, but we were too frightened to say. Up until then we were both straight, married, nice car, nice house, nice little village. Those sort of things don't happen, only in telly programmes!

Here, the presence of children is not mentioned as part of the hegemonic 'package' policing Tina's perceptions of desire. Rather, it is marriage and its traditional accoutrements, 'nice car, nice house, nice village', which she experiences as the signifiers of straightness for herself and the woman she fell in love with. The psychosocial paradigm of the reproductive matrimonial heteronorm is experienced rather differently by women who might otherwise fashion a lesbian identity for themselves at a relatively young age. Margaret (46), who had discovered a strong sexual preference for women during adolescence, felt unable to build her identity or way of life around that knowledge in social context where lesbians were marginalised and stigmatised. She therefore learned to enjoy sex with men, explaining that 'It was easier to be married and have kids. I felt that at the time; I don't feel like that now.' For her, what had appeared to be an easier option than fashioning a lesbian identity turned out to be a trap:

I divorced my husband four years ago after a long marriage – 23 years of misery. Two children, fitting in with society, doing the right thing. And then I thought, no. I just couldn't bear it any longer. I just couldn't see myself doing this until I was in my 50s and 60s and retiring with this man. No, I am not going to do it any more ... as soon as I was able to financially support myself, and my children were that much older, I called it a day.

Margaret's account also foregrounds the very real material consequences for women of the institutionalised nature of the heterosexual social order. Poverty and a still-segregated labour market make it difficult for many women to support themselves and their children outwith a relationship with a male breadwinner.

For Theresa (35), who was initially unable to name her desires as lesbian because of 'preconceived ideas ... that a lesbian was somehow connected to a gender thing, you know? If you felt you are a woman then you can't possibly be a lesbian', there was a similar sense that the world was simply not organised to have space for lesbians, or even for

female sexual pleasure:

... obviously, the world around you is to do with men, women, children. Marriage. I mean, I was brought up Italian Catholic ... I had linen bought for me for when I got married ... from the age of six, seven years old. So it's really, you're going to get married, you're going to have children. Sex was explained to me as to do with having children, so it is very hard for me to sort of connect sex with pleasure.

The welding together of sex, marriage and motherhood acts to police the sexuality of *all* women. Reductive-erotic discourses of lesbian perversion are, then, aimed not so much at lesbians themselves as at *all* women, with the intention of maintaining women's sexual and reproductive availability to men. Given that patriarchal systems of social order have tended to produce social space as radically segregated along gender lines, such strategies must be seen as the most effective way of preventing forms of female bonding which might pose a threat to male power. Where such systems traditionally relegate women to the private, domestic sphere, for example; prohibiting or restricting their access to the labour market, to political participation, and to public space generally; men are generally engaged elsewhere and must devise forms of control which continue to be effective in their absence (Dijkstra 1986, Sasson 1992). Constructing lesbianism as antagonistic to 'proper' femininity is, therefore, a necessary strategy for controlling women, rather than for controlling 'homosexuality'. As Young-Bruehl concludes, from her review of the sociological and anthropological literature on homosexualities:

A kind of rule of thumb has emerged from this research that says the more sexist and stratified a culture is, the more female homosexuality will be confined to informal or clandestine activities in the second class and segregated realms allowed to women ... By contrast, societies in which women are less constrained by their roles as wives and childbearers, and less submissive to males, are characterized by forms of female homosexuality that are more public. (Young-Bruehl 1996, p. 147)

This theory is borne out by my research, insofar as both lesbian and non-lesbian women spoke in very similar terms of the ways in which, as young adult women, they had (with more or less awareness and with more or less resistance) felt pressured into following scripted norms of

sexual behaviour that were firmly directed towards marriage, homemaking and motherhood. Tina's account of the heteronormative space bounded by her 'nice car, nice house, nice little village' is echoed by Jane (52), a heterosexual woman who recalls, 'suddenly I got to 30 and I thought, we've got a mortgage, got a house, car, job, what next?' These restrictive marital spaces are clearly experienced as suffocating by many women, whatever the gender of their lovers. Similarly, where Elizabeth (45), who is a lesbian, says, 'you grew up, you got married, you had children. That was it, there was no other option where I grew up', her words are closely echoed by (heterosexual) Sophie (50), who says, '[from] early childhood, you know, we've got the sort of connection between sex, relationships, mummies and daddies and so on'. In short, whether women remain heterosexual or become lesbian, they are aware of social pressures on them to be sexual only within the boundaries of reproductive matrimonial heterosexuality. It is perhaps the case that, post feminism, women's critical awareness of such pressures may act as a kind of cultural commons, such that lesbian mothers are able to interpret their marital dissatisfactions as female-typical rather than specifically lesbian.

### **Torn between two loves: mothers becoming lesbians**

Unlike lesbians who chose to become mothers, mothers who become lesbians are confronted with extraordinarily complex identity transitions, and with potentially damaging practical problems to do with negotiating access and care arrangements with male partners.

It was clear from the accounts of the lesbian interviewees that the interests and needs of the children were an absolute priority, to the extent that some women remained in deeply unhappy heterosexual relationships in order to protect their children or their relationship with the children. For those women, motherhood did, indeed, seem to require them to relinquish their own sexual and intimate pleasure, and their accounts are among the most distressing. Carol (55) reports being torn in two between love for her children and for her girlfriend. Initially, she tried to move out of the marital home to a nearby flat:

But it was too hard. I couldn't leave the children. My daughter was 15, my son was 12 and I lived for them. It [the flat] wasn't too far away, only five minutes in the car. I went back home every other evening and I spoke to my daughter every morning before she went to school. I went back every night to sort out the clothes and change the bed. But the guilt was too hard and I went back ... But I couldn't

stay there ... I was just so distressed. I was too distressed to go and too distressed to stay.

What emerges from an analysis of the accounts of those women who left marriages with children in order to be with a woman partner was that the behaviour and responses of their husbands was extremely significant. Thus, it was not only the emotional response of Carol's husband which made their separation so problematic, it was also the fact that he could not be trusted to take proper care of the children; she was forced to keep going back to change the bed linen and to 'sort out' the children's clothes. The domestic division of labour differentially assigns responsibility for household tasks, particularly care of the children, along a strictly gendered demarcation, and this poses tremendous problems for women trying to leave marriages where the division of labour has been very traditional. This research produced no evidence that this would be materially different if the women were leaving for another heterosexual relationship. However, it seems likely that the reaction of male partners may, indeed, be different when women leave them for female partners, and this is an area where further research is needed.

Several participants gave accounts of remaining in marriages for the sake of the children. Again, it is well established that women may do that whatever their sexual preference. However, the reductionist homophobic discourse of lesbianism seems to make it more difficult for some women to see their desires as at all valid, and certainly not so when set against the needs of their children. Elizabeth (45), managed to dismiss her lesbian desires for ten unhappy years, for the sake of her daughter:

I left my husband when I was 40, life begins and all that. So I was actually in the relationship for about ten years, and quite deliberately deciding to do nothing about it, about being lesbian at all, and my thought process was, my daughter has got to come first, she is more important than all that sort of stuff, and then it just got intolerable and so I left.

Compared to her responsibilities towards her daughter, her desires are very strongly downplayed. She refers to them as 'all that sort of stuff'. Even when she did come to leave the marriage, she seems to have felt a need to justify it in terms of a solution, not to her own unhappiness, but to the unhappiness of others around her, particularly her daughter:

...about six years ago, I just couldn't tolerate it any more ... I had depression now and again and I became depressed and I thought, I

have got to stop doing this, I can't carry on like this. It just felt like I was making everyone miserable, not just me... If I didn't get what I needed then my daughter wasn't going to get what she needed either, so it was compromising that as well, and I wasn't going to do that.

This account suggests that a particular discourse of heterosexual femininity as anchored in self-sacrifice and, particularly, in erotic self-denial, continues to have an impact on the gendered subjectivity of women and on their psychological preparedness to acknowledge and take account of their lesbian desires. It is important, of course, also to acknowledge that real relationships and deep feelings are at issue here. It is enormously painful to leave any close relationship and, for many women, simply not emotionally tolerable to leave a child. Jill (51) initially tried to leave her marriage in order to begin a new life as a lesbian, but the emotional tie to her son proved too strong:

My son... I think I've done a lot of harm to him in leaving him. I'm trying to put that right. He is the most important person in the universe to me... the only reason why I want to be with my husband is because of all our background together and because of my son. I don't think it is sexual at all. If I could live with him like a brother that would do me, but I can't do it. He wants a sexual relationship, which we still have... mostly I just lie back and think of England.

It would be inhumane to suggest that the powerful attachment and overwhelming love which many mothers feel for their children is entirely the product of discursive constructs of gender.<sup>4</sup> Rather, the emotions between mothers and children may be structured, repressed or exploited in the interests of hegemonic gender norms which interpenetrate with other hegemonic processes – such as those which maintain the political fiction of the nation state. Nevertheless, the imperatives of marital reproductivity may exert real force on women's lives. For some participants, the felt need to enact this particular gendered identity-script was expressed with extraordinary clarity. For example May (39) describes making a quite conscious decision to postpone an exploration of her lesbian potential until her children were grown:

I made the decision to think well, OK, I will be with my children until they are old enough to look after themselves and then I will find out for myself... I would have stayed, although I wouldn't have been happy, for the rest of our life. We have not been happy for at least five out of the ten years [of our marriage] I would say, but I wouldn't have

chucked it in for nothing, just to leave the kids struggling on their own without anybody.

