

TRANSFORMING IDEOLOGIES OF FEMININITY: READING WOMEN'S MAGAZINES

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A thesis submitted in fulfilment of requirements for the
degree of Doctor of Philosophy

To
The Department of Theoretical and Applied Linguistics
The University of Edinburgh

May 2006

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis is of my own composition. The work reported in this thesis has been executed by myself, except where due acknowledgement is made in the text.

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August 30, 2005

ABSTRACT

Women's magazines have been a popular and prominent form of mass media for many years now, and as such they are one of the main sites through which dominant discourses of femininity are produced and maintained. This dissertation is a discourse analytic study of how women talk about reading women's magazines, and is based on interviews with forty women. In this study I examine the ways in which my informants construct the nature of the magazines and their target readers, and how they position themselves in relation to the perceived target reader. In doing so I explore how, and to what extent, women's negotiation of their own identities is mediated by popular images and discourses of femininity.

This study shows that women draw on the magazines' discourses of femininity in varied, complex and sometimes conflicting ways. Firstly, I examine one of the most striking features of my data, which is the way in which many women 'talk themselves out' of the target readership of the magazines they read. In order to do so they construct differences between themselves and the perceived target reader on the basis of different social factors such as social class, age and sexuality. When positioning themselves in relation to the magazines, my informants also tend to draw on discourses of individuality, accounting for the differences between themselves and the target reader as a matter of individual experience, interests and preferences. When defining the target reader, on the other hand, they are more likely to invoke generalisations and stereotypes. These stereotypes are primarily based on gender, but are also inflected by other factors such as age or social class.

Advice, in various different forms and on different subjects, plays a central role in the content of most women's magazines. One of the main features of my informants' talk on the subject of taking advice from women's magazines was the construction of a distinction between 'practical' and 'personal' advice; they would consider taking advice they considered to be 'practical', but would not take advice on 'personal' matters from a magazine, as that should be sought from friends and family. My informants' talk about advice is revealing about how they construct their relationship with the magazines and their writers. It also demonstrates the complex nature of readers' relationships with the magazines: although women can, and do, take a

critical and resistant stance towards certain aspects of women's magazines, they also, sometimes knowingly, 'buy into' the discourses of femininity found in the texts.

Finally, I use membership categorisation analysis (MCA) to explore how my informants orient to notions that certain activities and interests are tied to gender categories. Women's magazines construct certain activities and interests, such as fashion and (heterosexual) relationships, as being normatively associated with women. Using MCA I explore the way in which women reproduce or reconstruct these associations when negotiating identities both for themselves and for the target reader.

This study offers a different perspective from much of the earlier work on women's magazines by providing a close linguistic analysis of women's accounts of how and why they read (or don't read) the magazines. Through this analysis we can see how women make use of the ideological resources provided by the magazines in the construction of their own identities, and how they reproduce or resist these ideologies in their talk.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My heartfelt thanks go to the following people:

My supervisor, Miriam Meyerhoff, who gave me constant intellectual and emotional support, and who believed in me even when I did not believe in myself.

My friend and colleague Heather Hewitt, who was invaluable in helping me to find informants, and who was always there for a chat, whether it be about work or the latest developments in Neighbours.

Elizabeth Black, Hugh Trappes-Lomax, Joseph Gafaranga, John Joseph, and everyone else who gave me advice and feedback on my work.

The ESRC for funding this research.

Mum, Dad and Shalini for all their love and support.

My friends, who supported me, distracted me, cheered me up, and ensured I had a life and a laugh away from work.

Last, but most definitely not least, to Ben, for his love, support and total faith in me. Thank you for always being there.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

From their origin in eighteenth century conduct books and periodicals for women, the genre of women's magazines has grown to become one of the most popular and prominent forms of mass media. This thesis is a discourse analytic study which examines the ways in which women talk about reading women's magazines. In doing so I explore how, and to what extent, women's negotiation of their own identities is mediated by popular images and discourses of femininity. The data upon which this thesis is based consists of thirty interviews with forty women, from a range of age groups and from different socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds.

1.1.1 Why women's magazines?

Walk into any supermarket or newsagent and there they are: row upon row of women's magazines. Long-running glossy magazines such as *Vogue*, *Elle* and *Cosmopolitan* are household names all over the world, and are prototypical examples of the genre, the names that immediately spring to mind when one thinks of women's magazines. Britain also has a large number of cheaper women's weekly magazines, such as *Woman's Own*, *Take A Break* and *Chat*. In recent years there has also been a proliferation of weekly magazines which focus on celebrity gossip. Now, in addition to *Hello*, we also have *Heat*, *Now*, *OK* and *Closer*, amongst others. New magazines are launched all the time, and in the first four months of 2005 alone, we have already seen the launch of three new titles: *Grazia*, *Easy Living* and *Happy*. Although some quickly disappear (*Eve*, *Aura*, *Nova*), others, like *Glamour* (which was launched in 2001 and is now the biggest selling women's magazine in the UK), are more successful.

Women's magazines are not just material commodities. In feminist work (e.g. Friedan, 1965; McRobbie, 1978), they are often considered to be one of the central sites through which ideologies of femininity are constructed and circulated through the wider society. Within the media, magazines are often held to be responsible for the creation of body image problems and eating disorders amongst teenage girls

and young women, and recently teen magazines have come under fire for their sexual content, accused of promoting under-age sex.

Simone de Beauvoir famously declared that 'one is not born, but rather becomes a woman' (de Beauvoir, 1960: 9). In other words, what it means to be a 'woman' and to be 'feminine' is a product of historically and culturally situated discourses, rather than inherent biological characteristics. This paradox lies at the heart of women's magazines. Magazines present femininity as something entirely natural, rather than as an historically situated social construct, and yet underlying the text is the idea that femininity is something that must be constantly worked at, and can only be achieved through bodily labour and consumption. Describing the role that magazines play in creating and reproducing this paradox, Dawn Currie writes that:

As a social text that mediates discourses surrounding femininity, women's magazines are part of the process of signification through which the female body, as signifier, is invested with characteristics which are culturally read as 'feminine'. This signification requires 'body work' on the part of women, because not all, or any, female body is deemed, *a priori*, as signalling the aesthetic requirements of 'femininity' (Currie, 1999: 16).

Women's magazines present themselves as guides on how to be a woman, defining what women are (and what we should not be), what we should aspire to, what we want, what we need and what we should buy. This thesis explores women's accounts of how and why they read (or do not read) women's magazines, looking at how their understanding and experience of gender identity is mediated by the discourses of femininity found in the magazines. Do women define themselves within the frames of reference set by the magazines? If not, how and why are they resistant to the magazines' discourse? The magazines may frame themselves as 'how to' guides, offering advice on how to be a woman, but this does not mean that they are read as such.

As has been acknowledged by feminist research (e.g. Ballaster *et al.*, 1991), women's magazines do bring pleasure and entertainment to their readers, but what exactly do readers say they find pleasurable, and is reading magazines always, and only, a pleasurable experience. In this thesis I explore the ambivalence that many readers feel towards the magazines, and the contradictory discourses they employ when talking about the texts and their attitudes towards them.

My own relationship with women's magazines is just such an ambivalent one. Like many of my informants¹, I rarely buy magazines, except perhaps before a long journey. As a feminist, I am often frustrated and angered by their constant focus on being thin and beautiful, and the importance they place on finding a man. As a teenager I particularly disliked the magazines' reviews of books, music and films; I felt offended by the assumption that girls and women would only be interested in boy bands, chart hits, airport novels and romantic comedies – things which I thought of as rubbish (as a teenager I was also an avid reader of music magazines, but was annoyed by their 'blokeishness', and the assumption that only boys took music seriously). On the other hand, I also find women's magazines irresistible and will always take the opportunity to look at them in waiting rooms, or flick through them in the shops. A friend of mine buys *Heat* every week, and without fail, the first thing I do when at her flat is seek it out and read it. In beginning this research I wanted to find out if other women felt the same way, and if so, why they inspire such contradictory emotions, and how women reconcile themselves to these contradictions.

As discussed later in this chapter, there has been much debate about the advantages and disadvantages of textual analyses of the magazines themselves, versus research which looks at readers' accounts of what the magazines mean to them. Underlying much of this debate is the assumption that the views of academics will necessarily differ from those of 'real' readers, and that academics are somehow apart from the rest of society, looking at the magazines with a more objective, critical gaze. My interest in women's magazines and in conducting this research stems from my interests, beliefs and experiences as a woman, a feminist, and a member of contemporary British society, and I remain all those things even though I am also an academic and a linguist.

¹ I use the term 'informants' throughout the thesis. I have chosen to use this term because it is commonly used within sociolinguistics, and not because I want to indicate that I am taking a particular stance towards the data and/or the women I interviewed.

1.1.2 Aims of thesis

The main aims of this thesis are as follows:

- The principal aim of this thesis is to examine the ways in which women talk about reading women's magazines. Previous studies looking at women's magazines and their ideological significance have largely been based on analyses of the texts themselves. In this study I aim to make a novel contribution to existing feminist work on women's magazines by focusing on the readers, and examining how readers take up and make sense of the magazines and the ideological resources they provide.
- Previous analyses of women's magazines have looked at the construction of the ideal or target reader, and of different subject positions within the texts which the target reader is encouraged to adopt (e.g. Talbot 1992, 1995). In this study I look at how women negotiate their own gender identities in relation to the subject positions constructed for them in the magazines, and to what extent they take on or distance themselves from these subject positions, and therefore, the target readership. When looking at how women construct both themselves and the target readership, I am interested in how their accounts are inflected, not only by discourses of gender, but also by discourses of class, age, sexuality and ethnicity.
- Women's magazines have been described as constructing a 'world of women' (Ballaster *et al.* 1991), or 'cult of femininity' (Ferguson 1983), and offering readers advice on all aspects of how to be a member of this world/community/cult. This study investigates how readers talk about the different types of advice offered in the magazines, and how they describe their attitudes towards taking advice from magazines.

1.2 OVERVIEW OF THESIS

I conclude this chapter by providing an overview of previous research which is relevant to this thesis. Firstly, I discuss research on language and gender, and look at developments in how gender (and its relationship to language) has been theorised over time. I also give a brief overview of work in cultural studies on mass

media and cultural consumption. I then look more specifically at prior research on women's magazines and their readers, as well as giving brief consideration to work on the related genre of men's magazines. In Chapter 2 I move on to discuss the various disciplines, methodologies and theoretical frameworks which inform this study, including discourse analysis (including both post-structuralist and ethnomethodological approaches to discourse analysis), conversation analysis (CA) and membership categorisation analysis (MCA). I also consider certain key terms, such as 'discourse' and 'ideology', which are central to this study, and which are widely used, but are subject to some dispute or variation in the way they are used. I discuss the different ways in which these terms are defined, and clarify the way I have used them on this study.

In Chapter 3 I begin my analysis by identifying and describing the ways in which women distance themselves, or 'talk themselves out' of the target readership of the magazines. This is one of the most striking features of my data, and demonstrates that 'real' readers are not necessarily willing to take on the subject positions constructed for them in the texts. In this chapter I examine the different strategies women use to distance themselves from the magazines and their target readers, looking at how my informants invoke different aspects of their identity, such as social class and cultural capital, age, ethnicity and sexuality. In Chapter 3 I also address the question of why women enjoy reading the magazines, and we will see that although women often criticise magazines for being 'trashy' and superficial, paradoxically, these are also the very same qualities which make the magazines appealing.

Women's magazines not only seek to create a 'world of women' for their readers, they also offer their readers advice on all aspects of this world. In Chapter 4 I explore how women talk about the advice found in women's magazines, looking at how women differentiate between different types of advice, and how they make judgements as to when it would, or would not be appropriate to take advice from a magazine. In this chapter we will see that women's attitudes towards advice can tell us a great deal about how they position themselves with regard to the magazines, and also with regard to other women. We will also see evidence of both resistance to, and acceptance of, the discourses of femininity found in the magazines.

In Chapter 5 I draw on membership categorisation analysis (MCA) in order to take a closer look at how women invoke shared knowledge about gender categories, and the activities and practices associated with those categories, when attempting to define themselves or others. Women's magazines construct and perpetuate dominant notions about the characteristics, interests and activities normatively associated with femininity. In Chapter 5 I examine how women invoke, reproduce or resist these associations, thereby shedding further light on how readers interpret, take up, or challenge the ideological resources provided by the magazines.

Finally, in Chapter 7, I summarise the analysis and findings presented in the previous chapters, and conclude with suggestions for further research.

1.3 LITERATURE REVIEW

1.3.1 Language and gender research

This study is influenced by, and adds to, research on language and gender, in that it is concerned with the discursive construction of gender identity, and how women make use of the representations of femininity found in women's magazines when constructing identities for themselves. Language and gender is an ever-growing, vibrant and diverse area of study, which incorporates work from a wide range of disciplines (and sub-disciplines), including linguistics, sociology, anthropology and psychology. As we would expect from such an inter-disciplinary field of study, there is no single, unified approach to the study of language and gender, although it is possible to identify a number of general trends and central debates which have helped shape and influence research in this area. This section traces the main debates and developments in the study of language and gender (see also Chapter 2 for a discussion of how gender has been theorised within different disciplines and theoretical perspectives), and looks at how this study fits with current concerns within the field.

Firstly, it should be stressed that although the majority of work on language and gender is (and has been) conducted by researchers who would identify themselves as feminists, the subject has also been dealt with by non-feminist academics, particularly those working within variationist sociolinguistics. For example, the linguist Otto Jespersen (1922) was one of the first linguists to address ideas about gendered language in his essay *The Woman*. In this essay Jespersen talks about

differences in the language used by men and women, presenting as fact folklinguistic notions about 'women's language', for example that women have a much narrower vocabulary than men, that they shy away from coarse or vulgar language, and that women have a tendency to produce 'hypercorrect' language. Although Jespersen's work can be seen as a product of its time, many of these ideas persist today in folklinguistic ideas, and, as discussed below, have also been recycled in academic work.

Very broadly speaking, there are two main strands of work on language and gender: firstly, that which focuses on describing and interpreting the significance of gendered speech styles, and secondly, work which takes a more social constructionist approach to gender, looking at how gender is discursively constructed in different communities and in different contexts. Much of the early work on language and gender, conducted during the 1970s and 1980s, took the former approach, but more recently this work has been subject to feminist critique and debate about its conceptualisation of gender as a relatively fixed and stable social category. In the 1990s, this essentialist discourse was challenged by the hugely influential work of the feminist Judith Butler. Butler (e.g. 1990, 1993) emphasised the fluid and performative nature of gender identity, arguing that '[t]here is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender [...] identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results' (1990: 25). As these ideas were taken on by feminist linguists and other language and gender scholars, gender was reconceptualised as something that people 'do', not something that they 'are'. Consequently, rather than view gender as a category which resides in individuals and determines (in part) their linguistic behaviour, it has become widely accepted that an individual's gender identity is something which is constructed and reproduced through their linguistic (and other) behaviour.

In recent years then, work on gendered speech styles has largely fallen out of favour, with a social constructivist approach becoming the dominant one. This latter approach is the one which informs and motivates my own work, which looks at how gender identity is articulated through talk, and how this talk is mediated by wider social discourses of gender, which are circulated through media such as women's magazines.

I will now look in more detail at how these two strands of research in language and gender have developed, providing a brief survey and summary of work in the field. This is not intended to be a complete account of all areas of work on language and gender; I do not, for example, look at work dealing with non-sexist language and language reform, or at feminist literary stylistics. This is not because I think this work is uninteresting or unimportant, but rather because it is not as relevant to the present study as other work in the field.

1.3.1.1 'Language and Woman's Place'

As mentioned above, early research on language and gender was generally interested in the idea of gendered speech styles. In most cases this work involved either comparative studies, looking at differences between men and women, or studies which focused solely on women's speech. Robin Tolmach Lakoff's seminal work *Language and Woman's Place* (1975) is widely regarded as the key text which laid the foundations for the feminist study of language and gender, certainly within linguistics, but also in other disciplines. *Language and Woman's Place* has been, and continues to be, hugely influential, and is typically the text which introduces undergraduate students to the subject of language and gender. However, it has also been subject to a great deal of critique, since the moment of its first publication. Lakoff's book is a useful starting point for a discussion of the field of language and gender research (particularly as it has evolved within linguistics), as the text itself, but perhaps more importantly, the surrounding debates about its importance and value, deal with many of the central issues which have exercised the field over the past thirty years.

Lakoff's book is concerned both with how women use language and how language is used to refer to (and denigrate) women. It is however, the section on so-called 'women's language' which has attracted the most critical attention. In this section Lakoff lists a number of features which she suggests are characteristic of women's language, a number of which were also raised by Otto Jespersen (1922), as mentioned above. These features include the use of tag questions, rising intonation on declaratives, 'empty' adjectives like 'charming' and 'divine', hedges such as 'sort of' and 'y'know', 'hypercorrect' grammar, and 'superpolite' forms such as using euphemisms and indirect requests. Lakoff interpreted these features as expressing uncertainty and a lack of confidence or authority. Lakoff argued that women are

placed in a 'double bind': if they do not use women's language they are criticised for being unfeminine, but if they do use women's language then they are seen as being silly, trivial and lacking in seriousness and authority. As such, according to Lakoff, women collude in their own powerlessness by using language which denies them access to positions of power.

Lakoff's analysis has been criticised on a number of counts. Firstly, Lakoff's claims are based largely on introspection and her own intuitions about women's language use, based on casual observation of her own speech, as well as that of women around her. Even though she acknowledges that this means she was only looking at the speech of white, educated, middle class American women, she argues that 'the majority of the claims I make will hold for the majority of speakers of English; that in fact, much may, *mutatis mutandis*, be universal' (2004: 40). Given the fact that Lakoff's claims have no empirical basis, it is not particularly persuasive for her to generalise her claims to all white, middle class women, let alone women in general. To do the latter is to assume that women are a homogeneous group, thereby reinforcing an essentialist discourse which constructs the male-female dichotomy as being not only clear-cut, but also one of the most important distinctions underlying variation in human behaviour (linguistic or otherwise).

Another point of dispute has been her assumption that there is a clear one-to-one correlation between linguistic form and communicative function. For example, Lakoff claims that, firstly, women use more tag questions than men, and secondly, that the use of tag questions always indicates uncertainty and submissiveness. These claims formed the basis for a great deal of later research, with other scholars seeking to test, verify or challenge Lakoff's hypothesis.

Dubois and Crouch (1975), for example, looked at the use of tag questions by speakers at an academic conference, and found that men used tags more frequently than women. In another well known study William O'Barr and Bowman Atkins (1980) examined the use of (Lakoff's definition of) 'women's language' by male and female courtroom witnesses. They found that both men and women used features of 'women's language', and that status (both in terms of general social status, and courtroom status, which is dependent on one's knowledge and experience of the judicial process), rather than gender, was the major determining factor in the use of

'women's language'. As such, they argue that the features described by Lakoff are more appropriately understood as markers of 'powerless language' rather than 'women's language'.

Other studies addressed the issue of how easily form can be mapped onto function. Cameron *et al.* (1988), in their study of tag questions, found that the relationship between linguistic form and communicative function was far more complex than Lakoff's study had suggested. As well as expressing uncertainty, Cameron *et al.* found that tag questions serve a facilitative function, encouraging others' participation in the interaction, as well as being used as markers of solidarity. They also found that the relationship between the use of tag questions and gender is far from clear-cut, arguing that researchers also need to consider how gender intersects with other factors, such as the speaker's status (both in the context of the specific interaction, and more generally), the context and purpose of the interaction, and the participants' roles in the interaction (e.g. pupil/teacher, interviewer/interviewee).

In their introduction to the edited collection *Gender Articulated: Language and the Socially Constructed Self* (Hall and Bucholtz, 1995), Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall consider the role *Language and Woman's Place* has played in the development of research on language and gender, and call for a critical re-evaluation of Lakoff's work. They argue that *Language and Woman's Place* has frequently been misunderstood by other language and gender scholars, who have failed to take into account the theoretical context from which Lakoff's work emerged. Bucholtz and Hall point out that Lakoff was not working in the (then new) field of sociolinguistics, but rather in generative semantics, and that at that time, the introspective methods Lakoff used were the norm within theoretical linguistics. As such, they suggest that much of the criticism directed at Lakoff was misguided, and that although her findings have been questioned, and approaches to the study of language and gender have moved on, Lakoff should be celebrated for her work as a pioneer, without whom the field would not have developed in the first place.

More recently, again at the instigation of Mary Bucholtz, *Language and Woman's Place* has been revisited and reassessed, in a new edition accompanied by additional commentaries (Lakoff, 2004, edited by Mary Bucholtz). This edition includes the original text, as well as a new introduction and annotations by Lakoff

herself. There are also a number of brief commentaries by other language and gender scholars, discussing the significance of Lakoff's work, and what its relevance is to the field today. This new edition aims to recontextualise Lakoff's work, both in terms of its relation to work in linguistics at the time of publication, as well as where it stands today and what it has to contribute to current work on language and gender.

This edition covers some of the issues raised earlier by Hall and Bucholtz (1995), with many commentators suggesting that Lakoff has been misunderstood or misrepresented. For example, Sally McConnell-Ginet (2004) writes about how she has reconsidered her original views on *Language and Woman's Place*. Initially, McConnell-Ginet was infuriated by the book, as she felt that it devalued women and their abilities. She now suggests that this opinion was misguided, as it was based on the belief that Lakoff was attempting to present an empirical argument about the speech of actual women, whereas she was actually 'trying to explore language ideology and its connections to gender ideology and gender arrangements' (2004: 137). Similar points are also raised by Mary Bucholtz and Penny Eckert. Eckert (2004) suggests that the woman invoked by Lakoff in the text, the speaker of 'woman's language', is not meant to be representative of 'real' women, but rather is 'an ideological artefact – a stereotype. And what makes the book important is that this stereotype is there to invoke' (2004: 165). Eckert argues that Lakoff drew attention to the normative power the stereotype of the 'good woman' held (and still holds) in society, noting that even though many women do not conform to this stereotype, they are certainly made aware of it from a young age, as it is held up as an ideal for young girls to strive towards.

Despite these claims that *Language and Woman's Place*, and Lakoff's intentions, have been misunderstood, one might ask why it is that there was so much misunderstanding in the first place. If Lakoff did intend her work to be an analysis of language ideology rather than an empirical study of how 'real' women speak, then I would argue that she does not make this clear in the original text. In fact, she clearly makes claims about the applicability of her findings not only to the speech of white, middle class, North American women, but more broadly to English-speaking women in general. Nonetheless, regardless of how we judge Lakoff's work today,

there is no doubt that her work as a pioneer laid the foundations for what has now become a diverse and ever-expanding field of study.

1.3.1.2 'Difference', 'dominance' and 'deficit' approaches to gender

Work on sex differences in language use has often been characterised as falling into one of three approaches: 'difference', 'dominance' and 'deficit' (or sometimes critique has focused purely on 'difference' vs. 'dominance'). Advocates of the difference approach, also known as the 'cultural' or 'separate worlds' approach, characterise sex difference as cultural difference, and argue that miscommunication between the sexes can be compared with cross-cultural miscommunication. This framework was first proposed by Daniel Maltz and Ruth Borker (1982), who argue that men and women come from different 'sociolinguistic subcultures', and are socialised into these different subcultures through gender-segregation in childhood. Their work also influenced that of Deborah Tannen, who is perhaps the most well-known advocate of the difference model, particularly for her popular science/self-help book *You Just Don't Understand* (1991), which is famous/notorious both in and out of academe. This book has been widely critiqued by feminist linguists (see Freed, 1992; Troemel-Ploetz, 1991; Uchida, 1992) for its failure to place male and female conversational styles within the context of the asymmetrical power relations between men and women in society in general, and for reinforcing essentialist views of sex and gender. Tannen's approach is also resolutely apolitical, individual tolerance, rather than collective action and widespread social change. However, this critique does not appear to have filtered down into the wider society, where Tannen's approach has been taken up by many women's magazines and translated into advice on how to improve one's career and relationships (see Cameron, 1995). It is particularly interesting to note that despite being written for 'men and women everywhere who are trying their best to talk to each other' (Tannen 1991: 19), the book appears to have been taken by readers as advice intended for women. This aptly demonstrates the very power imbalances which Tannen ignores, in that it is women who take responsibility for making relationships work, and women who have to change and make allowances for men's behaviour.

The deficit approach is one in which sex differences in language are judged against a male standard, so that women's language is often evaluated negatively as being weak, or unassertive. This approach was most common amongst early work on sex

differences in language use, but an additional problem is that academic work using the difference approach has often been interpreted by those outside academe using a deficit framework. This interpretation has given rise to self-help and assertiveness training, which attempts to address women's linguistic deficiencies (see Cameron, 1995). *Language and Woman's Place* has been characterised as an example of the deficit model (see Henley and Kramarae, 1991; Johnson, 1983), in that it can be argued that Lakoff sees women's language as deficient, and that women need to speak more like men in order to be successful in certain spheres. However, it has also been described as an example of the dominance model (see Cameron, 1992 [1985]) as she also suggests that women's language is devalued because of the patriarchal social order. Other work which takes the dominance approach includes that of Pamela Fishman (1983) and Candace West and Don Zimmerman (1983), who argue that sex differences in conversation are both caused by and constitutive of a male-dominated society, resulting in women having to take responsibility for what Fishman calls the 'interactional shitwork'.

The dominance approach is also problematic in that it takes a rather simplistic view of gender; taking power to be the main determinant of sex differences, and neglecting to take into account other factors, such as socio-economic status, age and ethnicity. Aki Uchida (1992; see also Coates and Cameron, 1988) argues that neither difference nor dominance alone can account for sex differences in speech, but that researchers should incorporate both approaches in order to get a more complete, multidimensional understanding of gender difference.

1.3.1.3 Gender as an activity/accomplishment

More recently, research on language and gender has moved away from research which looks at gendered speech styles, in which gender tends to be conceptualised as a relatively fixed and stable property of individuals, which exists prior to, and is a determining factor in linguistic behaviour. Instead, the focus is now on gender (and other aspects of social identity) as a social construct, as something people 'do', rather than just have. Early work which looked at the discursive construction of gender in everyday interaction includes that of the ethnomethodologist Harold Garfinkel (1967), whose groundbreaking study of Agnes, a male-to-female transsexual, was a powerful demonstration of how gender is acted and re-enacted through routine behaviour and interaction (see section 2.3.1 for further discussion).

Candace West and Don Zimmerman (1987) differentiate between 'sex', 'sex category' and 'gender'. They define 'sex' as a biological status based on the possession or lack of a penis, 'sex category' as a socially required categorisation based on sex (as exemplified by the requirement that everyone must be described as a boy or girl on their birth certificate), and 'gender' as social conduct, an activity which is managed according to social norms about behaviour and attributes appropriate to one's sex category. Gender is something that one does through the course of routine interactions which both reflects, produces and sustains societal gender norms.

Although this early work has been extremely influential, it was not really until the 1990s, with the popularity of poststructuralist thought in the humanities and social sciences, including the work of Judith Butler (as mentioned above), and the so-called 'linguistic turn' in these disciplines, that these ideas began to dominate research on language and gender. Two edited collections of language and gender research, *Rethinking Language and Gender Research* (Bergvall, Bing and Freed, 1996), and *Gender Articulated: Language and the Socially Constructed Self* (Hall and Bucholtz, 1995), reflect this more dynamic approach to gender.

For example, Kira Hall's (1995) study of women working on telephone sex lines provides an example of the conscious manipulation of gender identity, as Hall found that the women cultivated a highly stylised version of 'feminine' speech calculated to appeal to the male clientele. Similarly, drag queens and transsexuals consciously monitor their 'performance' of femininity, although in this case they can rely on other factors as well as speech, such as dress and demeanour.

In Hall and O'Donovan's (1996) research into *hijras* in India, it was found that the *hijras*, a marginalised social group commonly referred to by others as 'eunuchs' or as India's 'third sex', have a heightened awareness of the symbolic value of 'masculine' and 'feminine' speech, making use of both according to the gender of the interlocutor, the nature of the communicative event, and whether they wish to express power or solidarity. Hall and Donovan argue that the *hijras* 'are constantly working at the construction of their identity, subverting traditional conceptions of gender but at the same time constrained by them, viewing themselves 'as

“deficiently” masculine and “incompletely” feminine’ (Hall and O’Donovan, 1996: 229).

These studies exemplify not only the socially constructed, rather than biologically given, nature of gender, but also the deeply entrenched status of the male/female dichotomy. Unfortunately it would seem that, more often than not, this type of overt self-styling, particularly in the case of the sex line workers and transsexuals such as Garfinkel’s Agnes, serves to perpetuate the traditional conceptions of gendered behaviour. Hall argues that the sex line workers ‘produce a language stereotypically associated with women’s powerlessness in order to gain economic power and social flexibility’ (Hall 1995: 183). In this context it does indeed seem to be the women who manipulate gender identity in order to exert power over male clients and gain substantial financial rewards. It is also much safer than other aspects of the sex industry, particularly as many of the services involved in the research were run by women. Nonetheless, the empowerment of the workers themselves ultimately serves to reinforce existing notions of gendered language in society at large. As acknowledged by some of the sex workers interviewed, they may have creative control over the conversations, but only insofar as they conform to the stereotypes expected of them by the customers.

Victoria Bergvall (1996) takes a discourse-analytic approach to the construction of gender identities among female engineering students at a technical university. What with the traditionally male dominated nature of engineering and the fact that only about 25% of the students at the university were female, she found that the negotiation of gender identity for women was a particularly complex and difficult task. Female students are under conflicting pressures from the heterosexual market of campus life and the fields of engineering and academia in general, where traditionally ‘masculine’ behaviour is valued.

In this context gender is therefore highly salient, although the negotiation of gender identity will vary from student to student, and across interactions. For example, Bergvall found that one female student combined both assertiveness in her contributions to class discussion with self-deprecating comments, the former quality being seen as a ‘masculine’ trait and the latter a ‘feminine’ one. In the course of one discussion the same student went from being an active participant to virtual silence,

due to negative feedback from her peers, both male and female. Thus the negotiation of her identity is an on-going, locally situated process, adapting to the responses of her interlocutors. Her vocal participation in class can be seen as a challenge, whether conscious or unconscious, to existing linguistic expectations of women, but she is then constrained by the opposition from peers of both sexes.

This study, like the ones mentioned above, examines the contextually-dependent discursive construction of identity, but also looks at how the negotiation of identity is mediated, not only by the local context, but also by the macro-social images and discourses of femininity found in women's magazines.

1.3.1.4 The conceptualisation of (gender) identity

In this study I am interested in the way gender identity is shaped by, and intersects with, other aspects of social identity, such as age, ethnicity, sexual orientation and socio-economic status. Sociolinguistic work within the variationist paradigm has traditionally treated gender and other social categories as isolatable and stable variables which determine language use (c.f. Eckert, 2000, for a more complex view of linguistic variation). Work on language and gender, although it has developed a more complex understanding of gender as a fluid social construct, has, until relatively recently, tended to examine gender in isolation from other aspects of identity. With the development of frameworks such as the community of practice, however, analysts are now exploring the contextually-dependent interplay between different aspects of personal and social identity.

For example, Miriam Meyerhoff and Nancy Niedzielski (1994) have proposed a framework for speaker identity whereby the multifaceted nature of identity is conceptualised as a three-dimensional sphere, with two poles representing personal and group identities. Gender identity is one of many identities which are always present in an individual, but which will be more or less salient depending on the interlocutor, the feedback that he or she provides and the type of communicative event. The advantage of this approach is that not only does it reflect the multiplicity of identities present in any individual, but it also emphasises their interconnectedness. It also incorporates the concepts of ethnolinguistic vitality and social networks.

Another useful tool in the study of identity is the 'community of practice' (hereafter CoP). The concept of a CoP is defined as 'an aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in an endeavour' (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 1992: 464). In order to refer to a CoP, three criteria must be fulfilled: there must be *mutual engagement* of the members, members must share a *jointly negotiated enterprise*, and they must also have a *shared repertoire* (Wenger 1998).

One of the advantages of this approach is that it allows us to look at the mutual negotiation of individual and group identities, and the way meaning emerges through an individual's participation in multiple CoPs and through the connection between a CoP and the society at large. The concept of the CoP encourages a more dynamic conceptualisation of identity, and is therefore well suited to social constructionist approaches to language and gender. Penny Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet, in an influential article which made the case for applying the concept of CoPs to the study of language and gender, suggest that the community of practice allows researchers to focus on the multifaceted nature of identity as it is constructed in social practice, and examine 'people's active engagement in the reproduction of or resistance to gender arrangements in their communities' (1992: 472). The CoP framework has since been put to use in various language and gender studies, some of which appear in a special edition of the journal *Language in Society* devoted to the CoP framework (1999, volume 28), such as Alice Freed's (1999) examination of whether pregnant women can be considered a community of practice, in which she argues that although pregnant women are often positioned by others as members of a CoP, women's experiences of pregnancy in fact differ widely, and that the salient communities of practice in which pregnant women participate are not made up of other pregnant women, but rather family members, medical practitioners, and women who are already mothers. In the same volume, Mary Bucholtz (1999) looks at how female 'nerds' at a US high school use negative and positive identity practices to distance themselves from other high school communities and to engage in their own positive nerd community (see also Eckert, 2000, who looks at the construction of 'jock' and 'burnout' identities in a US high school).

