

Title Feminine sexual subjectivities: Bodies, agency and life history

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Biographical notes

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Abstract

The relationship between discourse, sex and the body has attracted sustained interest from scholars in sociology and cultural studies over the last twenty years. It is only recently, however, that sociological analyses of sexuality have begun to explore the specificity of the body and its relationship to human agency. This work suggests that, far from serving as a passive surface upon which sexual scripts are inscribed, the body in sexual action is itself a dynamic force in generating sexual subjectivities. This is related to the way that the praxeological aspects of sex are always corporeal and that corporeality is indivisibly related to individual agency. The specific configuration of sexual practices is central to the making of sexual identities. Indeed, it is through such a configuration that the sexual subject is brought into being. Yet human agency is a central feature of the process, rendering it a project that develops over time. Such an idea is particularly relevant to feminists who are concerned with the way that feminine sexual subjectivity can be theorised as active and desiring. This paper explores the way in which the body is implicated in sex practice and the making of active feminine sexual subjectivities. In doing so, it draws on qualitative data collected from life history interviews with eighteen women.

Keywords sexual practice, subjectivity, femininity, embodiment, life history

Feminine sexual subjectivities: Bodies, agency and life history

Much of the recent social research that explores feminine sexuality focuses on the role that discourse plays in constituting feminine sexual identity (some examples include Holland, Ramazanoglu, Scott, Sharpe, Thomson, 1990; Holland, Ramazanoglu, Scott, Sharpe, Thomson, 1992; Lear, 1995; Hyde and Jaffee, 2000; Tolman, 2000; Kippax, Crawford, Waldby, Benton, 1990; Roberts, Kippax, Waldby, Crawford, 1995; Crawford, Kippax, Waldby, 1994). This body of research offers a significant contribution to understanding the way that the sexual subject is determined by normative discourses of femininity, masculinity and heterosexuality. Understanding feminine sexuality in terms of discourse is attractive because it offers a view of the subject that is not the rational and unitary Cartesian variety ubiquitous in psychological or medical analyses of sexuality. A discursively-constructed self is understood as being constituted by a series of shifting, insecure and incommensurable subject positions. These are constituted by normative discourse, and while the process involved is dynamic and unstable, it renders largely impossible a unified subject capable of resisting normative inscriptions and inculcations (Foucault 1976, 1984, Pringle, 1992, Weeks, 1981; Weeks, 1985).

Recent theoretical interest in the body and its relation to the social world problematises this view of sexual subjectivity. It suggests that understanding subjectivity primarily as the product of discourse advances an overly mechanical and determinist relationship between discourse and practice (Connell and Dowsett, 1992; McNay, 2000; Segal, 1994). Indeed, the contention that individual practices and behaviours derive directly from the 'polyvalency' of discourse (Foucault, 1976) suggests that the subject comes into being only through discourse (Mansfield, 2000). As Judith Butler (1990: 173) has argued, the subject has 'no ontological substance' beyond the discursive. Accordingly,

from such a perspective, as Lois McNay (2000:9) remarks, the capacity for self-reflexivity and agency is significantly restricted.

Empirical social research exploring the role of the body in the creation of sexual identities poses critical challenges to deterministic understandings of the role of discourse. It reveals the way that the praxeological aspects of sex are central to the making of sexual subjectivities (see Connell, 1995; Dowsett, 1996; Potts 2001; Ussher 1997a; Ussher, 1997b; Grosz, 1994). It advances the view that the body is central to understanding the way that the subject is agential (McNay, 2000). Such a proposition is particularly relevant to feminist interests associated with understanding how feminine sexuality is active and desiring (see Segal, 1994, Tiefer, 2001, Tiefer, 2004, Albury, 2000). This paper draws on qualitative data collected from life history interviews with eighteen heterosexually-identified women. It explores the relationship between discourses of feminine sexuality and women's sex practice, and examines the way in which the body is implicated in sex practice and the making of feminine sexual identities.

Method

Life history research is a powerful means of capturing the dynamic and conflicting experiences of the sexual subject. As Ken Plummer (2001) suggests, life histories are arguably the most effective method for eliciting details about subjective experience. They have the capacity, as RW Connell (1991) proposes, to reveal 'social structures, collectivities, and institutional change at the same time as personal life' (p. 143). Importantly, life histories also capture the way that individuals 'move through' life, revealing how subjects are produced or made over time. Thus, life history research situates the experiences of the subject within a specific historical and cultural framework but, because it emphasises the temporal and existential specificity of a person's

experience, it does not render such experience a mechanically determined outcome of social structure and culture.

Eighteen women aged between 19-79 years participated in the study. All lived in the Sydney metropolitan area of Australia. Interviews were semi-structured, lasting between 75 and 150 minutes. Data were analysed for narrative structures following Labov (1982) and Riessman (1993). Case studies were written for each participant in which discrete narratives were synthesised to identify an overarching story line (following Connell, 1995; Dowsett, 1996). This was followed by an 'analytic abstract' (Denzin, 1989) where the research themes were discussed in relation to the respondent's life story. These analytical documents were synthesised into 'collective analyses' that compared and contrasted overarching storylines and summarised themes.