Note that, for May, the possibility of finding out whether or not she wants to live her life as a lesbian counts as 'nothing', and leaving her children to the care of her husband is to leave them 'without anybody'. This exemplifies the dual pressures exerted by the reproductive marital heteronorm; that the care and nurture of children is the primary responsibility of the female partner and that the erotic well-being of that female partner counts for nothing. The only way in which she is enabled to break out of this gender trap is by drawing on an equally powerful discourse, that of romantic love:

It was only [the kids] that made me stay. But once we found each other, well, we couldn't stay [in our marriages] after that anyway. You can't stay with the wrong person once you have found the right person...you just follow the norm, don't you, the norm that's portrayed at you, you don't think that you are anything outside of it. I obviously didn't have any really strong feelings, or strong enough to come through.

Such notions of finding the 'right person', of experiencing 'really strong feelings' are the traditional elements of a discourse of romantic love. One of the characteristics of romantic love is that it should be irresistible, certainly powerful enough to shatter otherwise sacrosanct matrimonial bonds, so it is no surprise that May is able to draw upon it to justify her escape from the heteronorm.

The discourse of romantic love is, of course, gendered, such that women who prioritise romantic over maternal love are stigmatised. This is so for women who leave their children for a new male partner, and the additional stigma of choosing lesbian romantic love (non-reproductive and therefore perversely self-indulgent and anti-feminine) over maternal love produces powerful feelings of guilt. Nevertheless, some participants did manage to build successful lesbian identities and relationships in such circumstances.

Some women are able to exert at least a degree of choice when considering how best to meet the needs of their children and themselves. Others have little or no choice in the matter. Husbands and male partners may insist that a woman who is wondering whether or not she may be a lesbian has to make up her mind one way or another. April (45) reported, 'my husband said to me, you have got to make up your mind',

and the consequence for her was that she was forced to leave both the marriage and her daughter:

... there was no compromise. I had to leave my daughter as well. She is still living with my husband. She is happy there. She is twelve, and you can't disrupt a twelve year-old if she is happy where she is ... I just couldn't take her with me. I had £4,000 and I didn't have anywhere to live, and I didn't know what the future was going to hold, so I had to leave her where she was. And now she has settled into school and everything and, even though there is a spare room and my girlfriend would be fine about having her come to stay with us, she doesn't want to come. I can't force her.

Whilst some men actively resist their children going to live with a wife who has set up home with her female partner, others do not. Only a tiny proportion of the participants in this study ended up living separately from their young children. For the majority, who ended up forming households with their children and their lesbian partners, a fresh set of problems presented itself, as they contemplated how best to deal with bringing their children up in a deeply homophobic society.

### **Sticks and stones: the children of lesbians at home and at school**

Women who are already mothers when they embark on a lesbian life and refashion their self as 'lesbian' must engage with heterosexism and homophobia on behalf of their children, as well as of themselves. Here, it is important to recognise that the oxymoronic nature of 'lesbian mother' tends to result in a kind of double marginalisation. Women who are mothers generally find that their access to lesbian cultural space is compromised by their maternal status, just as their access to maternal cultural spaces is compromised by their lesbian status. This is not surprising; all social groups tend to police their boundaries in order to maintain the coherence necessary for group identity, and the imperatives of the reproductive heteronorm dictate that 'mother' and 'lesbian' be perceived as antagonistic, if not mutually exclusive, constructs. It is, however, painful and difficult for women who find themselves in a kind of social limbo as they attempt to negotiate and incorporate these conflictual elements into their identity.

Moreover, the potential consequences of this dual exclusion may be profound. For the one participant who had eventually returned to

heterosexuality after identifying for some years as a lesbian, pregnancy appeared to have been a significant element in that process. She found herself coercively policed into heterosexuality by the father of her child, and simultaneously rejected by her lesbian community:

I fell pregnant accidentally ... so I wasn't just moving out of gay society because I was no longer gay, but also because suddenly I was a single mother ... being a single woman with a child was taking up all of my attention anyway. And as the months progressed, I realised that I had now been excluded from the gay circles that I socialised in ... my son's father threatened to fight me for custody if he ever found out that I was involved with a woman again. (Janine 31)

Janine does not attribute her return to heterosexuality to these pressures; as far as she is concerned, this was a transition she was in the process of making before she became pregnant. Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that the pressures on her were very different from those that might be faced by an always-heterosexual woman dealing with an unintended pregnancy.

Lenna (29) also identifies pregnancy as the catalyst for her marriage to a man with whom she was not happy:

Almost from the start I knew it was not good, the relationship wasn't good, the sexual part of it was not good, the emotional interaction wasn't good ... I fell pregnant, and had major pressure on me to actually marry. He then, for the first time, proposed. Well, he didn't really propose, it was just accepted that, OK, now we will get married. There were lots of pressures from my mum at the time as well, to get married, and I really, seriously didn't want to go into the marriage.

The marriage became violent, and in the end Lenna managed to leave. The process of leaving the marriage was made more difficult, since the therapist she turned to for support was uneasy with her wish to be in a lesbian relationship:

In many ways I was really angry with the last therapist I worked with, because I think she was not truly comfortable with me wanting to be with a woman, so she tried remedying the marriage and hoping that, if we worked through the other issues we could make it work. (Lenna 29)

The 'other issues' which the therapist was trying to get Lenna to work out with her husband were not trivial:

he started physically assaulting me. I couldn't handle the fact that we were repeating with our relationship what I had had as a child, all my children seeing it and being totally freaked out by it. Us screaming at each other and being out of control. (Lenna 29)

One account is not, of course, adequate evidence for bias in the entire therapeutic profession. However, there is evidence that therapy is a profoundly heteronormative praxis (Davies 1996), which tends powerfully to promote a paradigm of the 'healthy relationship' that is unquestioningly heterosexual. Certainly, the fact that Lenna's therapist encouraged her to remain in an abusive marriage rather than explore the possibilities of a lesbian relationship suggests that neither a professional rubric of client-centredness nor concern for the well-being of Lenna's young children was sufficient to override the heteronormative imperative.

Heterosexism is institutional throughout the hegemonic bloc (albeit to a greater or lesser extent) since, until the advent of globalisation and the shift of the manufacturing industries to the export processing zones of the 'developing' world, a heterosexual division of labour was necessary to the organisation of nation state and to the accumulation of capital (Bock and James 1992, Jacobsen 1994). These larger social and economic shifts are increasingly reflected in a weakening of statutory imperatives towards heterosexuality – the recognition of lesbian, gay and transsexual rights in European human rights legislation being an example of this. There has also been a profound liberalisation of social attitudes towards minority sexualities, catalysed by the efforts of gay rights campaigning organisations such as Stonewall and OUtage, by the social and cultural impact of HIV/AIDS and by the proliferation of positive media representations of lesbian, gay and bisexual people. Such transformations at the macro-social level are, however, slow to impact on the micro-social context which exerts most influence on the daily lives of individuals.

In particular, the institutional homophobia of British schools has been notorious, underpinned as it was for 16 years by the (spurious) justification of Section 28 (Colvin and Hawksley 1988, Epstein 1994). Most of the participants who had formed lesbian households with their children were anxious about the harm that might possibly be done to those children by the homophobia of schoolfriends, teachers and the parents of friends. Others were worried that their children's exposure to

homophobic discourses of lesbianism, in the playground or through the media, would make it very difficult for them to accept their mother's new identity as a lesbian.

This is a unique dilemma. In no other circumstance does a child have to engage with a parent moving from one status-location to another in quite such a freighted way. True, a parent may become disabled or terminally ill, or may be imprisoned for some criminal act. Yet a change of sexual identity from 'heterosexual' (which is so profoundly normal as to be a non-identity) to 'lesbian' (which is so profoundly abnormal as to be freakish, monstrous) carries with it a sense of retrospective questioning which is difficult enough for adults to deal with, but which may be alarmingly undermining for a child considering its parent. Participants described decision processes around coming out to their children which were informed by anxiety as to whether the child was able to cope with the information, and whether they would be able to cope with the reaction of their peers, teachers and other family members. In fact, mothers overwhelmingly found that their children were able to cope perfectly calmly with this information (there were exceptions), and that fears about intolerable homophobia in the school playground were largely unfounded.

Such fears are, however, very real, and may coexist with a woman's conviction that she made the right decision in leaving her marriage. Catherine (40), who was assertive enough to name herself 'queer' because, 'I wanted to be quite in your face about it for myself' is convinced that lesbian co-parenting has significant advantages:

I think, just having children to share where there is two women is going to be much easier than with a bloke, who is actually a child himself usually – the ones I married were! There is more of that sharing thing.

Nevertheless, she continues to feel that, 'If I had the option I think it would be better to be the norm, for my kids.'

For other lesbian mothers, school and their children's peer group loomed large as a potential source of homophobic hostility towards themselves and their children. Helen (36) identified as bisexual during her adolescence, but married in order to have children and remained in the marriage for 17 years:

I also wanted children ... We did stay together for 17 years. I suppose it worked in the sense that it gave me stability to raise children, and

perhaps I got married in the first place because I thought it would be for life.

At the time of her interview, she was in a relationship with another woman, who has children of her own. Helen was matter-of-fact about her responsibility to protect her children from any negative consequences of her new identity as a lesbian:

Yes, I have a 15 year-old, who I think would be quite cool about it, but she's still going through a lot of problems of her own at the moment. I have a son aged 11 who I think in particular would find it terribly difficult. There's so much negativity to being gay, or there just seems to be so much homophobia at school, and they'd be having to bear the brunt of it. And my partner [has] young teenagers which is where, I believe, the research comes up time and time again with negative reactions in that age group. We don't feel ready to come out yet. Her son is only 14, he too would have a lot of problems with it.