Although the CoP framework has proved a useful tool in recent language and gender research, it is not particularly relevant to this study, as women's magazine readers cannot be seen as constituting a community of practice, as there is no

mutual engagement, other than between small groups of friends who might read or talk about magazines together, and there is no evidence of readers engaging in a joint enterprise or having a shared goal. It is interesting to note, however, that readers of a particular magazine are often addressed as if they were member of a community of sorts, with shared experiences, needs and desires.

1.3.1.5 Indexing gender

Elinor Ochs' (1992) article *Indexing Gender* has also been extremely influential in the development of our understanding of the relationship between language and gender. Ochs argued that early work in the field had taken an overly simplistic view of how language indexes gender, suggesting that in fact there are very few linguistic forms which directly index gender. Instead of positing a direct relationship between, for example, the use of tag questions and women's language, Ochs argues that the relationship is more indirect: tag questions sometimes indicate tentativeness, or invite contributions from another speaker. These strategies in turn are sometimes associated with women because of cultural norms of feminine behaviour, according to which women are unassertive and supportive of others. In this way, Ochs suggests, gender identity is indirectly indexed by certain linguistic features. Because the relationship is indirect, this creates ambiguity, and means that a speaker's utterance could be interpreted in different ways by different interlocutors.

Ochs' work on the indexicality of gender identity has been important to my analysis in this study. Although this study is not directly concerned with the use of specific linguistic forms to index gender identity, I am interested in looking at how my informants exploit the ambiguity of language in order to invoke different social categories and their relationship to gender identity. Ochs' argument also acts as a counter to the Schegloffian point of view (discussed in Chapter 2) that gender is only relevant to the analysis of talk where it can be shown to be demonstrably relevant to the participants, as it demonstrates the subtle and complex ways in which speakers can invoke gender without doing it baldly and on-record.

1.3.2 Media and cultural studies – understanding the audience

Although this study is rooted mainly in discourse analytic work on language and gender, as it is concerned with a genre of popular culture it also draws on audience

research by scholars working in media and cultural studies. In this section I look at how researchers in this field have approached mass media and audience research.

Over the past twenty years qualitative audience research, using methods derived from ethnography, has become an increasingly important aspect of work within media and cultural studies. This turn to ethnography marks a significant departure from the early work on mass culture done by theorists from the Frankfurt School, such as Adorno and Horkheimer (e.g. Adorno & Horkheimer 1973), who argued that the culture industries are used to reconcile the masses to the status quo, and that mass culture is effective because it masks the possibility of any alternative to capitalism. Theorists in the Frankfurt School compared the media to a syringe, injecting propaganda and ideology into the minds of the audience. As can be seen from this analogy, these theorists' hegemonic view of mass culture was predicated on the notion of a passive audience, allowing little room for audience resistance or negotiation of meaning.

Screen theory (a Marxist theory from the 1970s which grew out of work published in the British journal *Screen*) offered a similarly fixed and abstract version of text-audience relations in its application of Lacanian psychoanalysis to film discourse (see, for example Mulvey, 1975). For screen theorists, the production of meaning occurs entirely at the level of the text itself. In this way, the actual reader is conflated with the 'ideal' reader inscribed in the text, as it is assumed that film and television viewers have no choice but to adopt the subject positions created for them by the texts if they are to make sense of those texts.

This approach has been criticised by David Morley (e.g. Morley, 1980) and other members of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, who have made the case for a more dialogic understanding of the text-reader relationship, arguing that media audiences are actively involved in the negotiation of meaning of media texts.

Much of this work draws upon Stuart Hall's influential 'encoding/decoding' model of media production and consumption (Hall 1973, 1996). This model has both a place for the ideological component of media production while also allowing a more active conceptualisation of the audience's role. Hall suggests that the message(s)

understood by media audiences will not necessarily correspond entirely with the message(s) encoded in the text at the moment of production. He argues that once an encoded media text has been distributed to its audience, its message must then be translated or decoded by that audience in order for consumption to have taken place. In other words, the audience plays an active part in the process of meaning-making, as texts do not become meaningful until they have been decoded. However, although media signs are polysemous, they are not open to an infinite number of readings, so readers do not have complete interpretative agency. Furthermore, not all readings are equal, as the range of available meanings are hierarchically structured around 'dominant' or 'preferred' meanings.

Hall posits three hypothetical positions from which the decoding of television discourse may be constructed: 'dominant-hegemonic', 'negotiated' and 'oppositional' positions or codes. A viewer constructing meaning from the 'dominant' position decodes the message 'full and straight' as it was encoded at the moment of production. The dominant position thus fits with Screen theory's conceptualisation of media reception. A 'negotiated' reading is one in which the viewer accepts the overall validity of the dominant ideology at an abstract level, while contesting its application in specific local contexts. In a later interview, Hall suggested that 'negotiated readings are probably what most of us do most of the time' (Cruz & Lewis, 1994:265), acting as socially and historically situated subjects, positioned by multiple and contradictory discourses. The third 'oppositional' position is one in which the viewer understands the encoded meaning but decodes the message 'in a globally contrary way'.

Hall's model draws on Foucault's conception of discourse and of the relationship between power and knowledge (Foucault 1981, see section 2.2.1.2 of this study for further discussion). Foucault argues that within a society there will be multiple discourses constructing 'knowledge' on any one subject. These discourses are hierarchically organised and are therefore the site of a power struggle between competing versions of the 'truth' about that subject. As with Hall's 'dominant' or 'preferred' meanings, some discourses claim legitimacy over others within what Foucault terms 'regimes of truth, and with this legitimacy comes power, as dominant discourses serve to regulate social attitudes and behaviour. Foucault focuses on the dominance of 'expert' discourses in late capitalist societies (a view shared by

Giddens (1991)). For example, within the body of knowledge about pregnancy and motherhood, medical discourses are presented as objective scientific fact and claim greater legitimacy over other discourses on the subject.

Although Hall's model was purely theoretical and not based on actual audience research, it is important in that it instigated a shift away from the textual determinism of previous theories of popular culture consumption, without disregarding issues of power and ideology. By contrast, the alternative 'uses and gratifications' model of media consumption (see Blumler and Katz, 1974) has been criticised by Ang (1991, 1996) and others for its focus on how the media is used to gratify *individual* needs while ignoring questions of meaning and the wider social context of media use, an approach which can be accused of political naiveté. The uses and gratifications model suggests that audiences select media texts in order to gratify their specific needs, such as diversion, surveillance (using the media to acquire information about society and current events), and personal relationships (a sense of companionship which viewers feel with characters on television, or by talking to others about their viewing), and that media texts are developed in order to meet those needs. Hall's model is less naive and optimistic, as it recognises that individual viewers do not operate in a social and political vacuum. According to Hall's model, viewers' decodings are constrained and shaped not only by the parameters set by the text itself, but also by their own social location. Individuals are multiply positioned by the intersection of factors such as gender, age, class and ethnicity, and by their access to economic, educational and cultural capital. These positionings affect the cultural resources, or discourses which are available to a viewer when decoding media texts. As such, decoding cannot be entirely individual as it is based on shared interpretative resources.

The encoding/decoding model provided the theoretical framework for Morley's two-part study of the news/current affairs television programme *Nationwide*, which combined text-based analysis (Brunsdon & Morley, 1978) with empirical audience research (Morley 1980). *The Nationwide Audience* was a milestone in the 'ethnographic turn' in media and cultural studies, as is evident by the continuing references to it in current work on audience research. In this study, Morley was concerned with examining the extent to which the meanings encoded in the text matched with the interpretative codes used by the audience ('dominant' decodings

in Hall's terms), and the effect of socio-economic status on audience interpretation. He found that audience decodings are not straightforwardly determined by an individual's socio-economic and cultural background, but that an individual's background limits the discourses which they have at their disposal, and therefore the resources they can draw on in making sense of media texts.

Janice Radway's *Reading The Romance* (1987) is a similarly influential and oft-cited example of ethnographic audience research. Like Morley's *Family Television* (1986), Radway was concerned with the domestic context of cultural consumption, and what this reveals about the politics and power struggles of everyday family life.

Radway's study of female romance readers is especially important for the questions it has raised about feminist approaches to popular culture consumption, particularly regarding 'feminine' genres such as romance novels, soap opera and women's magazines. Through her interviews with romance readers, Radway came to regard the act of reading as a form of resistance, in that it was used as a means of temporary respite from household labour and familial responsibilities. Furthermore, the choice of story, with the obligatory happy ending, acts as a kind of 'compensation' for what might be lacking in readers' own relationships through the vicarious gratification of their emotional needs (Radway's work is discussed further in Chapter 3).

Radway concludes that romance reading should be taken seriously as an act of protest, but that 'from the vantage point of feminism' it can also be seen as an activity which ultimately reconciles women to the status quo. The challenge, as Radway saw it, was to harness this oppositional impulse and use it to promote real social change. Clearly, Radway is keen to respect the views of the readers, but as a feminist her project is also politically motivated, and the difficulty for like-minded researchers lies in trying to keep a balance between these two motivations. Tania Modleski, for example, argues that it is very difficult for researchers to maintain a 'proper critical distance' when involved in ethnographic audience research, and that '[a]s a result they may unwittingly wind up writing apologies for mass culture and embracing its ideology' (Modleski 1986: xi). This is a valid concern regarding the 'celebratory' tendency of some work on cultural consumption, such as that of John Fiske (1987, 1989), which constructs all cultural consumption as somehow

subversive and resistant, leaving no room for questions of power and ideology. However, like Ang (1996), I do not feel that there is an inherent incompatibility between ethnographic (or quasi-ethnographic) work and a critical stance.

Other than Radway's study, there is now a considerable body of work which looks at women's consumption of popular culture and so-called 'women's genres', much of it from a feminist perspective, such as Len Ang's oft-cited work on fans of *Dallas* (Ang, 1982), and Tania Modleski's research on female soap opera viewers (Modleski, 1982). Some of this research is discussed in Chapter 3 (section 3.5), in which I look at what makes women's magazines pleasurable. I will now move on to look specifically at research which deals with women's magazines and their readers.

1.3.3 Research on women's magazines

Women's magazines are one of the most popular and ubiquitous forms of mass media in general, and certainly one of the most dominant types of feminine popular culture, and as such they have been the subject of much feminist concern and research. There exists a considerable body of work on women's magazines, much of it coming from a feminist perspective, and done by analysts from a variety of disciplines, although rarely from linguistics.

In this section I provide an overview of previous research on women's magazines and their readers. There are three main strands of research in this area (although there is a considerable amount of overlap between these strands, with some research incorporating two, or even all three approaches): work which looks at the historical development of the genre, textual analyses of the magazines themselves, and research which is based on readers' accounts. This section is intended to give an impression of how research on women's magazines has developed over time, and how these developments have been influenced by changes in the theoretical and methodological preoccupations within different disciplines. In order to do this I summarise the main findings and arguments, as well as the methodological issues raised by different researchers and strands of research. I refer to some of these studies in greater detail in the coming chapters, where specific issues are relevant to the discussion of my own data.

1.3.3.1 Historical research

There are several works which consider the historical development of the women's magazine, tracing the growth of the genre from its origins in eighteenth and nineteenth century periodicals (see section 4.1.2 for further discussion of advice and entertainment in early women's magazines). Much of this work is predominantly descriptive, such as Cynthia White's (1970) history of women's magazines between 1693 and 1968 (see also Braithwaite and Barrell, 1988, a catalogue of British titles and their editors; Dancyger, 1978, an illustrated history of women's magazines), which looks at how the design and content of the magazines evolved over this period. While these studies offer an interesting account of the emergence and growth of the women's magazine industry, and a catalogue of the appearance and disappearance of different titles, they offer little or nothing in the way of theoretical or critical analysis. For example, they are mostly unconcerned with questions to do with the construction of femininity within the texts, or with the role that magazines play within a capitalist society.

Issues to do with how the magazines attempt to define and reproduce how femininity is understood, and how this construction of femininity is shaped by ideologies, not only of gender, but also of consumerism, are addressed by Janice Winship (1983, 1985, 1987), whose work on British women's magazines has been very influential on research in this area (see Ballaster *et al.*, 1991; Hermes, 1995). In her 1987 study *Inside Women's Magazines*, Winship provides a detailed analysis of three magazines: *Cosmopolitan*, *Woman's Own* (both of which are still available), and the explicitly feminist and left-wing *Spare Rib*, which ceased publication in 1993. Winship's study provides a semiotic analysis of the magazines, and examines how changes in the form and content of the magazines were shaped by social and economic changes in the wider society. For example, Winship attributes the appearance of magazines like *Cosmopolitan* to the post-war increase in the number of working middle-class women. This increase, combined with the advances made by the feminist movement, resulted in many middle class women in their twenties and thirties having greater financial independence and disposable income. Whereas in the past women's spending was largely confined to what was needed for the home, the 'New Woman' was free to spend money on herself, and the magazines evolved to address this new brand of female consumer.

Unlike previous studies, Winship also looks at the politics of magazine production and ownership (see also Gough-Yates, 2003, a study which focuses on the social and economic aspects of magazine production and marketing), and how the content of the magazines was informed by the needs and demands of advertisers. Winship examines the steady growth in the power wielded by advertisers; the publishers are reliant on advertising revenue in order to make a profit, and as a result editorial policy often has to bow down to the interests of advertisers. One particular instance of this which Winship discusses was an agreement between the editor of *Woman* in 1956 and British Nylon Spinners. British Nylon Spinners were placing a large two-page ad in *Woman*, and negotiated with the editor that the issue which featured their ad would not include any article which promoted natural fibres. Since that time, these sort of negotiations between advertisers and magazine editors have become commonplace.

Although Winship does not engage with the accounts and practices of other readers, she does provide a reflexive account of her own experiences as a reader of women's magazines, particularly the three titles which she focuses on, discussing both the pleasure and the dissatisfaction she herself feels when reading the magazines. By positioning herself, not just as a detached observer, but also as a fan of the magazines, Winship was one of the first researchers to break away from the view that women's magazines are harmful to women, functioning purely as an instrument of patriarchal ideology. Rather, she states her aim as being 'to delve beneath this simple and dismissive description in order to both explain the appeal of the magazine formula and to critically consider its limitations and potential for change' (1987: 8).

Winship interprets the images and discourses used in women's magazines as ideological constructs, creating an enticing fantasy of womanhood based on idealised notions of femininity. However, Winship argues that by consuming, enjoying, and aspiring to the femininities presented in women's magazines, women are not simply the passive victims of patriarchal ideologies. Rather, she views femininity as a form of active subordination which women knowingly participate in, but are also restricted by. Winship stresses that the magazines offer a fantasy world where women can live out their imaginary selves, without the contradictions, burdens and inequalities they experience in their everyday lives. She argues that

women willingly participate in this fantasy world, and moreover, that readers do not look for 'reality' in the magazines, because for most women, realism does not mix with pleasure and entertainment (although this claim is not backed up with any data from readers other than herself).

Winship identifies advertisements as playing a central role in the creation of this feminine fantasy world, and claims that women enjoy and 'luxuriate' in the world portrayed in the ads, without necessarily intending to buy the products, or even noticing which particular product is being advertised:

We frequently luxuriate in the advertising without ever a thought of the product [...] We recognize and relish the vocabulary of dreams in which ads deal; we become involved in the fictions they create; but we know full well that those commodities will not elicit the promised fictions (1987: 55).

Again, Winship's claims are based on her own experiences as a reader, and on her semiotic analysis of the magazines. In my own data, I have found that many women describe themselves as being irritated and bored by the high proportion of ads in the glossy magazines. Some women dislike and resent the magazines' pushing of a consumerist lifestyle (often these women prefer to read magazines which focus more on celebrity gossip, or claim to never, or rarely, read women's magazines), whereas others might dislike the ads, but enjoy reading features which recommend specific products, or which describe the products used by celebrities.

In terms of any influence the women's movement might have had on the content of women's magazines, Winship points out that from the 1970s, magazines did run articles on issues to do with women in the workplace, as well as divorce, domestic violence and rape. The latter subjects were often raised in the context of problem pages or the 'triumph over tragedy' stories which are particularly common in weeklies like *Woman's Own*. Within this context, Winship argues, institutions such as marriage are not questioned. Instead, problems are constructed as arising out of individual circumstances and the behaviour of individual women or men. The solutions that are offered are also highly individualistic. As such, Winship argues that although on the face of it the magazines appear to be engaging with problems of gender inequality, issues like low pay and sexism at work, rape, and domestic violence are constructed as problems to be dealt with by the individuals involved. In

this way the magazines avoid having to deal with the more 'controversial' or 'radical' possibility that these problems are deep-rooted in society and need to be dealt with through collective action and wide-ranging societal changes. Writing in particular about *Woman's Own*, Winship argues that although there had been some cursory attempts to address questions raised by feminism, ultimately, '[t]he magazine's cautiousness around feminism – not wanting to upset too many apple carts too quickly for readers – leads at worst to a misrepresentation of the women's movement, at best to an enthusiasm about what women can achieve' (1987: 93).

Margaret Beetham's (1996) study of British women's magazines in the nineteenth and early twentieth century takes a similar approach to Janice Winship. Rather than look at a broad range of titles, Beetham offers a more detailed and in-depth analysis of a small selection of nineteenth century periodicals. In her analysis Beetham draws on research and theoretical perspectives from both women's studies and cultural studies. As well as offering a chronological narrative, Beetham also considers how the periodical format was shaped by its association (until fairly recently) with women and feminine concerns, and how discourses of femininity were informed by the arrival of the magazine format and developments in print technology.

Beetham argues for a more complex understanding of the role of the magazines in the construction of femininities, rather than simply seeing them as patriarchal instruments of a repressive ideology:

I assume not only that the meaning of femininity was and is radically unstable but that its relationship to sexuality and the female body had to be constantly re-worked. I do not assume that the magazines imposed a socially constructed femininity on a natural sexuality or on already existing bodies, but rather that the meaning of these terms was dynamically related. Nor did this go on simply in the realm of discourse. The female body was materially shaped by the corsets, medicines and hairstyles which the magazines recommended.

And these recommendations were themselves the products of economic as well as ideological imperatives, the need for the magazines simultaneously to insist upon femininity and attract advertising from the makers of corsets and medicines (Beetham, 1996: 4).

Many of my informants commented on the pages and pages of advertising which fill modern women's magazines, and as discussed below, much of the research on

twentieth century magazines has explored the way in which consumption is central to their definition of femininity (e.g. McCracken, 1977; Winship, 1987). Beetham's study shows that the contents of women's magazines have always been shaped by economic, as well as ideological concerns.

Demarest and Garner (1992) conducted a content analysis of articles in *Ladies Home Journal* and *Good Housekeeping* from 1954 to 1982, examining the changes in subject matter and the presentation of gender roles over the years. Taking Friedan's ideas (1963) about the portrayal of traditional gender roles in the media as a basis, they propose that the media 'may be described as either an agent of social control that reinforces traditional sex roles, a mirror of society that reflects current attitudes and opinions about women's roles, or a sluggish agent of social change' (Demarest and Garner 1992: 359). They found that although there was an increase in the number of articles on feminist themes, political and social issues, and career development, that the majority focused on the more traditionally 'feminine' domains of relationships, home and family. Furthermore, there was often a substantial time lag between the occurrence of a political/social event and the publication of articles dealing with it. Their tentative conclusions from this data are that traditional notions of femininity are still the norm, but that magazines are also sensitive to social change, albeit rather sluggishly, thereby reflecting rather than precipitating change. Of course, the magazines they looked at clearly signal their interest in issues of house and home in their titles, and so these findings are to be expected and we cannot generalise from them to the whole range of women's magazines.

1.3.3.2 Textual/content analysis

Early work on women's magazines was mostly based on the magazines themselves rather than their readers, much of it drawing on Stuart Hall's (1980) 'encoding/decoding' model for the analysis of media production and consumption (see section 1.3.2 for discussion of Hall's framework). This work is concerned with analysing women's magazines as a semiotic system, looking at the way in which dominant discourses of femininity are constructed through the text and images used in the magazines. As discussed below, many writers have examined the construction of the ideal or implied reader, who, it is assumed, will produce the 'preferred' reading (in Hall's terms) of the text. What these analyses do not address, however, is how 'real' readers make sense of the magazines.

Angela McRobbie's seminal work on (the now defunct) teenage magazine *Jackie* (McRobbie, 1978, 1999, 2000) is very much within the vein of research described above. She argues that *Jackie* acts as a 'powerful ideological force' (McRobbie, 2000: 114) which seeks to 'define and shape the woman's world' (2000: 69) for its readers. McRobbie claims that by including certain topics, and excluding others, the magazines set the parameters for what adolescence means to their readers, endorsing and naturalising conservative and traditional gender roles, and acting as a guide to what adolescent girls should be interested in.

In her analysis of the picture stories used in *Jackie*, McRobbie notes that the subject of female friendship is ignored in favour of the idealised and romantic portrayal of heterosexual relationships. In these stories, there are no platonic friendships, either amongst girls, or between girls and boys. Other girls are not to be trusted, unless they are old and/or ugly, and the message is that girls must fight in order to get and keep their man. The female characters in these stories fall into three categories: 'quiet, loving blonde', 'wild, fun-loving brunette' and the 'ordinary' girl who is essentially a non-character (2000: 84), and it is the 'good', caring girl who 'gets' the boy, and therefore the happy ending. In this way, McRobbie argues, the magazines 'elevate to dizzy heights the supremacy of the heterosexual romantic partnership' (2000: 86).

McRobbie also comments on the way in which *Jackie*'s readers are assumed to be confined to the home, suggesting that this foreshadows their future roles as housewives. She argues that '*Jackie* asserts the absolute and natural separation of sex roles [...] Boys can be footballers, pop stars, even juvenile delinquents, but girls can only be feminine. The girl's life is defined through emotions' (2000: 91). Although she notes that *Jackie* readers will not necessarily accept the world view presented in the magazines, her focus on the ideological force of the texts gives the impression of a more or less passive reader. However, Elizabeth Frazer's (1987) research (which is discussed in more detail in the next section), based on interviews with young girls talking about a *Jackie* picture story, demonstrates that teenage girls can, and do, take a critical stance towards the magazines' representations of femininity.

It should be noted that *Jackie*, which is no longer in existence, represents an older form of teen magazine, one which deals with romance, but not with sex, and in this respect bears little resemblance to more recent titles aimed at teenage girls. Contemporary teen magazines such as *More*, *Sugar* and *Bliss* tend to adopt a more irreverent, 'in yer face' tone, similar to that of 'ladmags' like *Loaded* (Jackson et al., 2001), and as a result have attracted a considerable amount of media attention, often being accused of encouraging under-age sex. *Sugar*, in particular, has been at the centre of various controversies over its sexual content. In 2003 it was criticised for giving away free condoms, and again in 2004 for running a promotional feature on Durex condoms (The Daily Telegraph, March 7 2004). *Sugar*, and other teen magazines were publicly denounced by musician Bob Geldof, who accused them of being too explicit and offensive.

In her later work on the newer generation of teenage magazines McRobbie (1999) moved away from her previous stance on the magazines as purveyors of oppressive ideologies, acknowledging the pleasures of consumption and the multiplicity of voices articulated in contemporary magazines. McRobbie argues that the ironic tone of magazines like *Just Seventeen* allows a more flexible and reflective, and less prescriptive articulation of feminine discourses:

This new form of ironic femininity allows readers to participate in all the conventional and gender stereotypical rituals of femininity without finding themselves trapped into traditional gender-subordinate positions. Irony gives them some room to move (1999: 53).

Mary Talbot (1992,1995) has also written about Jackie, and the discursive construction of gender identities within the texts. Talbot's work comes from a CDA (critical discourse analysis) perspective, and as a linguist she pays closer attention to linguistic detail than is usual in the work of analysts from cultural studies or other disciplines. Specifically, she concentrates on how the writers assume an intimate and friendly relationship with the reader in order to establish an imagined feminine community of the magazine writers and readers, what Talbot terms a 'synthetic sisterhood'.

Talbot takes language as the centre for the production of gender identity, and that this identity is therefore a fluid and changeable construct. Although women are active in the creation of their own gender identities, they are also influenced and

shaped by the articulation of 'femininity' in the mass media, including television, women's magazines and the fashion and beauty industry. The discourses of femininity used in these media provide women with resources to draw on in the linguistic or other construction of their femininity, both reflecting and reproducing societal gender norms. Talbot tries to avoid the portrayal of readers as passive and uncritical, while acknowledging that the mass media do exert a level of subconscious influence:

Like any other language users, readers are both actively agentive and unwittingly acted upon. As readers, we are seldom aware of the resources we are drawing upon in investing texts with meaning. The sense of autonomy that we experience as readers is an illusion, implying a nonsensical ability to pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps (1995: 146).

The question of the level of critical awareness attributable to readers has clearly been a divisive one in the work on women's magazines, and in my view cannot be resolved without recourse to the actual, rather than implied reader. Talbot does not do this, but she does stress that she is not attempting to present magazine readers as 'passive receptors and ignorant dupes' (Talbot, 1995: 161). She also refers to Janice Radway's study of readers of popular romance novels (Radway, 1987), describing Radway's work as an effective challenge to the overly simplistic view of readers as cultural dopes, brainwashed by patriarchal ideologies.

Talbot is particularly concerned with the way magazines, as with other forms of mass media, create imagined communities, largely based on consumption. She notes that women's/teen magazines address women/teenage girls as a single homogenous group, with the same needs and interests. As discussed earlier, magazines are effectively setting limits as to what is or is not 'feminine' through their choice of images and subject matter. For those women whose experience is denied or made deviant, how do they respond to these notions of the female community? Are readers who have a greater correspondence with the implied reader more likely to accept these discourses of femininity uncritically? These questions are addressed in the following chapters of this dissertation.

Talbot draws on the concept of *synthetic personalization*, defined by Norman Fairclough as 'a compensatory tendency to give the impression of treating each of the people 'handled' *en masse* as an individual' (Fairclough, 1989: 62). This

construction of personae for both the producer(s) of the text and the implied reader is also discussed in the work of Angela McRobbie (1978, 2000) and Eggins and Ledema (1997). The latter argue that '[t]he magazines excel at making the reader believe she is an autonomous individual, a voluntary member of a classless community of beautiful and successful women' (Eggins and Ledema, 1997: 169) and that this prevents the reader from becoming conscious of the ideologies and discourses of femininity at work in the text. In the chapters which follow I consider the extent to which this is true, looking at the ways in which readers affiliate themselves with, or distance themselves from this notion of a feminine community or sisterhood.

Talbot describes the 'synthetic sisterhood' of teenage magazines as 'bogus', as it is based on a capitalist strategy to encourage consumerism, but is this the perception of the readers themselves? Do readers actually feel like members of a genuine community or do they recognise it as an artificial construct which nonetheless adds to their reading pleasure? For example, previous commentators do not seem to have considered the possibility that readers actively *enjoy* participating in a synthetic community in the same way people seek out virtual communities through internet chat rooms and the like.

Both Marjorie Ferguson (1983) and Ellen McCracken (1993) analyse women's magazines as a semiotic system. Both conceive of the magazines as a powerful system of signs which seek to define what it means to be a woman, constructing a world of women which readers aspire to be a part of. Both also credit the magazines with a great deal of power to shape their readers' actions and attitudes, although these claims are based on the assumption that specific meanings are encoded into the texts and that these meanings are then transmitted wholesale to readers, who passively accept these meanings.

Marjorie Ferguson's (1983) content analysis of various titles is informed by her own experience working for a women's magazine, and is valuable for her 'insider' knowledge of production and practices in the magazines industry. Her knowledge and connections also helped her to get access to, and to interview magazine editors, which other researchers have found much more difficult (see Gough-Yates, 2003: 118).

Ferguson sees the magazines as a potent force in the dissemination of hegemonic notions of femininity, suggesting that 'these periodicals are about more than women and womanly things, they are about femininity itself – as a state, a condition, a craft, and an art form which comprise a set of practices and beliefs' (1983: 1). Drawing on Emile Durkheim's work on the sociology of religion, Ferguson argues that femininity, as presented in the magazines, can be likened to a kind of religious cult. Within this cult, Ferguson describes the position of women's magazines and their editors thus:

[T]he oracles that carry the messages sacred to the cult of femininity are women's magazines, the high priestesses who select and shape the cult's interdictions and benedictions are women's magazine editors; the rites, rituals, sacrifices and oblations that they exhort are to be performed periodically by the cult's adherents. All pay homage to the cult's totem – the totem of Woman herself (1983: 5).

Ellen McCracken's (1993) analysis draws on Stuart Hall's (1980) 'encoding/decoding' model, in which preferred meanings are encoded in cultural texts, and these meanings are naturalised and constructed as common sense or common knowledge. Like Ferguson, McCracken views women's magazines as a powerful ideological force which 'exert a cultural leadership to shape consensus in which highly pleasurable codes work to naturalize social relations of power' (1993: 3).

McCracken argues that the conflation of desire and consumerism is central to the magazines' construction of femininity, with the primary message being that femininity can only be achieved through the consumption of specific products. The magazines succeed in selling these products, as well as selling copies of the magazine itself, by combining pleasure and entertainment with images and discourses which encourage women's insecurities and vulnerabilities. Women would not buy either the magazines or the products advertised if the magazines consistently made them feel bad, but the underlying ideological codes are made pleasurable through the 'visual, verbal, and sometimes olfactory signifiers' (1993: 8) which create an appealing fantasy world, and the promise that women can improve themselves and participate in this world through consumption.

One of the magazines which McCracken discusses is *Cosmopolitan*, which is often described as the first women's magazine to celebrate single women, and to

encourage women to seek sexual pleasure. The association between *Cosmo* and sex still seems to exist, as many of my informants made reference to it being 'full of sex'. McCracken argues that although the magazine appears to embrace all types of (hetero)sexual desire and behaviour, it only allows readers to take vicarious pleasure in the accounts of transgressive behaviour. Ultimately the magazine reinforces conventional values and gender stereotypes by concluding such accounts with the reassertion of conservative views on what constitutes 'correct' behaviour for women, or by showing that women who transgress must suffer or be punished for their behaviour. McCracken suggests that:

Although most readers will never dress or behave as the magazine urges, *Cosmopolitan* offers them momentary opportunities to transgress the predominant sexual mores in the privacy of their own homes. A woman can dream of an adulterous affair or a *ménage-à-trois* with no threat of social stigma (1993: 159).

1.3.3.3 Research on readers

Like Mary Talbot and Angela McRobbie, Elizabeth Frazer (1987) is also interested in the ideological workings of *Jackie* magazine. However, rather than conducting a content analysis of the text, Frazer chose one picture story from the magazine and interviewed seven groups of teenage girls about their readings of the story. In turning to the readers, Frazer provides an invaluable companion, as well as a challenge, to the text-based studies.

Firstly, Frazer considers how the concept of ideology is dealt with in much social theory and research. The notion of ideology is widely used, but its meaning is also widely disputed, and academics often leave unspecified, or only vaguely specified, what they mean by the term. Frazer argues, however, that:

Where 'ideology' is more tightly specified [...] it predicts a certain sort of relationship between readers and the texts which are said to be bearers of ideological meaning, and is taken as an explanation of people's beliefs or behaviour (1987: 407).

Frazer suggests that 'social and cultural researchers have taken feminine heterosexuality as peculiarly "ideological"' (1987: 407), ignoring issues of male sexuality and its social construction. She is critical of the trend in social research which focuses on 'feminine' texts such as women's magazines, romantic fiction and sex education materials, arguing that previous purely text-based analyses imply that all girls and women are suffering from a 'false consciousness', a claim which cannot be substantiated without looking at the accounts of readers themselves.

Frazer interviewed seven groups of girls between the ages of thirteen and seventeen, from different social and ethnic backgrounds. In the group discussions Frazer gave all the girls a copy of the same photo story to read, and then asked them to talk about it. Firstly, she notes that her data support earlier claims that magazines are read only in a superficial and lazy way, as she found that some girls had to read through the story more than once before they remembered what the plot was. This is also borne out by my data. Although my informants might mention specific products that they had bought after seeing them recommended in a magazine, they all found it very difficult to remember specific articles that they had read. As discussed in Chapter 3, many women commented on the fact that the magazines did not require a great deal of attention or concentration, and described themselves as 'flicking through' the magazines or looking at the pictures, rather than reading them from cover to cover.

