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## Negotiating desire and sexual subjectivity: Narratives of young lesbian avengers

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### Abstract

This paper examines the negotiation and interpretation of first experiences of sexual desire in a group of 8 young women who identify as Lesbian Avengers, using in depth narrative interviews. Accounts of desire and its relationship to sexual subjectivity were organised under 4 broad themes: *Is this lesbian desire?* describes the difficulty in categorising first experiences of desire towards another woman as sexual; *My desire makes me a dyke* examines desire leading to sudden self-identification as a lesbian; or conversely, to the repression of desire and avoidance of lesbian identity; *Lesbian desire is dangerous* considers the negative representation of lesbian desire as perverse, sex being seen as central to lesbian identity, and the experience of being subjected to condemnation and abuse; *Dealing with dangerous desire* looks at the main strategies adopted in response to the above: the positioning of self as outsider, but strong because of it; embracing a transformation of self through becoming lesbian; or remaining in the closet.

Key words: Desire; Lesbian; Subjectivity; Sexuality; Narrative.

### Introduction

Desire and sexuality are central to women's subjectivity, particularly for those who identify as lesbian, dyke or queer. To be a dyke is to be deemed infused with sexuality, indeed to be defined by desire – albeit deviant desire – in representations found in popular culture, film and pornography. Self-identification as a dyke is also tied to desire: for many women desire marks the moment of definition of self as outside the heterosexual matrix. Looking more broadly, a number of feminist researchers have argued that the negotiation of sexual desire is central to the development of young women's sense of personal empowerment and entitlement (Fine, 1988; Thompson, 1995; Cowie and Lees, 1987; Tolman and Szalacha, 1999; Tolman, 1994b). However, despite all of this, there has been a marked absence of psychological research examining young women's subjective experiences of sexual desire (Tolman, 1994a). Research on sexuality has focussed on sexual *behaviour*, adopting survey methodologies which examine issues such as safe sex, sexual intercourse, and contraception. This has resulted in a limited or one-dimensional view of young women's experiences (Tolman and Szalacha, 1999), and reflects what has been described as the 'missing discourse of desire' in adults' discussions of girls' sexuality (Fine 1988). Whilst there has recently been a development of research which does focus specifically on young women's experiences of sexual desire (Tolman and Szalacha, 1999; Tolman, 1994a, 1994b), this research is limited, as it has concentrated on the experiences of heterosexually identified girls. If lesbian desire or

sexual experiences are included, they are in the minority (Tolman and Szalacha, 1999; Thompson, 1990). There is a need for this imbalance to be redressed, and for research to be carried out to specifically examine the meaning of sexual desire and its relationship to sexual subjectivity, in young women who identify as lesbian, dyke or queer.

For young women, regardless of their sexual identification, the recognition of feelings as sexual desire, the negotiation of first sexual experiences, and the development of sexual pleasure, are stages of adolescent development potentially fraught with conflict and confusion (Thompson, 1990). Girls are often uncertain about whether or not the feelings they have are desire (Tolman, 1996), and find that early sexual experiences are disappointing (Thompson, 1990), as they often do not match up to the fantasy of sexual fulfilment perpetuated in popular culture (Ussher, 1997a). For girls who identify as lesbian<sup>1</sup>, negotiating sexual subjectivity in the context of a phallogocentric culture where lesbian desire is invisible, stigmatised, or seen as source of titillation for men, and where there are few positive role models (Zitter, 1987), the process is arguably more complex. For despite recent discussions of 'girl-power', post-feminism, and the celebration of woman as agentic sexual subject, hegemonic sexual scripts still position woman's desire as a response to man, 'sex' as heterosexual intercourse, and practices or desires that deviate from this narrow norm as problematic or perverse (Ussher, 1997a; Weeks, 1990). Popular culture may have begun to provide us with glimpses of lesbian lives (Hamer & Budge, 1994). Yet young women who self-identify as lesbian necessarily negotiate sexual subjectivity and desire in a cultural context where fears and fantasies associated with the lesbian 'other' are rife, and where on an everyday level they are liable to be subjected to rejection, threat and abuse. The question is, how do young women negotiate and experience desire in this context?

The present study was carried out to address this question, through examining the experience and meaning of sexual desire in a group of self-identified young lesbians living in London. Our research question was phenomenological: how do these young women describe their early experiences of sexual desire for another woman, and how do they account for the relationship between their experience of sexual desire and the taking up of a subject position or identity as lesbian?