Elements of this account might well be present in the decision-making of any parent who leaves one relationship for another. There are, however, clearly identified additional factors to do with the social stigma attached to lesbian mothering; 'negativity to being gay' and 'homophobia at school'. Other participants shared these concerns. May (39) described living in a kind of social limbo, neither closeted nor out, her ability to be open about her identity and her relationship constrained by the need to protect two sets of children, hers and her partner's:

So we are still in the area where people all knew us before and we have a lot of cold shoulder treatment from people, but they haven't actually been told anything. They are just assuming, because we haven't actually told anybody because of the children. We are concerned about them, we don't want them to get any stick from school. So, although we are out in the fact that everyone knows we are here, we are not *out*. We haven't actually openly declared that we are together, we have said that we are just sharing the house because we can't afford not to, basically, which is fairly plausible, so that's the stand we're taking ... It is a lot of pressure. It would be much easier to say well, yes, bugger off, we are together. It's just the kids really, we are trying to make their life as smooth as possible.

As well as having to keep the truth about their relationship secret in order to make life 'as smooth as possible' for children, lesbian mothers

may also have to counsel children to hide the truth from various others. This introduces a difficult element into the relationship between mother and child; not only is the child being asked to lie, but the need for the lie has been introduced into the family by reason of the mother's indulgence of her own erotic desires. Thus, the secrecy about lesbian mothering within lesbian families not only reproduces 'lesbian' as unspeakable (the love that dare not speak its name), it simultaneously contravenes the regulatory codification of proper motherhood.

For Ann (37) and George (41), whose 'blended' family includes six children, there is the additional pressure of living in a small rural community. 'When we go and stay with my friend in London', George remarks, rather wistfully, 'we go out and about there, and it's so different, because it's just common'. For them there is no such sense of ease. Coming out to the children is something they must 'brew up to', but they must if they are to have an adult relationship:

Anne: We are brewing up to telling the children

George: We are going to tell them this summer, because we have lived as a couple, but separately in separate households for three years now, and it's not practical. And why should we? We are 40 years old, and we are living like teenagers, forever talking on the phone at midnight.

Both women are, however, anxious about the possible impact on their children, and are in conflict between giving them genuine ownership of this important information and warning them to be discrete:

G: Well, we have decided what we are going to say to them. We are going to tell them that we are telling them, but we are not broadcasting it to the whole world, so it's up to them. If they want to keep it to themselves, that's fine. But if they want to tell their friends, or the whole world, that's fine too.

A: Which they won't.

G: Well, we don't know. But they need to know that if they don't tell their friends then their friends aren't going to know. Only the people that they choose to tell are going to know. Because you know what it's like at these comprehensives, they get bullied ... gay is an insult in the playground.

Here, the potential of explicitness to cause harm must be acknowledged, but this acknowledgement must be weighed against other kinds of harm which may result from requiring children to be responsible for

keeping such a substantial secret. It is clear that the need to engage with societal prejudices against lesbians (and, in particular, against lesbian mothers) and to maintain open, honest communication within the family are at odds in many lesbian-headed households with children.

### **Conclusion: mothering against the odds**

A picture emerges here of mothers obliged to engage in complex and unfamiliar kinds of emotion work in order to maintain the safety, security and well-being of their children. The imperatives of the reproductive marital heteronorm produce particular forms of anti-lesbian homophobia, but they also continue to underpin the material and cultural infrastructure of social order in the hegemonic bloc. It thus becomes very difficult for individual women to negotiate a path through what is a discursive, social and psychological maze. Moreover, a degree of secrecy is required – or felt to be required – for the well-being of the children of lesbian mothers who, after all, have to attend schools where homophobia is allowed to flourish, and to carry on their daily lives in potentially homophobic neighbourhoods. This secrecy enables the continuation of fictitious claims about lesbian motherhood as unnatural, perverse, dangerous to children and unsuccessful and this, in turn, reinforces the discursive constitution of heteronormative familiarity which makes it difficult, if not impossible, for many would-be lesbian mothers to leave unhappy heterosexual partnerships.

There is a clear role here for schools. Nicky (38) is explicit about her decision to be pro-actively open about her sexuality, despite living in a small rural community, because she believes that her openness is important, not only for her own children, but for other children in the school where she is a governor. In her experience, this honesty has resulted in her being accepted for what she is:

I must be an insider, because I have been asked if I am going to go for school governor again, so I am accepted in that people want me there ... part of my feeling is that kids need to know that lesbians and gay men are out there. They need the images, in youth clubs and stuff like that, to help them.

Here, it seems as if the sense of responsibility Nicky feels goes beyond her own children, extending to the potentially lesbian or gay children in her locality. It seems, finally, that it is by adopting self-consciously, explicitly political forms of lesbian identity that mothers may best

escape the discursive parameters which anti-lesbian homophobia throws around their families with such damaging consequences.

### **Lesbian mothers are not pretending**

In response to the offensive labelling of 'homosexuality as a pretend family relationship' in Section 28, many lesbian activists carried placards on demonstrations proclaiming 'lesbian mothers are not pretending'. I myself still have a lapel badge which says the same thing. What emerges from the accounts of lesbian mothers who took part in this research is that the identity 'mother' is so strong, the bonds between mothers and their children so powerful, that coming out as a lesbian appears to have no more than a negligible effect on either. There is certainly no sense in which discourses of marital heterosexual reproductivity act to undermine these women's sense of their entitlement to either identity (although it is reasonable to hypothesise that this might be experienced rather differently by never-heterosexual lesbians, or by lesbians who become mothers by means of donor insemination).

It is, however, clearly very challenging for women to manage the practical and emotional consequences, for themselves and their children, of leaving the marital home and establishing a new household either with a woman partner or as a single lesbian. Many of these difficulties are, of course, shared with others who leave marriages, whether or not they subsequently adopt a lesbian identity. However, societal homophobia, particularly as it might impact negatively on children, poses additional problems for this group of women.

I shall leave the final word here to Jodie (41):

I've always liked children and, just because I'm lesbian or gay, there is no reason why I should be denied them. So that's what I did.

# 8

## The Lesbian Vanishes? Notes for a New Sociology of the Erotic

Present day civilisation makes it plain ... that it does not like sexuality as a source of pleasure in its own right and is only prepared to tolerate it because there is so far no substitute for it as a means of propagating the human race.

(Sigmund Freud 1961, p. 105)

The prohibitions imposed by the law of this country are based upon the view that sexual conduct is wrong and immoral and cannot be permitted except where it is unavoidable for reproduction purposes. As such it fails to coincide with the customs and cultures of any group in our society.

(Gordon Westwood 1952, p. 164)

Freud and Westwood represent the school of thought that regards sex and sexuality as everywhere subject to unjust and unnecessary prohibition on the part of a moralistic state legislature. As such, they are among the champions of sexual liberation. Contemporary theorists of the sexual, informed by Foucault's warnings against accepting the 'repressive hypothesis' (Foucault 1976) and alerted by feminists to the tendency of sexual revolutionaries (and Foucault) to neglect gender (Jeffreys 1990), regard such accounts as anachronistic. However, both men make a dual claim which, I suggest, retains the ability to make sense of the homophobias. Both assert that the hedonistic aspects of sex are problematic to the statutory authorities, and both see reproduction as the only permissible justification for sexual activity in the eyes of those authorities.

Of course, such prohibitions do not simply act to prevent or repress certain behaviours. Rather, they contribute to the social construction of specific behaviours, acts, identities and persons as normal/abnormal,

permitted/prohibited, moral/immoral and so forth (McIntosh 1968, Radicalesbians 1970, Foucault 1976). Nor does this prohibitive juridical discourse remain static or constant. This morning (1.12.2003), as I sat down to write the final draft of this chapter, the BBC newsreader announced that, from today, it is illegal in Britain for employers to discriminate against their lesbian, gay or bisexual employees. It should be noted, however, that such rights are granted to discrete and identifiable categories of person, categorised precisely according to a presumptive sexual orientation. In short, even the most liberalising legislation will – inevitably – continue to replicate the orientationalist discourses of sexuality which attempt to contain desire within restrictive parameters in the interests of reproducing heteronormativity.

It is, of course, extremely difficult to find a position outwith hegemonic discourse from which to speak about sex, desire and gender. Thus, even the most liberal sociologists of sexuality tend, unwittingly, to reproduce the heteroerotic norm in their own work (e.g. Aries and Bejin 1985, Hawkes 1996, Schwartz and Rutter 1998, Archer and Lloyd 2002). As Liz Stanley (1999, p. 415) indicates, this is particularly the case for large-scale empirical surveys of sexual behaviour:

...such surveys operate in a context characterised by the taken-for-grantedness of what 'sex' is: everyone is assumed to know and agree about the 'what', 'when' and 'who' of sex, to the extent that the basic behaviours with which these surveys are concerned are not looked at in any detail. The gloss of 'sex' defined as 'intercourse' is more often than not used as though there can be no variant behaviour involved beneath this visible and easily investigated tip.

I have suggested elsewhere (Wilton 1995) that 'lesbian' constitutes a privileged position from which to assess and critique the operations of heteronormativity, and have issued public invitations to 'assume the lesbian position' (Farquhar and Wilton 2000, p. 131). This is a paradigmatically queer strategy, since it invites others, whatever their gender-affiliation and erotic preference, strategically to self-locate as lesbian for the purposes of counter-hegemonic critique. Here, I have tried to make use of the accounts gathered from lesbian and non-lesbian women not to 'explain lesbianism', nor to give outsiders an insight into 'the lesbian experience'. Rather, I have tried to use both sets of accounts to trouble, in Butler's sense, discourses of gender and of sex.

