

## ARTICLES

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### Sex, Organs and Audiotape: A Discourse Analytic Approach to Talking About Heterosexual Sex and Relationships

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*This article examines talk about sex and heterosexual relationships, based on a study of 12 women and 13 men who participated in semi-structured interviews, in order to identify the 'discourses' of sexuality which inform talk about heterosexual sex. One theme in talk about heterosexuality can be understood through the 'pseudo-reciprocal gift discourse': women are described as 'giving' themselves to men, whereas men 'give' women orgasms, reproducing dominant norms of male activity and female passivity, — and thereby reinforcing the oppression of women. Men talk more graphically about sex than women — we suggest the resources of meaning concerning sex suit men's interests rather than women's, and reflect men's dominance in a (hetero)sexist society.*

#### INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE

This article explores how people talk about heterosexual relationships and sexuality. It concentrates on this topic for several reasons. First, the largely North American literature concerned with interpersonal attraction and 'dating behaviour' is unsatisfactory. For example, the currently influential 'equity theory' (Hatfield and Traupmann, 1981; Walster et al., 1978) treats relationships as sites where people consider costs and rewards for themselves and costs and rewards for the other person. Such theorizing does not address the possibility that the dominant ways of making sense of relationships are embedded in the heterosexual culture. Participating in such relationships, therefore, involves lived experience of this heterosexual culture rather than simply balancing costs and benefits. The best way to investigate this possibility, it seems, is to examine talk about relationships.

Second, the literature of the women's movement is concerned about

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heterosexual relations being a site of inequality, with women being disempowered in heterosexual sex (Hite, 1977). Heterosexuality, and in particular intercourse, is explicitly identified as a primary part of women's oppression (Dworkin, 1987). Indeed, it is often argued that heterosexual relationships are incompatible with women's interests and are imposed by a world which acts in men's interests, such that heterosexuality becomes 'mandatory' or 'compulsory' for women (Dworkin, 1987; Rich, 1980). The aim of this article, then, is to see how these inequalities might emerge in people's talk about heterosexual sex and relationships. Rich (1980) argues that women's sexual identity is not freely chosen but superimposed upon them. Institutionalized heterosexuality helps to maintain male dominance and ensures that women cannot easily define their own sexuality, not least because in many cases women are dependent on men economically.

Third, if women can address the power imbalances in sexuality, make explicit and analyse the male-serving assumptions about sex and women's role in it, then this is a positive step towards overcoming male dominance in this and other aspects of society.

A fourth inspiration for this study is a belief that sex is not simply a natural fact. Sex is a social construction, bound up with the economic, social and political structures of the world in which we live. The things people find attractive, or erotic or revolting vary from time to time and culture to culture. Even if we take a specific act like heterosexual intercourse, it seems that the social and personal meanings attached to this act in terms of sexual identity and sexual community have varied historically (Vance, 1983). The body and its actions are understood according to prevailing codes of meaning.

Finally, the study seeks to extend Hollway's (1984, 1989) analysis of talk about heterosexual relationships. Hollway proposes that there are 'discourses' within which people position themselves to make sense of and to talk about their sexuality. The use of the term 'discourse' in this article follows the usage established by Henriques et al., (1984: 105) where a discourse is a 'regulated system of statements'. However, a discourse is not necessarily written down in any one place; its level of articulation is social, rather in the way that ideologies or social representations are supposed not to be coextensive with any one person's mental contents or contained in their entirety in any single text. A discourse in this sense is shared by a social group of speakers and actors. It involves more than language, indeed it also organizes meaning and action. Our concern was to expand Hollway's analysis to include more of the texture and talk of participants' experiences of relationships and sexuality, and to show how this is embedded in larger sexist and heterosexist social representations or ideologies.

#### HOLLWAY'S APPROACH

Hollway (1984, 1989) provides one of the most comprehensive and influential attempts to analyse talk about relationships and heterosexuality. She argues that

our roles arise as a result of the broader, socially articulated discourses in which we are embedded. These discourses provide us with subject positions from which to speak. From her analysis of men and women talking about sex, she identified three 'discourses' which inform people's talk and which provide gender-differentiated subject positions. The discourses are: the 'male sex drive discourse'; the 'have/hold discourse'; and the 'permissive discourse'. Hollway's (1984: 230) use of the term 'discourse' shifts the emphasis away from Foucault's (e.g. Foucault, 1979) explicitly historical use of the concept towards an approach which is located around the meaning derived from language (written or spoken) which makes available different positions and powers for men and women.

*The Male Sex-drive Discourse.* This proposes that men are driven by biological necessity to seek out heterosexual sex. It relies on the claim that sex (for men at least) is a natural need and is not mediated socially. It positions men as pursuers of women, or as observers who critically evaluate women's bodies. In this discourse women's sexuality is sometimes seen as a lack, or is seen to be governed more by the need to reproduce than by the need for sex. Women are seen as the object of the male sex drive discourse, whereas men maintain the dominant position of being the subject.