The research was conducted from a feminist critical realist epistemological standpoint. Critical realism affirms the existence of reality, both material, psychological and environmental, but at the same time recognises that this experience is always mediated by culture, language, and political interests rooted in factors such as sexuality, race, gender or social class (Pilgrim & Rogers, 1997; Ussher, 1996). This is an approach that allows for acknowledgment of the material, discursive and intrapsychic aspects of experience, as well as the cultural and historical context in which individual women are positioned, and in which meaning about experience is created. Being grounded in a feminist standpoint means acknowledging that women's voices and experiences are silenced, distorted and obscured in a phallogocentric or patriarchal culture. A less distorted view can emerge by attempting to view the world "through our participants eyes" (Harding, 1991; 1993), in particular through attending to the narratives or accounts of women (Reissman, 1993). It also leads to reflexivity on the part of the researchers, and to a recognition that research is relational, in that researchers being self-knowledge and experience into the process of designing, conducting, analysing and interpreting research.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Eight women, aged 17 to 24 years, took part in in-depth, semi-structured narrative interviews. They were all members of a non-violent direct action group, the Lesbian Avengers. The Lesbian Avengers were

set up in London in 1994. They are an international organisation, started in New York, whose central premise is action not discussion. They carry out high profile, media friendly, 'sexy' actions to raise the awareness of lesbians. This particular group of young lesbians were chosen because they had all had experiences of sexual desire for women, had all openly and positively taken up a lesbian identity, and they were willing to take part in the research. All lived in London at the time of interviewing; half were of UK origin and the remaining four were German, Irish, Israeli and Pakistani. During the course of the interviews two women self-identified as working class and two as middle class. Four of the women were on undergraduate courses, one had completed an MA, one was doing a BTEC, and two were completing A-levels.

### **Procedure**

Semi structured narrative interviews, conducted by JMS, were used to explore the meanings women gave to their experiences of desire and of being lesbian (Reissman, 1993; Mishler, 1986). The interviews were tape recorded and fully transcribed, including annotations for pauses, by the interviewer. Participants were given a copy of the interview schedule before the interviews took place. Interviews were face to face and lasted between 60 and 180 minutes. For the purpose of the present research, the questions were: Can you remember when you first became aware of your sexual desire for a woman; can you tell me about it? Can you tell me about your first sexual encounter or experience with a woman? What does being 'lesbian' mean to you? Analysis of other questions on 'coming out' and mental health are reported elsewhere (Ussher & Mooney-Somers, forthcoming).

### **Analytic strategy**

Narrative analysis, which takes as the object of study the story itself, was used to examine the interviews. Narrative analysis assumes that the stories told do not simply mirror a world 'out there', but that they are constructed, creatively authored, rhetorical, replete with assumptions and interpretive (Reissman, 1993, p5). It was assumed that narratives act to constitute experience, meaning and reality, but that it is in the telling that we make sense of phenomena (Young, 1987) and are assumed to be doing particular 'identity work' (Ponse, 1978). After transcription<sup>ii</sup>, the interviews were coded, line by line, thematically. Themes were then grouped together, and then checked for emerging patterns, for variability and consistency, and for the function and effects of specific narratives. The interpretation of these themes was conducted by a process of reading and re-reading, as well as reference to relevant literature and consultation with colleagues. This process follows what Paul Stenner (1993: 114) has termed a 'thematic decomposition', a close reading which attempts to separate a given text into coherent themes or stories which reflect subject positions allocated to or taken up by a person (Harre and Davies, 1990; Ussher, 2000).

However, narratives do not simply 'speak for themselves' (Reissman, 1993, p22). They are both interpretive and open to interpretation. As every text is open to several readings or interpretations, our analysis is aiming at 'believability, not certitude, for enlargement of understanding rather than control' (Stivers, 1993, p. 424). The approach to the coding and reading of the interviews was partially grounded. That is, we were 'open to the data', but we were also influenced by knowledge of previous research on sexuality and desire, as well as our own personal experiences. In terms of the current study, several issues are relevant here. Both authors identify as lesbian. The interviewer (JMS) was of a similar age to the women, and was a member of the group that the women belonged to, and so held, simultaneously, the role of empathic group member, and the role of psychologist or interviewer. Whilst each stage of the research was discussed and agreed upon by both authors, the initial reading and detailed coding of the data was conducted by the interviewer (JMS). The analysis and interpretation of the data presented

here was conducted by the non-interviewer (JU), who is older than and had not met the interviewees, and was not identified as lesbian when she was a young woman first experiencing desire.

## Results and Discussion

Our presentation of the young women's accounts of desire and its relationship to sexual subjectivity is organised under 4 broad themes. The theme *The significance of a kiss: Is this lesbian desire?* examines accounts of the difficulty in categorising first experiences of desire towards another girl or woman as lesbian or sexual and the complex relationship between corporeal acts, sex and desire. The theme *My desire makes me a dyke* focuses on accounts of desire for another woman, or being the object of desire, leading to sudden self identification as a lesbian, or a dyke; or conversely, to the repression of desire for women because it leads to the taking up of a lesbian identity. The theme *Lesbian desire is dangerous* considers accounts of the negative representation of lesbian desire, and the consequences of taking up a lesbian identity. The fourth theme *Dealing with dangerous desire* looks at the main strategies reported as being adopted in response to these negative material and discursive practices associated with lesbian subjectivity.