When Butler (1990, p. xi) asks, 'What kinds of cultural practices produce subversive discontinuity and dissonance among sex, gender and

desire and call into question their alleged relations?' she is speaking about performativities (such as drag or gender-fuck). I am, perhaps, proposing that one such performative strategy is to step into a lesbian position, eccentric to heteropolarity, and adopt a lesbian 'gaze' for the duration of the counter-hegemonic moment.

The accounts gathered here, so generously offered by the participants, may act both to make visible and to intercept the trajectories of hegemonic discourses of gender, sex and the erotic. Women's descriptions of their own experiences, and of the complex ways in which they are obliged to negotiate these discursive strands as they fashion sexed, gendered and desiring selves, may be taken as something like core-samples of heteronormativity.

### **What has 'sex' got to do with lesbians?**

Gender is sexualised and sexuality gendered within heteropolarity. There is, as Freud and Westwood both claimed (albeit in pre-poststructuralist terms) a hegemonic form of the erotic which depends not only on essentialist but on orientationalist notions of desire in order to buttress the mutually co-dependent forms of gender and of the erotic which have underpinned modernist social structure ('civilisation', in Freud and Westwood's lexicon). There is, then, a heteroerotic hegemony.

Since this hegemonic heteroerotics is produced by and in the interests of gendered relations of power that are male-supremacist if not actually patriarchal, its terms are profoundly andro-centric. Within the terms of heteroerotics, therefore, 'sex' stands in curious relation to 'woman' and to 'lesbian'. Traditional discourses of femininity have produced 'female sexuality' as being both excessive and at the same time, almost non-existent (see Hawkes 1996 and essays in Nye 1999). Thus, from within this paradigm, women who have, or who prefer, sex with other women are homophobically constructed as being at the same time purely, perversely sexual and unable to have 'real' sex or to experience 'real' desire. Such constructs are closely bonded to heteropolar gender norms, insofar as lesbians are also constructed as excessively feminine (e.g. Scruton 1986), and hence unable to be properly sexual, or as excessively and improperly masculine (e.g. LeVay 1993) and hence driven by (perverse) phallic lusts.

In a strange and ironic parallel, radical feminist political discourse makes equally powerful claims for 'lesbian' as being, at the same time, the exemplary feminist woman who 'transcends' desire and the denigrated counter-revolutionary anti-woman who treacherously 'deploys'

desire against feminism (Jeffreys 1990, 1993). Lesbians are positioned as the virgin and the whore of feminism, in disturbing discursive mimicry of the positioning of 'women' in misogynist accounts.

I would suggest that this tendency for feminist and masculinist constructs of 'lesbian' so closely to mirror one another indicates just how troublesome a presence 'lesbian' is to existing notions of gender, sex and the erotic. Indeed, since both replicate notions of 'lesbian' as *primarily sexual* (albeit from contrasting perspectives), this also suggests that the erotic *per se* remains troublesome to the politics of gender (whether hegemonic or counter-hegemonic).

### **The real thing...**

The accounts of the participants in this research suggest that there is no form of sexuality that is intrinsic to lesbian or to non-lesbian women. It is not the case that heterosexual women experience a different kind of desire than do lesbian women, nor is it the case that their sexual pleasures, behaviours or relationships are differently motivated. The two groups share concerns to do with safety, comfort, intimacy, emotional contact, communication, honesty and what might be called sexual literacy.

Neither do they differ markedly in their experiences of gender-performativity. Both groups recount tomboyish behaviour in childhood – to the extent that it becomes impossible to describe tomboyishness as a form of gender-atypicality. I have suggested that this may be one explanation for the differences that have been noticed between the 'classic' gay male account of sexual-identity formation and that of lesbians (Whisman 1996, Stein 1999) whereby gay men's sexuality is popularly supposed to be 'fixed' from an early age, whilst lesbians tend to 'find out' at a later date.

Put simply, girls are permitted to be 'tomboyish' in a way that boys are not permitted to be 'sissies'. In part this is to do with contemporary understandings of childhood as a time of exploration, experimentation and physical play – behaviours that are typified as 'childish' up to a certain age become cast as male-typical as the individual moves out of childhood. Several women – from both groups – commented on the restrictive and uncomfortable nature of 'girlie' clothing and behaviours.

This is not the only explanation, however. Boys' behaviour is more stringently scrutinised than is girls' because male sexuality, and masculine gender-performativity, are much more highly valued than the female equivalents. Women are permitted to engage in behaviours that are prohibited to boys – such as 'gender-atypical play' in childhood, or

close same-sex emotional attachments in adolescence – because it matters much less what girls do. Female persons are simply less important than are male. One consequence of this is likely to be that boys who exhibit such behaviours are made aware that this is a problem, and may be punished for it or, at least, led to believe that such behaviours are a cause for anxiety. This, in itself, may be enough to explain why so many gay men, with powerful memories of being made to feel ‘different’ from a young age, hold to essentialist and orientationalist theories, whilst lesbians, who may have had to reach adulthood before learning to acknowledge their desires, are more likely to accept at least a degree of social constructionism (Whisman 1996).

### **A trivial matter: dismissive accounts of women’s desire**

The fact that ‘male homosexuality’ is policed and stigmatised in more overt and pro-active ways than is ‘lesbianism’ has led some gay male commentators to suggest that lesbians suffer fewer of the damaging consequences of homophobia. There is one sense in which this is true, insofar as lesbians have been less likely than gay men to experience the extremes of physical violence (both criminal and juridical) – at least within the hegemonic bloc (things are somewhat different under sharia law in theocratic Moslem states). However, in another sense it merely indicates that the operations of homophobia are themselves informed by hegemonic constructs of gender, such that male sexuality is both validated and valorised – it matters what men do and who they do it with – whilst women’s is dismissed, trivialised and erased. Admittedly, it is of small comfort to those men who risk imprisonment, casual violence or even death in the pursuit of their desires to be told that such interest marks them as the sex which matters. However, to have one’s sexuality dismissed as of no importance is profoundly damaging, and means that women struggle against a kind of cultural void when piecing together a sexual identity.

Perhaps the most significant theme to emerge from this research is the extent to which women themselves are socialised to regard – even to experience – their desires and their sexuality as trivial and insignificant. Thus, women’s desire is presented to them as something organised around reproductive matrimonial heterosex. Time and time again, women from both groups described drifting into marriage because that was what you did, or because the script they were expected to follow said something like ‘get married, have children’. Just as marked was the

extent to which women were prepared to tolerate unhappy, abusive or simply disappointing marriages. In particular, they reported extremely low expectations of erotic fulfilment. Some had been warned by their mothers not to expect much in terms of sexual pleasure, others gathered, from conversations with married women friends, that failure to have orgasms, sexual boredom or lack of sexual excitement were quite 'normal' aspects of married life.

Nor was there much evidence of heterosexual desire in these accounts. The majority of participants, whether heterosexual, bisexual or lesbian, stated that they did not experience desire for male partners, nor did they find men's bodies attractive. There were exceptions – both lesbian and non-lesbian – but they were in a minority. Yet, despite this lack of desire, women continued to participate in heterosexual and in heterosexual relationships. Some were made extremely unhappy by this, and the unhappiness associated with meaningless, routinised sex has been documented around the world (Doyal 1996, Hite 2000). Others tolerated it and, of course, those who later became lesbians managed to extricate themselves from the heterosexual infrastructure altogether.

For women who had rejected heterosexuality, or who had drifted away from it when they fell in love with a woman, the sudden experience of sexual pleasure and intimacy was a joyful and amazing discovery. By no means all these women described their past experiences of heterosexual sex as disappointing *per se*. Indeed, several were at pains to stress that they had enjoyed sex with men and found it pleasurable. For these women, sex with another woman was simply *more* pleasurable than an already pleasurable heterosexual sex. As Sally (46) so memorably puts it, 'It is the gourmet experience'.

In terms of the hegemonic order of the erotic, this is profoundly significant. For women to leave the cultural, social and psychological security of heterosexuality altogether is in any case extraordinary. It is also potentially threatening to male superordination and patriarchal power. This threat is forestalled by the dual strategy of othering and pathologising 'lesbianism' through essentialist or orientationalist discourse and of trivialising female sexuality. Thus, for women categorically to state that they have deliberately entered lesbian relationships and fashioned new lesbian identities and, moreover, that they have done so because they regard their own sexual and emotional well-being as important, represents something like a point of hegemonic crisis.

Current social policy and cultural praxis in relation to lesbian desire must be seen, at least in part, as a strategic response to this hegemonic crisis of the heteroerotic. Policy-makers have begun extending long-overdue

recognition of civil rights to lesbian and gay citizens,<sup>1</sup> but such political gains lie firmly within the parameters of essentialism. On the other hand, the trivialisation of lesbian desires and sexualities within mainstream popular culture is long-standing, and this continues to play an important role in the policing of women's sexualities.

It is, in this context, interesting to note how the pop-cultural machine managed so swiftly to destroy Russian girl-pop duo tATu (an acronym for the Russian language phrase 'this girl loves that one'). Men's magazine *Maxim* exploited their appeal to heterosexual men, pornographising them as 'Hot to Trotsky' and 'Randy Ruskies' (Semel 2003), music magazine *Q* labelled them 'the nastiest pop stars ever' and even lesbian magazine *Diva* refused to engage with the possibility that they might be 'real' lesbians. Finally, uber-hetero daytime television presenters Richard and Judy condemned them, not as baby-dykes who might encourage other young women to consider the possibility of lesbian love, but for their appeal to paedophiles. The result of this extraordinary onslaught was that tATu disappeared, despite making a pretty funky album<sup>2</sup> (*200 km/hr in the Wrong Lane*) and having a number one hit single in the UK.