*The Have/Hold Discourse.* Although not centrally concerned with sex, this discourse is closely linked with ideas of monogamy, partnership and family life. It proposes that sex should take place within the context of a lasting relationship where the man is the head of the family and is responsible for his wife and children. These principles are embedded in the Anglican Church's vows, hence the term 'have/hold' discourse. In principle this discourse applies to both men and women, but in practice it applies more stringently to women, to the extent that it confers different positions for men and women in society. For example, during the 1950s it was commonly invoked to produce the required norms of conduct in women, encouraging them away from their jobs and back into the home so that demobilized servicemen could return to both a 'traditional wife' and a job.

According to the have/hold discourse, women's sexuality is a lack, somehow compensated for by the emphasis on her relationship with husband and children. Women are thus designated as the subject of this discourse, in that they must be married or at least conducting a relationship in order to enter a sexual relationship. Men, on the other hand, are the object of the discourse, since it is their acquisition as husbands and lovers which is required before a sexual relationship is allowed to exist for a woman.

*The Permissive Discourse.* In this discourse the principle of monogamy is challenged — it is considered the right of both men and women to express their sexuality in any way they choose. In assuming that sexuality is natural and

should not be repressed, the permissive discourse is closely allied to the male sex drive discourse; however, it differs from the male sex drive discourse in that it applies the same assumptions to both men and women. Despite this, the permissive discourse has limitations for the position of women, as Campbell (1980: 1–2) indicates:

the permissive era permitted sex for women too. What it did not do was defend women against the differential aspects of permissiveness on men and women. . . . It was about the affirmation of young men's sexuality and promiscuity; it was indiscriminate and its object was indeterminate (so long as she was a woman). The very affirmation of sexuality was a celebration of masculine sexuality.

As Jeffreys (1990b: 22) points out, being included in sexuality, even having orgasms, is not necessarily pleasurable for women, nor does it mean that the ancient taboos or restrictions on women have been subverted or eroded.

It is this framework of discourses we draw upon and extend in the latter part of the article. Here, we simply make a number of points about Hollway's approach. First, she proposes that discourses make available positions for subjects to take up in relation to other people. Women and men are placed in relation to each other through the meanings which a particular discourse makes available. Second, because the traditional discourses surrounding sexuality are gender differentiated, the taking up of subject and object positions is not equally available to men and women. For example, the power of men over women is an important part of heterosexual eroticism (Jeffreys, 1990a: 2; Kitzinger, 1991: 307). However, once we imagine the man who yields and submits to the woman's aggressive pursuit we move outside the realm of everyday heterosexuality and into the more restricted realm of male fantasies of dominant women. Third, practices and meanings have histories developed through their role in human social life. People's lives are not the product of a single discourse but of many, which may be adopted almost simultaneously, in the same conversation, or over a longer time span.

The aims of this article in the following sections are (1) to discuss the role of the researcher in interviews of the kind we have conducted; (2) to elaborate on a fourth discourse for talking about heterosexual sex, i.e. in the manner of the 'pseudo-reciprocal gift discourse'; and (3) to consider some of the differences between women and men which are apparent in our data.

## METHOD

This article is based on discussions with 25 people, of whom 15 were undergraduate students, conducted as part of undergraduate projects at Aston University. There were 12 female interviewees and 13 males. The male interviewer

TABLE 1  
Participants

Participant number	Sex	Age	Occupation	Location of interview	Interviewer's sex
1	F	21	PhD student	Study/bedroom	F
2	F	22	Graduate employment	Study/bedroom	F
3	M	28	PhD student	Study/bedroom	F
4	M	20	Unemployed	Study/bedroom	M
5	M	21	Graduate law student	Study/bedroom	M
6	F	20	Student	Department	M
7	F	30	Student	Department	M
8	M	20	Student	Study/bedroom	M
9	F	20	Student	Study/bedroom	F
10	F	22	Student	Study/bedroom	F
11	F	24	Student	Study/bedroom	F
12	F	21	Student	Study/bedroom	M
13	M	22	Student	Study/bedroom	M
14	M	21	Unemployed	Study/bedroom	M
15	M	23	Researcher	Department	M
16	M	21	Student	Department	M
17	F	21	Student	Study/bedroom	F
18	M	26	PhD student	Study/bedroom	F
19	M	27	Unemployed	Study/bedroom	F
20	F	20	Student	Study/bedroom	M
21	M	23	Student	Study/bedroom	F
22	M	23	Student	Study/bedroom	M
23	M	30	Civil servant	Study/bedroom	M
24	F	25	Student	Study/bedroom	F
25	F	22	Student	Study/bedroom	F

(Wilson) interviewed 9 men and 4 women, whereas the female interviewer (Gilfoyle) interviewed 4 men and 8 women. It was felt that in dealing with a subject like heterosexual sex and relationships there is some difficulty in talking freely. Therefore, like Hollway (1984, 1989), the subjects were people presumed likely to talk freely about the subject material and to be relaxed and self-disclosing. A list of the participants is provided in Table 1. All but two were white. Most had middle-class cultural experience, either at home or at college, even though they might not be enjoying middle-class incomes. All participants were heterosexual.

Although the sample is small and does not represent a range of social divisions, the study was interested in language use rather than the people generating the language; in how language might correspond to broader structures of power in society, rather than in demographic relationships between the present sample and the population as a whole.