### The significance of a kiss: Is this lesbian desire?

**Recognising desire retrospectively.** How do we know when a feeling is sexual desire? How do we know when our desire is 'lesbian'? This is not an easy question to answer, for interpreting a feeling, thought or bodily change as 'sexual desire' is not a straightforward or automatic process. Growing up with the default option of taken for granted heterosexuality may mean that intense feelings, or erotic attachments, for another woman are not positioned as 'sexual'. There is no language, other than that of deviancy or pathology, for them to be seen as such. Many of the interviewees reported not having positioned particular feelings towards another woman as sexual desire when they first occurred, feelings which in retrospect they would categorise in this way. Strong feelings towards teachers at school were one of the most common experiences.

I was fifteen ahmm I was in the second year of high school and I sort of had this massive huge crush on a teacher... in a way at the beginning I didn't realise what was happening and ahmm, the only thing I knew that there was something in me that made me do things that are totally, I totally couldn't understand them, (.) and the main idea was basically to hang out with her as much as possible and like to be with her, ahmm, I suppose in a way for her to like me

Intense feelings between girls, and the idealisation of teachers at school, are portrayed as a normal part of adolescent experience in girls' comics and novels (Ussher, 1997b). This provides a discursive framework for the interpretation of strong emotions between girls as part of friendship, or feelings for a teacher as a 'crush', a passing phase which does not signify lesbian desire. As the woman interviewed above went on to say 'I didn't really think, does that mean I'm a lesbian'. For many it was only when they later took up a lesbian identity that they reinterpreted and renamed these past feelings as sexual desire. Are the women aware of this portrayal of intense feelings between women as idealisation and not desire? And how do they hold these simultaneously contradictory readings? It is perhaps a testament to the need for a consistent identity story that they have rejected these explanations and repositioned their feelings as desire.

we had a gorgeous piano teacher but I only ahmm like knew I was like it was different from what everyone else was feeling when I was in ahmm when I was about eleven, ten or eleven, and only when I got to secondary school cause I actually put a name to it.

We could interpret these accounts as a reconstruction of past self or sexuality, something which is common in women who make the transition to a lesbian identity later in life, when early same sex sexual experiences are reinterpreted by women as signs of a 'true' lesbian self that lay undiscovered (Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995, p101). However, we could also interpret this as a normal part of adolescent sexual development, where experiences occurring at a corporeal or intra-psychic level are not necessarily categorised as sexual when they first occur. This is because the meaning of sexual experience is socially or discursively constructed, and thus sexual desire is partly a learnt phenomenon (Rubin, 1984; Vance, 1984a). In a social context where young women's sexual desire is discursively represented as heterosexual response (Ussher 1997a), it is not surprising that being 'stirred up' by another woman is positioned as anything other than sexual. One young woman described feelings that she would now categorise as lesbian desire as initially being experienced as 'nervousness', or as a feeling of being impressed by another women.

I was writing articles for this magazine (2) this local feminist magazine (.) and we had one of our meetings she came in to the room and I was like (.) bloody hell this is making me nervous

I mean I didn't (2) don't think I had a crush on her or something it was just like I was really impressed by her

Fairy stories, teenage magazines, romantic fiction, and Hollywood films provide us with representations of women feeling 'nervous' in the presence of men, this being a sign of passion or love (Ussher, 1997a). For young lesbians, there is a dearth of such imagery (Zitter, 1987). For young women faced with these feelings and trying to extrapolate from these representations there is a confusion: 'do I desire her or do I want to be like her'. One consequence of this is that for many of the young women, it was only when an unequivocally sexual encounter occurred, that they could recognise their feelings towards another woman to be those of sexual desire.

it didn't necessarily kind of occur to me that (2) I had these feelings and thoughts about this woman it was just it was just kind of there... we used to have huge long in-depth conversations like what I wanted from life ....I was only probably really aware of kind of perv feelings (laughing) or sexual feelings (3) when we kissed which was completely ahmm (.) un ahmm a big surprise completely ahmm out of the blue

The lesbian as sleeping beauty awoken by a kiss.

**Sex: But not lesbian sex** However, a kiss is never just a kiss. For consensual erotic or sexual experiences with other girls are part of many young women's experience, and don't necessarily lead to the taking up of a lesbian identity (Bell and Weinberg, 1978). Indeed, for a number of the interviewees, there was description of a resistance to positioning sexual experiences, as sign of being 'lesbian'. In some cases, this was literally a resistance to the kiss.

we sort of, we got off with each other but without kissing, (2) because we thought that if we kissed then we'd be lesbians and so we didn't do that and it was just very, it was just, it was just

like this huge build up in intensity and then we sort of got off with each other, or how ever you put it

The intimacy of kissing, and what this signifies in terms of desire, sexual closeness and giving up of the self to the other, is evident in other accounts of sexuality. For example, sex-workers frequently report that they do not kiss their clients, and can thus categorise the physical encounter as 'work', not 'sex'. Between two girls, the avoidance of the material act of kissing functions to position the encounter as friendship, 'messaging around', or even sexual, but not as a sign of being 'lesbian', and thus the girls do not need to negotiate issues associated with taking up a lesbian identity. This parallels other reports of same-sex sexual experiences which are not categorised as 'gay' or 'lesbian' by one or both parties (Faderman, 1993; Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995), and reminds us that the meaning of bodily acts is always open to interpretation. A kiss can have many different meanings.