Yet tATu had the potential to act as role models for young women who might be fashioning a lesbian identity, or questioning their heterosexuality. Their two hit singles, 'They're Not Gonna Get Us' and 'All the Things She Said', were upfront lesbian love songs, and the accompanying videos made quite sophisticated points about lesbian romantic love and the difficulties of protecting that form of love in a homophobic society. All this was simply ignored by the media who refused to entertain for one second the possibility that Julia and Lena might be 'authentic' lesbians, scrambling instead to dig up boyfriends for the two women. This sudden interest in authenticity was, to say the least, surprising in a sector of the music industry characterised by the *inauthentic*, the ironic and the excessive. It exposes, rather powerfully, the continuing hysterical terror that women's erotic preference for each other unleashes in mainstream heterosexual culture.

## Human and civil rights in a hegemonic crisis

Human rights legislation emanating from the European Union, and the different varieties of same-sex partnership registration proposed or enacted by certain states, all assume an essentialist sexual *orientation*. Lesbians and gay men, in short, constitute a distinctive group with distinctive rights, much as do disabled people or those from minority

ethnic communities. Activists and lobbyists base their claims for human and civil rights on essentialist models (Young-Bruehl 1996).

There have, of course, been parallels to this in the women's rights movement. There is or, at least, there seems to be, a genuine dilemma for those who would, on the one hand, argue that the category of person they are advocating for (whether women or homosexuals) is socially constructed whilst, on the other hand, demanding recognition for the rights of those persons. It is a dilemma which may only be solved by appropriating a conceptual strategy from quantum physics where, for example, 'wave/particle duality' states that light is at the same time a particle and a wave. Thus, whilst recognising that the taxonomic categories which police and provoke us are contingent cultural constructs, we must, in certain contexts, behave *as if they were 'real'*.

This is not new. It was proposed by French feminist Julia Kristeva in 1982, when she claimed:

The belief that 'one is a woman' is almost as absurd and obscurantist as the belief that 'one is a man'. I say 'almost' because there are still many goals which women can achieve; freedom of abortion and contraception, day-care centres for children, equality on the job, etc. Therefore, we must use 'we are women' as an advertisement or slogan for our demands. On a deeper level, however, a woman cannot 'be'; it is something which does not even belong in the order of *being*. (Kristeva 1982, cited in Tong 1989, p. 230)

A similar, if less theorised, approach is suggested by Vera Whisman, at the conclusion of her research into some of the differences between the identity accounts of lesbians and gay men. She says (Whisman 1996, p. 121), 'Homosexuality is a nucleus around which we cluster, not an essence that we share'.

However, my analysis of the accounts given by the participants in this research – particularly the commonalities between the lesbian and the non-lesbian group – suggests that an alternative approach may be more effective. After all, the very fact that lesbians are able to prioritise their own sexual happiness exposes the extent to which this remains difficult or impossible for most of the world's women. Alongside continuing struggles against homophobia,<sup>3</sup> then, might be developed a human rights discourse that explicitly recognises (a) the inalienable right of *all* persons to bodily integrity and autonomy and (b) the inalienable right of *all* persons to free expression of their sexuality.

Such rights remain a distant, almost unimaginable, dream for the majority of women around the planet (including, as we have seen here,

many otherwise privileged women in the hegemonic bloc). In addition, they obviate any need for legislation designed to protect the vulnerable (including children) from sexual assault, exploitation or abuse, since the right to bodily integrity and autonomy is guaranteed. The free expression of sexuality, then, could not be at the expense of another; it would not be possible to treat people as objects for sexual gratification.

Importantly, for my purposes here, a rubric such as this does away with the need for reifying, orientationalist taxonomies. If all persons have such rights, there is no need for (spurious, heteronormalising) identity labels at all.

### **A matter of taste: taste matters**

It has not been my intention to propose a new theory of lesbian identity or of sexuality in this book. My argument has, however, depended on a particular theoretical approach – social constructionism rather than essentialism – and has been explicitly underpinned by feminist and queer theoretical insights. It would be disingenuous of me to claim that I have no interest in theory-building. In this concluding chapter I shall outline my understanding of same-sex desire, of what it ‘means’ and of the implications for self-fashioning. I shall not propose a ‘theory of’ anything, but I will explain what I think is lacking in existing theories of human sexuality. In particular, I will explain why I have come to the conclusion, during the course of this research, that there is no such ‘thing’ as a lesbian, a heterosexual, a gay man or a bisexual.

In short, I argue that the findings of this research serve to demonstrate the accuracy of McIntosh’s assertion that homosexuality is a social role of the same order of being as committee chairmanship or Seventh Day Adventism.

### **What good is a discourse if it don’t make sense?**

From the accounts given by the participants in this study it seems clear that discourses of inversion and of orientation, both rooted in the taxonomic paradigms of the nineteenth century, retain their hegemony. This is so, at least, insofar as women report that their own processes of self-fashioning drew on such discourses to a greater or lesser extent. However, the discursive construction of ‘lesbian’ within this essentialist paradigm was largely inadequate to the task of making sense of women’s experiences. As such, their incorporation into the project of self-fashioning was

largely negative, and women fashioned their lesbian identities in spite of, rather than in obedience to, notions of inversion and/or orientation.

Thus, for example, some women who reported experiencing sexual or romantic interest in members of their own sex at a relatively young age were unable to interpret these experiences as 'lesbian', since significant other elements of their sense of themselves did not correspond to the gender-inversion paradigm of homosexuality. In particular, those whose gender-performativity was otherwise 'feminine' tended to decide that they could not, therefore, be lesbians. In later life, when they had been able to move out of their location in heterosexuality and start a process of refashioning their sexual selves, such women were often able to draw on competing discourses – such as feminism or romantic love – in order to make sense of the lack of 'fit' of the inversion/orientation model.

For other women, orientationalist discourses of inversion were drawn upon retrospectively and used to interpret hitherto insignificant elements of their early history as meaning that they had been lesbians all along. Memories of gender-atypical play, of intense same-sex friendships in childhood and adolescence or of competence in male-gendered tasks such as routine DIY, were re-interpreted as early signs of a tendency towards lesbianism. However, the accounts of the non-lesbian sample reveal that putatively gender-atypical behaviours in childhood were at least as common for this group as they were for the lesbians. It must be concluded that gender-atypicality is, in fact, itself gender-typical for girls. As I have suggested, the differential value assigned to masculinity implies that this will not necessarily be the case for boychildren, something which is borne out by the literature, which finds that 'sissy' boys are more stigmatised than are 'tomboy' girls (Davidson 1990).

Orientalist discourses of inversion, then, whilst drawn upon by women in the fashioning of a lesbian identity, are inadequate to the task. Moreover, that inadequacy increases with the passage of time; younger women in this study tended to attach noticeably less significance to such notions than did older women, and were generally quite relaxed in describing their sexuality as to do with choice, fluidity and circumstance, and as remaining open to further change in the future. 'Lesbian', from within this more recent paradigm, seems less an identity than a statement of intent.

It seems that a different discourse, to do with the fluidity of female sexuality, both runs counter to and intersects with, discourses of orientation. The political implications of this discourse are, as I have already suggested, not necessarily positive. Given the heteronormative construct of female sexuality as reproductively driven rather than hedonistic,

of women as (if no longer actually characterised by 'sexual anaesthesia') relatively uninterested in sex, and of women's sexual well-being as trivial, it is perhaps hardly surprising that women exhibit sexual 'fluidity'. It may, nevertheless, be the case that individual women are able productively to exploit such notions to fashion a sexed and gendered self which incorporates desire and sexual agency whilst still remaining culturally legible as properly feminine.

It is not the purpose of this book to examine or explain the differences between gay men and lesbians. Nevertheless, just as it is only possible to isolate the specifically lesbian elements of lesbian experience by comparison with non-lesbian women's accounts, so it is important at least to acknowledge key differences between gay men and lesbians, in order to flag up the impact of gender on homoerotics.

Most writers on 'homosexuality' acknowledge that existing theories of orientation are premised on an exclusively male model (Stein 1999), and that almost all the research which underlies orientationalist claims has been carried out on men (Ruse 1988, LeVay 1993). Of these writers, those who have an understanding of gender suggest that the androcentrism of this research programme seriously detracts from the credibility of its claims, or even that orientationalism is fatally damaged thereby (Stein 1999). One problem with research into homosexuality carried out exclusively with gay men is that the typical (if not archetypal) male account is of 'feeling different' from a very early age, and this has almost always been interpreted as meaning that the roots of a gay male identity go back to very early childhood, if not to a perinatal or prenatal moment.