A set of 18 questions was used to initiate conversation, based on the interviewers' own experience of heterosexuality and relationships, and their

TABLE 2  
 Questions used as discussion prompts

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1. Are you or have you ever been involved in a long-term relationship with the opposite sex?
  2. What characteristics initially attract you to the opposite sex?
  3. Why do you feel you initially got involved with members of the opposite sex?
  4. What do you expect to get from a relationship with the opposite sex?
  5. Are your expectations usually fulfilled?
  6. What do you think your partner's expectations are?
  7. Do you think that power struggles exist in a relationship? If so, what is your experience of them?
  8. What can sexual relationship with the opposite sex give you which other kinds of relationships can't?
  9. How important do you feel sex is in a relationship?
  10. Do you think that sex can be a substitute for anything else in a relationship?
  11. Who do you find usually initiates the sex act?
  12. Who do you think usually enjoys sex the most?
  13. How important is orgasm to you?
  14. How important do you think it is to the opposite sex?
  15. How important is the act of penetration in a sexual encounter?
  16. Do you find that a good sexual relationship increases overall enjoyment of the relationship?
  17. The penis is to the man as the \_\_\_\_\_ is to the woman. Fill in the blank in your own words.
  18. What do you think would be a good question to ask?
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conversations with friends as the project developed. The questions are presented in Table 2. The questions were not always strictly adhered to but gave a structure to the discussion. The interviewers attempted to create an informal, relaxed setting for the interviews, which lasted between 20 and 50 minutes. Participants were interviewed singly and were aware that the discussion was being tape-recorded. They were guaranteed anonymity.

Clearly, factors such as the researchers' sex, manner, questions and non-verbal reinforcers could be crucial in constructing the responses which people made. Griffin (1990) describes three stances which the researcher might take in informal interviews of this type. The first, researcher as 'Kewpie doll', involves keeping one's eyes and ears open and one's mouth shut (Polsky, 1969). The second, researcher as 'nodding dog', involves encouraging respondents with smiles and nods but keeping verbal interventions to a minimum. However, silence and nods and smiles are not neutral interventions, as respondents may read positive and negative connotations into this behaviour and it might itself put respondents on their guard. Third, Griffin describes the researcher who 'talks back'. This can involve challenging what the participant says or encouraging mutual self-disclosure in the form of a friendly discussion. In our interviews, a mixture of these three approaches was used in an attempt to achieve a participative rather than a voyeuristic approach to the subject-matter (Currie and

Kazi, 1987). This results in dropping the formal procedures which restrict variation in traditional interviews (Potter and Mulkey, 1985).

The analysis of the data reflected a number of concerns. First, we were particularly interested in patterns or themes which would indicate that the two sexes were positioned differently. Second, we tried to examine the function which different aspects of the participants' discourse might have in terms of sustaining a particular pattern of gender inequalities. Third, we were also interested in methodological issues — particularly reflexivity.

## RESULTS 1: REFLECTING ON REFLEXIVITY

In considering how the interaction between participant and interviewer may be constructing the data, we were particularly interested in the way participants seemed to make sense of the interview situation. We sifted the material to discern any which satisfied Brown's (1988: 126) definition of reflexivity that 'an expression is reflexive if it indicates some awareness of the conduct or content of the discussion'. Part of this process can be conceptualized in terms of 'demand characteristics' (Orne, 1962) or the clues which give away the experimental hypothesis. In our case, some participants indicated that they perceived the interviewer to have some judgemental capacity over them, and had some sort of criteria whereby the answers were judged right or wrong. For example Participant 5, male (MP5):

MP5: . . . apparently when men have an orgasm there is a chemical which is released in their brains which makes them drowsy and go to sleep. Am I answering properly? Am I giving you a full account?

Here, there is also an emphasis on technical information, almost as if the interview were a knowledge test. Perhaps we can also draw parallels with Foucault (1979) and suggest that the relationship between interviewer and participant recalls that between doctor and patient, or priest and sinner, in its power dynamics. Further, sometimes participants obviously felt their answers were inadequate. For example:

MP8: I think you'd say that love was more important, if you see what I mean. I know it's not very good.

The disclaimer (Hewitt and Stokes, 1975) in this answer may serve two purposes. First, the participant may assume his answer is not up to scratch in terms of the criteria which might be operating in the situation. Second, the utterance may involve a display of self-worth (Goffman, 1959) in that he's presenting himself as someone who usually performs to high standards and this is a regrettable lapse.

A further example comes when the male interviewer (Wilson) is interviewing Participant 7, female (FP7):

W: What is the most important aspect of sex to you?

FP7: Well, you'll have to direct me if I'm going off the track . . .

There are two possible interpretations here. The first assumes that the interviewer had already decided what the proper answer was, and that it was his job to direct the interviewee to give this correct answer. The second interpretation invokes the grander roles which mainstream society proposes for women. The participant might have asked for direction because the way we talk about and conceptualize heterosexual sex may be more in line with male interests than female ones, as we shall argue below. Perhaps our language and culture provide only shaky and uncertain positions from which women's sexual experience can be described. Perhaps, then, FP7 was trying to adhere to a male account of sexuality. Another respondent, in the post-interview chat, seemed to doubt her ability to contribute anything novel:

G: . . . we're wondering, you know, if men and women say anything different about it.

FP11: I don't know, I don't know whether I've said anything other than the really totally blindingly obvious.