On the whole, Frazer found that the girls interpreted the story as a work of fiction, rather than as a reflection of their lives. Many of the girls, particularly the older ones, understood the story as normative, commenting on and evaluating the ideologies or message behind the text. For example, some girls felt that the story promoted the idea that 'you need the right bloke to make your life work' (1987: 416). They were critical of this message, arguing that it could make girls feel bad about themselves, and that friendships with other girls were more important than boyfriends. As discussed above, McRobbie also identified and criticised 'the supremacy of the heterosexual romantic partnership' (2000: 86) in Jackie stories, but Frazer's research shows that one does not have to be an academic in order to understand the texts in this way.

Some of the older girls Frazer spoke to discussed the story in terms of ideas about how society expects girls to behave (in other words, in terms of gender ideologies, but they did not use this terminology), suggesting that the story both reflected and reinforced gender norms. For example, one girl suggested that magazines are responsible for putting pressure on girls to find a boyfriend, arguing that 'in these sorts of magazines all the emphasis is put on you know, you do something wrong you won't get a boyfriend, you've got to behave in a certain way' (1987: 416). In the interviews, Frazer raised the issue of why the girls felt the magazines had such normative power over their readers, even though they themselves were able to produce critical and resistant readings. In the end, however, they were unable to reach any conclusions on this issue.

As discussed in the coming chapters, a recurring theme amongst my informants was the idea that although they, as individuals, did not take the magazines seriously, and had the self-confidence to resist any negative messages underlying the texts, they often suggested or implied that the magazines might have a negative impact on other younger/older/less intelligent women who might be more easily influenced. Many women also acknowledged the consumerist agenda behind the magazines. Although most women were annoyed by the sheer volume of adverts in the glossy magazines, some described themselves as willingly 'falling for' the endorsement of expensive clothes and cosmetics. It seems then that although readers might recognise ideological content in the magazines, that does not necessarily mean that this will correspond with resistant practices. Similarly, although this is not discussed by Frazer, the teenagers she spoke to might recognize the ideological work being done by the magazines, but this does not mean that they are able (or choose) to resist or ignore that pressure in their everyday lives.

Frazer's research demonstrates the value of looking at readers' accounts of how they read and make sense of the magazines, and the need to guard against conflating 'real' readers with the implied reader constructed by the text. Frazer concludes that on the whole, the girls she spoke to took a questioning, and even analytic approach to the texts, suggesting that 'the kinds of meanings which are encoded in texts and which we might want to call ideological, fail to get a grip on readers in the way the notion of ideology generally suggests' (1987: 419).

Ballaster *et al.* (1991) combine textual analysis with interview data, although their emphasis is largely on the magazines themselves. They describe a tension or conflict in previous research between two approaches to the study of women's magazines: the first is based on the view that magazines are a source of pleasure to their readers, and seeks to understand, and celebrate that pleasure, whereas the second views them as transmitters of oppressive ideologies. Ballaster *et al.* propose that these two notions are both crucial to understanding women's magazines, and should not be viewed as mutually exclusive. Rather, they argue that:

[A]ll pleasure is socially constructed – what counts for an individual or group as pleasurable depends on the culturally and socially determined range of meanings and values available to them in discourse. We must, then, reject the principle that pleasure can be 'pure' or 'authentic', and also recognise that the construction and maintenance of any social order entails the construction of certain pleasures that secure consent and participation in that order. That any cultural form is both pleasurable *and* ideological is, then, neither surprising nor worrying – what else could pleasure be? And how else could ideology work? (1991: 161, emphasis in the original).

I would argue that this is a crucial point to make, and is backed up by readers' accounts, as many of the women I spoke to have mixed feelings about the magazines, taking pleasure from reading them, but also realising that the magazines are continually trying to push consumer goods, and sell a certain lifestyle.

Ballaster *et al.* stress the fragmentary nature of the magazines' depiction of femininity, noting that even single issues of a magazine can contain inconsistent and contradictory discourses of femininity. Considering this inconsistency it is difficult, they argue, to specify exactly what the dominant ideology of femininity actually is, because there are in fact a multiplicity of femininities circulating in the magazines, and in society generally.

In their interviews with readers, Ballaster *et al.* found that women tended to be loyal to their choice of magazine, but that they would change their preferred titles as their own circumstances changed, for example, if they got married or had children. This was not so much the case in my data. Many of the women I spoke to, particularly women in their twenties, made comments like 'they're all the same aren't they?', and generally did not pledge allegiance to any particular title, although they might state a

preference for a particular type of magazine (glossy, gossip, traditional weekly) or might read one or two titles more often than others. However, I did find that my informants talked about reading different magazines at different ages, many drawing a distinction between their reading habits as teenagers on the one hand, and as grown women on the other.

They also found that readers did interpret the magazines as promoting particular discourses of femininity, such as the glossies' emphasis on glamour, or the traditional weeklies' focus on domesticity, which shows that readers are not necessarily blind to the ideological workings of the texts. The younger women they interviewed, particularly the groups of students and youth workers, were also critical of the magazines and their use and reinforcement of gender stereotypes. Although a critical, more reflective stance was common amongst younger readers, the group of pensioners they interviewed tended not to criticise the magazines in this way.

Although Ballaster et al. found that readers were far from being cultural dopes, they argue that readers' talk about the magazines still appeared to be informed and shaped by the discourses of femininity available in the texts. As such, they conclude that the magazines cannot be dismissed as harmless fun:

While we reject any straightforward causal relation between representation and behaviour, or the idea that texts simply 'brainwash' their readers, we would argue that certain readings are privileged and that frequently the terms of our criticism can only remain within the terms of the magazine discourse itself. We may not agree with the versions of femininity offered in any particular magazine text, or in magazines in general, but our disagreement is a response to, a reaction to, these versions, rather than a reshaping or destruction of them (1991: 131).

The value of Ballaster *et al.*'s approach is that they recognise and appreciate the pleasure which reading magazines can bring, but do not take this pleasure at face value, looking at how the pleasure is constructed. They also recognise that readers are far from being 'cultural dopes', but at the same time, they refrain from taking an overly celebratory tone, providing a critical analysis of their interview data, rather than insisting on the ultimate authority of readers' accounts.

The sociologist Dawn Currie's (1999) study of Canadian teen magazines combines textual analysis with individual and group interviews with ninety-one teenage girls,

and is similar in approach to the work of Ballaster *et al.* (1991). Some of the recent work on women's magazines and other 'feminine' genres of popular culture (and indeed, academic work on popular culture in general) has taken something of a celebratory tone, focusing on the pleasure that women get from their consumption of these media, and constructing this pleasure as a sign of women's agency as consumers. Currie, however, challenges the view that pleasure necessarily equates with, or should be celebrated as a form of resistance:

[T]he current study questions whether the treatment of women as active agents necessarily frees them from the power of mass media [...] the equation of agency with pleasure allows commentators to claim women's participation in commodity consumption as grounds for feminist resistance to patriarchy (Currie, 1999: 36).

Currie also takes issue with what she describes as a general trend within cultural studies, typified by the work of John Fiske (1987, 1989), which depoliticises the act of consumption and the role popular culture plays in capitalist societies. Although in one sense such work can be seen as political because it casts consumption as an act of political resistance or subversion, Currie argues that it depoliticises popular culture by ignoring the economic and cultural power wielded by the 'culture industry'.

Although Currie questions such 'redemptive' readings of cultural consumption, that is not to say that she constructs magazine readers as cultural dopes either. That is, she does not see them as passively taking on the femininities presented in the magazines. Currie stresses the performative and fluid nature of gendered identities, and argues that individual women actively negotiate and constantly re-enact or alter the ways they 'do' gender. For example, women make conscious decisions not only as to whether they buy a particular magazine or not, but they also make decisions about how they present themselves as women, which clothes they wear, whether they wear make-up, and so on.

Joke Hermes' (1995) study of both male and female readers of women's magazines provides a different perspective from other research, as she focuses entirely on the way texts are constructed by the readers and accorded meaning in their everyday lives.

Hermes' findings are discussed at various points in the coming chapters where they are relevant to the discussion of my own data, but at this stage I want to discuss

some issues raised by the way she approaches her research. Hermes argues that much of the previous work on women's magazines and their readers has been approached from a position of 'concern', rather than 'respect' for readers. She describes this position of concern as belonging to a 'modernity discourse' (see Jensen, 1990), and is critical of early feminist media criticism for its use of this discourse, which purports to speak on behalf of media consumers who are brainwashed by a false consciousness.

For example, Hermes criticises the work of Ballaster *et al.* (1991) for adopting a position of concern, arguing that they are:

[P]reoccupied with how feminism can most effectively challenge gender difference as it is reified and fixed by women's magazines [...] It echoes the older feminist position of concern, which is combined uneasily with a more postmodern, celebratory tone that stresses the pleasure, the creativity and the criticism of readers (1995: 3).

Hermes suggests that any respect Ballaster *et al.* show to their readers is undermined by their views that the magazines' constructions of femininity are not innocuous, which Hermes claims is an overly moralistic and judgemental stance. Hermes takes the view that 'it is very unbecoming to moralize as an author', and that it is 'absolutely improper to be critical of the people I spoke to' (1995: 4).

I appreciate and share Hermes' belief that purely textual analyses of the magazines, which privilege the views and interpretations of the analyst, cannot adequately represent how the magazines are interpreted by readers, and where they do make such claims, do not do justice to readers' critical faculties. However, as a researcher and a feminist, my interest is in not just organizing and presenting readers' accounts, but also in interpreting and analysing those accounts. As a feminist, one of the reasons I have been motivated to conduct this research is to explore how women's construction of their own gender identity is mediated by dominant discourses of femininity, such as the ones found in women's magazines. This requires taking a critical stance, not towards individual women, but towards the way conventional and normative representations of femininity (and the way these intersect with constructions of sexuality, ethnicity, age and class) seek to define who we are and what we can and should do. As a feminist I am also interested in exploring possibilities for resisting and transforming these representations. I do not

believe that such an approach is incompatible with showing respect for my informants.

1.3.4 Research on men's magazines

Men's magazines, although a much more recent phenomenon than women's magazines, are clearly a related genre: they both share the same glossy magazine format (there is not currently a men's equivalent to the women's domestic weekly), they are both driven by the need for advertising revenue and the related need to sell products to their readers, and most importantly (in terms of this study), they are both important sites in and through which gendered discourses are constructed, reproduced and circulated. As such, it has been useful and interesting for me to consider research on men's magazines, to see how the research has been approached and conducted, as well as considering the conclusions analysts have reached about the discursive construction of masculinity (both by the texts and their readers).

I address some of this work during my analysis in the coming chapters, where the issues raised are relevant to my data (see in particular Chapter 5, where I look at how one of my informants talks about reading men's magazines). In this section, however, I focus on the work of Jackson *et al.* (2001), as both their approach and their findings are similar to my own.

The body of academic work which takes men's magazines as its subject is much smaller than that which looks at women's magazines. This is unsurprising, as the modern men's lifestyle magazine has only really been in existence since the mid 1980s (although there were some earlier examples – see Jackson *et al.*, 2001). Prior to this, magazines aimed at men did exist, but dealt with specific interests such as cars, sports, and of course pornography. The first general interest men's magazines in Britain were *Arena* and *GQ*, which were launched in 1986 and 1988 respectively. It was not until the 1990s, however, with the advent of magazines like *Loaded*, *FHM* and *Maxim*, that the genre really began to take off, generating huge commercial success and becoming something of a cultural phenomenon, thereby provoking the interest of the media and academics.

Since the arrival of *Loaded* and its counterparts, men's magazines have come to play an important role in the articulation of popular discourses of masculinity. As

such, in recent years various academic studies have studied the genre and its consumers, looking at how they are produced and understood.

Jackson et al. (2001) is perhaps the most comprehensive study of men's magazines to date, in that it deals with both production and consumption. They combine textual analysis with interview data, having conducted interviews with editors of various men's magazines, as well as focus group interviews with different groups of readers. Firstly, they look at the historical development of men's magazines in Britain, concentrating on the period since the 1980s. They explore not only the magazines themselves, but also the surrounding media debates, arguing that both these sources 'provided a key context for thinking about contemporary masculinities' (*ibid.*: 24).

Jackson *et al.* (2001) look in particular at the development and significance of *Loaded*. Launched in 1994 with the strapline 'for men who should know better', *Loaded* was hugely successful and became the iconic men's magazine of the 1990s. With its irreverent tone and focus on football, drinking and semi-naked women, Jackson *et al.* discuss how *Loaded* came to represent the whole genre of men's magazines (in media discourse, at least), and moreover, was regarded as emblematic of the 'new lad' and 'lad culture'. They look at the way newspapers (both tabloid and broadsheet) and other forms of mass media reported on the increasing popularity of men's magazines and the notion of the 'new lad'. The rise of the 'new lad' was seen by some as a simple return to a more 'honest' portrayal of what men are 'really' like, a retort to the politically correct notion of the 'new man'. For others, it was symptomatic of a 'crisis in masculinity', with men no longer sure of their roles in a post-feminist society.

Jackson *et al.* argue that although the notion of a 'crisis in masculinity' cannot be seen simply as a construction of the media, nor can the (re)emergence of the 'new lad' (in opposition to the 'new man') be understood straightforwardly as a consequence of, or reaction to, the social and economic changes brought about by the feminist movement or (post)Thatcherite politics. Rather, they suggest that:

In this particular era of social, economic and cultural change, what we understand by work, family and sexuality can no longer be assumed, but are open to question. Thus, issues of relationships and gender identities become part of the cultural commentary of the press [...]

[E]ach new version of masculinity struggles to become the true version: the one that becomes most widely accepted as common sense [...] Thus, when we discuss new versions of masculinity, we are talking about a struggle for coherence as new versions emerge and are classified, and the process by which certain systems of classification become not only clearly distinguishable but gain more ideological resonance over other rival systems (Jackson *et al.*, 2001: 45).

Although Jackson *et al.* are concerned with the way in which different and competing discourses of masculinity are circulated in society through different media, and how they then become naturalised, the quotation above applies equally to discourses of femininity. Moreover, because of the symbiotic relationship between gender categories, it is inevitable that emerging discourses of femininity will feed off and impact on the construction of masculinity, as can be seen from the way in which the assertion of laddish masculinities was often interpreted as a response to the politically correct demands of feminism.

In their focus group discussions, Jackson *et al.* spoke to a wide range of men, and also to a small number of women, using their data to examine how 'different individuals and groups of men use the magazines to help them make sense of changing gender roles and relations' (2001: 3). In their analysis of the focus group data, Jackson *et al.* draw on and adapt the approach used by Joke Hermes' (1995). Like Hermes, their analysis is based on the identification of the discursive repertoires (Hermes uses the term 'interpretive repertoires') drawn on by their informants when discussing the magazines. However, Jackson *et al.* also draw an analytic distinction between 'discursive repertoires' and 'discursive dispositions'; discursive repertoires are defined as the range of discourses which individuals draw on in their talk, while discursive dispositions are the ways they position themselves in relation to these discourses, for example whether they accept or resist them. For example, Jackson *et al.* identified discursive repertoires such as 'harmless fun', 'women as Other', 'surface and depth', 'naturalness' and 'change'. When looking at their informants' dispositions towards these discourses, they found very little evidence of overtly 'oppositional' readings, but did find that there was considerable ambivalence towards more dominant discourses of masculinity. While some readers' dispositions were identified as 'compliant' or even 'celebratory' towards the 'laddishness' of the magazines, others positioned themselves in ways which Jackson *et al.* describe as 'apologetic', 'defensive' or 'hostile'.

Jackson *et al.* argue that this distinction between discourses and dispositions is an important one, because it 'helps us to highlight the ambivalences and instabilities in the ways the magazines are read, rather than assuming that all men have an equal investment in the magazines or are equally complicit in the magazines' dominant representation of laddishness' (2001: 45). This is a valid point: the invocation of a dominant discourse of masculinity (or femininity) indicates that the speaker considers it relevant to how they read and make sense of the magazines, but this does not necessarily mean that are totally accepting of, or compliant with that discourse. Ambivalence towards discourses is also evident in the use of conflicting discourses, or by the invocation of alternative, or non-dominant discourses (e.g. feminist discourses).

In the analysis of my own data I have examined not only *that*, but also *how* such discourses are invoked, and how my informants position themselves in relation to these discourses. Unlike Jackson *et al.* I have not used the notion of discursive dispositions, but rather have conducted a close linguistic analysis in order to demonstrate the different ways my informants position themselves in relation to the magazines and the discourses of femininity they employ. For example, by looking at the use of hedges and epistemic modality in my informants' talk, we can see (amongst other things) the extent to which they choose to align themselves with, or distance themselves from certain discourses.

1.4 CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have discussed my aims in conducting this research and set out the organisation of the thesis. I have also provided a critical overview of some of the relevant literature, looking at the development of the field of language and gender, and locating this study within current trends in this area of study. As this study also draws on work in media and cultural studies, I have also discussed the development of audience research in this field, before moving to look in detail at existing work on women's magazines and their readers. In the next chapter I look at the various methodologies and theoretical perspectives which I have drawn on, and discuss my methods of data collection, transcription and analysis.

CHAPTER 2 THEORY AND METHODS

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I discuss and evaluate the main analytic concepts, methods and theoretical perspectives which I have drawn on in this study. All the methods and perspectives discussed below have both advantages and drawbacks, which is why I have chosen not to align myself with any one particular approach, preferring instead to make use of a range of analytic tools in order to get the most out of my data. I also discuss the terms 'discourse' and 'ideology', both of which are central to my analysis, but which are also subject to considerable variation in the way they are used. In this chapter I look at this variation, and clarify my own use of these terms for the purposes of this thesis. Finally, I discuss my motivation for undertaking this research, and describe the process of data collection and transcription, including the various difficulties I encountered.

2.2 DISCOURSE, DISCOURSE ANALYSIS AND IDEOLOGY

2.2.1 What is 'discourse'?

The term 'discourse' is widely used across a range of academic disciplines within the humanities and social sciences, including linguistics, critical theory, cultural studies, social psychology, sociology and philosophy. As we might expect of such an inter- and multi-disciplinary concept, it incorporates a range of meanings. As such, the way in which it is being invoked in a particular context may be hard to pinpoint, particularly as writers often use the term without specifying what they mean by it (see Macdonell, 1986 or Mills 1997 for an overview of the development and usage of the term 'discourse' within different fields). Broadly speaking, the different definitions of 'discourse' can be divided into those which derive from linguistics and those which have emerged from post-structuralist thought, in particular from the work of Foucault. However, these meanings are not mutually exclusive, and much feminist research incorporates both strands of meaning. Indeed, this research is concerned with both discourse in the sense of situated language use, and also with the Foucauldian concept of discourse, specifically the discourses of femininity found in women's magazines.

2.2.1.1 Linguistic definitions of discourse

Within linguistics, discourse is defined both in terms of the form and function of language. On the level of form, discourse is understood as the unit of language beyond the level of the sentence. This is perhaps the most basic, and least disputed definition of the term. On the level of function, the study of discourse entails the study of language in context. In other words, discourse analysts focus on 'naturally occurring' language data, as opposed to the idealised, abstract linguistic examples often used by grammarians and syntacticians. This move towards a focus on language in use is exemplified by the work of Brown and Yule (1983). In their book *Discourse Analysis* they argue that:

[T]he analysis of discourse is necessarily the analysis of language in use. As such, it cannot be restricted to the description of linguistic forms independent of the purposes or functions which these forms are designed to serve in human affairs (Brown and Yule, 1983:1).

Most introductory textbooks on discourse analysis offer a definition of discourse which incorporates both the form and function aspects of its meaning (e.g. Schiffrin, 1994; Stubbs, 1983). Deborah Schiffrin also proposes a third definition of discourse as utterances (Schiffrin, 1994). She suggests that:

This view captures the idea that discourse is 'above' (larger than) other units of language; however, by saying that utterance (rather than sentence) is the smaller unit of which discourse is comprised, we can suggest that discourse arises not as a collection of decontextualised units of language structure, but as a collection of inherently contextualized units of language use (Schiffrin, 1994: 39).

2.2.1.2 Post-structuralist definitions of discourse

Post-structuralist thought is based upon the notion that all aspects of the social and material worlds are constituted as objects through discourse. Poststructuralism is commonly misunderstood as claiming that material objects and occurrences, such as earthquakes or falling bricks, do not exist outside thought. However, as Laclau and Mouffe argue:

An earthquake or the falling of a brick is an event that certainly exists, in the sense that it occurs here and now, independently of my will. But whether their specificity as objects is constructed in terms of 'natural phenomena' or 'expressions of the wrath of God' depends upon the structuring of a discursive field. What is denied is not that such objects exist externally to

thought, but the rather different assertion that they could constitute themselves as objects outside any discursive conditions of emergence (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 108).

Discourse is thus a central concept in post-structuralist thought. Although many post-structuralist theorists have written on the subject of discourse (e.g. Pecheux, 1982), it is Michel Foucault's work on discourse which has been the most influential, particularly within the fields of cultural studies and critical theory. The Foucauldian concept of discourse has also been effectively incorporated into more linguistic analyses of discourse, especially by critical discourse analysts and those who work in the field of language and gender.

Foucault famously defined discourses as 'practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak' (Foucault, 1972: 49). In other words, Foucault is interested in the historically situated, and socially shared, rules and practices which produce and regulate meaningful utterances and texts, rather than the details of the utterances themselves. Having said that, Foucault himself applied a range of meanings to the term discourse in his work, suggesting that:

Instead of gradually reducing the rather fluctuating meaning of the word 'discourse' I believe I have in fact added to its meanings: treating it as sometimes the general domain of all statements, sometimes as an individualisable group of statements, and sometimes as a regulated practice that accounts for a number of statements (Foucault, 1972: 80).

In the above quotation, Foucault identifies three main usages of the term discourse. The first usage is a broad one, according to which discourse refers to the body of socially meaningful statements (it is the idea of shared meaning, according to Foucault, which distinguishes 'discourse' from 'language' in general, which refers to all possible statements, regardless of meaning). The second usage refers to 'discourses', or sets of statements about a specific object which encode and embody a certain worldview or belief system. These statements usually carry some institutional or social authority, and define the parameters within which these subjects can be spoken about and made sense of. So, for example we can talk about a discourse (or discourses) of femininity (or orientalism, nationalism etc), which consists of a collection of statements which produce and define what we know and mean by femininity, which regulate the ways in which we can meaningfully talk about femininity, and which govern our understanding of what the 'truth' about

femininity is. The third usage of discourse refers to the practices and conventions which produce and regulate these statements (as in the previous quotation).

Foucault's theorisation of discourse is particularly useful to researchers who take a 'critical' approach to the study of discourse because of his concern with power, knowledge (or 'power/knowledge' in Foucault's terms), and what he calls the 'regime of truth' (Foucault, 1980), which allows for a more politically motivated analysis. Foucault uses the term power/knowledge, arguing that the two are inextricably linked, and come to be linked through discourse, as all knowledge that a society has at a particular point in time comes about as the result of power struggles over which statements become sanctioned and come to be regarded as 'true'. Foucault is not interested in the idea of objective or universal truth, but rather in the processes through which certain discourses become dominant, as each society creates a 'regime of truth' which produces and reflects its dominant values and belief system.

For Foucault, power is not simply oppressive, but also productive. Unlike the top-down, Marxist model of power, which sees power as residing in the state, which then exerts that power on individuals, Foucault conceives of power as circulating, although not necessarily equally, throughout society, creating instability, and therefore opportunities for change. As such, Foucault's model allows for greater individual agency, and emphasises the constant power struggles which occur as different discourses compete for legitimacy. Foucault argues that:

[W]e must not imagine a world of discourse divided between accepted discourse and excluded discourse, or between the dominant discourse and the dominated one; but as a multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies [...] We must make allowances for the complex and unstable processes whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it (Foucault, 1981: 100).

Foucault's concern with power, and his conception of power as productive, has made his work particularly appealing to feminists, who have used his work in a more overtly political way than Foucault himself did (see Diamond and Quimby, 1988, for an overview).

2.2.2 Ideology

The term 'ideology' is often employed in contexts which make it appear synonymous with 'discourse' in the Foucauldian sense. Both terms raise issues to do with institutional power and dominance (although, as discussed above, this is only one of many possible uses of the term 'discourse'). However, although the concept of discourse has been taken up and developed along different trajectories of meaning within different disciplines, 'ideology' is a term most closely associated with the Marxist tradition, and is strongly linked with the work of Marxist theorists such as Gramsci (1971) and Althusser (1971). Within this Marxist model, ideology is conceptualised as a system of beliefs and ideas which form the basis of what is regarded as 'common knowledge' or 'common sense' within a society. These beliefs and ideas originate from, serve the interests of, and are controlled by, the ruling class, but are naturalised, and therefore appear neutral, even to those who may be disadvantaged by the ideology. Within Marxist thought, ideology is often characterised as resulting in 'false consciousness', whereby those who are oppressed by the ruling classes come to see this situation as natural, and thereby become complicit in their own oppression.

In recent years Marxism, and with it the concept of ideology, has lost much of its popularity within academe. Theorists have instead preferred to work with the Foucauldian concept of discourse, which is seen as being a less politically loaded term, and which also allows for greater individual agency than traditional Marxist models of ideology. Foucault himself regarded his work on discourse as a response to, and reaction against, ideology. For Foucault, Marxist theorisation of ideology is problematic because it assumes an opposition with the 'truth'; if most people labour under a 'false consciousness', then the implicit assumption is that those who are able to see beyond ideology and produce a critique of false consciousness must know the 'truth', and understand society as it really is. Foucault, on the other hand, does not see himself as being outside discourse, and having an enlightened understanding of the truth, but rather that his own work is constrained by the discourses available to him at the time.

Marxist theory locates power in the state apparatus, and thus those that work for the state can be seen as agents of ideology. Foucault, on the other hand, argues that power circulates throughout society. Because power does not lie solely with

institutions, it is therefore difficult to identify any particular individual or body who is responsible for the development and transmission of particular discourses. Furthermore, Marxist theory understands economics as the driving force behind all ideology, whereas Foucault argues that power relations are not always determined by economic factors.

Despite these criticisms, the notion of ideology has still proved valuable to scholars interested in the social and political aspects of language use. There has been a great deal of work in linguistic anthropology and sociolinguistics, for example, which looks at language ideologies (e.g. Schieffelin *et al.*, 1998), which have been described by Kathryn Woolard as '[r]epresentations, whether explicit or implicit, that construe the intersection of language and human beings in a social world' (Woolard, 1998). Gender and language scholars have also explored the role that gender plays in language ideologies, looking at beliefs about how women and men do, and ought to, use language (e.g. Cameron, 1995, 2000; Mugglestone, 1995), or how gender ideologies manifest themselves through discourse (Phillips, 2003).

Furthermore, critical discourse analysts, and others working with various approaches to discourse, have also used both discourse and ideology in their analyses, using the terms more or less interchangeably, or differentiating between the two by viewing discourse as the medium through which ideologies are transmitted. The critical discourse analyst Norman Fairclough, for example, makes use of both terms, defining ideologies as:

[S]ignifications/constructions of reality (the physical world, social relations, social identities), which are built into various dimensions of the forms/meanings of discursive practices, and which contribute to the production or transformation of relations of domination (Fairclough, 1992a: 87).

For Fairclough, ideologies are embedded in, and disseminated through, discursive practices. Fairclough argues that ideology is located in all aspects of discourse, including form, meaning and style, and that although all discourses are open to ideological investment, some types of discourse have greater ideological investment than others. For example, Fairclough describes advertising discourse as being, generally speaking, more ideologically invested than academic discourse in the

physical sciences (although I am sure that some might question this particular claim).

In the quotation above, Fairclough refers to ideology as contributing not only to the production of relations of domination, but also to the transformation of those relations. It is in this emphasis on ideological struggle and the ability for that struggle to bring about change in discursive practices, that Fairclough's theorisation of ideology differs from that of Althusser. Fairclough also questions the view that ideologies reside in texts, and can simply be 'read off' the texts (a view which has also been questioned by those working in media and cultural studies, although not necessarily by scholars working in critical linguistics). Fairclough argues that this view is overly simplistic because:

[M]eanings are produced through interpretations of texts, and texts are open to diverse interpretations which may differ in their ideological import, and because ideological processes appertain to discourses as whole social events – they are processes between people – not just to the texts which are moments of such events (Fairclough, 1992b: 89).

Furthermore, Fairclough draws attention to the fact that, as much audience research and reception studies have shown (and as is the case with the women interviewed for this study), text consumers do not always interpret and respond to texts in predictable ways.

2.2.3 Discourse and ideology for the purposes of this study

In this study I have used the notion of discourse in a way which incorporates both linguistic and post-structuralist definitions of the term. As a feminist, I have found it valuable to use the Foucauldian concept of discourse in order to talk about the discourses of femininity found in women's magazines, and the ways readers invoke these discourses in their talk. I understand discourses of femininity to be socially sanctioned statements about what it means to be a woman, which provide women with the discursive resources with which they can define themselves as gendered beings, but also set limits on and constrain those resources. This notion of discourse is central to my analysis because I am concerned in this study with exploring how women make use of these discursive resources, and the extent to which they are constrained by, or are able to transform, dominant discourses when negotiating gendered identities for themselves.

A Foucauldian perspective allows for a macro-analysis of socially and culturally constructed beliefs and knowledge about gender. However, in this thesis I am also concerned with the linguistic details of my interview data. In order to provide a close micro-analysis of the data I have also drawn on linguistic approaches to discourse, and as such my analysis attends to the discursive construction of gender both at the level of society, and also at the level of individual interaction.

In this study I make use of both discourse and ideology in my analysis. I take ideology and discourse (in the Foucauldian sense) to be interrelated, but not identical, concepts, viewing discourse as the medium through which ideologies are made manifest (see Eagleton, 1991). Whilst I do not view ideology as necessarily emanating from state apparatuses, I do view them as serving to maintain unequal power relations. I have found it useful to talk about 'ideologies of femininity', in order to draw attention to the way that the representations of women found in women's magazines reinforce a stereotypical and conservative view of what women are and should be. However, I have tried to exercise caution in my use of the term, because I do not wish to overstate the power or permanence of these representations, or to understate individual women's agency and the possibility for change.

2.2.4 Discourse Analysis

Just as there are multiple definitions of discourse, there is no unified method or theory which can be identified as discourse analysis. Discourse analysis is not a 'research method' in the conventional sense, but rather an umbrella term which covers a variety of approaches and perspectives. Researchers who engage in discourse analytic work come from a variety of disciplines and draw on a variety of methods. What unifies this disparate body of work is a concern with situated language use. Although this is certainly not true of all work undertaken under the banner of discourse analysis, it is also fair to say that many discourse analysts (particularly those working in disciplines other than linguistics) share the view that the social world and the moral order are constituted primarily through discourse.

The so-called 'linguistic turn' which has taken place in the social sciences and humanities has seen discourse become a central concern of scholars in various disciplines. The ensuing body of work is too vast and too disparate for me to provide a satisfactory summary of it in this thesis, but in section 2.3 below I discuss

the approaches which I have drawn on in this study, all of which are concerned with discourse and the discursive construction of the social world.

2.3 METHODOLOGY AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

2.3.1 Ethnomethodology

Ethnomethodology was developed by the sociologist Harold Garfinkel (see Garfinkel, 1967) in order to move away from more abstract theorisation of the social world, instead focusing on how ordinary members of a society understand the world around them. It looks at the strategies people use in the course of mundane, everyday interaction, in order to construct and maintain a sense of social order. As with conversation analysis (see the following section) it gives primacy to the “everyday” and to the constructions of lay people as opposed to academics. However, unlike CA, ethnomethodology is not only concerned with what is explicitly relevant, but also with the ‘seen but unnoticed’ (ibid.: 36) background features of everyday activities which frame people’s understanding of the world.

Garfinkel’s ground-breaking study of Agnes (ibid.), a pre-operative male-to-female transsexual (although when conducting the research, Garfinkel believed her to be an intersexed person), not only introduced new ways of conducting sociological research, but was also instrumental in bringing about a change in the way that gender was conceptualised; not as a fixed trait which people ‘have’, but as a social accomplishment, something which people ‘do’.