***Lesbian sex without desire*** A kiss does not always signify desire. For a number of the interviewees gave accounts of lesbian sex without pleasure and desire: engaging in sex with a woman whom they did not find particularly attractive or desirable because they wanted to have a 'lesbian' experience, or to *be* lesbian.

she sort of, basically she snogged me, and asked me back with her, and I said yeah, didn't, I didn't find her attractive at all, but I was desperate, and ahmm, went over to hers, and had sex, and that was the first time

I didn't really fancy her, physically, particularly, but .... we had a bit of a thing, and then ever since then, well about for, that was about like about 2 months before, well three months before she went away, and then we did stuff together, we, we never actually went out, so I didn't, like I said I didn't really fancy her that much, , we did (2) occasionally sleep together, and we snogged a lot,

This is not an unusual experience for young women exploring their sexuality; heterosexual girls also report early sexual encounters where they had little desire for their partner, taking part in the sexual act out of curiosity, desire to lose their virginity, or because they want to 'have sex' (Thompson, 1990). For young lesbian women there is perhaps another reason. The implications of taking on a lesbian identity are substantial; sex with a woman they do not desire may be a way of 'testing the waters' before taking the risk with either a love relationship or embracing a lesbian identity.

Or perhaps it is very simply a desire to have sex with a woman, but faced with a lack of knowledge of where to find a woman they desire they take what is available, as the first interviewee says 'I was desperate'.

They also report a split between body and mind in accounts of desire: the mind sometimes saying 'yes' when the body says 'no', and vice versa (Tolman and Szalacha, 1999). As sex is positioned as central to lesbian subjectivity (see *sex = lesbian* theme below), it is arguable that in order to take up the sexual subject position 'lesbian', the women interviewed here had an additional reason to have sex without desire. Many gave accounts of how sex with a woman made them feel more 'authentic' as a lesbian, less concerned with the anxieties they reported to be associated with coming out, such as 'am I dressed right, have I got the right hair cut?' (Ussher and Mooney-Somers, forthcoming; Ainley, 1995). Sex was somehow easier to negotiate than the complexities of ever changing codes of behaviour and dress.

### **My desire makes me a dyke**

**I suddenly knew I was a lesbian** However, a kiss can awaken more than desire – it can produce a lesbian subject. Indeed, the first kiss, or first sexual touch, can produce a transformation in subjectivity.

it all happened, as soon as Hannah touched me (.) it I knew, I knew what it meant and the next day I was like looking around and I was seeing like all the gorgeous women and I was like wow, and I was like, I was a lesbian then, that was it, there wasn't any sort of long, oh my god I must get to know myself process, oh my god you know I'm this, you know this happened and it's just like I was a dyke and I didn't give a shit

In interviews with young lesbians in the United States, Sharon Thompson has found similar accounts of women positioning themselves as lesbian, dyke or queer after the first kiss. One woman commented 'And then we kissed, and it was the most incredible – I knew I was gay at that minute for the first time, because I had made out before and it never felt like that. And it was so incredible' (Thompson, 1990, p353).

**Being the object of desire** We see the same process of identification in accounts of being the object of another woman's desire, and the way in which that led to a recognition of the young women's own desirability, and their lesbianism, both represented as a positive and empowering experience.

we, went to, attended the same college and she sort of made it known to people I knew that she liked me , fancied me. J: how did that feel?D: ah, it felt jolly good, very nice thank you very much, very flattering, made me feel desirable. ahmm, made me feel good, ahmm, and it was, I don't know, it was sort of affirmed that it was okay, cause I, I had never sort of , I don't know I, I never ahm, that never happened to me with blokes, sort of, maybe it had and I just wasn't interested so it didn't seem as nice, but it wasn't as nice when blokes made, did that, let it be known that they liked me, it sort of it wasn't, you know so it sort of opened up possibility of sexual encounter.