A key objective in life history research is to present and understand lives as whole, collective experiences. As such, the presentation of life history data demands lengthy descriptions. It requires the researcher to include cultural and generational contexts as well as personal experiences. By contrast with traditional forms of qualitative research that present the words and experiences of multiple participants in tightly edited excerpts, life history research seeks to provide concentrated biographical vignettes based on select life stories. In adopting this approach, this paper presents data on four of the eighteen study participants. These stories were chosen because they best illustrate and express the findings of the study as a whole.

The paper is presented in four sections. The first three sections explore the study's main themes, illustrating the social processes through which women develop sexual subjectivity. The first of these themes examines the way in which prevailing discourses

of feminine sexuality operate in women's lives and sexual practice to generate embodied identities. The second considers the way that this embodied relation between discourse and practice engenders possibilities for the subversion of normalising discourse and transformations in sexual identity.. The third section further develops how embodied sexual practice, as it takes place over time and in relation to others, generates the sexual subject. The fourth and final section draws on these three themes to consider the way that a woman's sexual life history and subjectivity is a generative project constituted by the indivisible relationship between time and practice.

Sexual pursuits: women as embodied sexual agents

Evident in all of the respondents' life stories was a predominant discourse of feminine sexuality such as that described elsewhere and in detail by Hollway (1984, 1989), Ussher (1994), Summers (1994) and Cowie and Lees (1981), among others. Sometimes known as the 'Madonna/whore' discourse (Ussher, 1994) or the 'have/hold' discourse (Hollway, 1984), it is a symbolic construct predicated on the Christian principle that sex should take place within a lasting and committed heterosexual relationship. It positions feminine sexuality dichotomously as morally good or bad. The former is associated with sexual passivity and responsiveness to masculine desire, while the latter involves women's initiation and/or active participation in sexual relations usually conducted outside marriage. According to this discourse, women are defined in terms of one or other of the binary categories of 'wife and mistress, virgin and whore, Mary and Eve' (Hollway, 1984: 232). One of its prominent features is its fundamentalist understanding of women's sexuality as inherently depraved and dangerous, and in need of masculine control in order to protect social morality.

This discourse, however, was not simplistically and mechanically enacted in the sexual lives of the women who participated in this study. Rather, while it played a significant symbolic role in the construction of their sexual identities, it was not wholly determinant of their sexual practices. As the sexual life histories of the study's participants suggest, a dynamic configuration of practices, both corporeal and symbolic, is involved. They come together in a project in which the sexual subject is brought into being as agential and desiring.

Deidre was 79 at the time of her interview. She grew up in rural Australia in a well-educated and politically active middle class family. She spent 25 years in an unhappy marriage, having two children before divorcing in the early 1970s. Deidre's earliest sexual experiences were shaped by her desire to marry the 'right man'. For Deidre, this meant a man who was worldly, sophisticated and 'knowing'. Her talk was reminiscent of Ussher's (1997b) notion of the 'heterosexual romantic dream' or the idea that every woman has a predestined 'Mr. Right'. Romance and the pursuit of 'Mr. Right' featured strongly in Deidre's stories about her early relationships. She sought, and frequently found, relationships that offered fun and light-hearted romance that permitted her to achieve an image of herself as a sexually respectable, young woman. Her sexual propriety in these early years, however, was marred by a sexual relationship that ended in an unwanted pregnancy and a 'backyard' abortion. This proved to be a harrowing experience as her following account demonstrates:

We drove to a very innocent looking house. There was a woman and a man and they said, 'Wait here'. And there were other women there, uh, young, middling. We didn't talk much. [p] And then it was my turn. I could hear screaming, oh god [sigh]... I hate pain and they clamped it down and they pretended it was gas, but it wasn't. It went on and on and on, scrape, scraping your inside, like a cheese grater. Oh god! They said, 'Oh what do you do?' and I said, 'Nursing'. They said, 'These nurses are always the worst'... Anyway, I went back and stayed with a [big sigh], stayed at my mother's friend. She [had] said, 'Oh well, come and stay the night here'. Well, by that time,

she'd had time to think it over, silly old duck. And she'd met me at the gate. She said, 'You can't come here, you can't come here, the police might be after you'. I said, 'I have to', blood dripping down my leg. She let me in. It was freezing, (a) freezing cold house. I got in to bed, freezing cold and shivered and cried and stayed the nightI couldn't wait to get back to work... No wonder I haven't had a lot of sex. (JB: You mean because of an experience like that?) Yeah, yeah.