Through a series of interviews with the nineteen year old Agnes, Garfinkel looked at the multiple and complex methods used by Agnes in order to effectively ‘pass’ as a woman. The success of Agnes’ maintenance of a female identity was dependent on her constant vigilance in all aspects of daily life; in her clothes and appearance, her comportment, her speech and her actions. Garfinkel argued that:

In the lives of these persons the work and the socially structured occasions of sexual passing were obstinately unyielding to their attempts to routinize the rounds of daily activities. This obstinacy points to the omnirelevance of sexual statuses to affairs of daily life as an invariant but unnoticed background in the texture of relevances that comprise the actual scenes of everyday life. The experience of these intersexed persons permits an appreciation of these background relevances that are otherwise easily overlooked or difficult to grasp because of their routinized character and because they are so embedded in a background of relevances that are

simply 'there' and taken for granted (Garfinkel, 1967: 118; c.f. Schegloff, 1997)

Agnes' story offered an insight into the range of resources, linguistic or otherwise, which individuals can draw on in order to produce and maintain themselves, in a socially recognisable way, as gendered beings. Garfinkel argued that Agnes, by 'passing' as a female, was able to take commonsense social 'facts' about gender, and make 'these facts of life visible and reportable – accountable – for all practical purposes' (ibid.: 180). Garfinkel's study provides persuasive arguments for the socially constructed nature of gender, that gender identity is something which is "done" or "achieved", with Agnes as an extreme example of this because she did not acquire a female identity through her childhood socialisation, and had to make a conscious effort to 'pass' as a woman. Agnes' case also suggests that gender is omni-relevant, as in order to pass, Agnes had to attend to all aspects of her behaviour and comportment at all times, drawing attention to aspects of gendered behaviour which tend to be 'seen but unnoticed'.

In my own research I have found it particularly interesting to consider the extent to which dominant ideologies of femininity may have become so entrenched that they are not consciously recognised, often giving rise to contradictions in my informants' talk.

2.3.2 Conversation analysis

Conversation analysis (hereafter CA) is an analytic approach developed by Harvey Sacks, along with his principal collaborators Gail Jefferson and Emmanuel Schegloff (for example Sacks, 1992; Sacks *et al.*, 1974). CA grew out of the ethnomethodological tradition and Goffman's work on the presentation of self in mundane face-to-face interaction (e.g. Goffman 1959). What CA shares with these two strands of enquiry is a focus on how the social order is constructed and maintained through everyday interaction.

CA's focus is on the sequential organisation and turn-taking structure of talk-in-interaction. Conversation analytic research has looked at conversational features such as repair (Schegloff *et al.*, 1977), openings and closings (Schegloff and Sacks, 1973) and overlapping speech (Jefferson, 1973), revealing the orderliness and systematic nature of everyday talk. Sacks' argument that everyday interaction was not only a worthy subject for linguistic scholarship, but that it was also highly ordered and systematic, went against prevailing views of language use, particularly within linguistics. At the time when Sacks gave his *Lectures on Conversation*, between 1964 and 1972, the field of sociolinguistics was still in its infancy, and somewhat marginalised within the discipline as a whole. Chomsky (1965) and his followers, for example, took the view that everyday talk was too disordered to be of interest, or import, to linguists, and that studies of language in use could not contribute anything to linguists' understanding of the structure of language. Chomsky dismissively suggested of sociolinguistics that:

[It] is, I suppose, a discipline that seeks to apply principles of sociology to the study of language; but I suspect that it can draw little from sociology, and I wonder whether it is likely to contribute much to it. (1979: 57)

Sacks' work also broke away from conventions within sociology. Sacks questioned the reliance of much sociological research on methods such as participant observation, surveys and questionnaires. He argued that this type of research was not objective, as it was too dependent on the analyst's interpretations of the participants' actions; findings are therefore based on how researchers, and not participants themselves, make sense of the social world. Sacks felt that sociology could, and should be, an objective science, and that objective findings about the social world could be made through analysis of the 'machinery' of everyday talk-in-interaction (Sacks 1963, 1992).

One of the central tenets of CA is the primacy of 'participant orientations'. In other words, the analysis of talk-in-interaction should be based on what the participants are observably doing with their talk, using only the structures and concepts which they orient to and make relevant, and not those which preoccupy the analyst. There are, however, no hard-and-fast rules about how to determine what is demonstrably relevant, and this question had instigated a great deal of dispute (see section 2.3.4.1

below). As a result of this focus on what is demonstrably salient to the interaction, much (though by no means all) conversation analytic work tends not to engage in discussions of wider social context or background knowledge (Sanders, 1999). As such, the analyst who is concerned with the construction of class or gender in discourse should only refer to these categories as and when they are shown to be relevant to the participants themselves.

Proponents of sequential CA argue that such an approach means that analysts come to the data with a 'clean gaze', without imposing onto the data their own *a priori* assumptions about the significance of social categories, such as gender. CA, it is claimed, is thus more objective than other overtly political approaches, such as that of critical discourse analysis (CDA). This issue has sparked a heated, and long-running, academic debate between advocates of these two approaches (e.g. Billig, 1999; Schegloff, 1997, 1998, 1999a, 1999b; Wetherell, 1998) and has also led to much discussion as to the compatibility of conversation analytic methods with a feminist perspective. This debate is discussed in greater detail later.

2.3.3 Membership categorisation analysis

Membership categorisation analysis (hereafter MCA) is a strand of conversation analysis which grew out of the early work of Harvey Sacks (Sacks 1992; for an overview see Silverman, 1998). Sacks proposed MCA as an alternative to what he saw as the unanalytic way in which many sociologists made use of concepts such as 'culture' and 'common knowledge'. As with sequential CA, Sacks saw MCA as a means of moving away from categorization imposed on the data by the analyst, instead focusing on how the participants in conversation describe and categorize others and their activities. Sacks argued against the reification of concepts like 'common knowledge' as a pre-existing list of categories, beliefs and norms, internalised by members of a society through their socialisation. Rather, he saw 'common knowledge' and 'culture' as constructs which are achieved and maintained through everyday interaction. However, as MCA deals with speakers' use of normative and conventional categories, it tends to be less restrictive than (Schegloffian) CA as regards its discussion of background knowledge and the wider social context (see Stokoe and Smithson, 2001).

Central to MCA is the concept of the *membership categorization device* (MCD). An MCD consists of a collection of two or more membership categories, plus some

rules of application. One of these rules is the *economy rule*, which states that 'a single category from any membership categorization device can be referentially adequate' (Sacks, 1992: 246). In other words, although an individual may be ascribed to any number of membership categories (for example, I could be described, among other things, as a woman, a Sri Lankan Tamil or a linguist), the use of a single category description can be adequate and intelligible to the hearer (although that is not to say that speakers do not use multiple category descriptions).

Another rule of application is the *consistency rule*, which states that:

If some population of persons is being categorized, and if some category from a device's collection has been used to categorize a first Member of the population, then that category or other categories of the same collection may be used to categorize further members of the population (Sacks, 1972: 33).

This rule is accompanied by what Sacks calls the *consistency rule corollary*, which holds that if two or more members of a population are described using two or more categories which could be heard as coming from the same MCD, then hear them that way. This means that if, for example, a speaker categorises individual **x** as a 'student' and individual **y** as a 'teacher', we can hear them as coming from the same collection, in other words, that **x** is **y**'s student.

Just as one individual may belong to multiple membership categories, categories may belong to more than one MCD.

Some categories within a collection may be heard as a pair, with ensuing mutual rights and obligations, such as Sacks' famous example of 'mommy' and 'baby'. Sacks describes these pairs as *standardized relational pairs* (SRPs). In his lectures Sacks (1992) used the following example:

The baby cried, the mommy picked it up.

This example came from a story told by a two year old child. Sacks was interested in the apparatus which leads members to hear 'the mommy' to mean the mother of the baby in question, and to hear the act of 'crying' as the reason for the 'picking up'. He argued that we hear the mother as the mother of the baby because the categories of 'mother' and 'baby' are conventionally used together, and that they are also heard as coming from the collection, or MCD, 'family'.

Categories are 'inference rich', that is they are conventionally bound to specific activities, attributes and identities. Sacks describes activities which are associated with particular categories as *category-bound activities* (CBAs). When an individual is ascribed to a certain category, members, drawing on their background knowledge and assumptions, will associate that individual with specific activities and practices. Likewise, when certain activities are discussed, members will work with assumptions about what kind of person is likely to engage in those activities. As such, when given the example 'the **x** cried, the **y** picked it up', most members would hear the **x** as referring to 'baby' and the **y** to 'mother', 'father' or 'parent'. Although crying is an activity which may be done by members of any category, in this particular context the activities of 'crying' and 'picking up' are typically associated with babies and mothers.

Although sequential CA and MCA both grew out of Sacks' work, the status of MCA within the main body of conversation analytic research is ambiguous to say the least. MCA has often been sidelined by proponents of sequential CA, largely due to its less restrictive approach to what counts as admissible context. Schegloff, for example, in his introduction to Sacks' *Lectures on Conversation* (Sacks 1992) argues that Sacks himself moved away from, or 'abandoned' MCA in his later work, due to its potential for 'promiscuous' analysis (although this has been disputed elsewhere (see Silverman 1998)). Schegloff argued that MCA's reliance on concepts such as 'commonsense knowledge' and 'culture' could result in analysts moving away from an empirical, data-driven analysis, to one which is guided by the researcher's political and theoretical preoccupations and expectations about what s/he will find in the data.

This debate about the differences between sequential CA and MCA is clearly analogous with the debate between CA and other more 'critical' approaches, inasmuch as it rehearses many of the same questions about admissible context and analytic neutrality. These debates are discussed in more detail below.

2.3.4 Conversation analytic methods and feminism

As mentioned previously, there has been a long-running (and somewhat adversarial) scholarly discussion as to the merits and disadvantages of CA as

opposed to more 'critical' methodologies and theoretical perspectives, such as CDA and feminism. This debate began in a series of articles in *Discourse & Society* (Billig, 1999; Schegloff, 1997, 1998, 1999a, 1999b; Wetherell, 1998) and continues to be a divisive issue.

There are two issues which have been central to this debate; the first is the question of admissible context, and the second concerns CA's claims to analytic neutrality. I will address both these issues in turn, giving particular consideration to the implications of this debate for feminist research on language and gender.

2.3.4.1 Context

The question of what constitutes admissible context for the purposes of conversation analytic research is of particular relevance to feminist researchers, who wish to tie a micro-analysis of the construction of gender in everyday discourse to a macro-understanding of issues of power and inequality.

Although Schegloff's (1997) argument is framed as a critique of critical approaches to discourse in general, it is the (mis)use of gender as an analytic category which attracts his particular attention. According to Schegloff, an analyst is only justified in using gender as a variable if it is seen as being 'demonstrably relevant' to the participants themselves. He argues that:

It is not enough to justify referring to someone as a 'woman' just because she is, in fact, a woman – because she is, by the same token, a Californian, Jewish, a mediator, a former weaver, my wife, and many others (1997: 165).

Schegloff goes on to suggest that to do otherwise, to come to the data with *a priori* assumptions about the salience of gender or other variables, is:

[A] kind of theoretical imperialism [...] a kind of hegemony of the intellectuals [...] of the critics whose theoretical apparatus gets to stipulate the terms by reference to which the world is to be understood (1997: 167).

However, Billig (1999) has argued that such an approach is naively uncritical. He suggests that CA is predicated upon the view that everyday conversation is essentially democratic, providing a level playing field for all participants, as can be

seen from the primacy given to everyday conversation over other forms of talk. Billig argues that this approach is 'epistemologically naive', in that it implies that mundane conversation is free from the power imbalances and hierarchical structures found in interviews or institutional talk.

Therefore, Billig claims that CA is incompatible with feminist concerns with the operation of power and inequality. CA has also been criticised for being so concerned with the structural minutiae of talk that it becomes all too easy to lose sight of the context in which that talk is embedded, both in terms of the context of the interaction as a whole, and in terms of the wider social context (see Wetherell, 1998).

This question of the extent to which CA can contribute to feminist research on language and gender continues to be controversial (Kitzinger, 2000; Speer, 1999; Stokoe and Smithson, 2001; Weatherall, 2000), but not all feminist researchers have agreed with Billig. Kitzinger has pointed out that:

It would be unbearably limiting to use CA if it meant that I could only describe as 'sexist' or 'heterosexist' or 'racist' those forms of talk to which actors orient as such. Indeed, it is *precisely the fact that sexist, heterosexist and racist assumptions are routinely incorporated into everyday conversations* without anyone noticing or responding to them in that way which is of interest to me (2000: 171, emphasis in the original).

Unlike Billig, however, Kitzinger (see also Stokoe and Smithson, 2001) takes the view that CA provides a challenge, not a barrier, to feminist research. She suggests that it *is* possible to attend to the unnoticed operation of gender within a conversation analytic framework, and provides an example from Sacks' work that suggests that he too felt that this was a viable and interesting use of CA methodology.

Kitzinger also points out that the term 'feminism' covers a wide and varied body of research, and that CA may not be suited to all types of feminist work. Early work on language and gender was often centred around sex-differences research which could be viewed as reinforcing an essentialist, binary view of gender (for example, Lakoff, 1975; Tannen, 1991). Conversation analytic methods are not suited to this type of study which is based on the presuppositions, which it then seeks to confirm,

that gender is a fixed binary category and that there are distinct gendered speech styles. More recent work has shown a move away from essentialism (for example, Hall and Bucholtz, 1995; Bergvall *et al.*, 1996; Holmes and Meyerhoff, 2003) and instead focuses on the socially constructed and performative nature of gender. It is argued that conversation analytic methods are ideally suited to the micro-analysis of the ways in which gender identities are constructed, reproduced or resisted in everyday talk.

2.3.4.2 Analytic neutrality

CA's claims to objectivity have been challenged and criticised by many feminist researchers who argue that analysts' values are always present in their research. For example, Rosalind Gill suggests that '[w]hen values are not made explicit, it is not because they are not present, but simply that they have gone underground' (1995: 175). That is, even if one were to adhere to Schegloff's formulation of CA, the analyst must still select data for analysis, and which features of that data to focus on; these choices are in themselves a reflection of the researcher's values.

Gill proposes an alternative position based on the notion of 'reflexivity', whereby researchers should make their motivations and theoretical stances explicit, thus creating accountability on the part of the analyst. The idea of 'reflexivity' is not simply a means of giving the analyst *carte blanche* to make political statements, as it allows the research, and the theoretical concerns which inform it, to be scrutinised by others. Furthermore, by requiring researchers to 'reflect critically upon their own role' (1995:179), it should act as a control on the researcher him/herself when conducting the research and the subsequent data analysis.

This view is echoed by Weatherall, who argues that:

Values and biases enter into the most rigorous of empirical approaches by, for example, the types of questions asked and the kinds of interpretations made. Thus what becomes desirable, or 'more objective' for any analysis is a conscious reflexivity about the position one brings to a piece of research and a consideration of what is hidden by taking that perspective (2000: 287).

It should also be noted that Schegloff's viewpoint is not representative of all conversation analysts, some of whom acknowledge the ways in which they use their

own members' knowledge in making sense of the data (e.g. Moerman 1988). Hutchby and Wooffitt, for example, suggest that:

[T]he vast majority of available CA work, [relies] fundamentally on the analyst's ability to understand, and to come to some informed interpretation of, what it is that the participants in the data are doing (1998: 112).

2.3.4.3 Feminist conversation analysis

Although still somewhat marginal, there is an ever-growing body of work which moves towards a feminist strand of conversation analysis (CA) (for example Hopper and LeBaron, 1998; Kitzinger and Frith, 1999), including research which incorporates MCA (Ohara and Saft, 2003; Weatherall 2002; see Chapter 5 for further discussion of this work). This work problematises claims made about the impartiality and analytic 'clean gaze' of CA, arguing instead that conversation analytic methods can be used as a useful tool with which to provide a rigorous and data-driven analysis of the everyday construction of gender in talk, whilst still allowing the analyst to maintain a critical stance and advance feminist aims.

Celia Kitzinger (2000), as discussed in the previous section, puts forward a persuasive case for the benefits that conversation analytic methods can bring to feminist research. As well as addressing the doubts and concerns about CA which are often raised by feminist researchers, she also offers an empirical demonstration of how to do feminist CA through her own analyses of 'coming out' narratives, and the sexual 'refusal skills' training which is offered to young women (this research is also discussed in Kitzinger and Frith, 1999).

Refusal skills training and date rape prevention programmes, are predicated upon the notion that an effective refusal involves 'just saying no'. This rationale arises from a reliance on the 'miscommunication' or 'difference' model of gendered communication styles (e.g. Maltz and Borker, 1982; Tannen, 1990) women's speech style is different to men's and so they need to learn to say 'no' in a way which is clear to men, that is, assertively and unequivocally (Kitzinger and Frith, 1999). This way of framing date rape and sexual assault can, and has been, criticised by feminists for failing to take into account issues of power, and for placing the burden

of responsibility onto women (ibid.), thereby allowing defendants in sexual assault cases to shift the allocation of blame onto the woman (Ehrlich, 1998; 2000).

Drawing on conversation analytic methods, Kitzinger and Frith (1999; Kitzinger, 2000) are able to argue that a 'just say no' approach to sexual refusal is misguided because it is completely at odds with western cultural norms for doing refusals. By using CA to analyse the way in which refusals are done across a range of contexts in everyday interaction, they demonstrate that in western society, refusals can be made, and heard as refusals, without saying 'no'. In fact, it is very rare for a refusal to include the word 'no'. Rather, the conversation analytic literature on dispreferred responses shows that refusals routinely involve the use of delays, hedges or prefaces such as 'well' and 'uh', and palliatives such as apologies and delayed acceptance (Kitzinger and Frith, 1999: 173). These features are also typical of women's attempts to refuse sex, but in this context such refusals are often interpreted as being inadequate or ambiguous.

In this way, Kitzinger and Frith are able to utilise an empirical, micro-analysis of turn-taking structure in order to further advance the feminist critique of dominant discourses of rape and sexual assault. More generally, this work provides an ample demonstration that conversation analytic methods can indeed be fruitfully combined with feminist aims. As Kitzinger argues, '[i]n feminist CA, oppression and resistance are not simply abstract theoretical concepts but become visible as concrete practices' (Kitzinger, 2000: 188).

Other examples of language and gender research which incorporates conversation analytic methods are discussed in Chapter 5.

2.3.5 Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical discourse analysis (hereafter CDA) is an overtly political perspective (see previous section for contrast with CA) which looks at how asymmetric power relations and social injustice are discursively produced, reproduced and resisted through discourse. Unlike CA, the political and social world beyond the text is central to a CDA approach. Norman Fairclough, one of the principal practitioners of CDA, describes the aims of his approach to discourse as:

[T]o map three separate forms of analysis onto one another: analysis

of (spoken or written) language texts, analysis of discourse practice (processes of text production, distribution and consumption) and analysis of discursive events as instances of sociocultural practice (Fairclough, 1995a: 2).

The majority of critical discourse analytic work on gender has focused on written discourse, including women's magazines (see section 1.3.2.2 for a discussion of Mary Talbot's work on magazines) and other media discourse (e.g. Fairclough, 1995b; Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1998), looking at the ideologies behind the texts and how they conflict with what the texts seem to, or claim to be saying on the surface. This type of approach clearly lends itself to a feminist perspective, as it takes the omni-relevance of power imbalances as its starting point. However, as Schegloff has argued, a critical perspective can lead to a neglect of micro-level discursive practices, and may not reflect the reality of how ideologies are experienced and reproduced or resisted in everyday talk.

I would argue that my own approach complements, rather than conflicts with, the existing critical text analyses of women's magazines, as together they should enable a better understanding of the gap between the ideologies underlying the written texts and how they are interpreted by the readers, thus providing a more rounded picture of how gender ideologies are produced, maintained and subverted at both macro and micro levels of society.

2.3.6 Discursive Psychology

Discursive psychology (DP) has been influenced by work in ethnomethodology and CA, and takes a social constructionist approach to identity as something people 'do', rather than something that they 'are' (for an overview of discursive psychological approaches and research, and a comparison with social-cognitive perspectives, see Weatherall and Gallois, 2003). DP originated in the 1980s with the publication of Jonathon Potter and Margaret Wetherell's (1987) book *Discourse and Social Psychology: Beyond Attitudes and Behaviour*, although the label 'discursive psychology' was not introduced until the 1990s (coined by Edwards and Potter, 1992). Discursive psychology takes a different approach, and to a certain extent is in opposition to, cognitive approaches to psychology, in that it regards discourse as constitutive of, rather than a reflection of, reality. Cognitive approaches to psychology, on the other hand, tend to study language use as a means of accessing people's internal mental states. For cognitive psychologists, an individual's identity,

attitudes and beliefs are conceptualised as the relatively fixed products of cognitive processes, and language is seen as providing a verbal representation of those processes. For discursive psychologists, however, identity and opinions do not reside within individuals, but are discursively achieved through interaction with different people and in different contexts.

One of the main analytic concepts employed by discursive psychologists is that of 'interpretative repertoires', which Nigel Edley defines as:

[R]elatively coherent ways of talking about objects and events in the world. In discourse analytic terms, they are the 'building blocks of conversations', a range of linguistic resources that can be drawn upon and utilized in the course of everyday interaction. Interpretative repertoires are part and parcel of any community's common sense, providing a basis for shared social understanding (Edley 2001: 198).

Another important analytic concept is that of the 'ideological dilemma' (Billig *et al.* 1988). Billig *et al.* draw attention to the ways in which individuals make use of different, and often contradictory interpretative repertoires within the same interaction. They argue that the co-presence of conflicting interpretative repertoires in talk demonstrates the dilemmatic nature of culturally available discursive resources and ideologies. Ideological dilemmas arise as participants in talk try to negotiate and manage these conflicting discursive resources in their construction of identities and arguments. Dilemmas also arise when an individual's lived experience, or account of that lived experience, seems to contradict with an ideological stance they have adopted. Billig *et al.* give the example that people can simultaneously demonstrate a belief in innate gender differences, while also invoking ideologies of individualism and/or appealing to notions of common human nature. The tension between these three conflicting discourses is also evident in my informants' accounts.

Within social psychology, discursive psychology has often been seen as offering a different, or even opposing approach to that of Foucauldian discourse analysis (FDA). Ian Parker (1997), for example, argues that they are distinct approaches to discourse analysis, with discursive psychology growing out of ethnomethodology, sociology and CA, while Foucauldian discourse analysis has developed from post-structuralism and cultural studies. Potter and Wetherell (1995) see the difference between the two as being one of focus rather than theoretical perspective; DP's

focus is on local discourse practices, whereas FDA is concerned with broader cultural discursive resources.

This distinction, and work within social psychology which challenges it, is discussed further in section 2.3.7 below.

2.3.7 The approach to discourse analysis taken in this thesis

The methodological approach taken in this thesis can be loosely described as 'feminist discourse analysis', although as noted by Mary Bucholtz (2003), this is more of an umbrella term which covers multiple perspectives than a single well-defined approach. As stated in section 2.2.3 above, my own approach is one that combines both linguistic and post-structuralist approaches to discourse analysis, in that I conduct a close linguistic analysis of my informants' talk, but I am also concerned with looking at how the dominant discourses of femininity found in the magazines are invoked by my informants, and mediate their accounts of what it means to be a woman. Although these two approaches to discourse analysis have often been seen as being distinct from, and even opposing each other, language and gender scholars are increasingly using a more integrated and flexible approach. In her overview of approaches to discourse in language and gender research, Mary Bucholtz notes that:

Few scholars [...] take a rigid or absolutist position on the appropriate methods for the analysis of gender in discourse. Researchers tend to draw on multiple approaches as needed to answer the questions that arise in the course of research (Bucholtz, 2003:64).

As discussed in section 2.3.4.3 above (see also Chapter 5), there are an increasing number of scholars in the field of language and gender who combine the data-driven analysis associated with conversation analytic methods, with feminist concerns about gender inequality and broader gendered discourses. My transcription and analysis do not go into the kind of depth of detail associated with CA. I also find Schegloffian CA too restrictive when it comes to what is regarded as admissible context. However, I have used the CA-related MCA in my analysis (see Chapter 5), and more broadly I have taken from CA a concern with providing a data-driven analysis which focuses on how participants orient to gender and other social categories in their accounts, and how these categories can be shown to be relevant to the participants.

As mentioned in section 2.3.6 above, the distinction between top-down and bottom-up approaches to discourse also exists within social psychology, where discursive psychology and Foucauldian discourse analysis have often been regarded as separate and largely incompatible strands of discourse analysis. However, as in the field of language and gender, some researchers question this distinction and advocate an approach which draws on both strands.

Margaret Wetherell (1998), for example, argues that both Foucauldian and conversation analytic approaches have drawbacks, noting that:

If the problem with post-structuralist analysts is that they rarely focus on actual social interaction, then the problem with conversational analysts is that they rarely raise their eyes from the next turn in the conversation, and further, this is not an entire conversation or sizeable slice of social life but usually a tiny fragment (Wetherell 1998: 402).

Wetherell suggests that maintaining a rigid distinction between the two approaches is counter-productive, instead advocating a more eclectic approach which combines a fine-grained analysis of situated discursive practices with a focus on broader cultural and institutional frameworks.

Wetherell also pursues this argument in her work with Nigel Edley. They suggest that:

While the distinction between 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' has been useful for clarifying key theoretical and methodological issues, it is also, in our view, time to move on. Our broad aim is to build forms of discursive psychology which draw more eclectically on both styles of work and which study the ways in which people are simultaneously the master, and the slave, of discourse (Edley and Wetherell, 1997: 206).

The work of Edley and Wetherell is pertinent to this thesis in that they are also interested in language and gender, in this case the discursive construction of masculine identities. Their work, like mine, is also based on interview data, although their interviews were conducted with small groups of teenage schoolboys. In this research Edley and Wetherell describe the twin focus of their approach as follows:

[W]e look at, not only the ways in which men are positioned by a ready-made or historically given set of discourses or interpretative repertoires, but also at the ways in which these cultural resources are manipulated and exploited

within particular rhetorical or micro-political contexts (Edley and Wetherell, *ibid.*: 206).

My analytic approach is similar to that of Edley and Wetherell. My analysis is primarily based on an examination of the bottom-up, micro-discursive processes through which women play an active role in constructing themselves as gendered beings, and through which they invoke, reproduce or challenge the discursive and ideological resources available to them. However, I am also concerned with the top-down processes through which dominant discourses of femininity position women in different (multiple and conflicting) ways, and limit the resources available to them when constructing identities for themselves. In doing so I hope to explore the relationship between the situated construction of gender identity and the cultural availability of different discourses of femininity.

2.4 DATA COLLECTION

2.4.1 Motivation for this study

My initial interest was in self-help literature as well as women's magazines, in particular the type of self-help books which focus on how to find a partner, and how to maintain and improve (heterosexual) relationships.

I first became interested in the subject of self-help, and readers of self-help, after reading the linguist Deborah Tannen's book *You Just Don't Understand* (1991). Having read the book I felt frustrated that it failed to reflect my own experience of male-female communication, or that of most women I know. Moreover, by failing to recognise the wider context of the society within which these relationships take place, and thereby ignoring questions of power and inequality, I felt that Tannen was reinforcing essentialist views of gender.

Tannen's book (and more generally, the 'difference/cultural' approach to gender difference) has been widely critiqued by feminist linguists (e.g. Freed, 1992; Troemel-Ploetz, 1991; Uchida, 1992) for its failure to place male and female conversational styles within the context of the wider society, and the asymmetrical power relations which exist between men and women.

At the time of writing the dissertation, there seemed to be a proliferation of this type of self-help literature, and there had been a lot of attention given in the media to books such as *The Rules* (Fein & Schneider, 1995) and the recently published *The Surrendered Wife* (Doyle, 2001). This suggested to me that there was a growing culture of self-help in the UK and I was interested in exploring the appeal of such texts to women, and how they might be mediating women's perception and construction of gender identity.

The Rules and *The Surrendered Wife* are aimed specifically at women and their relationships with men, as can be seen from their respective subtitles: *the time tested secrets for capturing the heart of Mr Right*, and *a practical guide to finding intimacy, passion and peace with a man*. The underlying message of these texts is that all women are looking for a man, and having found one, that the successful maintenance of the relationship is a woman's work. Other similar texts, such as *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* (Gray, 1992), or *You Just Don't Understand* (Tannen, 1991) claim to be aimed at both men and women. Tannen, for example, states that her book was written 'for men and women everywhere who are trying their best to talk to each other' (Tannen, 1991: 19). However, despite this supposedly non-gendered approach, these books have also been widely interpreted as being aimed at women, thus reinforcing the notion that relationships are women's work. Indeed, the very title of Tannen's book is seen as the stereotypical woman's complaint.

These texts are phrased as 'how to' guides, meant not only to be read, but also acted upon. John Gray, for example, claims that by reading his book *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*, 'you will learn *practical techniques* for solving the problems that arise from our differences. This book is not just a theoretical analysis of psychological differences but also a *practical manual* for how to succeed in creating loving relationships' (Gray, 1992: 5, emphasis added). However, regardless of the authors' intentions, it is not necessarily the case that readers will approach and respond to the texts in this way, and I was interested in exploring how readers interpreted the advice, and how, if at all, it mediated their behaviour or their perceptions of themselves.

2.4.1.1 Women's magazines as self-help literature

In some ways, women's magazines can be seen as a form of self-help literature in that much of their content is based on giving advice to their readers (see Chapter 4). Indeed, much of the advice and ways of understanding heterosexual relationships found in popular self-help books, such as *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* (Gray, 1992) and *You Just Don't Understand* (Tannen, 1991), has been taken up by women's magazines and accommodated into magazine discourse on relationships and relationship advice. Moreover, women's magazines offer women advice, not only on the subject of relationships, but on every aspect of being a woman. This is what led me to an interest in women's magazines, and when embarking on the pilot study, I intended to interview readers of both self-help books and women's magazines.

Although my initial research interest was in self-help readers, it proved to be much harder than I had anticipated to find informants. As a result, only two of the informants for the pilot study had read self-help books. One informant, Sue (interview 5), had only read what she called 'New Age', 'personal development' type self-help, rather than relationship self-help. The other, Kate (interview 6), had read some self-help books about development in the workplace such as *Emotional Intelligence* (Goleman, 1996), and also *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* (Gray, 1992), although she said she read the latter purely out of curiosity because she had heard a lot about it. This difficulty in finding self-help readers led me to focus more on women's magazines and their readers. At the time I had hoped to be able to find more self-help readers when continuing with the research. However, when I began the next stage of interviews it soon became clear that I could not find enough informants to make this a viable option. As a result, I decided to narrow the focus of my PhD research and focus entirely on women's magazine readers.

2.4.1.2 The pilot study

This thesis grew from an initial small-scale pilot study conducted for my MSc dissertation, based on interviews with only seven women. Through this study, which I began with the intention of developing it into a doctoral thesis, I was able to narrow the focus of my further research, and develop and refine my research questions. For example, as described above, having completed the pilot study I decided to focus only on readers of women's magazines. Through conducting the pilot study I

also gained a better sense of how to phrase questions and which questions worked better than others.

2.4.2 The texts

The forty women interviewed (for both the pilot study and the continuing research) read a wide range of women's magazines, with differing levels of regularity. The magazines ranged from the prototypical 'glossies' such as *Marie Claire* and *Cosmopolitan*, through to the cheaper, more downmarket weeklies like *Chat* and *Bella*, and also celebrity gossip magazines such as *Heat* and *Now* (since completing the interviews the number of titles in this latter category has expanded considerably with the arrival of newer titles such as *Closer* and *Star*, the most recent being *Reveal*, which came onto the market in October 2004). Many of the informants asked me what I meant by 'women's magazines', but I chose not to specify as I was interested in finding out which types of magazine my informants thought could be classified as 'women's magazines'.

None of the informants read any one magazine exclusively, although most had one or two titles which they preferred and read on a more regular basis. Only one informant had a subscription to a magazine (*Good Housekeeping*) at the time of interviewing, although another mentioned that she had subscribed to one of the glossy magazines in the past. Almost all the informants claimed that they did not buy magazines regularly (although they might buy at least one magazine a month), preferring to read friends' copies or read them in waiting rooms (this reluctance on the part of the informants to categorise themselves as women's magazine readers is discussed further in Chapter 1).

2.4.3 The interviews

I chose to collect my data through interviews, rather than using questionnaires, in order to allow me to go into greater depth in the questioning, and to be led by the informants' responses when choosing which areas of questioning to develop. I also felt that an interview situation would encourage informants to produce fuller answers, and perhaps to talk more around, or even 'off' the topic if they wished, as opposed to the more rigid structure of a questionnaire. Given that I was asking informants not only about their reading practices, but also about their beliefs and attitudes, informants would also need to be prompted at times to develop their responses, therefore making a questionnaire unsuitable.

The interviews were open and only loosely structured. This meant that I did not use an interview schedule, although I prepared a few basic questions to ask all the informants and considered different paths of questioning I could follow, depending on the informants' initial responses. All the informants were asked which magazines they read and how often they read them, if they read the whole magazine or only certain sections, and what they liked or disliked about the magazines. I also asked the women about what they thought of the advice given in the magazines, and whether they had ever taken, or would consider taking the advice themselves. In the early interviews informants were also asked about which self-help books they had read and their opinion of them, and of self-help in general, unless I had already ascertained that they had never read any self-help.