This account of recognising one's own desire through being desired by another is not uncommon in narratives of desire expressed by heterosexual girls (i.e. Toman & Szalacha, 1999). However, it arguably has a different meaning here. In becoming the object of masculine desire, many young heterosexual women take up an archetypal feminine position (Berger, 1972; Mulvey, 1975), or masquerade as feminine (Riviere, 1935; Ussher, 1997a) and as a result may experience a suppression of agency, a process which many feminist critics have seen as disempowering (Hollway, 1989; Lees, 1993). In order to maintain a sense of personal agency, yet still engage in sexual relationships with men, many young heterosexual women masquerade as feminine by 'doing girl' (Ussher, 1997a, pp 450). For young lesbians there is arguably is no need to masquerade in this way. They can take up the position of object of the sexual gaze of another woman without the concomitant loss of agency which is associated with traditional heterosexual gender relations, as being the object of desire has a different meaning here. This is something that young lesbians are arguably aware of, for as the same interviewee quoted above commented, when talking of her desire now:

I feel I can take the initiative, and be dominant or and be active whereas in straight relationships I've had, ah, I never felt that was allowed, or was okay, or I would be seen as masculine if I did that, ahmm, whereas now it's sort of okay, I can be masculine or feminine, in those little inverted comma things, I can do anything I want, cause I am a woman, but I'm not a straight

woman, so I don't feel I have to behave as a straight woman is supposed to behave and be passive and you know. I approach people .... and I do pursue people

Being lesbian, here, is defined in opposition to being 'straight', and as such as giving a freedom to be passive or active, to desire or be desired, to be sexual subject and object. For most of the interviewees, this freedom and flexibility was reported as giving them a sense of both pleasure and power – being lesbian put them outside of the constraints of the 'heterosexual matrix' (Butler, 1990), something which the majority stated they wanted.

***I don't want to be a lesbian*** However, for a number of the young women, the categorisation of their feelings towards another woman as lesbian desire was reported to be initially anxiety provoking or fearful, and thus the feelings were resisted or rejected, as was the identity 'lesbian'.

I didn't want to be lesbian, no I had these feelings but I wanted them to go away you know

it just hit me someone directed at me yeah I had I had some idea yeah J: hmm and then what happenedU: I just panicked and it just got around and girls just joked and laughed you knowJ: hmmU: but from then on until I didn't come out. Years after my life was one messed up life (.) because that's from then on that it was confirmed that I was lesbian

Being the object of sexual desire could also provoke such feelings of panic, or of confusion.

I still didn't know whether she, obviously I didn't know whether she fancied me I didn't know what I felt towards her, I didn't know fuck all, I didn't know what I wanted I was shit scared

For all the interviewees, this fear was positioned in the past, as a lesbian identity was now accepted or embraced. Yet the taking up of a subject position as lesbian doesn't automatically follow for all girls and young women who categorise their feelings of desire for another woman as sexual. For other girls, this fear, anxiety or confusion can last for many years, in some cases for a lifetime, with a resulting suppression of desire and sexuality, as well as shame and guilt associated with the feelings they disallow (Savin-Williams, 1990). The consequences in terms of mental and sexual health problems are potentially serious (Davies and Neal, 1996). Yet when we look to the context in which girls experience their desire as lesbian, it is not surprising that many young women suppress their feelings, reject the identity lesbian, and avoid this categorisation, even to themselves.

### **Lesbian Desire is Dangerous**

***Lesbians are lecherous perverts*** One of the dominant themes in all of the interviews was that lesbian desire is dangerous. One of the reasons given for this was the way in which lesbian sexuality is positioned by others as perverse and disgusting. As one woman commented when talking about the reactions of her sisters:

being a lesbian and making love to another woman is like being you might as well fuck a dog like it's so bad that you can't explain it

J: hmm

and I just felt so ashamed they made me ashamed of what I was and what I did in bed



The representation of lesbian sexuality as sick, as animal like, or as perverse, has a long history, leading in previous eras to women being condemned to death, to severe punishment, or to the psychiatric hospital (Ussher, 1997a; Faderman, 1993). Today it may be less likely that young women will be subjected to the materiality of legal or medical regulation, (although many young lesbians are still referred for therapy to 'cure' them) but the discursive representation of the lesbian as perverse remains. One of the ways in which this is manifested is through the positioning of lesbians as lecherous – with heterosexual girls or women being seen as vulnerable to harassment or attack. The fear of being positioned in this way was evident in the young women's accounts, leading to many insisting that they had not initiated sex when describing a first sexual encounter. One woman talked of her first sexual experience with a friend:

it kind of kind of happened then (laughing) and then it kind of, she kind of, but I didn't ever, I didn't attack her, oh attack her, I didn't make a pass at her, she made a pass at me.

So although young lesbians arguably have more freedom to express sexual agency than is available within the confines of traditional heterosexual femininity, they have to avoid being seen as predatory, and thus may also have to constrain their desire. This particular representation of lesbianism has other consequences.