The experience of abortion in the 1940s in Australia was commonly hazardous and lethal, as the maternal mortality rate associated with abortion at the time demonstrates (see, for example, Schofield 1995: 74). The fact that Deidre was unmarried branded her as 'the worst' kind of woman. Her experience of abortion proved to be pivotal in her sexual life history, launching her on a trajectory to redeem herself as a sexually proper woman.

Deidre's re-establishment of her respectable self was secured by her marriage to John. She described her marriage to him as 'winning the prize'. John was American and in Deidre's view, exotic. He had travelled the world and was ten years older than her. By marrying John, Deidre felt she had successfully salvaged her identity as a 'good' woman. Yet her subsequent experiences revealed that this was difficult to sustain. Shortly after their marriage, Deidre found that John was not the good husband she presumed. His perpetual unemployment and inability to provide financially for their growing family meant that Deidre's 'heterosexual romantic dream' soon began to fade:

I knew that the marriage was [p] doomed.... I knew I couldn't work with him but it was the only way that I could get any pride or any money at all.

Divorce was not a viable option for Deidre. Not only was it difficult to obtain in Australia in the 1960s because of legal barriers (Matthews, 1984) but, according to Deidre, it was not what she wanted. A divorce would have undermined her identity as a respectable woman. As Deidre put it, marriage was the only way she 'could get any pride'. Indeed,

as Jill Matthews (1984: 142) comments, divorce 'reduced a woman to a single state, without the protection of a man, an anomalous and vulnerable position'. Despite unhappy circumstances, Deidre persisted with the marriage. However, as her comments below indicate, sexual relations ceased:

I couldn't have sex with someone who didn't care for me. He didn't. He still loved me he said when I tried to divorce him. It was all over and he'd still call me his wife. But I just don't think that's what sex is for. If you're not happy together I couldn't see why I should bother.

For Deidre, sex, romantic love and a daily life commitment to a sexual partner had become indivisible. The combination of these practices comprised a *project* (Connell 1987) that enabled her to bring herself into being as a respectable woman, as a woman who had been saved from the 'shame' of unwed sex and an unwanted pregnancy. Clearly, the achievement of such an identity was not simply the outcome of a discursively enlivened, sexual embodiment. Rather, Deidre's life history reveals that she actively fashioned such an identity as a steadfast project of redemption in which sex within marriage to a man whom she regarded as her social superior was a central feature. Deidre's sexual experiences were the bodily mechanisms through which she imbued her marriage with meanings of love and commitment and through which she secured herself as a worthy woman. They were also the means through which she expressed her love for her husband and her respect for herself as a married woman. Undoubtedly Deidre's sexual embodiment can be understood as enactment of the normative 'Madonna/whore' or 'have/hold' discourse. However the specificity of her sexual life history suggests a more complex reading.

Once Deidre had regained her social and sexual respectability and her husband proved unable to live up to her expectation, she refused sex with him. His failure as a provider

steadily eroded her esteem and love for him. For Deidre, the emotional dynamic between them was indissolubly linked to her desire for a partner whom she saw as her social superior, a 'Mr. Right'. This played a major role in their sexual relationship. As a consequence, though she remained married to John for many years, Deidre refused sexual relations with him. The end of sexual relations brought into being the end of the attachment between them, even though their respectable marital identities remained intact. For Deidre, the 'have/hold' discourse of 'proper' sexual femininity through marriage did not mechanically generate sexual practice.

After 25 years of marriage, Deidre divorced John. She got a job at the local school working as a teacher's aid. She did not have another long-term sexual relationship but she had several casual sexual encounters with men. None of them produced the same self-recrimination that she experienced as a young unmarried woman in the 1940s, nor the desire to re-establish herself as a married woman. Deidre's sexual subjectivity had changed over time. Her earlier explorations, followed by her pursuit and achievement of respectable feminine sexuality through and within marriage, gave way to a prolonged asexuality. This accompanied the deepening and embodied estrangement that occurred in her relationship with her husband. With her divorce, however, Deidre made tentative moves towards re-establishing sexually active relations with men. Experiencing none of the passion that had characterised her relationship with John, her sexual relationships became intermittent, indifferent and of limited significance to her.

Unlike Deidre, Nicole was not interested in 'proper' feminine sexuality. She actively renounced it, embracing a sexuality that rejected traditional notions of feminine sexual passivity. Nicole's life history reveals the pursuit of a sexuality that was autonomous, pleasure-seeking and predatory - a kind of masculine sexuality.

Nicole was 26 years old at the time of her interview. She grew up in a wealthy middle class family and was pursuing a career in investment banking. Her first experience with penetrative sex happened when she was seventeen while on a family holiday. Her sex partner was much older than her and married. Her story tells of an experience in which she succumbed to the advances of a highly predatory man:

We were flirting and you can always tell. I just knew something was going to happen. And so he did, the bastard. He planned the whole thing. Four o'clock in the morning on the Saturday night he leads me upstairs and he'd laid out this parachute and there's candles and the whole thing. And he just knew he was going to get it. So, he did. And, um, it wasn't horrendous. I think I was just so nervous and didn't want to look like a little girl idiot. And then I saw his wedding ring glinting in the light and I thought, 'Oh no !'. And for about an hour after that I just sat in the shower and we didn't use a condom so I was paranoid about getting pregnant. So, I was [laughing] just jumping up and down in the shower [laughing]. I was so stupid and that was that.