The sense that one has been gay all one's life may lead, quite understandable, to the belief that one was born gay. This subjective sense of what might be called 'homonatality' thus lends emotional support to essentialist theories. As Young-Bruehl points out, essentialist accounts have other seductions for gay people:

If homosexuality is biologically determined, then, of course, no homosexual can help being homosexual... many individual homosexuals also discovered that their parents could be much more accepting if absolved of their anxieties about having done something 'wrong' by producing a homosexual child. Unlike biologically based theories of racial and sexual inferiority, the biologically based theories of homosexuality have seemed controllable to many of their victims: the victims hope that determinism can be shown to imply only difference, not inferiority. (Young-Bruehl 1996, pp. 144–5)

Note that Young-Bruehl speaks of gay people who welcome essentialist theories as the 'victims' of such theories. This is because she clearly identifies 'biologically based theories of homosexuality' as integral to the homophobic project, namely the 'othering' of certain individuals by classifying them as homosexual, thereby producing and maintaining the privileged status of heterosexuality. She writes (*ibid.*, pp. 142–3):

Homosexuals are not a group unless they are made to be one or unless they respond to discrimination by organizing: they do not have a culture until they have been made into a sub-culture ... Homophobia is an assertion of control over the category "homosexual". Homophobes try to seize the power of definition ... The category itself – and whatever it means to the individual using it – is the main accusation: 'Faggot!' 'Dyke'!

Essentialist theories then, however much some gay people may welcome them, are a product of homophobia. As such, they represent a political and psychological trap. This is reflected in certain of the accounts given by participants in this study, inasmuch as essentialist/orientationalist beliefs about the nature of 'lesbianism' acted to impede, rather than to facilitate, their recognition of, and ability to act on, desires for intimate, sexual or romantic contact with other women. Non-lesbian participants, too, drew on essentialist notions of 'hard-wiring' or of 'chemistry' to protect their own identity as unassailably heterosexual. It is of particular note that those who did so were also those who expressed most dissatisfaction with their heterosexual relationships. In short, the pleasures and rewards of heterosexuality having proved inadequate to maintaining a heterosexual identity, they were obliged to defend themselves against the possibility of lesbian pleasures by defining such pleasures as impossible. They could then manage to appear both definitively heterosexual and not-homophobic by stating that they wished that they could be lesbians but, sadly, such a thing was not possible. The interesting question then becomes, why do some women need to defend their heterosexuality in this way, whilst others are able to explore other possibilities for pleasure and intimacy? Such a question is outwith the parameters of this research, but I suspect that the answer is to be found in the many other influences which go to shape personality, and which result in one person being courageous and another brave, one needing the approval of others, another caring far less 'what people think'. In short, I suspect that the capacity to seek happiness – particularly sexual happiness – outwith the bounds of social acceptability has to do with 'personality'<sup>4</sup> rather than what are often called 'lesbian tendencies'.

If orientationalist discourses are innately homophobic, it remains the case that some sort of discourse of lesbian desire is useful, perhaps needful, to women fashioning a sexed, gendered, desiring self (whether that self 'is' lesbian or not). At the conclusion of this research, what might such a discourse look like?

### **Music, food and love: in search of an analogy**

Sex, sexuality and desire are mercurial, evasive concepts. As Arnold Davidson (1990, p. 91) warns, 'Although we take it to be... a phenomenon of nature not falling within the domain of historical emergence, our experience of sexuality is a product of systems of knowledge and modalities of power that bear no claim to ineluctability'. In short, it is not that 'sex' is a natural, pre-social characteristic of the individual, shaped by social forces that constitute the external environment within which that individual lives. It is, rather, that 'self' is produced by the dynamic semiotic interchange between the body and its habitus. For Ian Hacking, this process is best analysed from a position he calls 'dynamic nominalism'. He summarises this theoretical approach thus:

The claim of dynamic nominalism is not that there was a kind of person who came increasingly to be recognised by bureaucrats or by students of human nature but rather that a kind of person came into being at the same time as the kind itself was being invented. In some cases, that is, our classifications and our classes conspire to emerge hand in hand, each egging the other on. (Hacking 1990, p. 79)

This assertion, which owes its origins to both feminist and Foucaultian accounts of the 'invention' of (respectively) gender and homosexuality, makes sense of a particular relationship between (certain) gay communities and essentialists in the scientific community. Recent histories of the lesbian and gay liberation movement provide fairly robust support for the notions of classification and class conspiring to egg each other on (Young-Bruehl 1996). However, my aim here has been to take this further, to try and capture the complexities of the process whereby an abstract taxonomic fiction ('classifications' in Hacking's terms) somehow produces flesh and blood persons who lay claim to its fictive sites as their proper source and locus.

I want to make some kind of sense of my findings here, firstly in terms of making explicit and legible the processes – always engendered by and implicated in hegemonic struggle – whereby words are made flesh.

Secondly, I want to find a way of facilitating debate around notions of what 'lesbian', 'gay', 'heterosexual' and 'bisexual' might mean, given that I am obliged to insist that they are in no sense 'kinds of person', although they may be states, or ways, of being. The semiotic slipperiness of the erotic makes it all but impossible to discuss such notions directly. Rather, one must develop a servicable vocabulary of metaphor or analogy.

### **Eat, drink, man, woman**

Others trying to expound non-essentialist theories of sexuality have fallen back on a range of such analogies. James Weinrich, for example, provides a witty and memorable account of *petuality* to explain the distinction between realist and social constructionist perspectives; detailing the possible explanations which either might offer for the existence of *feliphiles* (cat-lovers) and *caniphiles* (dog-lovers) (Weinrich 1990, pp. 177–81). In similar vein Edward Stein (1999) describes an imaginary country, *Zomnia*, where individuals are assigned 'sleep orientations' according to whether they tend to sleep on their back or their front. In a less extended fashion, Mary McIntosh (1969) compares homosexuality to committee chairmanship or Seventh Day Adventism in order to explain the nature of social constructionism. Hers is a beautifully simple tactic; there can be no doubt that committee chairmen are 'real', but it would be ridiculous to argue that their 'reality' was anything other than social.

However, committee chairs, imaginary lands or choice of pet are inadequate to my purpose. None of them, after all, attempts to account for the nature of sexuality. Rather, they are all attempts to explain the nature of social constructionism. The fact that they have taken sexuality as exemplary is, in fact, secondary to the central argument of each.

Having analysed the data produced by my own research, along with the theoretical and empirical work of many other, I have come to the conclusion that what we currently think of as sexual orientation is better described as sexual preference. There are problems, too, with the notion of preference. Firstly, one usually establishes a preference via a process of sampling the alternatives in order to discover which of them it is that one prefers. Secondly, as Young-Bruehl comments (1996, p. 142):

The term 'sexual preference' is ambiguous, as many people do not act on their preferences, so those preferences can be known only if the preferers know them and make them known. (There are, that is,

‘psychological homosexuals’ – those in whom homoerotic desires and fantasies preponderate – who are heterosexual in object choice, and may not even be conscious of their homosexuality).

This insight implies a further problem, that of the individual whose ‘preference’ may be for acts or for specifically gendered partners but who is repulsed by that preference. In short, the archetypal homophobe, as described by Young-Bruehl (1996, p. 143) thus:

In other words, homophobes hate acts that they themselves can, and usually do, engage in, so, to repudiate these acts they must assign them clearly to another category of people. The category is all that stands between them and those acts.

It is, I suggest, possible to get around the problems posed by the notion of ‘preference’ by replacing it with ‘taste’. Within this paradigm, the gender of one’s partner must be seen as one among many other variables which go to make up an individual’s erotic tastes. Please do not misunderstand the implications of this. I am emphatically ‘not’ claiming that, as a matter of taste, our choice of sexual partner is as trivial as our taste in soft furnishings or nail-varnish. The analogy I will use here is food, which seems to me to have much in common with sex<sup>5</sup>.

Like sex, food is essential to the survival of the species although, in despite of the World Health Organisation’s mantra of sexual health and of currently authoritative claims that good sex is necessary to individual well-being, I do not believe that sex is like food in being essential to individual survival.

Like sex, food is the subject of a complex variety of social and cultural mores; taboos, prohibitions, exhortations and rituals coalesce around both. Both are intimately bound up with social and cultural habitus, both are implicated in the social structuration of families, communities, ethnicities and nation states. There are dominant and counter-cultural forms of food, just as there are of sex. Food is inextricably geopolitical – in terms of its association with global capitalism, local cultures and colonialism – and so is sex. Importantly, food is implicated in the regimes of ordination which produce and police gender – in terms of its production, its consumption and rituals to do with both – and so is sex.

Let us consider, then, the development of food preferences. Firstly, it is clear that habitus – perhaps especially religion – may not be severed from food preferences. For example, an individual who is brought up to be an observant Jew or Moslem is highly likely to find the thought of

eating pork repugnant. Pig meat is, biologically speaking, perfectly good food for humans. It is not poisonous, not intrinsically unpleasant in taste, texture or aroma, and many millions of people enjoy eating it. Yet, for many Moslems or Jews, the thought that they might have eaten it unknowingly would be enough to make them feel physically nauseated or even to vomit. It would, however, be simply absurd to suggest that this response (powerful, physiological) might be due to a genetic or other biological characteristic. There are, after all, non-observant Jews and Moslems for whom the consumption of pork products is no longer an issue. Indeed, some may deliberately choose to cultivate a taste for such foods, precisely as a sign or marker of their having achieved cultural distance from the religious teachings of their community of origin.

In much the same way, religious and social strictures against homosexuality are likely to give rise to profound feelings of revulsion or disgust in response to the thought of engaging in same-sex activities. Although there is nothing intrinsically damaging or harmful to human health about such behaviours, those brought up to believe that they are disgusting may well feel physically sick at the thought of kissing or caressing someone of their own sex.

Notions of what is 'good to eat' are also intimately linked to a person's originary environment. People in one part of the world may consume with relish things which those brought up elsewhere would have difficulty in recognising as food at all. Termites, grubs, locusts, oysters, snails, fermented mare's milk, horse or dogmeat are all foods which I would be unable to eat unless faced with starvation. If I had to sit next to someone tucking in to dogmeat, I would experience strong revulsion, a sense of 'how could you?'. Yet all these are commonly eaten by millions, and are nourishing, 'good' foodstuffs for human beings.