Here, it is almost as if the investigation was being conceptualized as a search for the bizarre and esoteric.

Several participants indicated that they were making assumptions about the orientation of the researcher to the subject matter. This was particularly clear with a male interviewer and male participants. Some seemed to assume that he was 'liberal' and would disapprove of overt sexism; others supposed he maintained 'traditional' sexist ideologies.

The first group, those who presented a liberal 'non-sexist' approach, sometimes showed interstices in their liberalism which hinted at a more conventional sexist orientation. For example MP15 distanced himself from what he presented as the common male position:

W: How important is penetration in the overall sex act?

MP15: Ah, it's not that important, although I would say the majority of men would actually define sex as a penetration, I consider it in a broader sphere.

W: It's not the be-all-and-end-all then?

MP15: No, certainly not, it's just my thing. but most people see penetration as sex.

While this quote presents a more sensitive and liberal version of masculinity, explicitly distinguished from the attitude of 'most men', there were overtones of a more conventional sexism. Elsewhere in the discussion, this participant described how certain types of female behaviour could be seen as 'tarty', suggesting complicity with conventional sexist assumptions about women's sexuality. In this way perhaps we have an example of the 'unequal egalitarianism' identified by Wetherell et al. (1987). To explain this it could be suggested that



MP15 had constructed a version of the aims and orientation of the research and was tailoring his remarks to the recipient.

The second kind of response made by participants operated in a rather different way. Here we found an easily distinguishable sexism; no effort was made to hide a sexist orientation; and these participants attributed similar views to the male interviewer. For example, consider the following exchange with MP5:

W: What do you expect to get from a relationship with a woman?

MP5: Well, it's somebody you need in the morning and somebody to shout at when you're in a bad mood. Somebody to make me something to eat when I'm hungry, or go out for a drink, when I want to go out. Just somebody to be there.

W: A source of convenience?

MP5: Yes, *it's terrible isn't it?, we all do it.* (emphasis added)

This participant is universalizing the statements he makes, saying that we all do it. He may even be extending his own (male) fragment of experience to all men, or to the human race as a whole. Perhaps he is also trying to disarm any criticism the interviewer might make of the statement by inducting him into a frame of reference which they might hold in common.

Further, as we discuss later, the format of the investigation might be better suited to men than to women. Methods tend to reproduce dominant ideologies. For example, the statement 'The penis is to the man as the \_\_\_\_\_ is to the woman . . .' reproduces the assumption of men as 'hail fellow well met', with the goods in the front window, and women as being characterized by mystery — or even a blank!

We now move on to elaborate a variety of discourse which we believe usefully supplements Hollway's tripartite division: the pseudo-reciprocal gift discourse; and to show how this discourse underscores the inequality between men and women in heterosexual sex and relationships.

## RESULTS 2: DEFINING A NEW DISCOURSE: INTERCOURSE AS A PSEUDO-RECIPROCAL GIFT

In addition to Hollway's three kinds of discourse, another identifiable pattern appeared in our interview discussions. This led us to develop the idea of what we initially called the 'reciprocal gift discourse'. Later we changed this to the 'pseudo-reciprocal gift discourse' (on the advice that the original title connoted too much equality and mutuality). Indeed, we argue, this discourse is part of the fundamental inequalities which result in the oppression of women in heterosexual relationships and sex.

The central proposition of the 'pseudo-reciprocal gift discourse' is that men require heterosexual sex to satisfy their sexual urges (corresponding to the male sex-drive discourse). However, in order to do so, *this* discourse relies on men viewing women as passive receptacles who must relinquish all control over their

bodies, in 'giving' themselves, or in 'giving' sex to their male partners. In return, the man must try to please the woman, which entails, in most cases, trying to 'give' the woman an orgasm.

Positioned in this discourse, women are seen as the object who is both 'given away' and 'given to'; while men, on the other hand, are seen as the subject, maintaining their dominance by both being the recipient of the woman and conferring on the object (woman) the gift of pleasure or orgasm. By implication, this discourse rules out the possibility of women having sensual pleasure or orgasms on their own. Moreover, it positions these 'pleasures' as necessarily good, natural and proper.

There are clear links between the formulation of this discourse and the analysis of sexology and sexual 'liberalism' provided by Jeffreys (1990a, 1990b), who notes that many (male) writers on heterosexual sex, from Stekel (1936; 'to be roused by a man means acknowledging oneself as conquered') through to Chesser (1946; 'complete surrender is the only way she can bring the highest pleasure to herself and her husband') have seen the woman's role in sex in these terms. Indeed, present-day sexual libertarians have eroticized the power difference between men and women (Jeffreys, 1990b: 25). Stoltenberg (1990) argues that (male) sexual desire, venerated and valorized by 'sexual liberationists' (see, among others, Comfort, 1979; Crichton, 1986; Weeks, 1985) is not necessarily benign, but can arise from men's needs to put women down (Jeffreys, 1991). Thus, we would argue that the 'pseudo-reciprocal gift discourse' is similar to the position offered in modern manuals of sexology. The mutuality in this discourse is illusory, in the same way as the mutuality offered in *The Joy of Sex* (Comfort, 1979) or in the pages of *Forum* magazine. Perhaps, then, our characterization of the pseudo-reciprocal gift discourse represents a modernization and particularization of the male sex-drive discourse.