Nicole's narrative here suggests that she felt victimised. He was the 'bastard' that planned the whole thing. She was the object of his sexual desire, 'stupidly' duped into relinquishing her virginity. However, later in the interview Nicole claimed a more active role, describing the experience in terms of her effort to actively 'rid' herself of her virginity:

I wasn't in a serious long term relationship and I really wasn't gonna wait for Mr. Right to come along and that whole thing. So it was kind of just whoever's offering [laugh]. Take it! [laugh] (JB: Why do you think you just wanted to get it over with?) Uh, because I mean I don't know if you remember being a teenager and the whole virginity thing and you have to wait for someone you love and you have to wait to get married and 'are you a slut?', 'aren't you a slut?' and 'what am I?, should I?, shouldn't I?' [laugh] There were just too many questions and too many 'ifs' and I just thought I'm tired of wondering when and how and who. So, I'd rather take control of it and do it on my terms and just get rid of it.

In this part of her narrative, Nicole repudiates 'proper' feminine sexuality of the kind that Deidre sought. She finds waiting for 'Mr. Right' tiresome and wants to determine her own

future. Yet, as indicated by the first excerpt, Nicole also has considerable ambivalence about such a project. She repudiates respectable sexual femininity but also expresses dismay that her first sexual partner was married and obviously seeking only a casual sexual encounter.

Though Nicole believed she was acting in a self-determining fashion in her first sexual encounter, she also realises that she was not included in the decision making associated with how it would happen. She had been 'set up' and, as such, was not an equal subject in the process. Instead of naming the lack of mutual subjectivity in the encounter, Nicole conformed to its imperatives, proclaiming that she would have 'looked like a little girl idiot' if she had resisted.

Nicole's first sexual encounter, then, produced a paradox in terms of her emergent sexual identity. She believed she had become sexually empowered and equal with a male partner by acceding to a sexual arrangement that was inherently unequal. Nicole's subsequent sexual experiences suggest a vigorous quest to resolve this paradox, but one that produced mixed and unsettling results. Apart from a brief marriage at 22, her sexual experiences consisted of casual encounters. She constructed these as exercises in predation, describing men as sex objects and herself as the 'one doing the fucking'. In many instances, she engaged in what she called 'sex for the sake of sex' with little interest in developing relationships:

I had a date with a guy. We had nothing in common whatsoever. I thought 'oh well, may as well make the night worth while [by having sex]'. So I [did]. [Afterwards] I start getting SMS's from this guy saying 'you used me just for sex and I feel so cheap' and I thought 'Oh my god!' [laugh]

Nicole's predatory approach to sex was, however, highly precarious. Her stories about sexual conquest were often followed by statements of regret, as evident in her comments about a recent sexual encounter with a man in whom she had been interested for some time:

I'm always doing it for the wrong reasons. I'm always doing it for a quick fix. And the quick fix always turns into a massive guilt run that lasts for a couple of days and it's just, oh [sigh].... Friday night, I was so proud of myself that I finally got him; put a little notch on my belt. And then Saturday morning I felt terrible... because he's married and it wasn't romantic... But I can't now go back and start analysing what I think is a slut.

Nicole sought to become a self-determining sexual subject by rejecting feminine sexual passivity. In the process, she became engaged in a project that mimicked the predatory stereotypes of masculinist sexual practice. She believed this positioned her as 'equal to a man'. At the same time, however, she struggled with powerful feelings of guilt, self-doubt and self-loathing that she linked with 'being a slut'.

Although Nicole and Deidre have very different life stories, their narratives reveal a similar theme: both engaged in sexual relations with men in which they actively sought to realise themselves as particular kinds of subjects. Nicole's story reveals how she sought to constitute herself as 'the same as a man' by seeking casual encounters and pursuing men as sex objects. Though she revelled in her sexual conquests - the 'notch on the belt', being the 'one doing the fucking' - Nicole wrestled with becoming 'sexually equal'. Deidre, on the other hand, struggled to achieve feminine sexual respectability, experiencing disappointment, divorce and a desultory sexual engagement in her older age. Despite their differences, both engagements produced unanticipated outcomes that posed considerable challenges to their respective sexual subjectivities. Neither resiled from such challenges. In the respective negotiations of, engagements in and reflexions

on their sexual practice, both Nicole and Deidre fashioned their desires and themselves as distinctive sexual subjects.