I felt that this was the most appropriate interview technique, particularly for the pilot study, as it gave me the freedom to explore different topics for discussion and different ways of phrasing questions. Once I had begun interviewing and started to transcribe the interviews, certain themes started to emerge and I was able to get a better sense of which aspects of the data I wanted to focus on, and therefore which areas of questioning I should develop.

It also became clear when I started to conduct the interviews that in most cases the women I spoke to had previously given very little thought to the subject of women's magazines or self-help, and they were often at a loss to explain why they read the magazines or what they liked about them. As a result it was important that I had the freedom to pick up on my informants' responses and prompt them into expanding their answers and thinking more deeply on the subject. Although the resulting interviews were not entirely comparable, I feel that this was not a major problem, as I ended up with a richer and more varied corpus than I would have otherwise.

The final data sample consisted of thirty interviews with forty women. Twenty-five of the interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis, and the remaining five were group interviews, with between two and six informants. Most of the interviews (twenty-two out of thirty) were conducted at (one of) the informants' homes or at the home of a mutual friend. I felt that this would provide a more informal setting for the interviews and therefore make my informants feel more relaxed and comfortable than if I had chosen to conduct the interviews at university. Because the interviews

took place in the informants' 'home territory', this also helped to counteract any perceived imbalance of power between interviewer and interviewee.

Of the remaining eight interviews, six took place at the informants' place of work, and two women were interviewed in cafes (which was not ideal because of background noise). I did not conduct any interviews at the university, because I felt that the environment would be too formal and institutional, and would reinforce the power imbalance between interviewer and interviewee.

The interviews varied in length according to how much the informants had to say and how much time they could spare me, lasting between thirty minutes and an hour and a half. Before each interview I was able to chat to the informants over coffee, which broke the ice and allowed me to ask for information about their age and occupation, and generally get to know more about them.

All the interviews were recorded on minidisc. I then listened to and transcribed the interviews myself. The interviews were transcribed in their entirety, using conventions loosely based on the Jefferson system of transcript notation (Atkinson and Heritage, 1984).

2.4.4 Finding informants

Most of my informants, including all seven women I interviewed for the pilot study, were found through friends-of-friends and acquaintances. This proved to be a fairly simple and straightforward way of finding sufficient informants, although it was not without its problems (see section 2.4.4.1 below). Informants were recruited by asking friends and acquaintances to ask their friends if they would be willing to participate. I then asked all my informants if they in turn knew of anyone who might be interested in being interviewed. I hoped that this would have a 'snowballing' effect (see Hermes, 1995) which would facilitate the recruitment of a large number of informants.

Unlike the 'social network' approach (see Milroy, 1987) the informants did not (as a whole) form a pre-existing social group, although three of them (who were interviewed individually) came from the same network of friends, and the women

interviewed in groups (after the pilot study) were interviewed together because they were either friends or colleagues.

I felt that this approach, with the informants being put in touch with me by their friends, had the advantage of helping to put the informants at ease when talking to me. I hoped that being able to introduce myself as a friend-of-a-friend, rather than a researcher from an institution and a complete stranger, would position me as more of an 'insider' to the informants social networks and make them more inclined to help me (see Milroy 1987). I found that this method of informant selection helped to create a 'favourable interactive position' (see Labov, 1981: 15) between interviewer and interviewee, and to (at least partly) redress the imbalance caused by the asymmetric power relations found in interview situations. It also helped to minimise the effect of 'the observer's paradox' (Labov, 1972) by helping the informants to feel less self-conscious about being interviewed and having the interview recorded.

This approach was also used by Jackson *et al.* (2001) in their research on men's magazines and their readers (see section 1.3.4). Of the various methods they used they found, as I did, that 'snowballing' proved more effective than trying to recruit strangers by posting flyers. They conducted focus group discussions/interviews, rather than one-to-one interviews, and through this method they were able to recruit pre-existing groups of friends or colleagues. Jackson *et al.* note that recruiting participants through personal contacts had both advantages and disadvantages. For example, they found that groups that already knew each other appeared to be more relaxed and informal in the interviews, and that the interviews were generally more successful as a result. However, in some groups it was more difficult for the researchers to guide the discussion because the participants would use the interviews as an opportunity to engage in long-running debates, and in one case one of the participants was subject to frequent in-jokes and teasing about whenever he 'tried to be an intellectual'. As most of the interviews I conducted were one-to-one this was not really an issue. However, I did find that when conducting group interviews, some of the groups had a tendency to go 'off topic', talking, for example, about mutual friends or plans for the weekend. When this happened, I often felt like they had forgotten about my presence, and found it quite difficult to intervene and change the subject.

2.4.4.1 Problems with the friend-of-a-friend/ 'snowballing' approach

When continuing my data collection, having completed the pilot study, it eventually became clear that there were several problems with this method of informant selection. Firstly, using a friend-of-a-friend approach made it difficult to find informants of different ages and from different ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds, as informants tended to be friends with women of a similar age and background to themselves. Of the seven informants who participated in my pilot study, all were from middle class backgrounds, and all but one were white.

One of the aims of this research was to examine how the discourses of femininity found in the texts intersect with, and are mediated by, the readers' age, sexuality, ethnicity and social class. As such, in continuing with the research I wanted to use a broader, as well as larger, pool of informants.

Secondly, I also found that I eventually reached a dead-end trying to recruit informants through this 'snowballing' approach. Although most of my informants said they could think of friends who might be interested in being interviewed, in many cases nothing would eventually come of it. Understandably, informants were reluctant to simply hand over their friends' contact details directly to me, preferring to speak to their friends about it themselves at first, and ask them to contact me if they were willing to participate. This placed the responsibility with the informants and their friends to get in touch with me, and as a result I did not hear back from as many people as I would have liked to. Moreover, I felt uncomfortable with the idea of repeatedly reminding previous informants to ask their friends, as I did not want them to feel in any way that I was pestering them, particularly after they had already helped me.

In addition to the women I recruited through the 'snowballing' approach described above, I also recruited six women through notices which I put up in various shops in the local community. I decided not to put notices up around the university as I had already recruited university students with little difficulty and wanted to find a broader range of informants. I made notices stating that I was a PhD student and that I was interested in interviewing women about their attitudes towards women's magazines. I did not specify that they should be regular readers of women's magazines as I was

also interested in interviewing women who did not read the magazines, or would not classify themselves as women's magazine readers.

The notices were not as successful as I had hoped they would be. As with asking previous informants to ask their friends if they wanted to participate, this method placed the onus onto the prospective informants, requiring them to be proactive and contact me if they were interested. Furthermore, unlike some other research projects, I was unable to offer any kind of financial incentive, which might have encouraged more people to volunteer. I attached slips with my name and contact details to the notices, and although quite a lot of these were taken, this did not correspond with the number of women who actually contacted me. Indeed, some of the women that did volunteer mentioned that it had taken them some time after seeing the notice to actually make the next step and get in touch with me, either because they had been busy and it seemed like too much effort, or simply because they had forgotten about it.

Initially I hoped to conduct in interviews with sixty women, inclusive of the seven interviews conducted for the pilot study. However, as it proved to be much more difficult than I had anticipated to recruit informants, and because of the time needed to find informants and then to transcribe the interviews, I eventually collected a corpus of thirty interviews, interviewing forty women in total.

2.4.5 Composition of the data sample

As stated above, the corpus consisted of thirty interviews (inclusive of the seven interviews conducted for the pilot study) with forty women. The informants ranged in age from eighteen to sixty-nine. Thirty-five of the women were white and the remaining five were of South Asian origin. Similarly, thirty-five of the women identified themselves as heterosexual, and five identified themselves as lesbians. In terms of socio-economic class, I have categorised twenty-four of the women as being middle-class, and sixteen as being working class. Where informants self-identified as being middle or working class I have used their categorisation. In other cases my categorisation was based on what I could find out about informants' jobs and family background. Below is a full list of all my informants (with pseudonyms), along with information about their age, ethnicity, sexuality, socio-economic status and profession.

- 1) Venus: 41, white, heterosexual, middle class, freelance musician, married, no children
- 2) Irene: 23, white, heterosexual, middle class, scientific report writer
- 3) Jackie: 24, white, heterosexual, middle class, fund accountant
- 4) Maggie: 38, white, heterosexual, middle class, assistant Director of Studies at a language school
- 5) Sue: 38, white, heterosexual, middle class, operations director for a magazine
- 6) Kate: 25, white, heterosexual, middle class, EFL teacher, married, no children
- 7) Gayathri: 18, British Asian (Sri Lankan Tamil), heterosexual, middle class, undergraduate student
- 8) Ailidh: 24, white, lesbian, middle class, writer
- 9) Catriona: 26, white, heterosexual, middle class, trainee solicitor
- 10) Alice: 23, white, heterosexual, middle class, recent graduate
- 11) Meera: 24, Asian (brought up in India), heterosexual, middle class, postgraduate student
- 12) Emma: 26, white, lesbian, middle class (works for Ramblers' Association)
Sarah: 28, white, lesbian (Emma's partner), middle class (project manager)
- 13) Joan: 64, white, heterosexual, middle class, works in voluntary sector
- 14) Jenny: 36, white, heterosexual, middle class (part-time EFL teacher), separated with 2 kids
- 15) Lindsay: 34, white, heterosexual, middle class, EFL teacher
- 16) Louise: 21, white, heterosexual, middle class, undergraduate student
- 17) Aileen: 47, white, heterosexual, working class, cleaner
Morag: 57, white, heterosexual, divorced, working class, cleaner
Michelle: 22, white, heterosexual, working class, cleaner, 1 child
Shona: 48, white, heterosexual, working class, cleaner
Yvonne: 60, white, heterosexual, married with two children, working class, cleaner
Marta: 21, white, Spanish, heterosexual, working class, cleaner
(All the above women work together)
- 18) Kirsten: 30, white, German, heterosexual, working class (unemployed musician)
- 19) Rita: 64, white, heterosexual, divorced with children, working class, retired warden at sheltered housing
Maria: 39, white, heterosexual, married with children, working class, warden at sheltered housing

Marge: 43, white, heterosexual, married with children, working class, warden at sheltered housing

(The above women work/have worked together)

20) Maureen: 68, white, heterosexual, widow with three children, working class

Pat: 69, white, heterosexual, married with children, working class

21) Shazia: 36, British Asian (Pakistani), lesbian, working class, works in community education, 1 son

22) Laura: 23, white, heterosexual, middle class, graduate

23) Vicky: 29, white, heterosexual, middle class, project manager, 1 son

24) Lisa: 22, white, heterosexual, middle class, medical student

25) Fiona: 35, white, heterosexual, working class, works in administration

Nuria: 25, white, Spanish, heterosexual, middle class, postgraduate law student, Fiona's flatmate.

26) Kirsty: 22, white, lesbian, middle class, works for an insurance company

27) Smita: 23, British Asian (Indian), heterosexual, middle class (engineer)

28) Claire: 31, white, heterosexual, middle class, writer and teacher

29) Caroline: 49, white, heterosexual, working class (support worker), divorced with 2 daughters

30) Nadia, 34, British Asian (Pakistani), white, heterosexual, working class, works for community group

2.4.5.1 Selecting data extracts for detailed analysis

My analysis in the following chapters of this thesis is based on close examination of selected data extracts. I chose to conduct detailed analyses of a relatively small number of long extracts, rather than use a large number of shorter examples. I decided to take this approach because it allows me to demonstrate the way in which individual women make use of different, and sometimes conflicting, discourses over the course of one stretch of talk, or at different points in the interview, depending on the discursive context and identity work being done. For this reason I have also chosen in some cases to analyse more than one extract from a particular interview (see, for example, extracts 5.8, 5.9 and 5.10).

This approach to selecting data for analysis brings with it both advantages and disadvantages. The main disadvantage is that I have only been able to discuss examples from a limited number of interviews. Using a larger number of short data

extracts would have provided a broader view of my data sample, and enabled me to provide evidence of patterns and differences within the sample (see section 2.4.5.2 below). However, all researchers have to make decisions regarding how to go about presenting and analysing their data, and there will always be limitations on the amount of data examples which can be given and the level of detail the researcher can go into in their analysis, at least within the confines of a single thesis or paper. On balance I decided to use fewer, but longer, extracts because I felt that this approach worked better with my interest in exploring the fluid and variable nature of identity construction. Using large chunks of data from a single interview gave me the opportunity to look in detail at how individual women constantly negotiate and re-negotiate their identity on a moment-to-moment basis, and to explore any examples of ambivalence and contradictory discourses in their talk.

2.4.5.2 Identifying patterns in the data

In this thesis, one of the things I am interested in is exploring how discourses of gender and the discursive construction of gender identity are mediated by discourses of sexuality, ethnicity, age and class. My analysis is qualitative and, as stated in section 2.4.5.1 above, is based on the close analysis of selected data extracts. As such, my aim is to look at the varied ways in which different women draw on these discourses, and not to make any global claims about women from different social categories. Some of the demographic information in section 2.4.5 above is partly based on external (i.e. my own) categorisation of my informants into different social groups/categories. However, in this thesis I am more concerned with exploring how my informants draw on these categories, and discourses about what these categories mean, when positioning themselves and others, and when accounting for their behaviour and beliefs. So, for example, a forty-one year old woman might be categorised, according to conventional social norms, as middle-aged. What I am interested in exploring is whether and how she draws on notions to do with age when constructing an identity/identities for herself, and accounting for her relationship with women's magazines.

Nonetheless, where I feel it is appropriate I have drawn attention to certain patterns in my informants' accounts. As Barbara Johnstone notes, 'sociolinguistic research projects are neither exclusively quantitative nor exclusively qualitative. They are most often both' (Johnstone, 2000: 36). Indeed, much sociolinguistic research

which looks at language and gender has made use of, and made a strong case for the value of, a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods (e.g. Eckert, 2000; Holmes, 1997; Kiesling, 1998; Meyerhoff, 1999). Penny Eckert (2000), for example, successfully combines an ethnographic approach with a quantitative study of language variation and change in the context of an American high school. Another example is Scott Kiesling's (1998) work, which combines a qualitative discourse analysis with a quantitative analysis of the (ING) variable in the speech of American 'frat boys'.

This study is unlike those mentioned above in that my analysis is primarily qualitative; it is not concerned with language variation, and does not involve the use of any statistical analysis. However, this thesis is rooted principally in the field of sociolinguistics, and the reason I mention these studies is to draw attention to the existence of a tradition in sociolinguistic research of drawing freely upon both quantitative and qualitative methods. My data sample is too small, and not sufficiently varied to enable me to make any statistically significant claims about the differences between the accounts of women from different social groups or categories. However, in this thesis I do discuss various trends and patterns in the data which I have noticed. For example, I chose to look at how women 'talk themselves out' of the target readership of the magazines they read (see chapter 3) because this was a recurring feature of my data which came to my attention when transcribing and coding the interviews. In my analysis I provide examples of some of the ways in which women distance themselves from the target readership, and my main interest is in examining *how* women do this, rather than *how often*. Nevertheless I do draw attention to my impressions of the differences in the strategies used by different categories of women, or note where I think a particular example stands out as being unusual compared with the rest of the data.

By commenting on the frequency of specific discursive features or strategies I do not wish to make any strong claims for my findings as generalisations which can be applied to the wider society, or even necessarily to the corpus as a whole. Rather, I have made tentative suggestions based on my impressions of and familiarity with the data. I have made these suggestions because I feel that they help give a fuller and more coherent impression of the data, and point in the direction of how my findings could be developed with further analysis and a larger data sample.

2.5 RECORDING AND TRANSCRIPTION

2.5.1 Recording

The interviews were recorded using a minidisc recorder and microphone. This equipment was easily portable and also unobtrusive, which may have helped informants feel less self-conscious about being recorded. I did not choose to use the recording studio and facilities at the university because I felt that this would create a more formal atmosphere than conducting the interviews at the informants' homes. However, this meant that I had to be careful that there was not much background noise that would be picked up on the recording, making it more difficult to transcribe.

2.5.2 Logging the data

Initially I intended to transcribe all my interviews in their entirety. However, this was my first experience of transcribing and I had underestimated the amount of time it takes to produce an accurate transcript. Moreover, I soon realised that interviews often contained stretches of talk which were 'off topic', particularly in group interviews where interviewees might begin to talk amongst themselves (about people they know, their plans for the weekend etc). I decided that transcribing these sections of talk, while it might result in a more accurate and faithful representation of the interaction, would unnecessarily extend the already time-consuming task of transcribing, and would not add anything to my analysis of the data.

In order to aid transcription I began to produce a log of each interview. This involved listening to the audio recordings of each interview, noting down what was being discussed at different stages of the interview, and the minidisc counter times at the start and end of these stages. I could then decide which, if any, sections I wanted to omit from the transcript, but could use the log as a record of what was being omitted. The log could also be used in the future if I decided to go back and transcribe the omitted sections.

2.5.3 Transcription

The systematic analysis of spoken interaction cannot begin until the talk has been transcribed. Furthermore, as the process of transcription requires researchers to listen closely and repeatedly to their data, it encourages, even requires, them to become extremely familiar with the details of their data. Transcription is, therefore,

more than just preparation for the analysis to follow, but rather, as noted by John Gumperz and Norine Berenz, 'transcription is an integral part of an overall process of interpretative analysis' (1993: 94).

It should be noted, however, that no transcript can ever be entirely faithful to the original interaction; firstly, because it can only be a written *representation* of spoken language, and secondly because a transcript should achieve a balance between accuracy and clarity, and in order to produce a clear, readable transcript, researchers have to be selective. This process of selection involves making decisions about which features to include, and which to omit, and these choices will reflect the researcher's theoretical background, interests, concerns and assumptions about which features will be central to the analysis. As such, Jane Edwards argues that 'no transcript is completely theory-neutral or without bias' (1993: 3), and that analysts should therefore make their choices, and the reasons behind them, explicit. The issue of bias has also been raised by Elinor Ochs (1999 [1979]), who contends that aspects of transcript layout and organisation, which might on the surface appear to be theory-neutral, do reflect certain theoretical and cultural assumptions, and can influence the way the data is perceived. For example, Ochs notes the tendency amongst researchers of child language to represent speaker turns in columns, with adult speakers on the left, and children on the right. Ochs argues that because of a left-to-right bias in European culture, this placement suggests to readers that the adult is leading the interaction, which might give a misleading impression of the data, as adults are not always dominant in adult-child interaction.

As mentioned above, a good transcript has to achieve a balance between remaining faithful to the original interaction, and being readable and coherent. A transcript which contains too much detail can be extremely difficult to follow, and this is sometimes the case with CA-based transcripts, at least to the un-CA-trained eye. It is therefore important for the researcher to provide a sufficient, and consistent, level of detail to support the kind of analysis s/he intends to conduct, but also to know when to stop. For the purposes of this research I have used a simplified and adapted version of the transcription conventions developed by Gail Jefferson for CA (reproduced in Atkinson and Heritage, 1984). The conventions I have used are described below.

2.5.3.1 Transcription conventions

:	lengthening of preceding sound/syllable, e.g. 'ha::rd'
?	rising intonation
!	exclamatory intonation
=	latching/contiguous utterances
	overlapping speech
-	short pause - less than one second
[.]	long pause - one second or longer ([..] denotes a pause of two seconds or longer)
<i>bold italics</i>	emphatic stress
wh-	dash denotes truncated utterance/false start
()	material that is not part of the talk being transcribed e.g. laughter also used where transcription in doubt
[...]	section of transcript omitted

2.5.3.2 Pseudonyms

Pseudonyms were used to protect the anonymity of informants. Du Bois *et al.* suggest that '[i]f possible, pseudonyms should retain some flavour of the actual names' (1993: 49), and I have attempted to do this where possible, for example by assigning Hindu or Muslim names where appropriate to Asian women. The women interviewed for the pilot study were asked if they wished to choose their own pseudonym (three out of seven did), but when continuing with the research I decided to choose pseudonyms myself, in order to avoid any possible incongruity or misrepresentation (e.g. a middle class white women in her forties wanting to call herself 'Beyonce').

Where data extracts are reproduced in this study, I also provide some basic demographic information about the informants, including their age, ethnicity and sexuality. Although this is not considered necessary or appropriate by many practitioners of CA, I believe this contextual information is a useful aid to

interpretation, and I invoke informants' backgrounds in my analysis where I believe it is relevant, even if these social categories have not been *explicitly* invoked by the participants themselves.

2.5.4 Coding

Having transcribed the interviews, for the next stage of analysis I printed out the transcripts and used highlighters to manually code them for talk which indexed age, socio-economic status, ethnicity and sexuality. This gave me an idea about how, and to what extent these categories were invoked by my informants, and for what purposes. Going through the transcripts in detail also brought other recurring themes and discourses to my attention, which I identified and marked in the transcripts, so that I was able to get a better picture of patterns in the data, and thereby narrow down my research focus. Having selected certain passages, I then went over these extracts again, coding for linguistic features such as hedges, false starts, repair and pauses. I did this because I was interested, not only in *what* women say about certain subjects, but also *how* they say it, and what this can tell us about how women are orienting to these subjects, and how they present themselves.

2.5.5 Ethical considerations

Labov's (1981) discussion of sociolinguistic ethics, as discussed and expanded on in Milroy (1987) focuses on the subjects of candid recording, protection of anonymity and access to recordings.

- Candid recording is not an issue with this research, as consent was gained from all the informants before proceeding with the interviews. The participants were informed that I would be asking about their reading habits and views on women's magazines (and self-help literature, in the case of the pilot study for my MSc dissertation). I also obtained consent for the interview transcripts and recordings to be used by myself in further research, and by other scholars according to my discretion.
- I have used pseudonyms in order to preserve the anonymity of the participants, and they were informed accordingly at the outset of the research.

- Also in order to preserve the informants' anonymity, they were assured prior to the interviews that the tapes will be kept in my possession and will only be made available to bona fide researchers.

2.6 CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have discussed some of the central analytic concepts, and summarised the main theoretical perspectives and methodologies which inform this study. More detailed discussion of these approaches, and particular studies which have been conducted using them, can be found in the later chapters where particular issues are relevant to my analysis. In this chapter I have also described the process of data collection and transcription.

In Chapter 3 I move on to begin my data analysis, looking at how my informants distance themselves from women's magazines and their target readers.

CHAPTER 3

'TALKING YOURSELF OUT': READERS' DISTANCING STRATEGIES

3.1 INTRODUCTION

3.1.1 Aims of this chapter

One of the most striking features of my informants' accounts is a widespread reluctance to describe themselves as 'women's magazine readers'. When approached about being interviewed, my informants often questioned their suitability as interviewees, claiming that they 'don't really read' women's magazines. During the interviews themselves, informants would also try to distance themselves from the target readership. I heard this type of distancing strategy, not only from women who only read magazines in waiting rooms and on long journeys, but also from those that buy them every month. However, despite this disclaimer all my informants were familiar with the range of titles on offer and with their contents, and were able to produce a fairly detailed critique and meta-analysis of the genre.

Initially, I was surprised by how common it was for women to try and distance themselves from the magazines, but then I found that other researchers have also come across this distancing strategy when interviewing men's magazine readers (Gill, 2003; Jackson *et al.*, 2001). What these researchers do not provide is a close linguistic analysis of how this distancing is achieved, or a discussion as to why people might choose to distance themselves from the (women's or men's) magazines, even if they do read them on a regular basis.

It should be noted at this point that interview data only give us an *account* of how and why my informants read (or do not read) magazines. They do not tell exactly how these women's actual reading practices correspond with their accounts, as I have not been able to observe these practices. For example, if an interviewee says that she rarely reads women's magazines, the interview alone will not tell me if this is in fact the case. However, my interest is not in finding the 'truth' or the 'reality' of how women read magazines, but rather in looking at how they talk about them, and how they use that talk in order to say something about themselves and how they

want to be seen. As such, the fact of whether they buy magazines once or four times a month is irrelevant to this study.

In this chapter I examine how my informants 'talk themselves out' of the position of 'women's magazine reader'. In doing so I look at how my informants construct their own identities in relation to the perceived target readers of the magazines, and how gender identity is inflected and mediated by other social factors such as age, class, ethnicity and sexuality. As we will see in the data analysis, a concern with cultural capital animates the discourse of some of my informants. As such I have found it useful to draw on the work of Pierre Bourdieu in this part of my analysis, and I provide an overview of his work in the following section (this is not intended to be a thorough and all-embracing account, but rather focuses on the aspects of his work which are most relevant to my analysis).

When talking themselves out of the target readership of magazines, my informants drew on notions of age, ethnicity, class and sexuality. Implicit in their talk was the belief that women's magazines do try to deceive readers in some way. However, by positioning themselves outside the target audience in terms of these social categories, they sought to construct themselves as being somehow immune to any negative influence the magazines might have. They also constructed their distance from the target reader as a justification for the act of reading women's magazines, the suggestion being that this detachment allowed them to read the magazines in a tongue-in-cheek or ironic way.

If so many readers are reluctant to position themselves within the target readership of the magazines they read, and describe the magazines as being trashy and stupid, then this begs the question: why do they read the magazines in the first place, however infrequently? In this chapter I address this question, looking at how women talk about what they like about reading women's magazines. This involves looking at the context of use: *how* and *when* women read the magazines, and the role magazine reading fulfils in the context of their everyday lives.

3.1.2 Bourdieu: taste and cultural capital

The work of Pierre Bourdieu is principally concerned with exploring the connections between capital, class and culture. In *The Forms of Capital* (1986), Bourdieu

expanded the notion of 'capital' beyond its narrow economic, material sense, arguing for the existence of non-economic and 'symbolic' forms of capital (which confer status and power just as economic capital does). He identified the three forms of capital as 'economic', 'cultural' and 'social', and examined the ways in which these forms of capital can be acquired and converted.

Social capital is dependent on an individual's social networks and group membership, and how these connections can be utilised to acquire power and status. Bourdieu writes that:

The volume of social capital possessed by a given agent [...] depends on the size of the network of connections he can effectively mobilize and on the volume of the capital (economic, cultural or symbolic) possessed in his own right by each of those to whom he is connected (Bourdieu, 1986: 249).

For example, the continuing existence of 'old boys' networks' (inflected by both class and gender) in British society can bring professional, material and social advantages to people from the 'right' family, public school or Oxbridge college. Equally, membership of a trade union can also be used to acquire respect as well as improve one's economic situation.

For the purposes of this thesis, I am principally interested in the notion of 'cultural capital'. Bourdieu defines cultural capital as existing in three forms or states. Firstly, it is embodied in the individual as habitus, that is a culturally specific system of dispositions which are acquired through an individual's upbringing and education, and which generate that individual's perceptions and practices. Secondly, it is objectified in cultural goods and artefacts, such as books or works of art. Objectified cultural capital can be acquired materially, by purchasing an artwork for example, or symbolically through the acquisition of knowledge about cultural goods. Thirdly, it is institutionalised through academic and professional credentials and qualifications.

The concept of cultural capital is central to *Distinction*, Bourdieu's (1984) critique on the politics of taste. In *Distinction*, Bourdieu challenges the view that the meaning and aesthetic value of cultural objects are inherent and fixed, arguing that taste and aesthetic judgements are socially structured, not only reflecting, but also reproducing class divisions. He writes that:

Taste classifies and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves in the distinctions they make, between the beautiful and the ugly, the distinguished and the vulgar, in which their position in the objective classifications is expressed or betrayed (1984: 6).

Bourdieu argues that taste is a marker of identity and reflects one's position in the social hierarchy. An individual's cultural preferences and practices serve to identify the social group to which that individual belongs. Although Bourdieu's focus was on social class, there are many other factors which might influence and mediate a person's cultural preferences, such as gender, age and ethnicity. An individual's political leanings, for example, are perhaps most clearly marked by their choice of newspaper. Although the distinction between broadsheet and tabloid newspapers in Britain is, on the face of it, related to paper size, the terms are usually used to invoke differences in content and style, as well as differences in readership. Broadly speaking, broadsheet newspapers are associated with a more middle class, well-educated readership than the tabloid papers. It is the extended, non-literal meaning of the terms that accounts for why the terms 'broadsheet' and 'tabloid' are still common currency, even though the difference in size no longer applies in the same way, now that some of the former broadsheet format newspapers, such as *The Independent* and *The Times* are now available in tabloid format.

More specifically, describing someone as a '*Guardian* reader' or '*Daily Mail* reader', for example, serves as a kind of cultural shorthand, indexing respectively left-wing and right-wing political beliefs, as well as invoking a whole host of other associations about where that person lives, their lifestyle etc.

For Bourdieu, preferences for cultural objects and activities are socially constructed and inextricably tied to class membership. As such, the field of cultural production and consumption is a site of constant struggle, as different social groups seek to acquire and maintain cultural capital by seeking to legitimise and privilege the practices and stances associated with their habitus, while distancing themselves from the tastes of other groups. Bourdieu argues that the upper and middle classes have both greater economic and social capital, and that they seek to maintain and reproduce their position through discourses of art and culture which assign greater value to their cultural pursuits, while at the same time devaluing working class or popular pursuits as unrefined and vulgar. He is also interested in the division and

struggle between the 'petit bourgeois' section of the middle classes, who have greater economic capital, and the middle class 'intelligentsia', which would include academics, artists and others who may not have great financial wealth, but acquire symbolic capital through education and cultural practices.

Bourdieu distinguishes between 'highbrow', 'middlebrow' and 'lowbrow' tastes.

'Highbrow' tastes are those of the upper class, and would include, for example, an interest in fine art, antiques and opera, interests which require not only knowledge of the subject, but also a great deal of economic capital; acquiring art and antiques is an option only available to those with a large disposable income, or to those who inherit family collections, and opera-going is typically an expensive pursuit.

'Middlebrow' tastes are those of the 'petit bourgeoisie' and incorporate aspects of both high and low culture, and 'popular' tastes are those of the working class, who do not have the material or educational resources to access highbrow pursuits.

Struggle arises because different tastes are not seen as 'different but equal' but 'different and better' or 'different and worse'. In order for the dominant classes to create a sense of group identity, as well as maintain their status in the social hierarchy, they must both assert the value of their own interests and also define themselves negatively by distancing themselves from the interests of other groups. Bourdieu argues that tastes 'are the practical affirmation of difference [...] when they have to be justified, they are asserted purely negatively, by the refusal of other tastes' (1984: 56).

Bourdieu's work has been criticised for displaying a kind of essentialism which does not allow for individual agency. It is argued (see Featherstone, 1991; Frow, 1987) that Bourdieu's conception of habitus posits a stable model of social reproduction which treats class experience as monolithic and does not allow for the possibility of radical social change.

Bourdieu's conception of class-based cultural consumption, which was based on empirical research conducted in France, is perhaps too rigid to be unreservedly applied to the current British cultural climate. The distinction between 'highbrow', 'middlebrow' and 'lowbrow' tastes is becoming more and more blurred in British society. Popular culture, particularly television, is the dominant medium transmitting

or defining culture, and its consumption is far from restricted to the working classes, although much of what is shown on TV might be classified as low- or middlebrow. Television is dominated by reality TV programmes of one kind or another, and the presence (albeit briefly) of the feminist academic and writer Germaine Greer on *Celebrity Big Brother* in 2004 is perhaps one of the most striking examples of the blurring of these boundaries.

Popular television series, such as *Big Brother*, *Friends*, and *Sex and the City*, are watched by people from all class backgrounds, and are discussed as cultural phenomena in the press, as well as becoming the subject of academic interest within subjects such as cultural studies. However, that is not to say that popular culture and high culture now share equal status. The struggle over how cultural goods are evaluated is clearly evident in the resistance towards popular culture being treated as the 'proper' object of academic study, as shown by the discourse of 'Mickey Mouse' degrees, a derogatory term sometimes used in reference to cultural studies and related subjects. For example, in 2003, Margaret Hodge, who was then Higher Education Minister, attracted criticism from the higher education sector for talking about 'Mickey Mouse courses', which she described as degree courses 'where the content is perhaps not as rigorous as one would expect and where the degree itself may not have huge relevance in the labour market' (BBC News, January 14, 2003).

Although the audience for popular culture may be wide-ranging, individuals can still assert their cultural and intellectual capital through the discourses they employ when talking about these cultural goods. Middle class viewers of reality TV, for example, often account for their interest in programmes like *Big Brother* by using discourses which could be glossed as 'anthropological/sociological interest' and 'ironic detachment'. Typically, such discourse will include some form of concession or acknowledgement that the cultural product in question is, or is commonly considered to be, trashy or lowbrow. Viewers will then assert their higher cultural capital by intellectualising their interest, which may involve references to higher forms of culture (as will be seen in the analysis of my data which follows, this type of discourse occurred extremely frequently in the talk of my middle class informants).