Parental rejection was one. This was the reaction of one mother on being told by her daughter that she was a dyke:

"if you're a dyke you can't be in my house, you're not a daughter of mine" ..... my mum didn't actually calm down, that was in December ninety two, my mother didn't calm down (2) until October ninety four (2) when her brother died in New Zealand and she was very aware of like losing people and stuff and she's kind of was a bit more (.) forthcoming to me. She'd calmed down a lot. She stopped calling me a pervert on the phone and stuff and saying "I wish I'd had an abortion"

J: god

"you should have died at birth"

A number of interviewees talked of teachers counselling them to be discrete about their sexuality, and in one case, to reassure the school that she would not 'attack' younger girls. In a similar vein, many interviewees reported that they had been isolated by other girls at school, through the inaccurate representation of lesbians as desiring *all* women.

your friends won't even sit next to you and they won't bend down to pick up a pencil while you're nearJ: what do they think you're gonna doL: (laughing) I think they think we're gonna jump them or something cause they are all so wonderfully attractive

In contrast, heterosexual women are not assumed to desire all men, and men are not seen as being at risk of being 'jumped' by heterosexual women. It is the lesbian who personifies the monstrous feminine made flesh.

**lesbian = defined by sex** One of the reasons why these particular representations of lesbians as dangerous or lecherous proliferate, is the fact that to identify as lesbian means to be defined by sexuality, in a way that is not the case with young heterosexual women. *Not* wanting to be defined

by their sexuality lead to a number of the young women reporting that they wanted to distance themselves from the subject position 'lesbian', or more specifically, from lesbian sex.

I wouldn't say I'm a dyke.... wouldn't even say necessarily lesbian, cause it got quite a slight thing on it, because I think, cause those they do carry weight with them, they are in your face, they're saying, yeah I sleep with women, and you have these images, these women, snogging and stuff, and like really hey! And like you know hooo, and, very violent, very in your face very kind of (2) whoo, angry, do you know what I mean. I used to have a problem with the word dyke, and kind of queer an stuff ahmm, simply because of those images, and I didn't want to be a part of that

The lack of sexual privacy associated with taking up a lesbian identity was also evident in many of the accounts, often being reported as a justification for not coming out. As one woman commented:

being queer you have to tell everybody who you sleep with, and like people who I'd never tell who I sleep with, so it's like aunts and uncles and my mum and dad's best friends and stuff . And I never tell who I'd slept, sleep with so why should I tell them that oh, you know I'm shagging women, at the moment, it's like excuse me, they don't need to know, they don't deserve to know, so, that isn't a closet.... I don't want these sort of people sticking their noses into my life

Privacy is one of the central issues of concern to young women who are exploring desire, sexuality and sexual relationships. Heterosexually identified girls do not give away any information about themselves by assuming this taken for granted sexual subject position. Even if they are open about being in a relationship, this doesn't mean that they are having sex, as many girls still maintain virginity, or restrict their sexual practices, even when they are 'going out' with boys (Cowie and Lees, 1987; Ussher, 1997a). In contrast, as is described above, to describe oneself as 'lesbian' is read as saying 'I'm shagging women'. Ironically, this isn't necessarily the case. Two of the young women interviewed in this study talked of taking up a lesbian identity before they had had sex, and in all of the interviews, being lesbian was about much more than sex or desire. It was about friendship, empowerment, politics, not being feminine, appearance, feminism, being with women, and having fun together, amongst other things (Ussher and Mooney-Somers, forthcoming).

### **Dealing with dangerous desire**

***Being an outsider: but strong because of it*** In dealing with the positioning of lesbians as perverted, as 'other', and with the positioning of desire as dangerous, the women interviewed reported a number of different strategies. One of the most common, perhaps to be expected in a group of women who were lesbian activists, was the reporting of taking up of a subject position as outsider, but defiant and strong because of it.

I just felt yeah you know I felt like a stranger, I felt like a foreigner like you would in my own country you know

J: hmm

and no body there to understand what I was going through (.) but it's made me a strong person like whatever you know like not what ever happens to me nothing worse can happen the worse that ever happened has happened

There is arguably a representation of ambivalence described here in the defiant stance taken up – a sense of isolation, of being different, and of facing difficulty because of this. Yet these are also accounts

of the acceptance of this difficulty as being an expected part of taking up a lesbian identity, and of a determination to overcome it. As another woman said, 'I got a lot more confident in myself and sort of thought let them stuff it, this is who I am and they are going to have to deal with it'. Previous research has demonstrated that individuals use narratives of past experiences or of the life course as a means of making sense of adversity, and preserving a sense of self as coherent and integrated over time (Cohler, 1991, p 184). What is arguably being presented here is a narrative account of investment in a lesbian identity, and in being able to experience and express lesbian desire, being made stronger through this opposition and adversity.

**Embracing transformation through lesbianism.** A second, related, theme, was that of embracing the transformation which takes place after taking up a lesbian identity, in accounts of a dramatic shift in the way the world is seen, or in subjectivity, after naming desire, and one's self, as lesbian. The majority of the young women interviewed here described a split between the old and new self pre and post 'coming out', a common theme being that life began when they came out.