This is not to say that they invented the tools of their respective engagement. Prevailing discourses of sexuality established parameters of possibility and, as such, provided the symbolic resources required in the making of their sexual subjectivity. Clearly, the most significant was the 'Madonna/whore' or 'have/hold' discourse with its dichotomous and dichotomising categories. Such a discourse imposes marked limitations on women's opportunities to develop an identity that draws on a diversity of sexual practices and relations. Its binary structure makes only a very narrow range of sexual practices and circumstances socially valorised, namely those associated with respectable feminine sexuality. Accordingly, those who transgress its imperatives often pay severe bodily penalties in the form of emotional distress associated with guilt and self recrimination. Deidre's and Nicole's stories illustrate such an experience.

At the same time, Deidre's and Nicole's accounts suggest significant limitations in analytical approaches that view sexual practice as a non-reflexive 'performance' of normative discourse. Both stories express an agency that defies an understanding of sexual identity as having 'no ontological substance' (Butler, 1990: 173) beyond discourse. They reveal how they shape themselves as sexual agents in relation to an ongoing engagement with, and negotiation of, discursively constructed meanings but they do so through an embodied process involving strong emotional responses, self-reflexion and rearrangement of intimate attachments. Deidre engages with discursive meanings in her struggle to reproduce herself as the good and sexually respectable woman; Nicole resists ideas of feminine sexual propriety, instead remaking herself as what she understands to be 'equal to a man'. Without question, discourse is a major

feature of the process but the specificity of the women's stories and the individual struggles they experience over time suggest the presence of an agency that is not reducible to embodied discursive performance.

The concept of performativity has, of course, become popular in gender studies largely as a result of the contribution made by the North American feminist, Judith Butler (1990, 1993). As Lois McNay (2000: 33-35) reminds us in her discussion of Butler's work, discursive performativity does not exclude agency. Rather, according to Butler, performativity produces it. The repeated inscription of 'symbolic norms' through performativity produces a stable subject who has the capacity to resist them, usually in the marginalised domains of 'excluded and delegitimated' sex (Butler 1993). Such an understanding of embodied agency, as McNay (2000: 35) explains, has attracted sustained debate and criticism. This has focused on Butler's failure to escape the 'over-determined' nature of the concept of agency she advances. As McNay (2000:35) puts it, for Butler, agency is a 'property of sedimented symbolic structures rather than ... an anticipatory element inherent in praxis'.

Butler's approach shares similarities with many within sociology that understand social organisation in terms of 'scripts' and of social actors as performing 'roles'. Basically, these scripts direct our 'performances', determining our actions. Individual improvisation is acknowledged as a central feature, allowing for individual expression and agency. Yet, ultimately, the 'non-scripted' features or improvisations associated with people's experiences and actions, remain precisely that. In other words, they are of little or no import in shaping enduring patterns of practice. From such a perspective, there is no dynamism in the relation between script and improvisation. All sorts of improvisations may occur but the script remains largely unchanged. Such an approach is trapped within

a synchronicity that renders it resistant to conceptualising and explaining how new 'scripts' may occur over time (McNay 2000; Connell 1983).

One of the defining features of the new sociological research that approaches sexual practice and identity from a life-history perspective is not only the emphasis on participants as active agents engaged in interpreting the meanings of discourses available to them. It also involves recognition of the role of agential practice in altering the social patterns of sexual practice that develop over time (Connell 1987, 1995; Dowsett 1996). From this perspective, bodily practice is central to understanding the ways that discourse operates in the social world. For proponents of this view, it is only through bodily practice that the symbolism of discourse becomes a 'real thing' (Connell 1987, 2002). Both discourse and symbolisation are understood as practice that has its own and distinctive social patterning but it is only through its *operationalisation* in bodily practice that it has any significance for understanding human sexual experience (Connell, 1987). For both Deidre and Nicole, it is in their bodily practice of sex that discursive meanings are engaged, negotiated and given full meaning. As such, they are not objects of discursive regulation but, rather, self-reflexive agents who interact with prevailing sexual discourse in the making of their own sexual subjectivities.

Transformative moments

The second theme to emerge from respondents' narratives relates to the previous theme of the embodied relation between discourse and practice. However, here the data centre more specifically on the way that this embodied relation engenders pivotal or transformative moments that change the trajectories of women's sexual life histories.

Certainly, Deidre's and Nicole's narratives reveal how women's sexual pursuits are conducted within a highly contested arena. However, it is Kathleen's life history that demonstrates how negotiating the conflicts and uncertainties associated with the field can generate significant transformations in the making of sexual identity. .