In an article in *The Observer*, Sean O'Hagan discusses why he likes watching Big Brother, and defends reality TV against the criticisms he sees as coming 'from the ivory towers of academe'. As we will see in the following sections of this chapter, many of the themes and concerns raised by O'Hagan in this article, as well as the rhetorical and discursive strategies which he uses to make his argument, can also be found in the talk of my informants, specifically in the talk of the well-educated, middle class women that I spoke to. O'Hagan begins his article as follows:

I have a confession to make: I watch Big Brother. There, I've said it. I'll go even further: I think it is truly great television - of, and for, our time: both blissfully banal in a way that reflects and amplifies a certain kind of everyday, commonplace reality; and, on a whole other level, endlessly, often accidentally, thought-provoking.

Let me just say from the outset that, like the majority of people who watch Big Brother, I am not a fanatic. I don't rush home to see it, nor set the video for it, nor, God forbid, tune into E4 or the website to witness the almost unedited version, nor would it ever cross my mind to lift the phone and vote to evict my least favourite housemate (I mean, who would I possibly choose?). But, if I'm at home, or round at someone else's house when it's that time, I turn on, tune in, and, often against my better nature, find myself quietly, quizzically absorbed in the strange semi-mediated human drama unfolding in front of me (O'Hagan, 2001).

The above quotation is taken from the beginning of O'Hagan's article, and it is interesting to note that he begins by framing the text as a confession, which implies that watching *Big Brother* is some kind of sin, and therefore something that one should feel ashamed and guilty about. O'Hagan's article serves as a retort to those people who might disapprove of his viewing habits, whom he describes as variously 'truly square', 'seriously snobby' and 'cultural hand-wringers'. In light of this we can read this framing as an ironic one, as O'Hagan is arguing that *Big Brother* has cultural value and that he actually has nothing to be ashamed of. In his conclusion, he argues that society can and should enjoy and value both high and low culture, suggesting that '[c]ulturally, this is where most of us have been living for a long time now, picking and mixing high and low, deep and shallow, serious and trashy'. However, despite his criticism of discourses which either dismiss the programme as superficial and voyeuristic on the one hand, or attempt to intellectualise it on the other, his own feelings are somewhat ambivalent, and he is complicit in reproducing such discourses.

O'Hagan's ambivalence towards *Big Brother* is evident in the above excerpt when he describes his interest in it as being 'often against my better nature', suggesting that the programme appeals to some negative aspect of his character. He also distances himself from some aspects of the programme, stating that he would not set the video for it and would never even consider participating in the telephone vote. He argues that 'like the majority of people who watch Big Brother, I am not a fanatic', the implication being that to participate in the vote or watch the continuous coverage would be the actions of a fanatic. However, millions of votes are cast, which indicates that there are many viewers whom O'Hagan would classify as fanatics. He also distances himself from other viewers later in the article by suggesting that not everyone watches the programme 'on the same level'. Although he does not say so explicitly, the assumption underlying the rest of the article is that his understanding and appreciation is on a 'higher' level than that of the idealised 'real' viewer.

Throughout the article O'Hagan asserts his cultural capital by using what I glossed earlier as a discourse of anthropological/sociological interest, and also through references to other, more highbrow, forms of culture. The attempt at anthropological engagement is evident in the way he describes *Big Brother*, not just as entertainment, but as 'thought provoking', 'an intriguing pop cultural moment' and a 'cultural phenomenon'. He also suggests that '[t]he hermetically sealed, constantly mediated world of Big Brother could, on one level, be viewed as a conceptual art installation'.

O'Hagan is dismissive of attempts to intellectualise or offer an academic meta-analysis of *Big Brother* as a cultural product, but draws on just such a discourse himself. He writes, 'I could, in conclusion, intellectualise my relationship with Big Brother, pointing out, for instance, how it is McLuhanesque - the medium as message and massage - and of course, Warholian'. What O'Hagan seems to be trying to do here is to demonstrate that he has the necessary cultural capital to provide an intellectual argument for the cultural worth of *Big Brother*, while at the same time (through the use of the counter-factual 'could') criticising and distancing himself from such an approach. However, by describing *Big Brother* in the way a cultural theorist might, as a significant moment in the history of popular culture, and

by making reference to figures such as the influential media theorist Marshall McLuhan, he is using the very intellectualised discourse he is so scornful of.

While my informants tend not to engage with arguments about high and low culture to the same extent, or as explicitly, as O'Hagan does, they do use some of the same discursive strategies, and demonstrate some of the same concerns about cultural capital. O'Hagan's argument is framed as a retort to those who dismiss reality TV as trash, but despite his defence of the genre, I would argue that one can also detect a certain amount of ambivalence. O'Hagan's defence of *Big Brother* is reliant upon his knowledge, both of different forms of culture, and of meta-discourse about high and low culture. Paradoxically then, we see him asserting his own intellectual and cultural capital, whilst simultaneously criticising others' attempts at intellectualising *Big Brother*. We also see him reproducing notions of high and low culture (as if these categories were clear-cut and predetermined), while at the same time dismissing the need for such categories.

As we will see, a similar kind of ambivalence also characterises many of my informants' talk about women's magazines. There is a disjunction in the way many (particularly middle class) women position themselves in relation to the magazines: on the one hand they assert their own cultural and intellectual capital by categorising women's magazines as trashy and lacking in cultural value, as well as by positioning themselves as consumers of high culture. However, they also defend and justify their own consumption of the magazines by constructing the magazines' trashiness and lack of serious content as something enjoyable and worth valuing. This ambivalence and use of competing discourses is discussed in greater detail later in this chapter.

3.1.3 Women's genres and cultural capital

This economy of cultural goods both reflects and reproduces hierarchical social structures, and is inflected not only by class, but also by gender and other factors (although Bourdieu's analysis focuses almost entirely on class). This can be seen in the way that so-called 'women's' genres such as romance novels, women's magazines, and soap operas are generally devalued as 'vulgar' and lowbrow. For example, the terms 'chicklit' and 'chick flick' are often used derisively to imply that the books and films so described, and by extension their readers/viewers, are silly,

fluffy, lacking in any literary/cinematic merit and not to be taken seriously.

Conversely, there is a lack of gendered terms with which to refer to genres such as action films, which are typically associated with men. Although action films are not regarded as a highbrow genre, they do not seem to attract the same level of derision and scorn which is often aimed at so-called 'chick flicks'. This disparity is not a subject which arises explicitly in any of my interviews, but the general lack of value placed on women's genres may be one of the reasons why readers themselves are so quick to dismiss the magazines as trash.

3.2 MAGAZINES AS 'TRASH'

A common feature of my interviews (with middle class and well educated readers in particular) is an awareness of the low cultural capital of the magazines. This belief is reproduced in my informants' discourse, as can be seen from the following comments:

- (1-40) V: [my reading habits have changed] with how much money I've got to waste on a magazine
- (2-14) I: I like Heat just because it's kind of general rubbish – it's mindless
- (2-27) I: probably none of it's worth reading
- (6-320) K: they're completely pointless – and ah – but vaguely amusing (laughter)
- (7-24) G: [it's] just something trashy to read
- (7-66) G: rubbish celebrity gossip stuff

These types of comments were extremely common in my interviews and were often repeated several times over the course of an interview. They could be construed as a pre-emptive justification and defence against any negative judgements that might be made about their own levels of cultural capital, either by myself as an academic researcher, or by the wider society. These remarks occurred throughout the interviews, but were particularly common at the beginning, when I asked what women thought about the magazines in general, or what they liked about them. This adds to the impression that dismissing the magazines as trash is a pre-emptive strategy, meant to demonstrate that the speaker knows that women's magazines are not a culturally valued genre. It is certainly a strategy I have come across in other contexts when people talk about their consumption of other 'lowbrow' forms of

culture. Specifically, I have used this strategy myself because I feel that I have to justify my own fondness for soap operas. When talking to someone who does not watch soaps themselves, I tend to assume that they are judging me negatively and therefore try to justify my behaviour by being overtly critical of the programmes, and by making references to more 'highbrow' television that I also watch. In this chapter we will see that this strategy is also used by some of my informants when talking about women's magazines.

The effect of describing the women's magazines in these negative terms is to distance the readers from the texts and present the act of reading them as tongue-in-cheek. These women do not deny that they read women's magazines, or that they gain some pleasure and enjoyment from doing so. Instead they seek to disassociate themselves from the low cultural capital that may be assigned to the activity of reading women's magazines by acknowledging their low status as cultural goods, and positioning themselves as people with the necessary cultural competence to distinguish between 'high' and 'low' culture.

3.3 MAGAZINES AND CULTURAL CAPITAL/SOCIAL CLASS

Social class is rarely mentioned overtly as a factor which influences the way in which my informants read and relate to women's magazines. However, a common theme was that of individual interests and intelligence. I would argue that this orientation towards the idea of intelligence acts as a means of introducing discourses of class indirectly, thereby allowing the speaker to avoid being judged 'politically incorrect' or snobbish.

Many of my middle class informants constructed the target reader as someone of limited interests and intelligence, and distanced themselves from the target by positioning themselves as women with a broader range of interests than those found in the magazines. Drawing on Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984, 1986) I would argue that these strategies serve as a means of demonstrating the women's cultural competence, and thereby asserting a middle class identity for themselves. This is evident in the types of media they refer to. For example, my informants tended to refer to newspapers and documentaries as better or more valuable sources of information than women's magazines. Several women referred

to themselves as Guardian readers, using this category as a cultural marker of a cultured, liberal, middle class identity.

In the following excerpt Alice explains why she thinks she is not part of the target readership:

Extract 3.1: Alice

(23, white, middle class, heterosexual, recent graduate)

- 160 A: whatever extreme you go – em – but [.] I s'pose – I – I just feel that I
161 I'm not in the right **league** of people – em [.] I – I'm not I'm not in the
162 sort of target audience – you know when I buy the magazine –
- 163 D: | right | right
- 164 A: d'you know what I mean? – I'm just [.] I'm too interested in other
165 things and I treat it too much as entertainment – to take any of it =
- 166 D: | mmh
- 167 A: = seriously – and I **know** that there are lots of people who **do** buy it –
168 and read it seriously and – you know they'll bring it up in
169 conversation and – you know it's it's this is oh my God – someone
170 wrote this and I **can't** believe that and you're like well don't believe
171 it cos it's a load of rubbish you know – em but they will just sort of –
172 find it like an emotional rollercoaster reading it and oh God! you
173 know this is amazing and wow! – and I I you know they'll
174 believe every word of it and – I never do – so =
- 175 D: | mm
176 = so how – mm who do you think the target reader **is** then in these =
- 177 A: | em
- 178 D: = magazines
- 179 A: well they're all so – I think they're – ach! – they're different – depends
180 on the magazine doesn't it? – em – but I think [.] hhh aah! – it =
- 181 D: | mmh
- 182 A: = sounds **so** patronising – makes me sound like I think that I'm sort of
183 God's gift or something but **I'm not** – I'm not – I don't think that – but
|
184 really do believe that people who buy them on a regular basis – aren't
185 that intelligent [.] I know that sounds awful and I don't mean it – I
186 (laughter) – you can't say it in a way – which – it sort of – sounds less
187 arrogant but [.] ah I just think that if you're someone that – spends all
188 your money on – and they are so expensive – on buying these
189 magazines – em [.] and I'm talking about people that buy more than

- 190 one so that – you know they’re spending like fifteen twenty quid a
 191 month on magazines [...] you know I think God! – you – ach! – you
 192 know open your eyes! – there’s so much more to sort of – discover
 193 out there! – em – and I’d much rather spend my time – reading a
 194 couple of **newspapers** – you know – with different views – and I
 195 mean I know what’s in newspapers can be just as much rubbish but –
 196 at least it’s concerned with – em things which are of a – of real
 197 importance in everyday life [...] em [...] you know – you can =
- 198 D: | mmh
- 199 A: = form – opinions that are actually quite useful to discussion
 200 - at the moment that you’re reading it – whereas stuff about – you
 201 know whether Joanne was right to sleep with her – stepfather – you
 202 know – I [...] pff! so what? – you know – I mean – you can think up that
 203 situation for yourself and work out how you – what you feel about =
- 204 D: | mm – mm – mmh
- 205 A: it – erm – so – I – I don’t know who they’re targeting I mean I know
 206 yeah – but then again – people might just have the money to buy
 207 magazines and they might just like a lot of light entertainment rather=
- 208 D: | yeah
- 209 A: = than watching TV or watching videos they buy magazines so – you
 210 know – I don’t think – I’m not sort of making a sweeping statement =
- 211 D: | mm
- 212 A: = and saying all people that buy magazines are stupid but [...] you
 213 know – people that buy magazines because they take it – **really**
 214 seriously and – em – they believe that the magazine they’re buying is
 215 the only place where you can find out the truth about such and such a
 216 thing [...] are seriously – you know – sort of – illusioned

Here Alice constructs a clear distinction between herself and the target reader, stating in lines 160-162 that ‘I just feel that I I’m not in the right **league** of people – em [...] I – I’m not I’m not in the sort of target audience – you know when I buy the magazine’. The hedges and false starts in these lines suggest that Alice is finding something problematic or difficult. Given her later construction of the target readership as people who ‘aren’t that intelligent’ (lines 184-185), I would suggest that her hesitation here indicates that she knows that the subject matter is potentially sensitive or controversial, and is therefore proceeding with caution.

Alice’s use of ‘d’you know what I mean’ in line 164 serves as an appeal to shared knowledge, as Alice wants to check that I know what she means when she says she

is not part of the target audience. In case I do not understand (I do not provide any kind of backchannel or other response which would suggest that I do), she then goes on to offer an explanation of what differentiates her from the target reader. This distinction seems to be based largely around notions of intelligence, which she invokes explicitly in lines 185 and 212. However, she is clearly somewhat reticent about using this as a means of categorising other readers. In lines 164-165 she begins by saying that she is 'too interested in other things and I treat it too much as entertainment – to take any of it seriously'. We can infer that she is drawing an implicit contrast between herself and the target reader here. Alice states that she is not part of the target audience because she does not take the magazines seriously, which entails that the target audience *do* take the magazines seriously. Furthermore, if Alice does not take the magazines seriously because she is too interested in other things, and treats them too much like entertainment, this entails that people who do take the magazines seriously (i.e. the target audience) are not interested in other things, and do not treat the magazines like entertainment, or at least not to the extent that Alice does. What Alice seems to be suggesting here is that target readers lack the cultural competence to evaluate what is written in the magazines, while her own broad range of interests show that she possesses a greater level of cultural capital than the target reader.

As discussed in Chapter 1, researchers whose work is based on the magazine texts themselves often assume the existence of an ideal reader who does take the magazines seriously. It is assumed that these readers will unquestioningly take on the subject positions provided for them within the texts, accepting the ideologies of femininity found in the magazines as common sense. Alice seems to share this view, but seeks to distance herself from the target reader because she herself does not want to be seen in this way. This was a common view amongst many of the women I spoke to, who argued that although they themselves did not take the magazines seriously, other women, who are younger, less educated, less intelligent or less confident, do take the magazines seriously and more likely to be influenced by them. Interestingly, I did not come across any women who did claim to take the magazines seriously and live their lives by them, so one is left wondering whether such a woman exists.

In line 167 Alice emphasises that she knows there are many people who take magazines seriously. This acts as a justification for her description of the target reader by suggesting that her comments are based on knowledge of actual readers rather than speculation. Although at this stage Alice has yet to explicitly raise the idea of intelligence, she is clearly critical of the target reader. In lines 169-174 she constructs the target readers as women who “believe every word” of what is written in the magazines. She then describes herself addressing a target reader and telling them not to believe it because ‘it’s a load of rubbish’. Alice uses this imagined conversation to suggest that these other women do not have her level of awareness and understanding. Her line of reasoning seems to be that magazines deceive less intelligent people. Because she herself is intelligent, therefore she is not deceived, and because she is not deceived, she is not a reader.

In lines 183-185 Alice goes on to say ‘I really do believe that people who buy them on a regular basis – aren’t that intelligent’, but she prefaces her assertion by conceding that she ‘sounds so patronising’ and that it might sound like I ‘like I think that I’m sort of God’s gift or something but *I’m not* – I’m not – I don’t think like that’. She also follows on from her claim with an extended, and unprompted attempt to justify her opinion. This explanation/justification includes a further concession that she knows what she is saying ‘sounds awful’ (line 185), but that ‘you can’t say it in a way – which – it sort of – sounds less arrogant’ (lines 186-187). This pattern continues between lines 182 and 216, where Alice’s talk takes the form of a series of claims, followed by qualifications and concessions, and finally the reiteration of her original claim in line 216 when she concludes that people who take women’s magazines seriously are ‘seriously – you know – sort of – illusioned’ (I assume she means ‘deluded’ or ‘delusional’).

This pattern shares similarities with a rhetorical device called a ‘show concession’ (Antaki and Wetherell, 1999), which has been identified and studied by conversation analysts and discursive psychologists. As defined by Charles Antaki and Margaret Wetherell, a show concession is a three-part structure comprising of a proposition (something which is liable to be disputed or challenged by an interlocutor), a concession, and a reprise (qualifying the concession and then reasserting the original proposition). A show concession is defensive in nature, and is used by speakers when raising potentially sensitive or problematic subject matter. When

making claims that are vulnerable to challenge or misunderstanding, speakers can use show concessions to make a show or gesture of conceding, thereby warding off potential criticism and making their argument appear stronger.

In this case Alice is making the potentially sensitive or challengeable proposition that people who buy women's magazines on a regular basis 'aren't that intelligent'. Alice mitigates this initial claim through her choice of wording: saying that regular readers 'aren't that intelligent' appears less marked than if she were to say 'they're stupid' (note that she acknowledges in line 212 that others might think she is implying that 'all people that buy magazines are stupid'). However, Alice clearly feels that this mitigation is insufficient in guarding against criticism, hence the concession that 'I know that sounds awful'. She then qualifies her concession, attempting to further deflect potential criticism by suggesting that it is not possible to express this opinion in a way which does not seem arrogant. Reprises are often marked by the use of 'but' or another contrastive conjunction (Antaki and Wetherell, 1999), as is the case here in line 187 when Alice begins to reiterate her original claim. In reprising her initial claim Alice reformulates it slightly, so instead of talking about people who buy magazines on a regular basis she now describes them as people who spend all their money on magazines. She then elaborates on this description, adding that 'I'm talking about people who buy more than one so that – you know they're spending like fifteen twenty quid a month on magazines' (lines 189-191). With this reformulation Alice seems to be trying to narrow her definition of what a regular reader (and therefore someone who is not that intelligent) is, and therefore make her opinion seem less controversial. Furthermore, in lines 191-197, she reformulates her proposition so as to avoid any overt reference to intelligence, although the implication is that she has a level of knowledge and understanding that regular magazine readers lack, as she suggests that they should 'open [their] eyes!' (line 192) and realise that 'there's so much more to sort of – discover out there!'

In lines 193-205 there is another example of a show concession. Alice claims that she prefers reading newspapers to magazines, as newspapers have different views (the implication being that magazines do not show different views). She then concedes that she knows that 'what's in newspapers can be just as much rubbish' (line 195), before reiterating her original proposition that newspapers are of 'real

importance in everyday life' (lines 196-197) whereas her reaction to the issues dealt with in women's magazines is 'so what?' (line 202).

In lines 206-208 Alice makes another show of conceding by offering alternative reasons why women might choose to buy magazines on a regular basis (other than because they are not that intelligent). She suggests that it might be because they simply have money to spare, or because they 'just like a lot of light entertainment'. However, she passes over these ideas without expanding on them, which suggests to me that they are being offered primarily as justification for her concession in line 210 that 'I'm not sort of making a sweeping statement and saying all people that buy magazines are stupid'. Alice recognises that an argument which is based on generalisations is more open to dispute, or accusations that she is relying on clichés and stereotypes. She therefore uses this disclaimer to acknowledge the possibility of, but simultaneously attempt to dismiss, any suggestion that she is over-generalising or trying to comment on *all* magazine readers. It is interesting to note that Alice's wording here recalls expressions such as 'I'm not a racist/sexist/feminist but ...'. Expressions like this are typically used to preface statements which could be regarded as being racist/sexist/feminist, and are intended to disarm any potential criticism or accusation. This disclaimer is followed by another re-iteration of her belief that those women who do take magazines seriously are somehow deluded (prefaced by the contrastive conjunction 'but'), reinforcing her negative construction of the target reader. This statement that some readers are deluded could be interpreted as introducing the idea of a false consciousness. This is interesting as it links back to the ideas found in much of the text analyses of women's magazines (see Chapter 1), which took women's magazines to be bearers of patriarchal ideologies, which the implied reader would then take on as common sense.

What we can see in this extract, then, is an elaborate series of show concessions. Show concessions are often used defensively (Antaki and Wetherell, 1999), as they attend to vulnerability in (what Edwards and Potter (1992) call) the speaker's 'stake' or interest in the matter being discussed, and the claims they are making. In other words, the speaker is aware of a chink in the armour of his/her argument, and seeks to strengthen his/her case by acknowledging, and then dismissing, alternative viewpoints. Because of their use as a defensive structure, show concessions are a useful indicator that participants are orienting to a subject as being sensitive or

challengeable in some way. In this case, Alice is trying to defend her claim that regular readers of women's magazines are not that intelligent, which she realises could lead to the accusation that she is a snob. Alice does not explicitly mention social class, but she does go to great lengths to justify her argument, and deny that she is being 'arrogant' or 'patronising'. I would suggest that this indicates that Alice is indirectly orienting to notions of class, which is often tied up with ideas about taste and intelligence, but is intentionally avoiding any explicit mention of it, because she knows it is a sensitive subject. Although it might not be considered admissible context by conversation analysts, I also think it is worth pointing out that Alice is public school educated and speaks with what would commonly be identified as received pronunciation (RP). Because Alice could be categorised as being 'posh' or a 'yah' (a term commonly used in Edinburgh, particularly within the university context, to describe upper middle class people with public school backgrounds), she may feel that her comments are more likely to be perceived as snobbish, and therefore be especially careful to avoid presenting herself in this way.

Alice's eagerness to clarify and justify her views may also be partly due to the context of the research interview. The possibility that the conversation could be made public might have made her feel the need to negotiate a liberal, egalitarian (and possibly left-wing) identity for herself. Indeed, towards the end of the interview Alice remarked that she was glad that I would be using a pseudonym because she felt her views might appear "right wing".

Alice's comments also question the value or truth of the information found in the magazines. These comments on value suggest a belief in some sort of hierarchy of reading material. This hierarchy is based on notions of 'high' and 'low' culture, according to which notions women's magazines seem to rate very poorly. In lines 193-200 she says that she prefers to spend her time reading newspapers, as they give access to different views, deal with issues that are 'of real importance in everyday life' and help in forming opinions which are 'useful to discussion'. These notions about the relative value of different texts are also linked to issues of intelligence, education and class, and so by evaluating the magazines in these terms, this strengthens the underlying discourse of class. In order to discursively construct herself as an intelligent and educated woman, Alice has to assert her ability to differentiate between high and low culture (note that although O'Hagan, in

his article discussed above, claims to reject the distinction between high and low culture, he nevertheless relies on his ability to distinguish between the two). This links back to Alice's comment that she is 'too interested in other things' to take the magazines seriously. Unlike the target reader, Alice is able to judge the value of the magazines through comparisons with her other interests in higher forms of culture, such as newspapers.

This notion of a reading hierarchy is also made clear by Meera in the following excerpt:

Extract 3.2: Meera

(24, Asian, middle class, heterosexual, postgraduate student)

169 D: so what is it that you like about them then?

170 M: you know I really don't know I've thought about this after you asked
171 me and I **can't** figure it out – because [...] I sort of I find I'm actually
172 look at them with a bit of disdain [...] and er – like I said I worked for =

173 D: | mmh

174 M: = a magazine – I was working for two years – and it would be
175 completely beneath my dignity to **ever** [...] write or or to go to Elle or
176 Cosmo for a job [...] and er – I wouldn't even – I wouldn't like to know =

177 D: | mmh

178 M: = anybody who was writing for them because I would think they were
179 completely vacuous (laughter) – but yet I read it! – and I think it's just
180 er maybe – it's like bathroom entertainment – you know – not =

181 D: | mmh

182 M: = beyond that it's – it's er sort of pretty pictures and – er – silly little
183 life stories [...] um it's sort of taken the place in my life I guess of =

184 D: | mmh

185 M: = pulp – you know – the those – s- sort of stories that you used to
186 read and – that people read in airports?

[...]

203 D: when would you typically read them then?

204 M: um – I think probably – when I came home from a **long** day – I would
205 never read them in public (laughter) very sad to say (more
206 laughter) it's ridiculous very [...] bizarre

- 207 D: so you wouldn't read them if you were sitting on a train or something
208 or on the bus? (M shakes head) no?
- 209 M: not only because I'd be ashamed to be caught with one of them but
210 because I – I'd really – because if I felt that I had – sort of the
211 attention span I would much rather give it to [.] er a book – a good =
- 212 D: | mmh
- 213 M: = book [.] er so it would probably be after I was really tired and I just
214 wanted – some light entertainment and like I said because I don't
215 read [.] a light books – this would be something that I'd read just =
- 216 D: | mmh
- 217 M: = before going to sleep and then – then forget about
[...]
- 284 M: but [.] I think it's just fun – you know – in many ways [.] I think =
- 285 D: | mmh
- 286 M: = of entertainment actually as being more serious because – a good
287 film a good music good book is all entertainment [.] I wouldn't put =
- 288 D: | mmh
- 289 M: = a magazine like Cosmo in entertainment it's just a bit of fun
- 290 D: right [.] so it's somehow it's kind of a step (laughing) a step below!
- 291 M: | (laughing)it's a step down yeah –
292 yeah!
- 293 D: so – you said that you wouldn't want to read it in public – cos =
- 294 M: | hmm
- 295 D: = you'd be – ashamed – I mean why – you know [.] **why** would you
296 be ashamed? I mean how do you think that people would look at you
297 or how do you think – how do you perceive – you know this image of
298 someone who reads women's magazines that you wouldn't want to
299 **be – seen** as that person?
- 300 M: um – I don't know but it's similar to the fact that **we** are – at home we
301 um [.] er subscribe to several magazines like India Today which is a
302 political magazine – Outlook that's another political magazine –
303 Newsweek Time et cetera – but we wouldn't even consider
304 subscribing to **these** and I – I really don't understand why I don't
305 know – I don't think it's snob value – but er maybe when you're =

- 306 D: | mmh
- 307 M: = sort of em – tallying about you know – how much money you’ve
 308 spent you don’t want to – **feel** that you’ve spent money on –
 309 something like that [.] not because it’s frivolous but because =
- 310 D: | mmmh
- 311 M: = even that frivolity is so – unfulfilling – you know [.] em [.] but the =
- 312 D: | mmh
- 313 M: = reason I wouldn’t want to be caught in public was because – em –
 314 I guess for that same peephole thing my eyes usually – sort of
 315 **goggle** (laughing) when I see something – and wouldn’t be
 316 particularly happy for anybody to see me – looking like that (laughter)
 317 and em [.] yeah – and if I felt I had the attention span I would rather
 318 give it to something else

Meera freely admitted to buying at least two magazines a month, and yet she evaluates them in almost purely negative terms. In lines 171-172 she explicitly comments on her ‘disdain’ not only for the magazines themselves, but also for the journalists who write for them, whom she characterises in line 11 as ‘completely vacuous’. This constitutes a particularly overt assertion of her own superior cultural capital, as both a consumer and producer of media texts. Meera has worked as a journalist for the political magazine *India Today*, but she would never consider working for *Cosmopolitan* as it would be ‘completely beneath my dignity’ (line 175). As with Alice, she is keen to position herself as intelligent and educated, and as someone who indulges in the reading of women’s magazines but is under no illusions as to their intellectual worth.

While many of my informants tend to read magazines when they are travelling, Meera is unique in saying that she would be ashamed to be seen reading a women’s magazine in public, although in line 206 she describes her attitude as ‘ridiculous’ and ‘bizarre’. Her comments could be interpreted as an objective acknowledgement and evaluation of the irrational discrepancy between her attitudes and behaviour. However, when I ask her if she would read magazines on public transport, she reiterates her original claim that she would not, partly because she would be ‘ashamed to be caught with one of them’ (line 209). Given this reprise of her original proposition, Meera’s description of her opinion as ‘ridiculous’ can be seen as a show concession (as used by Alice, and discussed above): Meera is

drawing attention her concession that her attitude could be considered 'ridiculous' and 'bizarre', but is not actually conceding or altering her opinion in any way. Furthermore, although she concedes that she might be perceived as 'bizarre', she does not recognise the possibility that she might be thought a snob. In this way she could be attempting to construct her attitude as an idiosyncratic aspect of her personality, rather than anything to do with snobbery and class.

When asked why she would be ashamed to read women's magazines in public, Meera refers to her family, and that while they have subscriptions to various political magazines, they would never consider subscribing to a women's magazine (lines 300-304). This reference to her family background could be taken as an indirect reference to class, and a desire to conform to middle class standards for what is appropriate reading material. It is particularly interesting that all the magazines she refers to are published in English, as in India there is a strong link between class and access to education, and especially access to English. Although in line 305 she argues that this is not because of snobbery, the pause before she says this, and the fact that she herself introduces the idea into the conversation suggests that she has at the very least considered snobbery as a possible interpretation of her comments, but does not want to position herself in that way. The notion of being a snob is clearly linked to social class, so by rejecting the idea of snobbery Meera is again acknowledging that her attitudes and behaviour could be linked to social class, but at the same time she is trying to avoid positioning herself within a class-based discourse.

In lines 313-316 she goes on to reason that she does not like to be seen in public with women's magazines because of the way her eyes 'goggle' when she's reading them. These comments could be connected to Alice's description in lines 172-173 of readers' amazement at what they read in the magazines. Perhaps Meera is concerned that if she were seen 'goggling' at a magazine that observers would perceive her as gullible and inexperienced. If we look back to her comments in lines 171-179, where she characterises journalists who write for women's magazines as vacuous, then it seems possible that she is worried that other people might consider her vacuous for reading them.

Again in Meera's talk we see the notion of a reading hierarchy, with political magazines constructed as somehow more authentic reading material than women's magazines. Meera places women's magazines on a par with pulp fiction, and argues that they are not really deserving of her attention; if she feels she can concentrate she would rather read a 'good book' or do something else (lines 26-27). She goes even further by suggesting in line 36 that she would not classify women's magazines as entertainment as entertainment should be 'more serious', like a good book or film. These ideas plug into largely middle class notions about the value of different media. Most of my middle class informants rate magazines very poorly, both as sources of information and as sources of entertainment. Through their talk they distance themselves from the target readership, and align themselves instead with other media such as newspapers and political magazines (as Meera does), which are seen as better markers of their cultural competence. Furthermore, if we take O'Hagan's article in *The Observer* (discussed above) as an example, broadsheet (or former broadsheet) newspapers refer to, discuss and evaluate both mainstream and highbrow art and culture in their supplements and review sections. Women's magazines, by contrast, do feature reviews of music and books, but these tend to focus on popular chart music and books that might be described as 'chicklit' or 'airport novels' (Meera herself refers to the latter category in lines 183-186), equating them with women's magazines). As such there is even more indirect indexing of cultural capital involved in expressing preference for newspapers above magazines.

3.4 OTHER WAYS OF 'TALKING YOURSELF OUT'

Although the tendency to draw on notions of intelligence and cultural capital when distancing oneself from the magazines was particularly noticeable in my data, my informants also talked themselves out in other ways, often on the basis of age. To my surprise, however, ethnicity was rarely mentioned or invoked as a reason why women did not identify with the magazines or the target readership. Despite the success of black models such as Naomi Campbell, it is still unusual to see women from ethnic minorities pictured in mainstream British women's magazines. Because of this, I had expected that the Asian women I interviewed might raise ethnicity as a reason why they do not identify with the target reader. I was surprised to find that this was not the case: informants tended not to discuss ethnicity unless I explicitly asked them about it.

In the following extract, Shazia invokes factors such as sexuality, age and socio-economic status in order to explain why she, as well as other women, are not interested in, or are excluded from the target readership of most women's magazines. Unlike the previous extracts in this chapter, Shazia is not concerned here with asserting her cultural capital, and her talk is not designed to defend or justify an interest in lowbrow popular culture.