I love being a dyke it's (3) sometimes I sit down like when I have time for me self in the flat like this and I scream and I think oh my god I'm a lesbian you know (2) it just hits me now and it's fab (.) it's fab (4) since I've come out I can't relate to the person that I was before it was like two different people and I just sit down and I think who the fuck was that

Being part of the avengers was central to this process.

now we're talking about a period like of time where I was beginning to be active in the Avengers, I started doing my own Zine, like about cartoons and stuff, I started having a social life, started having a life, I was ahmm, so I was a bit, I was definitely much more much different, hugely different to what I was when I got there

Heterosexually identified girls commonly group together around a shared interest in music, fashion, boys, or being a fan of a particular 'pop-star' (Garrett, 1984), forming relationships which are central to the development of their sexual subjectivity (Ussher, 1997a; Firth and Goodwin, 1984). Becoming a Lesbian Avenger arguably works in the same way for this group of young women, providing a positive social identity, a sense of group solidarity, a source of role models, friendship, and common goals. As these women are all positioned as outsiders because of their sexuality, being a member of the Lesbian Avengers also functions to provide a social context where they are normal and accepted. It acts to reframe their lesbianism as powerful, positive and defiant – a reframing which doesn't merely take place at the level of the individual, but takes place at the level of the group. It also provides a context where they can explore the meaning of sexuality and desire without fear of retribution or attack. The Avengers provided a set of sexual scripts, and potential sexual partners, for young women who otherwise would have been isolated in a heterosexual social sphere. I don't know that they provided the sexual scripts - I think it was more that they provided an arena where young women could watch the scene/scripts acted out.

**Staying in the closet.** The other strategy most frequently reported, other than the repression of desire outlined above in the theme 'I don't want to be a lesbian', was staying in the closet – keeping sexuality and desire hidden from others, a common strategy amongst lesbians and gay men (Golden, 1987). Despite their being lesbian avengers, the majority of the women interviewed talked of particular situations where they weren't open about their lesbian identity, work being the most common.

I work with children and I probably and I couldn't come out there. A couple of them know by now but (.) if I confronted them with that I probably wouldn't have the job much longerJ: hmmmL: and (2) as it is as soon as I sort of half came out they sort of ahmm they'll pick anyone else to teach the kids as long as not me and I hate that. It's in the Isle of Wight it's very homophobic it's very (.) it's like my god all homosexuals are child molesters and whatever and (2) I mean they probably don't believe it but the atmosphere is very dangerous so I have to be a bit more discreet about it

Other women talked of not being out with particular members of their families, certain friends, or at school. Given the negative material consequences for many lesbians of being open about their sexual identity, in terms of rejection, harassment, discrimination, and verbal abuse, this is arguably a protective strategy. However, unsurprisingly, none of the young women in this study embraced this strategy as positive or desired. Many looked to a future when they could be more open in a safe context. As one woman said 'in the future.... I wouldn't ever want to be somewhere where I had to hide'. Being in the closet means a fear of exposure and an awareness that acceptance by others is based on a lie (Margolis et al 1987). In other research, passing as heterosexual has been found to be associated with feelings of shame, depression, anxiety and awkwardness (Rotheram-Borus & Fernandez, 1995). The most closeted individuals report the highest levels of social and personal conflict, alienation, depression and negative self esteem (Savin-Williams, 1990). So the closet is not a comfortable place to be – something on which all of the women interviewed agreed.

### **Conclusion**

Experiences of sexual desire and first sexual relationships are a central part of the transition from adolescence to adulthood, for many girls the first marker of being 'woman'. For young girls who identify as lesbian, experiences of sexual desire and first sexual relationships mark them not as 'woman', but potentially as 'dyke', 'queer', or 'lesbian'. The results of this study demonstrate that in a cultural context where lesbianism is positioned as deviant, dangerous or shameful, the positioning of feelings towards another woman as sexual desire is a complex process, which has to be understood at a material, discursive and an intra-psychic level. We cannot separate out one of these levels of analysis from the others; they are all inter-related. The materiality of the corporeal body, of sex, of discrimination, of rejection and abuse; the discursive construction of the lesbian as lecherous and perverse, of lesbian desire as dangerous, of sex, and of femininity; and the intra-psychic negotiation of desire and sexuality, of being other, being lesbian, and being woman. Thus there is a need for a move away from a solely social constructionist (ie Kitzinger, 1987), intra-psychic (ie Minton and McDonald, 1984), or material/biological (ie LeVay 1991) analysis of desire and of what it means to be lesbian, towards a material-discursive-intrapsychic perspective. This will allow us to understand the meaning of lesbian desire and its relationship to sexual subjectivity, and the complex negotiations undertaken by young lesbians, in their interpretation and expression of their own desire for other women.