Kathleen was 43 at the time of her interview and married with two children. Marital sex had been problematic because of what Kathleen perceived to be her husband's lack of sexual aptitude. Before she married, her sexual experiences were characterised, for the most part, by confusion and a strong sense of obligation towards her sex partners. It took a long time for Kathleen to learn that she 'didn't actually have to fuck [men]' in order for them to like her. She recalled the first time that such an option became evident:

[I'd] been having a big snogging session with this guy ... and we were actually in bed. And he had his clothes off and I had half of my clothes off. And I just said 'I'm sorry I can't do this'. And if he'd have said 'yes, you can', I'd have said 'OK, [laugh] OK, I guess, yeah' [laugh]. But he was really good about it. I think somehow it gave him more respect for me because I'd said no.

Kathleen's refusal was precarious. She admits that if her partner had pressured her, she would have agreed to sex. But he respected her wish and, as a result, she realised that she was an active agent in her sexual encounters. She described how this experience laid the groundwork for subsequent ones:

(With) one guy I said, 'I like you, let's go home together but I don't want sex tonight'. And he said, 'OK'. And I did it with two or three guys and so I was like 'Hey, this works!' [laugh]

Kathleen gradually gained confidence in herself and her right to sexual self-determination, and developed an understanding that this was related to men's capacity to recognise such rights in their sexual practice with women.

Kathleen's story demonstrates how her sexual practice was powerfully shaped by social discourses of feminine sexuality, in particular, that she had an obligation to engage in

sexual relations with men. However, her story also shows that Kathleen was not simply inculcated by discourse. While she typically entered sexual encounters with the belief that women are obliged to let men fuck them, she eventually exited one of them with a rather different understanding – that women have sexual choice. The moment when Kathleen said ‘no’ to sex revealed the possibility *not* to have sex. It was in the ‘doing’ of sex – the bodily practice of sex – that Kathleen’s discursively-constructed beliefs about sex were transformed.

Kathleen’s story reveals that practice does not mechanically replicate discursive meanings. Instead, embodied practice can ‘be divergent or cyclical... it is not a logical requirement that social reproduction occurs; that is simply a possible empirical outcome’ (Connell, 1987: 141). For Connell (1987), it is fundamentally a matter of probability: the reproduction of normative practice is more likely because of the powerful quality of normalising discourse. However, practice that diverges or subverts normative discourse is an ever present prospect. The embodied relation between Kathleen’s sexual practice and her agential participation meant that she was able to intervene in and change the understandings that had ‘sedimented’ over time and that had shaped her sexual practices with men.

For some women in the study, the capacity of embodied sexual practice to reveal new possibilities often originated in erotic bodily pleasures. Elena’s interview was replete with such stories. She was 63, lived alone, and had an active social and sexual life. She began her interview by telling stories of childhood sex play while growing up in Europe:

All those boys, they taught me, when I was ten or twelve, how to swim by putting their hand [gestures upwards] holding me in the water. They always seemed to slip [laugh]. That’s why I think it’s so horrific that sort of rape and that child sex, you know, when all those horrible Australian old bastards go to the Philippines and they sell [girls

aged] five years old. It's not just the physical harm, it's losing all this, all this long seduction, which can be very beautiful, you know?

Elena's childhood sex play was innocent and pleasurable. As the excerpt above shows, she was revolted by the way that children's innocent sexuality is destroyed by the predatory sexuality of men like the 'Australian old bastards'. Elena remembered her childhood experiences as joyful explorations of her body. These culminated in what Elena described as an almost overwhelming desire to know more about sex and, by the time she first experienced sexual intercourse, she said she felt like she 'was bursting'.

Kathleen also described exhilarating physical experiences during her early adolescence, beginning with a memorable first kiss:

I was fourteen when we started going out together. And we mostly just did kissing and hugging ... but he's where I found out what lust was. We had a goodbye kiss in the hallway that just lit my fire. I was like 'holy dooley!' Um, yeah, and that's where I was like, hey, this is good stuff. And then I went looking for it. He could kiss. He was the beginning of my life-long affection for good kissers.

Both Elena's and Kathleen's narratives recount their delight in discovering bodily pleasure and the joy it gave them as very young women. Elena described accidentally learning about sexual pleasure by being touched by the boys who were her childhood playmates, and Kathleen reported her introduction to lust through the enormous arousal she experienced in one of her first kissing encounters. Gary Dowsett (1996: 159) calls such corporeal possibilities 'body-erotic potential', suggesting that the sexual development of children is shaped by the exploration of bodily pleasure. He contends that the discovery of such pleasure prior to 'any discernable formal or informal discursive inscription' (Dowsett, 1996: 169) sets the pursuit of pleasure in motion because social injunctions against such sensual pleasures are not yet learned. This is certainly evident in Kathleen's and Elena's stories. As both women explicitly report, their early discovery

of pleasure prefigured their later experiences with sex. Elena's reference to the 'long seduction' and Kathleen's comment about 'going looking for' good kissers reveals the way that they understood these early experiences to be formative of subsequent ones. Elena's 'long seduction', for instance, set the stage for a lifetime of comfortable and pleasurable sex. Her life history revealed further discoveries of 'body-erotic potential', such as her first experience with anal sex:

Somehow we were doing it from the back and, you know, he touched me there and it felt pretty pleasant [laugh].