Extract 3.3: Shazia

(36, Asian, working class, lesbian, community education worker)

- 6 S: (inaudible) erm yeah – so you know – sometimes I'll pick up
7 Cosmopolitan or – Marie Claire – quickly flick through it read =
- 8 D: | right | uhuh | mhmm
- 9 S: = the horoscope and put it back – I don't **buy** them – just cos =
- 10 D: | right | no ok
- 11 S: = they're so expensive! (laughter) for what you **get** anyway – I
12 mean they're too expensive! – you know they're just full of [.] I =
- 13 D: | yeah – yeah
- 14 S: = don't know I mean it's just like you know images of women that –
15 I think are totally unattainable for – you know someone =
- 16 D: | mmh
- 17 S: = that's – yeah – your – you know going to the supermarket an
18 ordinary person – yeah – I don't have the time [.] to kind of you =
- 19 D: | mmmh
- 20 S: = know – be [.] going on the high street shopping for – the **latest**
21 fashion – the latest lipstick – whatever – it's just not what I'm into
- 22 D: | mmh | yeah
23 mmh
- 24 S: and a lot of them [.] well **all** of them I would say actually are –
25 targeted a:t – heterosexual women
- 26 D: mmmh
- 27 S: so – yeah th- they don't – I you know I don't identify myself as **that**
- [...]

- 38 S: they're – it's it most of the ones that I look at – are very much kind
39 of **glamour** – type magazines u:hm [.] I don't know that there's =
- 40 D: [mmh
- 41 S: = an awful lot positive it's it's very much – aimed I think at the kind
42 of – a a professional career woman – um – not necessarily a:t –
- 43 D: [yeah
- 44 S: any other group of women – for instance single parents [.] u:hm =
- 45 D: [mmh
- 46 S: = you know [.] older women [.] sort of it it's very much I I / think it's
47 very much about glamour
- [...]
- 75 S: um [.] so I don't think it's as clear cut as – you know Cosmopolitan
76 have done brilliant things – they may have done brilliant things for =
- 77 D: [mmh
- 78 S: = **certain sectors** – of women – but – you know there's a huge =
- 79 D: [right yeah [mmh
- 80 S: = number of us – that aren't up there in – you know Wall Street or –
81 you know – in – that kind of **management** – kind of – um strata =
- 82 D: [mmh
- 83 S: = that you know can't actually achieve that it's totally unrealistic –
84 um – when you match that up with reality in our lives [.] yeah =
- 85 D: = so if you think that the – er sort of standards that they set are
86 unrealistic – do you think that they are [.] a – sort of – standards –
87 or – standards that women should be **trying** to achieve – even?
- 88 S: no – I don't actually – I I think that it – sometimes can set women up
89 to fail – um a:nd [.] you know trying to achieve [.] that kind of
90 standard in life **can mean** – you know there's the – you know the
91 process that you go through to do that can mean that – you lose out
92 on a lot of other stuff – because you're so focused on you know I
93 want this career I want to earn – x amount of money or whatever [.]
94 I question the process that women have to go through to achieve
95 that
- 96 D: mmh
- 97 S: um – and it's also kind of [.] I don't know – I think it's a bit **arrogant**

- 98 to – assume that all women want that – or that that is the only way =
- 99 D: | mmh
- 100 S: = to *live* or that is the only way to be – um – they very rarely talk
 101 about – other aspects of being – you know be that – spiritual um [.]
 102 you know religious whatever cultural – ways of doing things that =
- 103 D: | mmh
- 104 S: = are just more imp- – as as important I guess – to incorporate into
 105 your life as – you know having a brilliant sex life or whatever else =

Shazia is a British Asian from (what she describes as) a working class Pakistani family. She is also a lesbian and a single mother. Therefore she differs in many respects from the white, heterosexual, middle class women usually seen in glossy women's magazines. In this extract she draws on these various elements of her identity in accounting for why she does not read the magazines and why she feels they are not relevant to her.

In the turn prior to the beginning of this extract Shazia explained that she does not read as many women's magazines as she used to, and in this extract we see her offering an account of why she never buys, and hardly reads, the magazines. In lines 6-9 she says that she just flicks through them in the shops but does not actually buy them. Initially, in lines 9-12 she suggests that this is 'just cos they're so expensive', with 'just' implying that this is the only reason why she does not buy the magazines. However, she then self-repairs, qualifying her previous statement by suggesting that they are too expensive 'for what you *get* anyway'. The emphasis on 'get' draws attention to her shifting her talk away from the issue of cost, and moving on to comment overtly on the content of the magazines. This is what she does in line 12, as she begins to criticise the discourses of femininity promoted in the magazines.

In the rest of this extract Shazia takes an overtly critical stance towards women's magazines, questioning the ways in which they represent women, and thereby positioning herself as someone who refrains from buying magazines for ideological, rather than economic, reasons. It might seem odd, then, that the first reason Shazia gives for not buying the magazines is cost. It could be, particularly at this early stage of the interview when she might not have been feeling relaxed or comfortable

in the interview context, that she felt hesitant about positioning herself in a way that might be seen as feminist. In lines 12-14, she downplays the illocutionary force of her comments about the magazines' representation of women with hedges and epistemic modals, 'I don't know I mean it's just like you know', which demonstrates that she is hesitant, and reluctant to state her opinion too forcefully. In lines 12-17 Shazia uses the discourse marker 'you know' four times. Although discourse markers like 'you know' are notoriously polyfunctional (see Holmes (1984) for a discussion of the principal functions of 'you know'), here it seems that Shazia's repeated use of 'you know' functions as an iterated appeal to common ground and shared knowledge.

Only five of my informants explicitly raised the subject of feminism and feminist politics, although others discussed what could be described as feminist issues without ever mentioning the words 'feminist' or 'feminism'. Shazia is one of these five women, and later in the interview she shows an explicit orientation to the subject of feminism, talking about changes in the feminist movement over the last twenty years. This would suggest that at the beginning of the interview she was trying to assess what my feelings were, and was hesitant because she was attending to the possibility that I might disagree or judge her negatively. Indeed, when considering how to present my research to informants I was reluctant to identify myself as a feminist researcher, wary that this might put some women on guard and that they might feel that I would be critical of their interest in women's magazines.

The relationship between being a feminist and reading women's magazines is a complex one, as in many ways the two can be considered incompatible. Feminism is about questioning and challenging the established andocentric, patriarchal, heterosexist social order, whereas women's magazines are implicated in perpetuating much of that order. In Bourdieuan terms, feminism seeks to radically change what constitutes social and cultural capital, raising awareness of aspects of culture and society which have previously been devalued. Shazia herself rarely reads women's magazines, but that is not to say that being a feminist and being a women's magazine reader are mutually exclusive. Women who consider themselves feminists can and do read women's magazines, taking pleasure from them, while at the same time finding them problematic or frustrating. I say this primarily from personal experience, but women's magazines and their relationship

with feminism are also frequently discussed in articles, reviews, and letters found on the *fword* website (www.thefword.org.uk), a site dedicated to contemporary UK feminism. For example, Catherine Redfern, editor and founder of the website, writes:

Don't get me wrong. I love magazines. I've been addicted to them since my teenage years. There's something about a woman's magazine's superficiality that I often enjoy. But oh boy, they are just so, so frustratingly predictable (Redfern, 2001).

Looking at what contributors to *thefword* have to say about women's magazines, we can see that there are many similarities between the views of these (non-academic) feminists, and those of my informants who did not identify themselves as feminists. However, we can also see that it can be difficult to reconcile interest in and enjoyment of the magazines with one's feminist beliefs.

Another reason why Shazia and my other informants might hesitate to identify themselves as feminists, is the way that 'feminism' is often treated as something of a dirty word in certain branches of the media and popular discourse. Ideas about what feminism involves are also often tied up with beliefs about political correctness, so that feminism is often blamed for instances of what is described as 'political correctness gone mad' (how the term 'politically correct' is used and interpreted, and its relationship with feminism, is a complex and fascinating question, but not one which I have the space to discuss in this thesis). For example, recent press coverage of research which claimed that young women no longer want to 'have it all', but would rather stay at home and bring up their children, often implied (or stated directly) that feminism was to blame for encouraging women to believe in the myth of the 'superwoman'. One commentator, Jenny Rees from the *Western Mail*, introduced an article on this research by stating:

After the feminist movement told women that they could climb the career ladder, raise a happy family and still have time for themselves, new research reveals that today's women are tired of aspiring to a depressing dream (Rees, 2005).

Although Shazia does not explicitly invoke feminism in this particular extract, her comments in lines 12-18 suggest that she is drawing on discourses of feminism. In these lines Shazia criticises the magazines for containing 'images of women that I think are totally unattainable [...] for an ordinary person'. In the earlier extracts in

this chapter we saw women taking a critical stance towards the magazines by invoking notions of taste and drawing on a discourse of women's magazines as trashy and lowbrow. Here, on the other hand, Shazia draws on a more politically motivated discourse, judging the magazines not in terms of aesthetic or cultural value, but in terms of ideology and the way they represent women. It is also interesting to note that Shazia's argument that women's magazines set unattainable standards for women, is very similar to Jenny Rees' comments above, only the latter implies that the feminist movement is responsible for encouraging women to aspire to 'a depressing dream'. In other words, both Shazia and Jenny Rees agree that it is bad for women to have unattainable goals held up to them as models, but they disagree about where the model is coming from.

When other informants talked about the possibility that women's magazines could have a negative effect on their readers, they tended to use a discourse of individualism (at least in regards to themselves), foregrounding the differences between themselves and other women. It was common for them to suggest that although women's (and teenage girls') magazines could be a negative influence on the way other women perceive themselves, they as individuals were too old, too intelligent, or too self-confident to be affected in such a way. Shazia, however, uses a more inclusive discourse, drawing on her group identity as 'an ordinary person'. We can assume that she includes herself in this category given the context, which is that she is accounting for her own attitude towards buying women's magazines.

Similarly, in lines 75-95 Shazia invokes her membership of a wider group of women when responding to a question about whether women's magazines have achieved anything positive for women. In lines 83-84, she reiterates her argument that women's magazines portray a certain lifestyle which a lot of women 'can't actually achieve', and which is 'totally unrealistic'. Shazia seems to be invoking the category of 'ordinary people' that she first raised in line 18 (where she describes the magazines as presenting images of women that are unattainable for 'an ordinary person'), and constructing a distinction between this group of women, to which she belongs, and high-earning career women. She does this in lines 76-81 when she states that magazines like *Cosmopolitan* 'may have done brilliant things for **certain sectors** – of women – but – you know there's a huge number of us – that aren't up there in – you know Wall Street'. The emphatic stress on 'certain sectors' draws

attention to her point that magazines do not address the needs or desires of all women, but only specific groups of women. She then makes clear that the women who are excluded constitute a large(r) group by describing them as 'a huge number of us', and explicitly includes herself in this group through her use of the inclusive pronoun 'us'. Then, in line 84, she contends that the aspirational images presented in the magazines are unrealistic 'when you match that up with the reality in our lives', using 'our' to identify herself as one of these women. In this way Shazia constructs solidarity with, and allegiance to, the majority of women, or ordinary women. This is strikingly different from Alice's talk in extract 3.1, as Alice sought to distinguish herself and set herself apart from what she sees as the large group of women who take women's magazines too seriously.

In lines 75-81 Shazia constructs the main difference between these two groups of women as being principally a difference in class or socio-economic status. In lines 80-81 she describes the group of women who can, or do, live the *Cosmopolitan* lifestyle as being in 'Wall Street' or 'that kind of **management** – kind of –um strata', working in highly paid jobs in the (traditionally masculine) financial sector. For Shazia, the femininity and feminine lifestyle depicted in magazines like *Cosmopolitan* set standards which are unrealistic and unachievable for women like Shazia, and only attainable by a 'professional career woman' (line 42) who works in management or 'Wall Street'. In other words, *Cosmopolitan's* version of femininity is not universal, but is largely dependant on a woman's professional and financial status.

Many of the researchers whose analyses have focused on the magazines themselves have argued that women's magazines seek to present femininity as a unified and universal construct, with all women sharing the same experiences, needs and desires. However, although they position themselves as addressing all women, the representations of femininity found in the magazines show women as being predominantly heterosexual, middle class (in the glossy magazines) and white.

Eggin and Iedema (1997), for example, argue that '[t]he magazines excel at making the reader believe she is an autonomous individual, a voluntary member of a classless community of women (1997:169). On a similar note, Ellen McCracken

suggests that *Cosmopolitan* readers 'like to imagine that they participate in the utopian, imaginary world of the magazine' (1993: 7). However, it should be noted that these claims were made purely on the basis of the writers' textual analyses of the magazines themselves, and not through any engagement with actual readers. Although the magazines may indeed be designed to have such an effect, one cannot assume that readers will position themselves in this way, and the above comments were made purely on the basis of the magazine texts alone.

Shazia clearly interprets magazines like *Cosmopolitan* as presenting an affluent, middle class version of femininity which bears no relation to her own experiences of being a woman, nor does it relate to the experiences of many others like her. McCracken (1993) argues that readers know that the world of *Cosmopolitan* is imaginary, but that they aspire to, or enjoy the temporary feeling that they live in such a world. Shazia, however, contends not only that she does not belong to the world of the magazines, but that it is neither healthy nor desirable to aspire to live that way. In line 88 she suggests that the magazines 'sometimes can set women up to fail'. She continues in lines 89-96 to suggest that it is not a positive thing for women to aspire to reach that 'Wall Street' level of socio-economic status because in doing so 'you lose out on lots of other stuff'. Although she does not specify exactly what that 'stuff' is, 'stuff' (or expressions such as 'and stuff like that') is used to imply the existence of shared knowledge between interlocutors, which the hearer will draw on in order to fill out the meaning (see Overstreet, 1997, 1999).

As in lines 12-18 when Shazia first introduced the idea of magazines setting unattainable standards for women, in lines 88-95 Shazia demonstrates a certain amount of hesitation in her talk. I would argue that this is because she is orienting to the topic as a sensitive one, and therefore tries to mitigate the illocutionary force of her assertions as she is uncertain about how I will respond (see Holmes, 1984, for a discussion of different ways of modifying illocutionary force, including hedges).

In lines 85-87 I ask her if she thinks women should be trying to achieve the type of lifestyle portrayed in the magazines. Shazia's response in line 88 is 'no – I don't actually'. Within conversation analysis the notion of preference structure is used to refer to the customary ordering of conversational interaction (see Pomerantz, 1984), according to which some responses are conventionally expected and therefore

linguistically unmarked ('preferred responses'), whereas 'dispreferred responses' are unexpected and linguistically marked (e.g. by delays, disfluencies and accounts). Shazia's response in line 88 is marked by some of the features characteristic of a dispreferred response, suggesting that she understands her response to be a disagreement or unexpected answer. Dispreferred responses are often marked by delays, a preface of some sort such as a token agreement or a hedge, or an account (Pomerantz, 1984; Levinson, 1983). In this case, although there is no pause or preface before Shazia says 'no', a bald 'no' is not enough, and she qualifies her response by saying 'I don't actually'. 'Actually' indicates that the proposition it modifies may not be what the hearer was expecting (Clift, 2001), and suggests here that Shazia perceives her answer as possibly being unexpected or even controversial and likely to be questioned. She then goes on to offer an account for why she feels this way, but frames it very much as a statement of personal opinion, saying 'I think' and 'I question', rather than presenting her account as a statement of fact. She is also careful to soften the force of her proposition by saying that aspiring to the standards of the magazines 'can mean' that women suffer in other aspects of their lives. The emphatic stress on 'can mean' in line 90 shows that she is keen to stress that she is only stating a possible, rather than a probable or universal, outcome.

Elsewhere in the extract, and in the interview generally, Shazia also draws attention to the fact that non-white and lesbian women are also absent from the magazines, as well as older women and single mothers. In lines 38-47 she talks about the focus on glamour in the magazines, which she argues is aimed only at the 'professional career woman'. She goes on to say that the magazines are 'not necessarily [aimed] at: any other group of women – for instance single parents [...] u:hm you know [...] older women'. She also suggests that all women's magazines are aimed at heterosexual women (lines 24-25), and states that 'I you know I don't identify myself as *that*' (line 26). Shazia's choice of wording is noteworthy, as she simply states that she does not see herself as being heterosexual, rather than saying that she does identify herself as a lesbian. At a later stage in the interview, however, when asked if she would ever read advice pages in a magazine, she explicitly states that they are not relevant to her because 'their readership is straight' (line 184), and lesbian women would not write in with their problems. Later in the interview, Shazia also mentions that although she had read the lesbian magazine *Diva* in the past, it

was not particularly relevant to her either because she felt it was aimed at white lesbians. Based on her experience, Shazia no longer expects that mainstream media will cater to her concerns and interests. When I asked her if she felt excluded from women's magazines, she replied 'I feel excluded in *lots* of different ways – so it's just – another dimension of exclusion – um [...] er I think maybe I've got to a point in my life where I expect that' (lines 135-139).

Here again we see that although women's magazines may present their content as being relevant to all women, readers do not always accept this. On the contrary, Shazia implies that the majority of women are excluded from the target readership of the magazines. However, Shazia was unusual amongst my informants in the way she frames her critique of the magazines. Most of the other women I interviewed seemed prepared to more or less unquestioningly buy into ideas about feminine appearance and heterosexual relationships (their responses are examined in the next chapter). This may be because Shazia's own experiences of being a woman differ in many ways from the magazines' construction of femininity. As a result it might be easier for her to take a critical stance and question naturalised, 'common sense' ideas about gender, as these ideas do not fit easily with her own experience. Women with a greater correspondence to the target reader, however, might be more likely to accept the magazines' discourses as common sense. A notable example of this in my data is the way in which heterosexual women did not comment on the issue of sexuality at all (I return to this issue in the next chapter).

Dominant or hegemonic discourses of femininity, which circulate in women's magazines and other forms of popular culture, provide women with resources to draw on in the linguistic or other construction of their femininity, both reflecting and reproducing societal gender norms. Although individuals do not passively and unquestioningly take up these discourses, one's ability to negotiate and articulate alternative ways of being a woman can be difficult without access to and knowledge of alternative discourses. Shazia works in community education and deals with working class women and the issues facing them on a daily basis. Through her work and her own interests and experiences, Shazia is familiar with discourses of feminism and political activism, which allow her to understand and articulate her identity in a different way.

3.5 WHAT MAKES READING MAGAZINES ENJOYABLE?

Myra Macdonald, in her book about representations of femininity in the popular media, asks a pertinent question:

Why do out-of-date myths of femininity still continue to exert a magnetic pull over us, and why is it easier to criticize those media that target us than to explain their fascination? (Macdonald, 1995: 11).

In the next sections of this chapter I address the latter part of this question, looking at what women enjoy about reading women's magazines. Although Macdonald was talking particularly about feminist research on gendered genres of popular media, the same could also be said of consumers. My data shows that women find it relatively easy to articulate their criticisms of the magazines, but tend to struggle when asked to explain why they continue to read them and what it is that they like about them.

In the following sections I consider some of the previous research on other popular genres targeted at, and primarily consumed by women, such as soap operas and romance novels. I use this as a counter-point to my discussion of how my informants talk about why they like reading women's magazines. Much of this earlier work shows that the act of reading/watching, and the role this activity fills in the context of their daily lives, is as, if not more important to women than any specific content or stylistic features of the genres they consume. As we will see, this was also the case with many of the magazine readers interviewed in this study.

3.5.1 Magazines as 'comfort food': a guilty pleasure

In their study of women's magazines and their readers, Ballaster *et al.* (1991) acknowledge that they are not just researchers but also consumers of women's magazines. They recognise that they themselves gain pleasure from reading the magazines, but suggest that:

[T]his pleasure is by no means pure, unambiguous or unproblematic. The magazine is for us both an object of academic interest and an object of consumption. Reading women's magazines can have exactly the same kind of effect as eating two or more bars of chocolate – the original

craving was real but seems in the end to have been for the wrong thing (1991: 1).

What Ballaster *et al.* seem to be suggesting by drawing this comparison between women's magazines and chocolate, is that although women's magazines are superficially appealing, they may not be as satisfying as they at first appear, and ultimately might even be bad for you. This chocolate analogy is also used several times by Janice Winship in her seminal study, *Inside Women's Magazines* (1987). Winship positions herself as an avid reader of women's magazines, and describes the pleasure she gets from reading them as a kind of 'mental chocolate'.

In the following extract Fiona also associates reading magazines with eating chocolate. She not only suggests that they have a similar effect on her, and satisfy the same desires, but she also tends to consume them at the same time.

Extract 3.4: Fiona

(35, white, heterosexual, working class, clerical & admin. work)

586 F: | and e:rm – like I see them – they're a bit like comfort food to
587 me like for instance if I'm **miserable** – I'll go to the shop – and get
588 like ten packets of crisps three bars of chocolate – a magnum –
589 and a National Enquirer – you know – and that's gr- you know e-
590 there's junk food and read **gossip** – you know and I love the =

591 D: | mmh

592 F: = most the more gossip the better – about celebrities' lives – e:rm
593 – so: and then in fact sometimes with those magazines I'll try and
594 throw them away as quickly as possible – I'll read them and throw
595 them away

Firstly, it should be noted that in this extract Fiona is talking specifically about magazines which focus on celebrity gossip, rather than glossy magazines like *Elle* or *Marie Claire*. Earlier in the interview Fiona said that she was 'fed up' with glossy magazines, criticising their consumerist focus on expensive clothes, cosmetic products and 'nonsense accessories'. She also describes them as being 'belittling' to women. She does, however, enjoy reading gossip magazines, which she described at the beginning of the interview as 'the most **cheapest sleaziest** gossip magazines', and she buys *Now*, *Heat* and *National Enquirer* on a regular basis.

In line 586 Fiona explicitly compares the gossip magazines she reads with 'comfort food', and then with 'junk food' in line 590, and goes on to explain that she likes to consume both of these things when she is feeling miserable. In line 588-589 she then lists the sort of thing she would buy if she was feeling bad, 'ten packets of crisps three bars of chocolate – a magnum – and a National Enquirer'. The sheer volume of 'junk food' that she lists invokes notions of excess and indulgence or over-indulgence. In line 592 she adds 'the more gossip the better', which suggests an over-indulgence in gossip as well as junk food.

By associating gossip magazines with junk food, Fiona is orienting to notions that these magazines are 'bad' for you in some way, and therefore that reading them is a kind of indulgence, and not something that one ought to do, or at least not on a regular basis. Equating the magazines with 'junk food' also taps into the same discourse used by my informants in section 3.2 above, describing women's magazines as 'trashy' and 'rubbish'.

In lines 593-595 Fiona goes on to say that she will 'try and throw them away as quickly as possible – I'll read them and throw them away', which suggests that she regards the magazines as a highly disposable 'quick fix' rather than things to be kept and valued. Here Fiona is contrasting herself with her flatmate Nuria, who was interviewed at the same time. Earlier in the interview, Nuria had mentioned that she holds on to her glossy magazines for years and has boxes full of them at her home in Spain.

It seems that the magazines' 'trashiness' is in part what makes them appealing to Fiona. Like junk food, she sees the magazines as being cheap, trashy and even unhealthy, but this is why reading them feels like a treat or indulgence. This is clear from the way she compares the magazines not just to 'junk food', but also to 'comfort food', because although they might be bad for her, they are also comforting, and can help to cheer her up when she is feeling miserable.

3.5.2 Magazines as escape

In her study of female readers of romance novels, Janice Radway (1987) explored not only *why* her informants read romance novels, but also *when* and *how* they read them. In this influential and oft-cited example of audience research, Radway was

concerned with the domestic context of cultural consumption, and what this reveals about the politics and power struggles of everyday family life. When embarking on the research, Radway was working with the assumption that the appeal and pleasure of romance reading was to be found within the texts themselves. Accordingly, when conducting interviews she was initially concerned with finding out which aspects of the texts, such as characterisation or plot devices, appealed to her informants the most. However, she soon found that for her informants, it was the act of reading itself that was meaningful and gave them the most pleasure. Radway found that notions of 'relaxation' and 'escape' were two of the main themes animating these women's discourse about why they enjoy reading romance novels. Radway notes that:

Because the women always responded to my query about their reasons for reading with comments about the pleasures of the act itself rather than about their liking for the particulars of the romantic plot, I soon realized I would have to give up my obsession with textual features and narrative details if I wanted to understand their view of romance reading. Once I recognized this it became clear that romance reading was important to the Smithton women first because the simple event of picking up a book enabled them to deal with the particular pressures and tensions encountered in their daily round of activities. Although I learned later that certain aspects of the romance's story do help to make this event especially meaningful, the early interviews were interesting because they focused so resolutely on the significance of the *act of romance reading* rather than on the meaning of the romance (Radway, 1987: 86, emphasis in the original).

When she began interviewing readers, Radway found that the act of reading was pleasurable to them principally because it functioned as a means of escape from their duties and obligations in the home, and offered a temporary respite from their roles as wives and mothers. For most of Radway's informants, the home was primarily a site of labour, not leisure, and reading romance novels was one of the few activities which allowed them to relax and focus on themselves, rather than attending to the needs and wants of their husbands and children:

These women believe romance reading enables them to relieve tensions, to diffuse resentment, and to indulge in fantasy that provides them with good feelings that seem to endure after they return to their roles as wives and mothers. Romance fiction, as they experience it, is, therefore, compensatory literature. It supplies them with an important emotional release that is proscribed in daily life because the social role with which they identify themselves leaves little room for guiltless, self-interested pursuit of individual pleasure (Radway, 1987: 95).

Seiter *et al.* (1996), in their study of (both male and female, but primarily female) soap opera viewers in the U.S., looked at how soap opera viewing fitted into the everyday lives of women working in the home. They found that, like romance novels for Radway's informants, the women they interviewed enjoyed watching soap operas because it provided them with a rare opportunity to take a break from housework and take time for themselves.

Seiter *et al.* (1996) found that women's patterns of soap opera viewing were dependent on their domestic schedule. Those women who carried out the housework according to a relatively fixed schedule were able to organise their work around the television. By incorporating their leisure time into their daily routine these women were able to sit down and give their undivided attention to the television. On the other hand, those women who did not keep to a fixed routine (generally because they had young children to attend to) found it harder to balance their work and leisure time. As a result they would often have to watch the soap operas whilst attending to chores such as cooking or ironing, sometimes only being able to listen to the programme while doing something else.

Women from the former group were more likely to see soap operas as a reward and a well-deserved break. They did not feel guilty about taking time off from household chores, would expect to be left alone by their husbands and children while watching, and might even tell friends and family not to call them while the show was on. Women from the latter group, on the other hand, were more likely to feel guilty that time spent watching soap operas is time they could (and should) spend working.

Ann Gray's (1996) British study of the use of video recorders and television in the home came up with similar findings. Gray found that most of her informants felt guilty about watching television during the day, some even using a discourse of addiction, with daytime television as a drug which consumes them and prevents them from fulfilling their domestic duties. Gray suggests that by using television as a reward for the completion of housework '[t]his assuages the guilt to a certain extent and the pleasure afforded by this particular viewing context seems to go far beyond the pleasures of the text itself. What it represents is a breathing space when the busy mother can resist the demands of her children and domestic labour for a brief period of time' (Gray, 1996: 125).

Unlike the informants in these studies, the majority of my informants were in paid employment, and those that were not were either students or retired. I also found that my informants did not express feelings of guilt about reading magazines when they ought to be doing housework or looking after their families. It is possible that this difference occurs because for women in paid employment, the demarcation between work and leisure is much clearer, although I can only speculate as this is not an issue which arises in my data.

Joke Hermes' (1995) study of women's magazine readers was also concerned with the context of everyday media use, and how the meaning of popular culture is dependent on how it is consumed and the role it occupies in its consumers' lives. Hermes found that 'relaxation' and the 'easilyputdownable' nature of the magazines formed the two main interpretative repertoires (see section 2.3.6 for further discussion of interpretative repertoires) used by her informants when describing and accounting for their reading of women's magazines.

Describing the different contexts in which women read magazines, Janice Winship writes:

We escape with them in nervous moments at the doctor's or during tedious commuting hours. We read them as relaxation at the end of a long day when the children have at last been put to bed, or to brighten up the odd coffee break and lunch hour when life is getting a bit tough, or simply dreary (1987: 52).

In the above quotation Winship uses the inclusive 'we', which emphasises that she is not simply reporting these patterns as a researcher, but that she is drawing on her own experience as a magazine reader. Her words describe the different daily contexts in which my informants also said they read magazines, and invoke notions of relaxation and escape which are extremely common, not only in my data, but also in that of Joke Hermes.

Similarly, many of my informants, when asked why they read women's magazines and what they like about them, commented on the lack of time and effort required to read the magazines. They also talked about the escapist qualities of the magazines, allowing the reader to forget about work or family problems. The

extracts below are typical of the sort of comments made by my informants when discussing why they read women's magazines, and the recurring discourses of 'relaxation' and 'escape' echo the findings of Radway and Hermes.

Extract 3.5: Sue

(38, white, heterosexual, middle class)

139 S: - one of the reasons I would read it would be to disengage – or just
140 relax or turn off from the world – it's almost like a form of escapism –
141 er – you know – a beautiful world presented to you in all it's shining
142 glory

[...]

155 S: em [...] I think again it's part of the – escapism – it comes in with the
156 whole idea of the Big Brother – the voyeurism into other people's
157 lives – I suppose distracting you from maybe the – the troubles of
158 the things you have to deal with of your own [...] em – it's easy as
159 well – it doesn't engage you at a serious level –or – most commonly
160 it doesn't and it doesn't make you think – em [...] I don't know – it's
161 like candy floss I suppose (laughter)

The discourses of 'relaxation' and 'escape' which were so prevalent in the talk of Radway's romance readers are explicitly invoked by Sue in the above extract, as can be seen from Sue's explicit use of the words 'relax', 'disengage' and 'escapism'. In lines 139-140 she says that one of the reasons she reads women's magazines is 'to disengage – or just relax and turn off from the world'. She had also made a similar remark earlier in the interview, stating that 'I associate taking a magazine with switching off from the day and the world around me because it's complete escapism'. Like Radway's romance readers, when asked why she reads magazines, Sue refers to the pleasure of the act of reading, rather than to any specific features of the magazines' contents. Sue's repeated use of expressions such as 'switching off', 'turn off', and 'disengage' invokes notions, not simply of relaxation, but of in some sense removing oneself from reality and everyday life. In this way, Sue implies that the world of women's magazines is not representative of 'real' life, but rather represents some kind of fantasy which enables her to forget the mundane and everyday. For Sue, then, this removal from reality is a positive thing, and part of what makes the magazines enjoyable. This is not true for all women, however, as can be seen from Shazia's comments above, in which she sees the magazines' lack of realism as having a negative effect on readers.

Sue explicitly orients to this idea of women's magazines as fantasy in line 141 when she describes them as offering 'a beautiful world presented to you in all its shining glory'. What she seems to be suggesting is that the magazines' detachment from the reality of most women's lives, with their glossy images of beautiful women and designer fashion, is an important part of what makes reading the magazines pleasurable.

Another aspect of the magazines' appeal, related to the idea of escapism, appears in lines 156-158. This is what Sue describes as 'the voyeurism into other people's lives - I suppose distracting you from maybe the - the troubles of the things you have to deal with of your own'. It is not clear whether she is talking about the lives of celebrities or the lives of 'real' people, but again Sue enjoys these features because they allow her to momentarily stop thinking about her own life and her own problems.

In lines 158-161 Sue adds that the magazines are also enjoyable because they are 'easy' and unchallenging. She suggests that they '[don't] engage you at a serious level [...] and it doesn't make you think', but in this context this comment is not a criticism, because a lack of engagement or thought is what Sue needs in order to 'switch off'. Comments of this type, describing the magazines as enjoyable because they are 'easy' and 'light reading' were extremely common amongst all my informants, as we will see later on in this chapter.

In line 161 Sue concludes by suggesting that women's magazines are 'like candy floss I suppose'. This analogy is interesting because it suggests something light, fluffy and without substance. Candy floss is generally regarded as a treat for children, and is extremely sweet (and a little sickly), and very bad for your health. In this sense the analogy echoes the comments of Ballaster et al. (1991) quoted above, as well as those of Fiona in extract 3.4, comparing reading a women's magazine with eating several bars of chocolate; the implication being that although it might be pleasurable at first, ultimately there is little value to it.

In the next extract Kate talks about why she enjoys reading the 'true life dramas' which are especially common in the cheaper weekly magazines. In the previous extract Sue claimed that she enjoys voyeuristic stories because they take her mind

of her own problems. Kate is a bit more blunt, suggesting that reading about the misfortunes of other women makes her feel better about her own life.