Like Hollway's discourses, the pseudo-reciprocal gift discourse is a product of a number of components which enable subject and object positions to be adopted in relation to other people. As becomes clear from the data presented below, the most conspicuous manifestation of this position came from male participants. We might speculate, then, that the pseudo-reciprocal gift discourse not only confers more power on men, but gives them linguistic resources to develop more flattering descriptions of what it is that heterosexuality, and its associated sexual practices, involves.

We have divided our identification of the components of the pseudo-reciprocal gift discourse into three categories: passive woman; active man; and the role of sex as another kind of reinforcer.

### *Passive Woman*

A general theme, which ran through several of the men's discussions, suggested that women were best fulfilled in their roles as inactive 'quarry' during the process of starting liaisons. For example:

MP4: It always has been the role of the male to make the first move in any part of the relationship at all. It's always the man who is supposed to ask the girl to dance or is supposed to go over and give the girl the first chat-up line.

There were a myriad of suggested reasons why women should be so inactive during the formative stage of relationships. There were perhaps best summed up by MP23:

MP23: I think historically, traditionally, it's the man who makes the play, who's chasing the woman. Historically that is his role. You see it presented to you in the media as well. I mean all the films you see it is the bloke chasing the woman.

This is curiously similar to Metcalfe and Humphries (1985) who include a discussion of male power and female passivity in media representations of sexuality.

As mentioned earlier, the pseudo-reciprocal gift discourse relates primarily to people positioning themselves in discussion about sexual activities, however the foregoing suggests that the passivity of women is an idea which pervades all aspects of relationships. Women's perspectives on this issue were not so readily offered. An example, however, was provided by FP17:

FP17: I don't think, come to think of it, that I've ever really been looking for it [heterosexual relationship] but it just sort of happens, you know, there's always someone about, so I've never needed . . .

G: To make the first move?

FP17: Yeah, I suppose.

In this case there is no specific reference to making the first move — this terminology was supplied by the interviewer — but there is no particular passivity either. In the interviews themselves there was no critique offered of men's activity, but informal conversations with friends (and the experience of the first author) suggest that being 'pestered by wankers in pubs' is a common if regrettable experience.

With such a backdrop it is hardly surprising that men describe the role of women during sexual intercourse also as that of a passive object. This was most explicit in MP14's account:

MP14: It's more important that the woman is giving herself to me. She is laying herself on the line.

MP14 appears to view intercourse not as a mutual interaction, but as his partner offering herself to him. The sacrifice he perceives her as making by giving herself to him is reinforced by his inference that his partner does not have any strong inclinations for intercourse. For example, he states that sex is not as important for him now as it was when he was younger, and that now sometimes he prefers 'to talk rather than jump into bed', because he likes to 'think of the other person as well'. He states that he is taking his partner's wants into

consideration and he interprets these as not being interested in sex; this implies that when he does have intercourse, it is for his own gratification. Moreover, he seems to conceptualize his partner as a passive entity to meet his sexual needs. However, he does attempt to reciprocate her giving herself to him by giving something in return; he 'makes an effort' to 'give' her an orgasm because he thinks a lot of her.

The 'giving' on the part of women corresponds to the 'He asks; she gives' detected by Rubin (1976: 139). It is exemplified in our study by FP9, speaking in response to the question about who initiates the sex act:

- FP9: . . . it makes him happy so I always reckon I might as well give it to him.  
 G: Even when you don't . . .  
 FP9: Even when I don't want to, no I suppose if I really don't want to I don't want to, but sometimes I give it to him.

Giving oneself and giving sex to one's partner are not quite the same: the latter implies merely an activity, whereas the former is more likely to involve the whole person. Nevertheless, this discourse involves a relentless giving on the part of the women.

The perceived passivity seems to be the result of two factors. First, women are assumed, particularly by men, to have a much smaller 'sex drive' than men (if they have one at all!). This corresponds to the major tenet of Hollway's 'male sex-drive discourse'. It was mentioned equally by men and women in our discussions; however the position is best described by MP4:

- MP4: Women are much more affectionate than men. What I've always found, they're always much more ready to hold onto you and kiss you and things but when it comes down to sex they're not as vigorous I suppose. They don't have the same sort of sex drive.  
 W: So what do you think it is about men? Do men have a sort of inbuilt . . .?  
 MP4: Yeah, I suppose so, I suppose it's from the power syndrome thing. It's like men have always been more powerful at sex. They have more sexual urges, much more sexual vigour.

Notice the exclusion here of 'hold onto you and kiss you' from MP4's definition of sex. Apart from not having the biological urges of men, women are also assumed to have less interest in sexual intercourse from a recreational point of view:

- MP23: I find with women, they can't be bothered making the first move but once you've started it's great. I think it takes a bit to get them warmed up.

Women's responses to the issue of who initiates the sex act seemed to embody two themes. One was summed up by FP24: 'Oh god he's always wanting it!' Another respondent, who was living with a partner and slept with him every night, appeared to meet resistance sometimes in her quest for physical intimacy:

FP25: I mean sometimes I was feeling you know passionate and he would say like he had to get up in the morning or what was it, he would say I was making him itchy, that's it.