Her narrative described how in touching her anus, her partner unleashed a whole new kind of sexual pleasure:

There is something more involved, something different... And, I don't know if you ever had it, but it's altogether a different sort of sensation and the orgasm is very, very deep.

Clearly, this 'altogether different sort of sensation' was generated by bodily practice. It was in the 'doing' of sex that Elena discovered a new realm of sexual potentialities: sensations and orgasms that were qualitatively different from anything she had previously experienced.

Evident in both Elena's and Kathleen's stories is the way that their bodily practices and pleasures shaped their orientation to sexual experience with men. Their narratives reveal that the body does not simply perform sex. Rather, it is irreducibly constitutive in the making of sexual experience and the development of oneself as a sexual subject. Elena's and Kathleen's narratives show how an attunement and responsiveness to pleasurable sexual embodiment can play a significant role in women's preparedness to explore this embodiment further and to actively pursue sexual relations with men in order to do so. Gary Dowsett's (1996) study reveals similar transformative moments in the

sexual life histories of gay men. He illustrates how it was in the 'doing' of gay sex that heterosexually-identified men experienced emotionally-connected desire for other men. For them, this revealed the possibility of something beyond sex - the possibility of *being* a gay man. As Dowsett (1996) comments, such moments 'lifted sex out of the purely physical and deposited [it] into a psychic domain' (p. 159).

Elena's and Kathleen's experiences can be similarly understood except that their transformations involved the discovery of themselves as desiring and agential sexual subjects who actively pursued sexual relations with men to secure and further develop their experience of physical pleasure. This is not to say that such a transformation involved the establishment of instrumental sexual relationships with men. Far from it. For both women, the explicit pursuit and exploration of intense sexual pleasure was strongly associated with relationships with men that they felt were romantic, loving and respectful. Yet, neither was satisfied to forgo the former for the latter. Their sexual embodiment had permitted them to see beyond the discourse of compulsory heterosexuality that offered to women no guarantee of reciprocal rights to pleasure. Through their bodily experiences new erotic possibilities were revealed. To invert Dowsett's (1996) description, for Elena and Kathleen, sex was lifted out of the psychic and deposited in the physical.

The sexual self as self-reflexive and relational: 'The thing about sleeping with a lot of guys is...'

The third main theme to arise from respondents' life stories was the significance of time, self-reflexion and relationality in the development of their sexual identity. Kathleen described a life of plentiful and varied sexual experiences. She reflectively compared these, talking about good and bad sex, forgettable and unforgettable partners and her

own shifting understandings of her life experiences with sex. In describing such varied experiences, Kathleen articulated the way in which 'sleeping with lots of guys' permitted comparisons and, therein, a process of 'sexual learning'. She commented:

The thing about sleeping with lots of guys is that often times it is not memorable. You know, you just have in and out and in and out. So [p] uh, if any were outstanding then that makes it memorable. One of them just talked and talked [laugh].

Kathleen's broad sexual experiences with different partners and under varying circumstances meant she was able to reflect upon, identify and articulate what was good sex for her and what wasn't. In 'sleeping with lots of guys' she learned to recognise what she liked in a sexual partner. For instance, in the preceding excerpt she made reference to a man who talked a lot. However, in other parts of her narrative she identified how comparisons enabled her to learn how 'good' sex felt physically:

I had had lots of ordinary sex. And I just think in my twenties, I'd started off on the wrong foot. I think if I'd been fifteen, sixteen and actually gotten a good, healthy long term kind of relationship, I'd have got it. But because I had so much bad sex, it sort of got mixed up in so many other bad things that I didn't really get it imprinted on me what good sex was, what good sex felt like, until my thirties and then I just went oooohhh! I mean orgasms. I never had orgasms in my twenties and when I did they were these little piddly things and in my thirties it's like wow!

Kathleen learned about the physical pleasures of 'good' sex during an extramarital affair. She described how this experience taught her what sexual pleasure meant to her, especially the feeling of penetration:

I mean fingers and tongues are nice but for me they're just an accompaniment to the main course... I just like the feeling of the in and out.

Kathleen was confident and explicit about her sexual likes and dislikes. Such self-awareness was, as Kathleen herself attests, made possible through the parallels and contrasts of her varied sexual experiences – through 'sleeping with lots of guys'. The 'physical discovery' she experienced in her sexual affair could not have occurred in the

absence of her previous experiences with her husband and the sensation of 'bad' sex in which penetration was rare.