The negotiation of desire as lesbian and the open taking up of a lesbian identity, was reported as having been accomplished by all of the young women who took part in this study. Whilst many gave accounts of early uncertainty, ambivalence, or resistance, as well as negative reactions from others, they all now positioned themselves as sexually empowered, desiring, and desirable now. This confirms previous research that found that the negotiation of sexual desire is central to the development of young women's sense of personal empowerment and entitlement (Fine, 1988; Tolman, 1994b). It also suggests that whilst it is important to acknowledge the difficulties facing young women recognising and coming

to terms with their desire for other women as 'lesbian', there are also many positive aspects of this experience, and of openly taking up a lesbian identity.

The representations of desire and lesbianism as positive in the narratives of the young women in this study, may partly reflect the changing socio-historical context in which they live. London in the late 1990's allows for more open expression of lesbian desire and identity than is possible in other social contexts, or other points in history (see Faderman, 1993). There are more positive representations of lesbian desire and lesbian lives, and more spaces in which it is safe to be 'out'. It also may reflect the support, friendship, pleasure and sense of empowerment which comes of being part of a close group of girls with shared interests and experiences. As research on resilience has shown, female friendship is a major protective factor in mental health (Rutter, 1979; Ussher, 1991), particularly in situations where there are other risk factors, such as social isolation, parental conflict, harassment or abuse – phenomena reported by this group of young women.

The Lesbian Avengers are an important, and unusual, aspect of this story - at the time of the interviews the London group comprised anywhere between 10 and 60 women, all identified as lesbians, but from a wide range of backgrounds. Although first and foremost a politically driven group, the social aspect cannot be emphasized enough. For many of the women it provided access to the lesbian community, as well as numerous opportunities to meet friends and lovers. It also functioned as an informal support network, for example some of the women who had no contact with their families met for Christmas Day.

It was assumed that the narratives presented by the young women in the interviews were acting to construct an account which is consistent and compatible with their current subject position as Lesbian Avenger; doing 'identity work' in acting to construct themselves as lesbian through talk. The narratives of desire and lesbian subjectivity were striking in their consistency across the group. There were no noticeable differences across social class or ethnicity, with one exception. One 19 year old Asian woman, who came from a very traditional family, reported that there was a double taboo in her being lesbian, as she was rejecting both her culture, and heterosexuality. Her parents would be aghast at her having a relationship with a man who was not Asian; a woman was even worse.

The consistency in narratives suggests that the interviewees may have been presenting shared interpretations of experience in the interview, or interpretations which have been negotiated at a group level, and then is used by an individual woman as a means of making sense of her own experience. In future research, it would be useful to examine the same questions and issues in groups of young lesbians who don't identify as Lesbian Avengers, or who are not 'out' about their sexuality, to see how lesbian desire and subjectivity is negotiated in this different context, and whether different narratives are presented. It would also be interesting to conduct interviews with the same young women interviewed here, but with a different interviewer, one who is not a member of the Lesbian Avengers. As meaning is constructed within an interview context through the interaction of interviewer and interviewee (Hunt, 1990), the fact that the interviewees in this study knew the interviewer as a fellow member of the Lesbian Avengers, has to be taken into account in interpreting these accounts. For example, JMS was aware of relationships and dynamics within the group that may have been worth exploring. JMS refrained from asking about these subjects, unsure as to whether they would be seen as legitimate inquiry or merely personal curiosity or gossip. This also hints at another issue, talk around sexual desire and sexual experiences usually takes place within the context of a relationship, or during courtship (!!)- the giving of information was not reciprocated, was with a non-stranger, and potentially a future sexual partner!!

The *absence* of certain themes in the interviews – such as ambivalence about desire or lesbian identity now, positive experiences with men, or discussions of bisexuality – may partly have been a reflection of the shared group understanding of ‘lesbian identity’, and of interaction with the interviewer. There was also an absence of themes found commonly in interviews on the subject of desire carried out with heterosexual girls, such as discussion of the embodied nature of desire, or discussions of sexual violence or abuse (see Tolman & Szalacha, 1999). This may be because these issues were not central to the experience of these young women, or because we did not specifically ask about such issues.

In conclusion, as was stated at the outset, there is a need for more research on the subject of sexual desire in young women, to redress the ‘missing discourse of desire’ in research on girls’ sexuality (Fine 1988). The results of the present study suggest that any future research in this field should include specific questions on lesbian desire, and on sexual desire between women, both in young women who come to identify themselves as lesbian, and those who do not. For whilst young women’s experiences of heterosexual desire are now beginning to be spoken of in critical psychological research, lesbian desire is arguably still a silent subject, something which has implications for research and theory on desire, as well as for young women who experience such feelings. It is time that this silence was broken.

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<sup>i</sup> Whilst we use the term 'lesbian' in much of the discussion in this paper, this is not intended to suggest closure, or an essentialist category, as it is acknowledged that many women position themselves as dyke or queer.

<sup>ii</sup> Transcription conventions were (.) pauses of less than a second; (1) timed pauses; underlining for emphasis. The emphasis was on readability, following Marshall & Wetherell (1989).