So her own efforts were not interpreted as sexual advances, but rather as keeping her partner awake, or as the source of unwelcome bodily sensations.

The second factor which contributes to women being placed in a passive role is the assumption that women's orgasms are a product of men's intervention, and that in order for a woman to achieve orgasm she must lie back and relax:

W: Do you think it has anything to do with a man whether a woman has an orgasm?

MP5: Yeah, definitely.

W: To what extent?

MP5: Well, firstly a woman . . . I think she has to be mentally relaxed then I think it's down to the bloke to experiment.

The presumption that women should be passive throughout heterosexual intercourse seems to result in women losing any self-determination of their bodies, or their orgasms. Once a woman enters a sexual encounter, she is no longer seen as in control of that particular facet of her physiology, and it seems as if an invisible contract is drawn up, whereby the man is responsible for both partners' 'pleasure'. Pleasure, it should be noted, is in this discourse constructed in much the same way as it is for the 'sexual liberals' discussed by Jeffreys (1990a, 1990b), in that sexual feelings, practices and orgasms are unproblematically good things. The notion of pleasure is often collapsed into the concept of orgasm. Particularly when experienced by women, moreover, it is supposed to represent some form of liberation. However, as Jeffreys argues, this is not necessarily so; and, as we hope will become clear from this article, it can reinforce inequality in relationships.

### *Active Man*

Men are conceptualized as active in the pseudo-reciprocal gift discourse, as we have implied in dealing with the passive role assigned to women. However, there are additional components to the idea of the active man which merit further attention. First, the man, as the subject of the discourse, is the active agent — in that he is responsible for any activity that might take place during intercourse. This activity is not limited solely to the sexual side of the relationship — as some of the earlier quotes indicate, he is responsible for any initiative that might take place at the start of the dating procedure.

The concept of active man during intercourse was almost universally accepted by both our men and women participants, and many of the discussions were characterized by the assumption that it was the man's responsibility both to initiate any sexual advance, and to create any feelings of pleasure or enjoyment therein. FP12 sums up a position common to many of our women participants:

W: Who do you think enjoys sex the most?

FP12: It depends on the bloke because it's harder to have an orgasm or whatever so the bloke has to put a bit more effort in.

Again we can see how the woman has resigned responsibility for the enjoyment of sex, and is relying on the man to get any pleasure out of the encounter. This type of attitude is exemplified by many 'enlightened' men, who see it as their responsibility to give the woman as much pleasure as they themselves experience. We have used the term 'enlightened' because this position was contrasted with a more primordial and less mutualistic approach by MP23:

W: Who do you think enjoys sex the most?

MP23: Mmm. Depends on the individual. Personally I try to make the woman enjoy it as much as I can, and sometimes I haven't enjoyed it because the person I'm with hasn't enjoyed it either. I think it is an individual thing, it just depends on how good you are, how interested the bloke is. I mean it's easy for any bloke just to go in, belt away and finish and not even care about the woman.

It is clear, then, that if the woman does enjoy sex, it is not because of her activity or feelings, but instead because the man is 'good', or rather that his technique is 'good'.

This way of talking about sex is another salient feature of the pseudo-reciprocal gift discourse, and it exemplifies the active/passive dichotomy even further. For example, many men's talk about intercourse and sexuality was infused with mechanistic and technical metaphors:

MP5: Yeah, touching certain buttons does play a very big part of it, certain positions play a really big part of it.

Men's use of this type of language may signify that the act of sex is a male domain, and that there is no place for an equally active female partner. Throughout the discussions continual reference was made to women as passive objects to be controlled. Indeed, there seemed to be a repertoire of references to sex as work:

W: How important is orgasm to you?

MP14: Pretty important. I don't like to leave a job half finished.

Some women seemed to use this way of talking about their partner's attitudes to their orgasms:

FP17: When I was going out with Mark and I didn't come he was upset on my behalf because he didn't feel he had done a good enough job.

Or again with FP24:

FP24: Steve used to, he might have read it somewhere, but he used to think that

he had to keep going. I used to feel sorry for him sometimes, the effort he put in, for ages and ages.

Thus, we have a bifurcation between the men's accounts mentioned earlier, and the women's accounts immediately above, wherein it is not quite the case of women giving themselves to the men and the men giving them orgasms ('pleasure'). Getting their partners to reach orgasm is a reinforcer for the men. It is not a no-strings-attached gift for the women. As some of Rubin's (1976: 151) respondents seemed to suggest, for women, perhaps, men's 'wish for their orgasm is experienced as oppressive and alienating'.

While it has been noted for some time that men's language is task oriented while women's is more socially oriented (Spender, 1980), it seems that the language men adopt when referring to sexual intercourse has special connotations for power in relationships. For example, how can you consider somebody as an equal partner when you describe them consistently as a passive object or when you describe their sexual pleasure using mechanistic and technical phrases?

While the man has adopted the active role, he is not only dominating the woman through his activity in conferring on her any pleasure she might experience, he is further defining, demeaning and relegating her position through his positioning of her as a passive object. His own activity is defined like that of the videogame expert — in terms of performance and competence. By implication, then, men become the source of all sexual pleasure. Thus, if men are absent then so is sex, and the possibilities of lesbian sex or women's autoeroticism are ruled out.