Dowsett (1996) identifies a similar kind of learning among gay men, which he called 'sexual skilling'. This involved the discovery of the 'physical possibilities of the body; what hands, mouths, penises and anuses can achieve' (p. 143) and gaining skills in the 'subtle and nuanced movement of bodies in sexual encounters: ... the inviting glance, the suggestive movements of bodies, the first contact, the sequencing of exploring bodies, and so on' (p. 144). Yet, Dowsett's sexual learning seems limited in comparison to the sexual discoveries revealed in Kathleen's story. Certainly, she described learning about the possibilities of the erotic body and how to choreograph sexual encounters. But Kathleen's narrative also shows how her sexual development extended beyond the physical to learning about and understanding her male partners, discovering their potential for mutual decision-making and sexual engagement, and recognising what allowed her to maximise her agency in sexual relations. Clearly, as Kathleen's story shows, the development of sexual identity is an agential process that occurs over time. As such it may be understood as a kind of *project* in which sexual subjects are brought into being through their sexually embodied engagements, responses and negotiations with their partners. The process of producing sexual identity, then, is necessarily *relational*. For women who identify as heterosexual, their sexual identity always involves their relations with their male partners.

Feminine sexual subjectivity as a generative project

It is evident that the women in this study gained a sense of sexual 'selfhood' through their practice over time. Time is an important undercurrent in all of the themes explored in the study. According to the women's accounts, it was a crucial feature of the process

of bringing a feminine sexual identity into being insofar as it involved generating a singular, connected life trajectory through linking previous experiences to subsequent ones. Yet it is not temporality *per se* that is vital in the making of sexual subjectivity. Rather, as Jean Paul Sartre (1967: 91-95) explained some time ago, it is the *generative* nature of *practice* that is foundational in understanding human identity. It is precisely because this process is generative that it necessarily involves and invokes the concept of time. For Sartre, the human subject develops in relation to the reflexive accumulation of actions over time. This is not, however, a simple linear process of addition and accretion. Rather, it is a dynamic and dialectical *project* as he explains below:

...(M)an (sic) is characterized above all by his (sic) going beyond a situation, and by what he (sic) succeeds in making of what has been made...The most rudimentary behavior must be determined both in relation to the real and present factors which condition it and in relation to a certain object, *still to come*, (emphasis added) which it is trying to bring into being. This is what we call *the project*. (Sartre 1967:91).

The 'project' of being human, then, is intrinsically generative, involving actions that are predicated on their predecessors but never in an automatic and mechanical fashion that ensures their mimetic reproduction. Lois McNay (2000) comes to similar conclusions. . She disclaims the Foucauldian argument that the self is constituted by a series of disjointed, incommensurable subject positions that have no chronological relation. Instead, like Sartre, McNay argues that the self is generated through specific configurations of practices over time. This is made possible through the indivisible relationship between time and practice. She writes that practice generates time: 'time is engendered in the actualisation of the act' (McNay 2000: 40). In the process, the subject

is intrinsically imparted with a coherent sense of self. The embodied subject is not an incommensurable collection of subject positions. Rather it acquires 'the dynamic unity of change through time' (McNay, 2000: 27).

Each of the life histories presented here discloses a process that produces identities that endure and develop over time, and that derive from creative and embodied self-reflexion and through relations with others. The subjectivities explored in this study cannot be thought of as simply a collection of disjointed, incommensurable subject positions - the 'good' wife, the sexual conqueror, the sexual hedonist and so forth – that are momentarily generated and then vanish as the next discursive construction occurs. Deidre's moment of 'being' the whore does not simply evaporate, nor do Kathleen's momentary 'feelings of good sex'. Each moment of identity production is predicated on a previous experience and constitutive of the next. Kathleen could not have known the feeling of good sex without her previous experiences of 'bad' sex. Likewise, Deidre moves forward in her life with a steadfast desire to regain her 'proper' femininity. For both women, their moments of sexual subjectivity operate collectively through time according to a dynamic that produces an ongoing and developing subjectivity that is both manifold and singular.

Conclusion

The sexual life histories of the women in this study provide insight into the specificity of the embodied dynamics involved in sexual practice and the making of feminine sexual identities. These stories provide an account of women's sexual relations with men that shows the deeply agential character of this embodiment. Normative and normalising discourses of female sexuality are significant but they operate as symbolic technologies that the participants adopt in making sense of their sexual practice and in fashioning its

development. The corporeality of sexual experience is itself also determinant here. Sexually embodied practice, according to the women's descriptions, produces diverse experiences including joy, exhilaration, confusion, pain, shame, embarrassment, self-loathing, and transcendence. These both arise from and shape the women's desires and fuel the kinds of sexual relationships and identities they pursue. In the process, they learn about what they like and dislike, and, as significantly, what kinds of relationships with men are likely to generate these. Mutuality and inter-subjectivity are strongly associated with the development of women's agential sexual subjectivity.

Certainly the body and its practices are shaped by the regulatory discourses of the social world. Yet embodiment is also constitutive of social meanings associated with sexual practice and identity. The body seems to be a 'mutable and dynamic frontier' (McNay, 2000: 32) between the symbolic and material domains and it is in this dynamic relationship that the sexual subject emerges.

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