This association of culinary taste with upbringing also has its parallel in sexuality. The anthropological and historical study of sexual mores demonstrates that behaviours regarded as perfectly acceptable or even laudable in some cultures may be seen as contaminating, sinful, unlucky, foolish or taboo in others. In Samoa, for example, families regard their fa'afafine members as particularly valuable members of the community, since they are able to carry out the kinds of task traditionally assigned to both genders. This is in stark contrast to Britain, where a young man who exhibits effeminacy is likely to be regarded as a source of shame to his family, and where young lesbians or gay men are routinely insulted, abused, assaulted or rejected by their families.

As well as the food tastes instilled in us by our upbringing, we may adopt new tastes later in life for a variety of reasons. Some may be political. For

example, many people become vegetarians because of concerns about animal welfare or the environment, yet such concerns may eventually lead to real revulsion at the thought of eating meat. Other such changes may be due simply to our exposure, during the life-course, to a wider variety of foodstuffs. As I grew up in Cornwall in the 1950s, for example, I never saw avocados, pasta, peppers, yoghurt, satsumas, mangoes, lychees – the list would have to contain hundreds of items – yet I now happily eat all of them.

Similarly, some people (particularly feminist-identified women) may adopt a gay or (more likely) lesbian identity for political reasons. The doctrine of political lesbianism had nothing whatsoever to do with erotic pleasure or sexual preference. Rather, it stated that sexual withdrawal from men and forging strong bonds between women, were necessary strategies for achieving women's liberation. A woman who adopts a lesbian identity for political reasons has much in common with a vegetarian whose rejection of meat-eating has nothing to do with dislike of meat, but expresses political convictions to do with global political economy, animal welfare, environmental issues and so forth. It must be said, too, that lesbians were as invisible as avocados in the Cornwall of my childhood, and that the absence of an erotic possibility functions, in the same way as the absence of specific foodstuffs, to restrict choice! This is, of course, precisely the function and purpose of the phenomenon known as 'lesbian invisibility', and of the trivialisation of lesbian desire which I have identified here.

Taste, then, in sex as in food, is something which develops through the life course. It is profoundly shaped by habitus, and its enactment is structured by ritual and in response to legislative and socio-cultural norms as much as by personal 'preference'. It may be totally inexplicable; I am as unable to explain why I loathe curry, apricots and anchovies as I am to justify my love of coriander, prawn crackers and sweet potato. The fact that these food preferences are deeply felt and that they were an immediate response to the foods in question (rather than learned), does not mean that they are genetic, hormonal or neuroanatomical in origin. By inference, neither does the inexplicable, deeply felt and immediate nature of some people's sexual preferences mean that these are genetic, hormonal or neuroanatomical either.

Where sexual agency is made possible by habitus, it is demonstrably the case that some individuals enjoy sex with women more than they do with men, that the opposite is true for others, and that yet others enjoy sex equally with both. It is possible, effective, and perfectly rational, to frame this in a structure which departs significantly from the

homo/hetero/bisexual rubric whilst continuing to present an account which reflects the variety of desire. There is no reason why we should not propose that, in the absence of reproductive intent, to enjoy sex with both women and men is the shared potential of all. After all, Freud himself concluded that:

... the exclusive sexual interest felt by men for women [or women for men] is also a problem that needs elucidating, and is not a self-evident fact based upon an attraction that is ultimately of a chemical nature. (Freud 1915, cited in Young-Bruehl 1996, p. 140)

That being so, we might speak of an exclusive attraction to women regardless of the sex of the person experiencing the attraction as 'gynophilic', and an exclusive attraction to men as 'androphilic'. Thus, an androphile would be any woman or man attracted exclusively to men, and any woman or man attracted exclusively to women would be a gynophile. That this is not so suggests that gender, rather than sexual taste, is the primary organisational imperative of both the homo/heterosexual binary and of the homophobia which it engenders and which gave rise to it in the first place.

To begin to conceptualise sexual 'preference' in terms of taste, then, is to undo the interdependency of gender and the erotic which underpins the hegemony of the patriarchal heteroerotic order. Moreover, as we have seen, the notion of taste functions quite effectively to incorporate all the complexities of the erotic; its social, cultural, political and psychological densities and complications.

### **Towards a politics of 'taste'**

It may be argued, probably with particular vigour by lesbian feminists or traditional assimilationist gays, that one cannot organise resistance to oppression around the notion of 'taste'. Such pessimism is, I think, mistaken. Indeed, existing discourses of human and civil rights are probably better able to incorporate issues to do with sexuality if those are framed in terms of taste than if they are essentialised. For example, it would clearly be an abuse of human rights to pass legislation forcing observant Jews or vegetarians to eat bacon and there is no reason why laws that force people to have only the kinds of sex which contravene their political convictions or personal tastes should not come to be seen as equally abusive.

## Conclusion

I find it hard to imagine that the most dyed-in-the-wool essentialist could continue to assert, in response to the accounts of participants in this research, that there is such a thing as 'lesbianism' and that it is a fixed characteristic of certain individuals. There is, however, little doubt that discourses of essentialism continue to be drawn upon by women who wish to make sense of their own sexual tastes and experiences. The normative status of heterosexuality means that few heterosexual women will feel this need, something demonstrated by the confusion and bafflement expressed by the first few heterosexual women asked by me to name their sexual orientation.

For lesbians, however, all of whom must, at whatever time in their life course, undertake the work of refashioning their identity as sexed, gendered and desiring agents, essentialism must be engaged with. I have not used the data collected via the short questionnaire in this book, for reasons outlined in my account of methodology. I will note, here, however, that out of 136 women who returned completed questionnaires, 25 agreed that they were 'born lesbian', 110 disagreed with that statement and 1 was undecided. This is complicated by the fact that, when asked whether they had chosen the identity 'lesbian', only 39 said yes, whilst 97 said no.

The interviews suggest that women find essentialist notions unconvincing, and that they make some women very angry indeed. Louise (32) said, 'I think all those sorts of statements tend to annoy me, because they just don't seem to fit', whilst Grace (47) said, 'I don't believe them for a minute! I really can't engage with them because I think sexuality isn't an either/or.' Janine (31) describes genetic theories as 'absolute rubbish ... I don't believe that I was born gay ... I don't believe that we're gay or straight'. However, essentialist claims come with the whole weight of the scientific establishment behind them, and many women who may not intuitively feel that they are right nevertheless remain uneasy. Jill (52) concludes:

I think it is probably something I was born with, although I don't know what I should have been, there's no-one else in the family or anything like that. I don't think it can be in your genes. I don't know where it is, to be honest. I suppose it's hormonal. I don't know.

I want to reiterate here that it is not my intention to demolish essentialist theories of sexual orientation, sitting ducks though they may be (Stein 1999). It is, however, important to assess the impact of such theories on women's ability to exert sexual agency, to recognise and acknowledge

their desires, and to fashion coherent and functional selves. From the evidence of these accounts, orientationalist accounts are the opposite of useful. Indeed, they function quite powerfully, on an individual as on a societal level, to impede and hamper women's sexual autonomy. I want, therefore, to say unequivocally that these are bad theories, in the sense of being damaging and unethical, as well as being bad science.

I want to leave the final words in this book to two voices. The first, Sigmund Freud, offers an account of human sexuality that, although by now very familiar, does not appear to have knocked essentialism off course in the way that it perhaps should have done. That even Freud, the exemplary sexpert, was unable to do this is convincing testimony to the depths of anxiety provoked by the erotic. The second, and final, voice is that of Virginia (44), a previously heterosexual lesbian participant in this research, whose words suggest an altogether different possibility for desire.

By studying sexual excitations other than those that are manifestly displayed, [psychoanalysis] has found that all human beings are capable of making a homo-sexual object choice and have in fact made one in their subconscious... psychoanalysis considers that the choice of an object independently of its sex – freedom to range equally over male and female objects – as it is found in childhood, in primitive states of society and early periods of history, is the original basis from which, as a result of a restriction in one direction or the other, both the normal and inverted types develop... Thus from the point of view of psychoanalysis the exclusive sexual interest felt by men for women is also a problem which needs elucidating and is not a self evident fact based on an attraction which is ultimately of a chemical nature. (Freud 1986, pp. 56–7)

Looking and thinking about my own story and the accidents in my life which have allowed me to move away from the drabness of heterosexuality. I have loved men and I have never, honestly, felt oppressed by men. But when you have lived your life in black and white, which is how many people have, living it in colour is difficult to describe... You look at other women in their close friendships, you look at women on the bus, on the street, you look at women in all sorts of different situations and settings and, when they look into the eyes of their close friend, they are in love and they just don't know it. I can see, in those women's everyday close friendships a love in their eyes, and having that love is not that different from what I feel.

# Appendix: Research Instruments

## The questionnaire

This short questionnaire was intended as a pilot, and published alongside an article describing the research in the lesbian magazine *Diva*. I have not used any of the data captured by means of the questionnaire in this book, for reasons outlined in the chapter on methodology. However, since it was the means by which the majority of participants were recruited, I present it here.

## List of research participants

This is a full list of all participants in the research, identified by chosen pseudonym, age at time of interview and the occupation they gave. It is divided up according to the different stages in the research process, as outlined in the methodology chapter.