### *Sex as Another Kind of Reinforcer*

While both men and women seemed sometimes to be inscribed within the pseudo-reciprocal gift discourse, it seems that the men's subject positions within it are more dominant than those available to women. This discourse may also seek to define an appropriate subjectivity for women, rather like the 'submission' advocated by Chesser (1946), or indeed the 'ecstatic submission' suggested as a title for this discourse by an external referee. Perhaps we can develop some insight into the role sex plays for our participants if we examine some of the functions of the positions available within the pseudo-reciprocal gift discourse.

For many participants, the positionings of the pseudo-reciprocal gift discourse, namely those of passive woman and active man, is seen to reinforce each person's gender role:

W: Do you think the male is responsible for the female's orgasm?

MP5: I would put it down to the man and his technique. Yes I think pressing the right buttons is important, but you also have to have the right mental attitude, because I think if a woman has an orgasm you probably feel more of a man. You know the other person has enjoyed it and it was because of you and your penis, you gave her that, you gave her one.

Also:

W: How important do you think orgasm is for women?

MP5: I think it's pretty important. I don't think a woman will feel quite as feminine if she couldn't experience one.

As MP5 describes the active role he adopts there is no doubt as to where his partner's pleasure comes from — himself and his penis. He attributes her pleasure to his technique. Thus, he perceives her sexuality as moulded to fit in with, and react to, his own; he regards her sexuality as passive and dependent upon his actions.

In effect, then, intercourse is seen as clearly distinguishing between the sexes, as building masculinity and femininity. A possible speculative implication of this is that it is passivity which to some extent, at least, confers upon women their femininity, and hence may delineate their role in wider social contexts.

Therefore, it can be concluded that the man positioned as subject of the pseudo-reciprocal gift discourse, and the woman as object, involves him perceiving her as a passive entity who will react to his sexual advances and respond to his technique. It is ironic, then, that the 'enlightened' male discourse, in which men take some responsibility for their partner's pleasure, is yet another example of men abrogating power to themselves, as they take away women's ability to be an independent sexual agent. The discourse denies the possibility of such agency, as men become not only the dominant sexual partner but also the experts on sexual pleasure for themselves and for women. The use of mechanical metaphors by men when talking about sex constitutes more evidence for men regarding women as passive sexual objects. Therefore, when men adopt this subject position in the discourse, intercourse acts as a reinforcer of the passive and active roles which are conferred on women and men respectively. It appears that men's positioning of women as passive in sexual activity is consonant with the passive roles conferred on women in other spheres of society.

#### THE LANGUAGE OF MEN?: REFLECTIONS ON GENDER AND TALK ABOUT SEX

In presenting this account of the pseudo-reciprocal gift discourse we have drawn extensively on four men's and five women's accounts of the process of finding partners and conducting heterosexual life. In this final section we voice some of our misgivings about the fact that the men in our study were much more forthcoming than women. Women's version of sexuality was much more difficult to determine from this study. From a Foucauldian perspective one might argue that the 'discourses' available in the contemporary western language community within which we speak about sex are geared to articulating men's interests and accounts of sexuality. We suggest there is much less space in western twentieth-century culture for women than men to build accounts of their sexuality. As



Spender (1980: 172) says, 'Only male sexual characteristics have been named as real within the patriarchal framework'.

Of course, we are not saying that there is a total absence of discourse about sex which foregrounds women's interests. Clearly, heterosexual feminism has produced alternative discourses concerning women's sexuality in heterosexual sex. Equally, we must acknowledge the productivity of lesbian feminist theorists (see, for example, Frye, 1990; Hoagland, 1988) in producing alternatives to the dominant (malestream) sexual discourse. Moreover, there is a tradition of psychological work on the topic of gender differences in self-disclosure. Early work, such as that by Jourard (1964), suggested that women were more self-disclosing than men (although, more recently, Rosenfeld et al. [1979] suggest that age differences, situational and personal factors may override any general masculine or feminine patterns). Miell (1984) notes that women are often expected to disclose more and may be pressed to do so. Overall, there are *a priori* grounds for expecting women to self-disclose more than men. However, we found greater difficulty in generating and analysing accounts from women than men. Why should this be the case?

We are given clues in some parts of the interview discussions as to what women's version of sexuality might be like. For example, comments in response to the question 'What characteristics initially attract you to the opposite sex?' suggest much less of an orientation to attractiveness on the part of women than men:

W: What about physically, does that. . . ?

FP7: Well, I don't think physically is high on my list, I would tend to sort of steer away from someone who is hugely fat or tall, but other than that average sort of looks.

Also:

G: What initially attracts you about them when you start?

FP2: It's personality, but I wouldn't go out with them if they were a hunchback . . . cos I'm small I couldn't go out with someone who's about six foot seven and I couldn't go out with someone who was 20 stone.

We are given further clues as to the nature of women's talk about sex by means of responses to the question: 'The penis is to the man as \_\_\_\_\_ is to the woman. Fill in the blank in your own words.'

Eight men said 'clitoris', four said 'vagina' and one didn't know. Apart from one woman who said 'clitoris', women in general said there was no equivalent. The men interpreted this question from a physical standpoint and defined women's sexuality in the same way as they defined their own: as being centrally concerned with one zone or organ. Those who replied 'vagina' are perhaps seeing women as a receptacle for their sexual gratification. Ann Koedt (1970), in her article 'The myth of the vaginal orgasm', states that the myth persists not because of ignorance on the subject, but because it is not in men's interests to

acknowledge that women's orgasms are not dependent on penetrative intercourse. Johnston (1973) warns against the danger of the equally problematic myth that the vagina is insensitive. Of course, men viewing women's sexuality as vaginally based helps them more easily continue with a phallogentric sexuality. However, the extent to which men replied 'clitoris' to our question suggests that sexual knowledge has been popularized over the last 20 years.

Women's responses to our 'penis analogue' question expressed uncertainty, and doubts as to whether the issue could be summed up so simply:

G: So how would you describe it in your own words?

FP1: I think it's an overall sexuality about a woman rather than a particular object.

Or FP9, interviewed by Gilfoyle, in response to the same question:

FP9: I don't think it's all concentrated in one little tiny zone.

In the few accounts we have of women describing what they find erotic it seems that female desire is described as being capable of attachment to many different things. For example, Galloway (1990: 28) describes her delight at being fed fish by a partner in a restaurant (possibly not so delightful for the fish). If we find such descriptions quaint and unusual, this indicates the extent to which our culture is informed by phallogentric notions of sexuality. This diffuse eroticism is rather different from the fascination with, say, high heels and stockings which might be found in stereotypically male accounts of fetishism, because it is not specifically and obsessively located in one subject or situation, but rather is capricious, flexible and surprising.

Also our female respondents' talk about sex contained some analogies between sex and communicative activity. FP1 refers to intercourse as having expressive qualities:

FP1: Sex is something special and I basically think is an expression of intensity of feeling between two people, which can't be expressed in any other way.

And:

FP6: . . . sex in a relationship builds the intimacy up.

On being asked what roles or functions sex played in a relationship, another female respondent said:

FP7: Sex is probably an expression of intensity of feeling which isn't matched in any other way.

At the same time there was some attempt by the women to represent male sexuality. There was, for example, an account of the alleged ubiquity and inevitability of men's orgasms:

W: How important is it [orgasm] for males?

FP7: It's a foregone conclusion, it just exists, it is very important.

One further possible reason why the men were more forthcoming than the women is that our investigation might have suited them better. The exercise — and the particular questions asked — may have been geared to men's interests.

If an investigation is constructed in such a way that it makes it difficult for women to talk about sex then we are much less likely to get a full and candid account from them. If the nature of the investigation is different from the sorts of topics and issues around which women's everyday talk centres, we can be much less sure of the generality or representativeness of what they may say. There may be realms of untapped feminine discourse.

For example, it was suggested to us that a group of older feminist heterosexuals would have no difficulty in articulating their account of sex and sexuality. Certainly, our results are profoundly local to the age, ethnic, class, sexual and educational characteristics, and the able-bodiedness of our participants, to name but a few of the salient characteristics. Were we to repeat the exercise we would be looking for ways of eliciting more from women and trying to make the investigation correspond more closely to women's interests. We would also want to represent the concerns of a more diverse group of women.

## CONCLUSION

Despite the energy with which the topic of heterosexual sex and relationships is theorized and debated, there is an enormous amount of work to do to open up the field. In particular, the possibilities of articulating women's experience of sexuality are only beginning to be tackled. We have briefly mentioned Frye (1990) and Hoagland (1988). Hite (1977: 363–97) provides some insights, but despite the large number of women on which her book is based, it is in itself a very small step towards reforming heterosexuality.

We hope to have made two points strongly in this article. First, we have supplemented Hollway's account of the discourses of heterosexuality by the addition of the 'pseudo-reciprocal gift discourse', whereby women are conceived of as giving themselves or giving sex to men, while men give women orgasms. This, we have suggested, reinforces the oppression of women by encouraging their passivity in the face of the activity, and crass notions of technical expertise, it encourages in men. It seems to colonize the terrain of women's pleasure in a way which is profoundly confirming for and reinforcing to men, much as is argued by Jeffreys (1990b).

Second, we have noted some of the differences in men's and women's talk about sex. Specifically, women seemed to apply what could be described as a 'critique of silence' (Morley, 1980) to talk about sex. Apart from inviting us to question our data-gathering procedure, this relative silence on the part of women

also invites us to speculate that dominant ways of talking about sex correspond more closely to men's interests than to women's.

Taken together, these findings suggest the resilience of prevailing notions about sex. In particular, we would highlight the way in which the pseudo-reciprocal gift discourse has condensed women's desire for pleasure into an entity called 'orgasm', which is called into existence by men's skill and technique. The recent development of so-called 'women's erotica' (Barbach, 1988; Chester, 1989; Reynolds, 1990; see also Galloway, 1990; Campbell, 1990 for discussion) invites us to ask whether these publications reflect autonomous, woman-oriented discourse about sex, or whether they are publishable, readable and comprehensible precisely because they reflect the dominant way in which stories about sex are told in a (hetero)sexist society. Even if women can produce alternative languages and concepts which they are able to control (e.g. Daly, 1987), this is very different from actually attaining equality between the sexes in heterosexual relations — or in any other aspect of society.

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