### Pilot study (before publication of *Diva* article)

1	Sally	46	teacher
2	Kitt	44	unemployed counsellor
3	Lilly	45	voluntary organisation co-ordinator (paid)
4	Dilly	42	psychotherapist
5	Grace	47	university lecturer
6	Gala	45	university lecturer
7	Claire	24	researcher
8	Nicky	37	social worker (SA)
9	Helen	38	counsellor/psychiatric nurse (SA)
10	Janine	31	broker (SA)
11	Lenna	29	camera assistant/writer (SA)
12	Jade	49	research fellow
13	Kate	47	head of English at a private school
14	Simon	33	HIV policy officer/gay activist
15	Fiona	35	artist

### Self-identified lesbians recruited through *Diva*:

17	Pippa	49	watercolourist
18	Paula	40	freelance trainer
19	Karla	26	unemployed/student/performing arts
20	Louise	32	tax inspector

21	Charlotte	30	unemployed youth worker
22	Kerry	32	sales manager
23	Katie	26	chiroprapist
24	Lee	32	youth worker
25	Vikki	45	team leader, clinical trials packaging
25	Jenny	48	travel agent
26	Ann	37	swimming instructor
26	George	41	swimming instructor (business partners)
27	Anna	35	joiner
28	Claire	46	lawyer (unemployed) M2F
29	Catherine	40	interior designer
30	Margaret	55	violin teacher
31	Theresa	35	business studies student
32	Eve	42	administration manager
33	Louise	38	teacher
33	Adie	29	teacher
34	Liz	42	administrator
35	Claire	39	chartered accountant
36	Sue	45	student and mother
37	Kate	26	student midwife
38	Jodie	41	security/porter at university
39	Lesley	30	mother of five
40	Hilary	37	theology lecturer
41	Kaz	34	mother/disabled
43	Michelle	22	receptionist/law student
44	Jane	53	foster carer
45	Florence	44	senior psychiatric nurse and homoeopath
46	Elizabeth	45	local government training officer
47	Kerry	34	theatre designer
48	May	39	library assistant/catering assistant
49	Charis	55	community care assistant
50	April	45	telesales rep
51	Zara	39	SRN neonatal intensive care
52	Virginia	44	university lecturer
53	Nicky	38	parent/volunteer at Women's Aid/OU student
54	Katie	23	nurse/library assistant/student
55	Hannah	26	PhD student
56	Suzanne	37	mum/gay switchboard volunteer
57	Louise	33	journalist
58	Julie	35	community psychiatric nurse
59	Jill	51	secretary
60	Helen	36	therapist
61	Toni	23	programmer
62	Barbara	47	PR consultant

63	Barbara	49	housewife/voluntary worker/writer
64	Sue	44	retail pharmacist
65	Karen	23	student
66	Jennie	29	PhD student/motorcyclist
67	Jodie	50	teacher/therapist
68	Sarah	24	assistant facilities manager DSS office
69	Carol	55	retired postmistress
70	Michelle	30	student (office technology)
71	Margaret	46	staff nurse
72	Marie	28	assistant manager in posh shop
73	Tina	43	sales manager
74	Maureen	34	civil servant
75	Robbie	48	adult education/university teaching fellow
76	Sue	50	voluntary sector trainer
77	Ruth	58	writer/teacher

### **Heterosexual participants (final stage)**

1	Elizabeth	46	chronic sick/catering
2	Mary	54	housekeeper/carer
3	Desire	26	actor/director (telesales)
4	Georgina	21	student
5	Maureen	43	health care assistant
6	Chris	40	home care manager/yoga teacher
7	Sarah	27	supervisor/researcher
8	Sue	40	nurse
9	Catherine	42	university administrator
10	Linda	51	domestic
11	Fiona	41	health care assistant/hotel management
12	Sue	47	social worker
13	Donna	37	no occupation given
14	Angela	39	learning adviser
15	Sophie	50	teacher
16	Linda	45	teacher
17	Jane	52	teacher

## AND WHAT ABOUT YOU?

What about you, gentle reader? Has your sexuality changed during the course of your life, or has it remained constant? It would be very helpful to me if you could let me know. So please (yes, I'm begging!) spend a few minutes answering the questions below and send the form to: Tasmin Wilton, School of Health Sciences, University of the West of England, Glenside Campus, Bristol, BS16 2DD. The form is designed to protect your anonymity, and if you don't like a particular question, don't answer it. Use a photocopy if you don't want to mess up your copy of *Diva*. If you'd like to be interviewed, drop me a line and I'll get in touch. Thanks!

### 1. About You:

Age: ..... Occupation: ..... Gender: .....

Where do you live? ..... Ethnicity: .....

### 2. About your history:

What word do you prefer to use to describe your sexual identity?

lesbian       gay       dyke       bisexual       homosexual

other (please state): .....

Please say why: .....

### 3. Which of these statements applies to you? (Please tick)

"My sexuality has remained constant." <input type="checkbox"/>	"I am sure that I was born this way and can't change." <input type="checkbox"/>
"My sexuality has definitely changed." <input type="checkbox"/>	"I could change, but I don't want to." <input type="checkbox"/>
"I have always been a lesbian, but social pressures pushed me into a heterosexual lifestyle." <input type="checkbox"/>	"I made a choice to be the way I am." <input type="checkbox"/>

### 4. How important are the following in your sexual relationships? (Please rank from 1–5)

	Example	Your answer
Desire	2	
Intimacy	4	
Sexual pleasure	1	
Equality with your partner	3	
Communication	5	

# Notes

## 1 Of Models and Muddles: Disorientating Theories of Sexuality

1. Particularly Lambeth Palace, seat of the Archbishop of Canterbury, as the Church of England schisms over the ordination of an openly gay bishop in the United States.
2. Lyrics from 'Where I End and You Begin/The Sky's Falling In' from the Radiohead album 'Hail to the Thief' (2003: EMI)
3. Please note the qualifiers 'may be' and 'relatively' at work here!
4. As, I am sure, social-scientific accounts appear to natural scientists. One important difference being that social scientists are obliged to engage with natural scientific accounts, whereas the reverse is not the case.
5. He is also, of course, leaning heavily on his insider status as gay man speaking to a (presumptively) non-gay audience. I think this makes his unsubstantiated claims still more offensive.

## 2 Declaration of Self-Interest: Epistemological and Methodological Conundrums

1. Other than insofar as we may shift from a natally to an artefactually 'sexed' body via sex reassignment surgery.
2. Of course the social sciences have developed a battery of research methods carefully designed to take account of the distorting effects of everything decried by Lewontin. But, in any case, he fails to grasp the point that self-presentation and the fictions which this entails is recognised within the social sciences as the only possible object of scrutiny. In this, the social scientific approach is somewhat more sophisticated than that of natural scientists who still believe in a pre-existing natural 'reality' of human life.
3. I have long been intrigued by the routine claim that Money represents the school of thought which claims that 'nurture' inevitably triumphs over 'nature' in the development of human characteristics such as gender. In fact, if Colapinto is to be believed, Money's methods were brutal in the extreme. Not only did he use radical and repeated surgeries and powerful drugs to reshape the bodies of the infants whose gender he claimed to have successfully re-routed, he also seems to have routinely bullied and coerced their parents and to have bullied and sexually abused his young patients. The fact that such a paradigmatically masculinist wielding of power can lay claim to the equally paradigmatically feminine term 'nurture' is an interesting discursive anomaly.
4. Although, given the increasing uptake amongst men of complex grooming and sartorial practices previously held to be quintessentially 'feminine', the construction of non-narcissistic behaviours as paradigmatically masculine appears anachronistic.

## 4 Telling the Difference: Desire, Safety and Sameness

1. This may, of course, be problematic for men as well as for women. This is not my theme here, but interested readers are referred to Richard Herring's fascinating book *Talking Cock* (2003) for a wealth of information.

## 7 Your Mum's an Oxymoron: Sexuality and Reproductivity

1. It is both ironic and worthy of exploration that Comte's vision is so close to similar ideas proposed by some feminists during the early days of the second wave of the women's movement.
2. The other Abrahamic religions, Islam and Judaism, are similar to Christianity in that they contain both relatively liberal and profoundly illiberal, fundamentalist strands. Since both are minority religions within the hegemonic bloc, I here concentrate on Christianity.
3. This is not the place to counter such arguments, but I can't resist pointing out that 'fundamental human anatomy' situates the erotically sensitive prostate gland inside the male rectum, and the clitoris outside the vagina. In short, if God was designing us to achieve maximum sexual pleasure from penis-in-vagina intercourse, his design skills appear a bit amateurish.
4. As a mother myself, I too would say that my son is the most important person in my universe, and that my love for him is of an entirely different order than any of the other varieties of love in my life.

## 8 The Lesbian Vanishes? Notes for a New Sociology of the Erotic

1. I am not including 'bisexual' here, since it is on account of their same-sex relationships that bisexual people are disadvantaged. Similarly, transsexuals face a qualitatively distinct set of social and political problems. This does not mean that I regard these other groups as unimportant, simply that my argument here is specific.
2. Although I am a Radiohead and Nine Inch Nails fan myself.
3. I want to stress this, as does Kristeva in her proposals for women's liberation. It is, of course, the case that those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual etc. require protection from abuse and discrimination. Nevertheless, whilst we must continue to engage with homophobes 'on their own terms', it is, I think, vital that we simultaneously chip away at the cognitive and discursive foundations of gender and of orientationalism.
4. ... whatever that is! Yes, I know this may seem like something of a cop-out, but there is a real difference between claiming that something is an innate characteristic and claiming that it is part of 'personality' which, I suggest, is generally believed to develop over time.
5. I have not referred to the work of Bourdieu on taste, although it is relevant, since I am interested here in analogy rather than theory (Bourdieu 1979).

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