Extract 3.6: Kate

(25, white, middle class, heterosexual, EFL teacher)

85 K: I think it cheers you up – I mean – it’s like with the Bella and the
86 Now – not the Now but the Bella and the Chat – they’ve always got
87 articles about – em – people whose lives are horrific – and – and
88 pictures of their horrible lives and things – and you read them and
89 you feel – you feel better – (laughter) because you think at least – at
90 least that’s not me (more laughter) – basically – which isn’t very *nice*
91 but I think – I reckon that’s why a lot of people read them

In the above extract Kate is talking about the ‘true life drama’ or ‘triumph over tragedy’ stories which are a common feature in the more downmarket weekly magazines (Kate specifically mentions *Bella* and *Chat*). These stories, although presented as heartwarming and hope-giving examples of how ‘real’ women overcome adversity, tend to be somewhat lurid and voyeuristic, and it is this latter aspect which Kate seems to enjoy. Some examples of this type of story include ‘They Fooled Me: My Husband’s Strumpet Posed as his Daughter’ (*Take A Break*, March 24th 2005), or ‘How Do I Tell My Son I’ve Hacked Your Evil Dad’s Head Off?’ (*Chat*, April 2005).

For Kate, these stories about ‘people whose lives are horrific’ (line 87), accompanied by pictures of ‘their horrible lives and things’ (line 88), do not encourage her to empathise with the plight of other women. Rather, they make her feel better about her own life because she can think ‘at least that’s not me’ (line 90). Kate goes on in line 90 to acknowledge that her attitude ‘isn’t very *nice*’, but suggests that a lot of people probably read them in the same way. As we have seen in the previous extracts, many women tend to construct their readings and interpretations as a product of their own individual opinions. It is interesting to note here that Kate describes her reading as one which would apply to most readers. This can be seen as an attempted justification for her thinking unpleasant or uncharitable thoughts about other women; it might not be nice, but it is what most people think.

We saw previously that one of the things Sue values in the magazines is the fact that they are easy, unchallenging reading. Many of my informants seem to feel the

same way, as can be seen in the two extracts which follow. This type of talk suggests that what women value in the magazines is that they do not require readers to think, whether it be about the magazines' content or about their job or family or anything else that might be worrying them. This point is discussed in more detail by Maggie in extract 3.7 below.

Extract 3.7: Maggie

(38, white, heterosexual, middle class, director of studies at a language school)

- 137 D: mmh [...] so would you **want** a magazine to have – erm – more
138 coverage on sort of political things or – or issues ?
- 139 M: for me no – for me that's not really the purpose of a magazine – I
140 think I go to the newspapers for that [...] or – pick up maybe a copy of
141 - em – The Economist or Newsweek at work – cos we have these
142 floating around – or – The Week magazine – em – but for me – a
143 sort of eh women's magazine – I want it to be light [...] I don't want to
144 be reading about heavy duty things that're going to make me feel
145 **crap** (laughs) I want to read something really **light**
- 146 D: so do you think in a way it's sort of a similar thing to – don't know – I
147 like to watch Neighbours for example
- 148 M: | mmh – mmh
- 149 D: as relaxation
- 150 M: | I think it's relaxation I think it's escapism – I think it's just [...] I
151 think it's just a way of kind of forgetting about things at work or
152 forgetting about whatever's in your head – and just escaping cos it
153 takes absolutely zip brain power – it's really **short** articles – really
154 sort of easily written and easy to read

Maggie's talk in this extract explicitly draws on the same discourses of 'relaxation' and 'escape' which we saw Sue using in extract 3.5. Like Sue, Maggie uses the magazines as 'a way of forgetting about things at work or forgetting whatever's in your head – and just escaping' (lines 151-152). Just as romance novels gave Radway's informants the opportunity to mentally disconnect from their domestic environment and the demands of family and housework, so it seems that my informants use magazines as a means of taking their minds off the stresses of work.

In terms of content, like many of my informants Maggie does not mention specific subjects which interest her. What is important is that in order to serve its function as escapism, women's magazines must stick to 'light' subjects. In this extract Maggie

differentiates between reading material which is 'light' and that which deals with 'heavy duty things' (line 144). It is worth noting that although many of my informants, like Maggie, talked about liking the light and fluffy content of women's magazines, they also often mentioned these factors as a reason for disliking or being dissatisfied with them. Some of my informants, including Maggie and Sue, singled out *Marie Claire* as a magazine which they particularly enjoyed because it was more serious and had features on global women's issues ('women under the Taliban' was the subject my informants usually offered as an example of this type of feature, even in the pilot study interviews conducted before September 11th and the ensuing invasion of Afghanistan). At other points in the interviews, however, the same women might suggest, like Maggie, that they would not want women's magazines to become more serious, with some informants suggesting that it was hypocritical to have sections on fashion and diets juxtaposed against articles on female circumcision. The reality of women's lives involves hard work and stress, whether they work outside or inside the home (or both). Women's magazines provide welcome relief from those stresses, and perhaps are enjoyable because they allow women to imagine that they have the time and money to spend on designer fashion and weekly manicures. However, popular discourse stereotypes glossy women's magazines and their readers as silly, vain and superficial, essentially as brainless bimbos.

The importance of the 'light' content is something which readers can articulate quite clearly and unambiguously. At the beginning of the extract I ask Maggie if she would like women's magazines to include coverage of political issues, or in other words to be more 'serious'. Her response in line 139 is a clear no, as can be seen from the way in which there are no hedges or false starts in her talk. However, note that twice in line 139 she qualifies her response with 'for me', thus framing her opinion as a matter of personal preference, rather than as a general statement about the purpose of women's magazines, or what readers in general look for in a magazine.

In lines 140-142 Maggie sets up a distinction between women's magazines on the one hand, and newspapers and magazines like *The Economist* on the other, with each serving a different purpose in her life. Maggie would not want to see politics in a women's magazine, not because she has no interest in politics, but because she

prefers to read about politics in a newspaper or *The Economist*. By positioning herself as a reader, not only of women's magazines, but also of newspapers and political magazines, Maggie is able to acknowledge that she enjoys the 'light and fluffy' nature of the women's magazines without having to define herself as a 'light and fluffy' woman.

In lines 142-145 Maggie goes on to explain what it is she looks for in a women's magazine as opposed to a newspaper, saying 'but for me – a sort of eh women's magazine – I want it to be light'. Again, as in line 139, Maggie uses 'for me' to position her argument as a purely personal one. This is reinforced by her repeated use of 'I' in 'I want' and 'I don't want'; she wants to make it clear that this is about her preferences as an individual, and not about all readers in general.

Finally, in lines 153-154 Maggie adds that the magazines allow her to relax and escape because the articles are short, easy to read, and require 'absolutely zip brain power'. Maggie is able to state that she enjoys not using her brain because she has already established in lines 140-142 that she can and does read more stimulating and challenging media at other times (just as Alice and Meera also asserted their cultural capital through references to higher forms of culture).

It is perhaps surprising, given that so many women value magazines as a form of escape from everyday life, that there is a tendency amongst my informants to construct their interest in escapism as a matter of personal preference. This may be because escape is a personal and solitary pursuit, and not something that is shared with others. As we will see in the next chapter, certain aspects of the magazines do seem to lend themselves to being read communally. Some informants, for example, mentioned reading problem pages aloud amongst friends, and discussing what the appropriate advice would be to particular problems. Thus, it seems that magazines are read in different ways and serve a variety of functions (a question I will return to later), besides that of private escape into a fantasy world.

3.5.3 Flicking, not reading

Typically, my informants talk about 'flicking through', or 'looking at' women's magazines, rather than reading them. Considering this, it is unsurprising that they

found it hard to recall specific articles or features that they had read, because the magazines are consumed in a somewhat distracted frame of mind.

In extract 3.8 below, Kate, like Maggie and Sue, talks about liking the magazines to be easy and unchallenging. She also talks about *how* she reads them: flicking through them without paying close attention rather than reading them closely from cover to cover.

Extract 3.8: Kate

(25, white, middle class, heterosexual, EFL teacher)

- 14 K: I see them as a bit of a treat so – if I was in the kind of – a really
15 girly frame of mind and I wanted something light to read I might – em
16 - but it's rare – maybe two or three times a year I'll buy one – if I'm
17 not travelling
- 18 D: so what do you like about them?
- 19 K: em – they're really light reading – there's no – no pressure
20 (laughing) – no difficult vocabulary – nothing really engaging so you
21 can kind of flick one open and shut it again

In line 14 Kate describes women's magazines as 'a bit of a treat', echoing Fiona's comparison of them with comfort food. She says that she reads the magazines when she is in 'a really girly frame of mind', orienting to a discourse of femininity according to which women are seen as being silly and unintelligent. However, she adds that this is a rare occurrence, and that aside from when she is travelling she only buys a magazine two or three times a year (we do not know how often Kate travels, and therefore buys magazines – it could be once a month!). 'Girliness' then, for Kate, is not an inherent and permanent state, but an aspect of femininity which women, or at least she herself, can inhabit on occasion when the mood takes her. It is something which can be enjoyed and appreciated when she chooses to slip into it, but is not the sum total of her identity as a woman. This is an interesting comment because it shows Kate (indirectly) orienting to notions of femininity as a social construct rather than an innate biological characteristic.

As in the two previous extracts, when asked what she likes about the magazines, Kate talks about them being light, easy and unengaging, rather than referring to any specific features of the content. In lines 20-21 Kate adds that the fact that the magazines are easy and unengaging means that 'you can kind of flick one open and

shut it again'. This reference to *how* Kate reads the magazines, flicking through them rather than reading them from cover to cover, reflects the role that the magazines seem to play in many women's lives (as discussed further below), and the context in which they are read.

At the beginning of this extract in lines 14 -17 Kate constructs her talk as being about her personal preferences and habits, as can be seen from the six examples of the first person pronoun 'I'. This personalisation does not occur, however, in lines 19-21, where Kate seems to be talking in more general terms, even though this is in response to the question 'what do you like about them?'. In line 20 she says 'you can kind of flick one open'. This inclusive use of 'you' implies that this is the way most women read women's magazines, and indeed most of my informants did refer to 'flicking through' the magazines or just looking at the pictures. So, although throughout this study I have chosen, for the sake of convenience, to gloss the activity as 'reading magazines', it seems clear that many women do not in fact read, the magazines, or at least not in the same way that they might read a novel (from front to back, reading the entire text).

Extract 3.9: Jackie

(24, white, heterosexual, middle class, accountant)

- 164 D: so – is the fact that you're in a rush – is that a big attraction about
165 magazines – that you can – you don't have to concentrate – you can
166 just pick them up when you've got five minutes?
- 167 J: yeah yeah – cos if I read them in my lunch hour then I don't have
168 enough time – I can just go flick flick flick – and that takes your mind
169 off – your work

As mentioned above, Joke Hermes (1995) found that one of the most common interpretative repertoires used by her informants was that of the 'easilyputdownable' nature of women's magazines. Being 'easilyputdownable' means that the magazines can be read in brief, snatched moments of free time. Because they do not require the levels of concentration needed to read a novel, it also means that they can be flicked through while in front of the television, or while engaging in, or listening to, a conversation. In this sense women's magazines are read in a similar context to the one in which some of Seiter *et al.*'s (1996) informants watched soap operas: with minimum levels of concentration, simultaneously with other activities, or in brief pauses from work.

However, because most of my informants work, or have worked, in paid employment outside the home, the division of their time between work and leisure seems to be more clearly demarcated. Writing about women and daytime television, Tania Modleski (1996) writes that a woman in the home:

[M]ust be prepared to drop what she is doing in order to cope with various conflicts and problems the moment they arise. Unlike most workers in the labour force, the housewife must beware of concentrating her energies exclusively on one task - otherwise the dinner could burn, or the baby could crack its skull' (Modleski, 1996: 107).

Modleski argues that the rhythms of a housewife's daily routine require that she is in a permanently 'distracted or distractable frame of mind' (1996: 110) because of the need to 'multitask' in attending to the multiple and conflicting needs of home and family, and that the rhythms of daytime television are designed to fit with and reflect these patterns.

Hermes (1995) found that many of her informants read women's magazines in front of the television, particularly if their partners were watching sport, or if the television was just on to provide background noise. Hermes describes women's magazines as 'typically second choice reading matter that adapts to a noisy background, to other obligations. They are read more for their adaptability than for their content' (Hermes, 1995: 34). Like daytime television, women's magazines do not require close attention and concentration, and so they are ideally suited for those in a distracted frame of mind or with little time to spare. Unlike television however, magazines are portable, which means they can be read while travelling or taken to work. Hermes notes that many of her informants would read magazines during breaks at work, the situation which is described by Jackie.

One thing which my informants do not discuss in the above extracts, presumably because they take it to be self-evident, is *why* the magazines do not require much attention. They do, after all, contain text as well as images, although the fact that women find it extremely difficult, or impossible, to recall specific articles, suggests that they do not pay much attention to the texts. Many women did remark that the magazines were dull and repetitive, suggesting that although the headlines might make an article sound interesting and new, when they looked inside, the main text was tediously familiar.

3.6 CONCLUSION

As I noted at the beginning of this chapter, the widespread tendency amongst my informants to try and distance themselves from the magazines, and to 'talk themselves out' of the target readership, was one of the most striking features of my data, and in this chapter I have analysed a number of extracts which exemplify this tendency. Furthermore, this reluctance to identify (or be identified) with the magazines, does not correspond with a lack of knowledge about the content of women's magazines. On the contrary, all the women I spoke to displayed knowledge about the different types of magazine available, as well as the range of content to be found in them. It seems, then, that one does not have to identify oneself as a women's magazine reader in order to be familiar with the magazines, and to express opinions about them and their readers.

In this chapter I looked at some of the different ways in which women 'talk themselves out' of the target readership of the magazines, and the different aspects of identity they draw on in order to do so, including sexual identity, intelligence/class and age. We have seen that some women are reluctant to define themselves as 'women's magazine readers' because of the low cultural capital which the genre confers on its consumers. In accounting for why they read them they therefore seek to distance themselves from the target readership, explicitly invoking the low cultural status of the magazines and constructing their relationship with the magazines as one of ironic detachment. Other women talk themselves out because they feel excluded from the target readership. Shazia, for example, argued that she was excluded on the basis of her sexuality, ethnicity and socio-economic status, arguing that the magazines only address the interests and concerns of heterosexual, white, middle class women, a point that has also been raised by much feminist work on women's magazines.

Despite their professed indifference or distaste for the magazines, many women continue to read them. Looking at readers' talk we can see that many of the characteristics which attract criticism of the magazines (their lack of substance, the unrealistic lifestyles portrayed, unengaging subject matter) are paradoxically also what they say makes them appealing. Many women describe the magazines as a means of distracting themselves from the hard work and worries of everyday life.

Rather than consciously finding time to sit down and read the magazines from start to finish, they talk about dipping in and out of them whenever they are bored or have a spare moment. At such times women look for something which is glossy and escapist and does not reflect the reality of their lives, rather than something of higher cultural value which would require time and effort.

From this first chapter we can begin to see that many of the same themes and concerns crop up across my data, but that there is a great deal of inter-individual variation in the ways different women orient to these themes. In the next chapter I move on to consider how women talk about advice in women's magazines, both in terms of how they interpret the advice itself, and also how they construct readers who take advice from magazines. In this chapter we will see that despite their eagerness to distance themselves from the magazines and their target readers, many women are willing to buy into certain aspects of the 'women's world' constructed by the magazines, such as the reification of femininity through consumption. By looking more closely at how women talk about specific aspects of the magazines' content, I will show that the relationship women have with the magazines is much more complex and nuanced than might first appear, and that my informants' attempts to 'talk themselves out' should not necessarily be taken at face value.

CHAPTER 4

TAKING ADVICE FROM WOMEN'S MAGAZINES

4.1 INTRODUCTION

4.1.1 Aims of this chapter

This chapter examines the ways in which readers make judgements as to when it is or is not appropriate to take advice from a women's magazine. As stated in Chapter 1, the main focus of this thesis is to examine how women discursively construct their own gender identities in relation to the discourses of femininity and the feminine subject positions constructed for them by the magazines. A focus on advice offers one way of addressing this question, as I have found that my informants' talk on the subject tells us a lot about how they construct the relationship between writer and reader, and also about how they position themselves in relation to other readers.

In the last chapter I looked at the striking tendency amongst my informants to try and distance themselves from the magazines, and the various strategies they use in order to do this. In this chapter I will show that if we delve a little deeper into my informants' accounts, beyond their protestations that they 'don't really read' women's magazines and certainly do not take them seriously, a more complex picture starts to emerge. We can see that although many women are reluctant to identify themselves as readers, and attempt to distance themselves from the magazines, as well as from other readers, this does not constitute a wholesale rejection of the magazines, or of the images and discourses found within them.

Women's magazines encourage their readers to participate in the imagined community, or 'world of women' constructed by the magazine. An intimate tone is often used by magazine writers in order to give the impression of a close personal relationship between writer and reader, thereby encouraging the reader to feel that she is indeed a member of this female community. My data show that the ways in which readers talk about the advice offered in women's magazines can tell us a lot about how they position themselves in relation to these imagined communities, and how they themselves construct the reader-writer relationship. As we will see in this chapter, a common feature in my informants' talk was the division of advice into two categories, which I have glossed as 'practical' and 'personal' advice (many of my

informants used either one, or both of these terms themselves). The first category includes things like advice on fashion and make-up, health and fitness, and recipes, whereas the latter category includes anything to do with sexual/romantic relationships. Readers are willing to state that they would consider taking practical advice from a magazine, but are adamant that magazines are not an appropriate source of personal advice. The reason most commonly given for this, is that personal advice should be sought from close friends and family, rather than from the magazines' advice-givers, who are categorised as strangers who do not understand you and your problems. In this way, readers try to distance themselves from the magazines, rejecting the notion of a close, confiding relationship between reader and writer. My informants also distance themselves from the type of reader that would write to problem pages or take personal advice from a magazine, thereby resisting the idea that they are part of a community or sisterhood of magazine readers. Nonetheless, we will also see that although readers might resist the idea that the magazines are an appropriate source of relationship advice, this does not necessarily mean that they challenge the importance accorded to heterosexual relationships by the magazines, or question the idea that women need help with relationships.

Where other types of advice are concerned, many readers are aware of the consumerist ideology which informs much of the advice about fashion, cosmetics and lifestyle, but often enjoy reading these sections without intending to purchase the products advertised, or else are actively complicit, taking pleasure from indulging in expensive products, even though they know they are 'falling into a trap'.

Firstly, I provide some background to the development of women's magazines as a genre providing both instruction and entertainment. I then look at what previous research has had to say about the role of advice in women's magazines, before looking at some examples from my data.

4.1.2 Early women's magazines and conduct books

Women's magazines combine the (sometimes conflicting and contradictory) functions of entertainment and instruction. This element of instruction has long been an important aspect of the content of women's magazines. This is unsurprising when we consider that early British women's magazines in the 18th and 19th

centuries can be regarded as emerging in part from the genre of conduct books for women.

Ballaster *et al.* (1991) trace the historical development of women's magazines as a genre, from the 17th century through to the 1980s, looking not only at change, but also at continuity of subject matter and in the representations of femininity presented (see also White, 1970). They note that women's magazines of the early 18th century were divided between the 'society' periodical and the domestic journal. The former was primarily concerned with party political and aristocratic scandal, whereas the latter was modelled on the genre of conduct manuals and was aimed at women from the emergent middle classes.

Domestic journals had little or no coverage of politics or public affairs, instead focusing on issues to do with successful marital relations and household matters, both reflecting and defining the new category of the middle class housewife, a woman with both time and money on her hands.

These periodicals also saw the introduction of what is now a staple of the women's magazine, the agony aunt. Ballaster *et al.* (*ibid.*) identify *The Female Spectator* as one of the first British titles to have an agony aunt. They also suggest that the female readers writing in to seek advice from these early agony aunts were probably fictional, a suggestion which was often made by my informants in relation to contemporary women's magazines.

These domestic journals also contained fictional accounts of women falling prey to the sexual advances of predatory men, amongst other woes. In *The Female Spectator*, these stories would be followed by advice from the author about how readers could avoid these dangers. As discussed by Angela McRobbie (2000), the picture stories found in the (now defunct) teenage magazine Jackie served a similar moralising and didactic function, allowing readers to vicariously experience the thrill of transgressive behaviour, but concluding in such a way as to remind readers that such behaviour is unacceptable. Although this type of fiction is uncommon in contemporary British women's magazines, I would argue that a similar function is now served by the tales of 'true life drama' which are particularly common in the more downmarket weekly magazines such as *Bella* and *Chat*. These 'true life'

sections commonly describe an ordinary (i.e. not a celebrity) woman's 'triumph over tragedy', and tend to feature shocking or scandalous scenarios (such as 'My policeman dad was a secret sex beast', *Full House*, 12 July 2005), while at the same time taking a firmly moralistic tone (similar stories are also common in tabloid newspapers).

By the late 18th century the society magazine for women had begun to disappear as the domestic journal became increasingly dominant, as did the definition of the feminine world as one concerned solely with domestic and romantic issues. This period also saw an increase in the amount of advice and instruction offered in women's periodicals. Ballaster *et al.* (ibid.) note that one of the most popular journals of the late 18th century was entitled *Town and Country Magazine, or Universal Repository of Knowledge, Instruction and Entertainment* (note that, despite the general title, this journal was aimed at women), which shows us that by this stage women's magazines were not only meant to be entertaining, but also didactic and instructional.

This trend continued into the 19th century, when women's magazines developed into a format which revolved around the dispensing of advice on many different subjects, and as such would certainly be familiar to modern women's magazine readers. By this time journals contained not only problem pages offering advice on romance or etiquette, but also medical advice, financial tips on how to manage the household budget, plus recipes, sewing patterns and gardening advice.

Lynda Mugglestone (1995; see also Romaine, 1998) examines the role that language, particularly accent and pronunciation, played in eighteenth and nineteenth century social norms governing notions of 'genteel' behaviour. Romaine looks at the many conduct and etiquette manuals published in Britain during this time, as well as journals and popular novels, all of which described and promoted idealised notions of femininity, embodied in the notion of the 'lady'. Women from all walks of life were encouraged to aspire to be a lady, and Mugglestone argues that conduct manuals and other related literature presented '[c]ompliance with the established tenets of feminine conduct [...] not as options but as laws' (1995: 165).

Mugglestone describes how language played an integral part in nineteenth century cultural constructions of the 'lady'. The 'gentleman' was also subject to rules and proscriptions as to how he should talk. Mugglestone argues, however, that women, who were positioned as the guardians of morals, particularly in their roles as mothers, were subject to greater scrutiny. She writes that the lady, 'if she was fully to justify her right to such an appellation, was to excel still further' (1995: 164).

As can be seen from this section, by the nineteenth century many of the elements of contemporary women's magazines were already present, with advice playing a prominent part in the genre. Women's magazines followed from conduct books in offering women a 'how-to' guide to being a woman, helping to define and maintain dominant discourses of femininity.

4.1.3 Advice in contemporary British women's magazines

Advice-giving is central to the content of most women's magazines (although it forms a much less prominent part of the more celebrity gossip oriented magazines such as *Heat* and *OK*). This advice appears in different forms and on different subjects. For example, readers are offered advice on beauty (which products they should buy and how to use them), dieting and exercise, (heterosexual) relationships, health (including sexual health), careers and cooking. Individual readers can seek advice on specific problems by writing to a magazine's problem page. Advice is not limited to the problem pages, however, as many features and articles are also based on the giving of more general advice to readers, often in the form of step-by-step guides or lists of dos and don'ts. Below are a number of examples, demonstrating the range of topics on which advice is offered:

'622 SUMMER STYLE TIPS: YOUR BODY'S A MIRACLE WAITING TO HAPPEN'
(*Glamour*, July 2001)

'SEX, YOUR BODY & HIM: What men need you to know by tonight'
(*Glamour*, July 2001)

'THE TOP 5 X-RATED SEX POSITIONS (AND PLACES) TRIED & TESTED. *Plus:*
Your kinkiest questions *ever*, answered'
(*Cosmopolitan*, September 2001)

'Hurrah! Never be unlucky in love again. We've discovered what makes a man Mr. Faithful'
(*Cosmopolitan*, September 2001)

'How to have sleeker, shinier, straighter hair'
(*InStyle*, November 2001)

'FLAT STOMACH SPECIAL! Get into your favourite jeans by Saturday'
(*New Woman*, November 2001)

'Men tell! 8 signs he's headed for a bended-knee moment (and six he so isn't)'
(*New Woman*, November 2001)

'SHOP YOURSELF SLIM. How to dress your size.'
(*Happy*, August 2005)

RATED BY REAL BLOKES! 20 CELEB BODIES. Do men really fancy skinny women?
(*More*, July 5, 2005)

As we will see in more detail in the next section, women's magazines seek to define the parameters of what it means to be a woman. They present their contents as reflecting the natural concerns and experiences of all women, and following from this, any subjects which are not included are implicitly defined as *not* being feminine. Women's magazines present femininity as something 'natural', a quality or set of traits inherent to all biological females. However, this is belied by the way in which the magazines also present femininity as something which requires constant effort and expenditure. This point is raised by Ballaster *et al.*, who argue that '[a]t the heart of the women's magazine lies the paradox that natural femininity can be achieved only through hard labour' (1991: 14). Similarly, Marjorie Ferguson argues that in the world of women's magazines, 'the unacknowledged assumption [is] that women must be taught femininity' (Ferguson, 1983: 8), and that therefore femininity is a career which requires a lifetime commitment from women.

The magazine headlines above offer examples of the types of labour a woman is expected to make, although the headlines are usually designed to make these activities seem simple, fun and fast, rather than labour-intensive obligation (e.g. 'Get into your favourite jeans *by Saturday*', *New Woman*, November 2001). In glossy magazines like *Cosmopolitan*, *Glamour* and *Marie Claire* there is a strong emphasis on heterosexual relationships, whether it be how to improve your sex life, how to keep a man faithful, or how to recognise if a man is 'the marrying kind'. Often this advice is presented as being 'insider' information about what men think and what men want, the implication being that without this advice a woman cannot expect to understand a man's thoughts or actions (thereby reinforcing an essentialist discourse which constructs men and women as polar opposites). The other main

area of advice centres on how to improve one's physical appearance, with tips on dieting, make-up and fashion. Many feminist analysts would argue that this advice is another aspect of the andocentric view of the magazines: women need to work on their appearance as another way of finding and keeping a man. Although this may be the unstated assumption behind these articles, from my own experience of reading women's magazines I have found that the text itself is often framed in terms of self-improvement as a means of boosting one's self-esteem, and feeling happier and better about oneself.

This chapter explores how readers' construction of their own identities as women is mediated by the guidance offered in the magazines. The texts themselves may be phrased as 'how to' guides, but readers do not necessarily make use of them in this way. As we will see shortly, readers might be willing to take advice on subjects such as fashion and make-up, but were adamant that they would not consider taking advice on relationships. The crucial difference, it seems, is whether readers consider the advice to be 'practical' or 'personal', as many of my informants argue that while it would be appropriate to take practical advice from a magazine, personal advice should be sought from family and friends. In this chapter I look at how women construct this difference between 'practical' and 'personal' matters, and what this tells us about how they position themselves in relation to the magazines and their readers. Women's stance towards the advice found in magazines also tells us a lot about how women take up, reproduce or resist the ideologies of femininity which underlie the advice.

4.1.4 Magazines: the 'world of women'

Various studies of women's magazines have examined the strategies utilised by writers in order to frame the world for their readers and position them as members of an 'imagined community' (see Anderson 1983) of women. The textual construction of imagined communities has been central to much of the theoretical work on women's magazines. The magazines, it is argued, employ discourses of women's shared experiences and interests (but significantly, not of shared struggle) in order to give a sense of unity and common purpose to what is in fact a hugely diverse group. This community is an ideological construct which disguises divisions of class, ethnicity and sexuality by presenting a relatively homogenous picture of feminine experience (McRobbie 1978). Although individual titles are targeted at

specific demographic groups (with the most important factors being age and socio-economic status), this is rarely made explicit within the magazine text. Rather, they are presented as being relevant to all women. This is more than a marketing claim on the part of the publishers, it serves to naturalise an essentialist discourse of femininity which marginalises those women who do not conform to the supposedly universal feminine traits and activities it espouses.

Marjorie Ferguson (1983) and Ellen McCracken (1993), for example, analyse women's magazines as a semiotic system, and the promotion of conventional norms of femininity, or as Ferguson terms it, the 'cult of femininity' (see Chapter 1 for further discussion), within this system. Ferguson posits that women's magazines 'attempt to provide a collective female social 'reality', the world of women' (ibid.: 185), a world in which femininity is something to be worked at and achieved through the consumption of commodities. Janice Winship (1983) adopts a similar argument to Ferguson. In her analysis of *Options*, Winship focuses on the magazine's ideology of individuality, as expressed in notions of 'choice'. She examines how the magazine addresses its readers as self-determining individuals with a whole range of 'options' to do with every aspect of their lives. Winship argues, however, that the seeming optimism of this discourse of self-help is limited through its conflation of choices with consumerism; women *can* determine their own lives, but these choices can only be achieved and expressed through consumption, and hence are limited by what is on offer to consume.

These studies provide an invaluable insight into the ideological underpinnings of the magazines themselves, but what they do not tell us is the extent to which readers accept the subjectivities which have been created for them in the magazines. Furthermore, they do not tell us if readers are in fact unaware of the ideological workings of the texts. For example, as we shall see in this chapter, my data suggest that some readers are aware of the consumerist agenda of the magazines, although this awareness does not necessarily lead to a (complete) rejection of the idea that femininity can be expressed through consumption.

Egins and Iedema (1997) use social semiotic techniques to conduct a comparative analysis of two Australian women's magazines, *She* and *New Woman*. They argue that personalisation is key to the effective transmission of the magazines' code of

femininity, that is, that readers are more likely to identify with the imagined community of women created by the magazine if the impression of a confiding personal relationship is constructed between reader and writer. They claim that:

The magazines excel at making the reader believe she is an autonomous individual, a voluntary member of a classless community of beautiful and successful women' (ibid.: 169).

I would argue that this is a claim which cannot be substantiated by an analysis of the magazines alone. In order to get a better understanding of the extent to which the magazines really do 'excel' at making the readers believe they are participating in this feminine community, we need to examine how readers position themselves in relation to both the magazine and other readers. As we shall see from my data, readers are often resistant to being positioned in this way, either as the writer's 'friend', or as part of a community of readers with shared experiences and interests.

The need for the advertising industry and mass media to create the impression that their large, and unknown, audience is being engaged with on a personal level has been discussed extensively by Norman Fairclough (1989, 1992b; Chouliaraki & Fairclough 1999). He describes this strategy as 'synthetic personalisation', which he defines as 'the impression of treating each of the people 'handled' *en masse* as an individual' (Fairclough 1989: 62). Mary Talbot (1992) draws on this concept of 'synthetic personalisation' in her critical discourse analysis of a beauty feature from the teenage magazine *Jackie*. She examines the creation of the 'text population', which she describes as 'a mesh of intersecting voices of characters inhabiting a text' (Talbot 1992: 176). She looks at how the writers construct themselves in the role of older sister or friend, that is, as someone who has a close relationship with the reader but who is also more knowledgeable, and therefore in a position to give the reader advice on how to be a woman.

The impression of a close relationship is achieved by presupposing shared knowledge and experiences with the reader. Talbot argues that scare quotes, for example, are used to represent the thoughts and words of the implied reader, giving the impression that the writer knows what the reader thinks. The inclusive 'we' is used to suggest that the writers and reader share a system of knowledge and beliefs. The writers also use lexical items like 'lippy' and 'cutesy', which Talbot

suggests is used to approximate the readers' supposed way of speaking, making the writers seem closer in age to the reader.

Talbot describes the imagined feminine community created by the magazine as a 'synthetic sisterhood' (Talbot 1995), developing Angela McRobbie's (1978) earlier analysis of *Jackie* as presenting readers with a 'false sisterhood'. This sisterhood presented in the *Jackie* beauty feature is 'synthetic', Talbot argues, because, as previously discussed, there is no 'real human relationship' (Talbot 1995: 162) between writer and reader. It is also unsisterly, in that it is manipulative; what is presented as the intimate exchange of secrets and advice is in fact covert advertising. It has been argued in much of the earlier research that advice sections, and problem pages in particular, are central to the creation of this 'synthetic sisterhood'. It is in these advice-giving sections of the paper that writers are most concerned to create the impression of a close, confiding relationship between reader and writer, in order to suggest that the writer understands the reader and her problems, and is therefore in a position to offer the right advice. This chapter focuses on how readers themselves approach this advice, and as a result how they position themselves in relation to the synthetic sisterhood. Furthermore, as advice is given on all aspects of the magazines' content, readers' attitudes towards advice are also revealing about how women interpret and put into practice the codes of femininity found in the texts. As we shall see in this chapter, my informants might be willing to say that they have taken, or would take, advice about beauty and fashion, but none of the women I spoke to said they would ever take relationship advice from a magazine. A common reason women offered for this, was that they preferred to turn to friends and family for advice, from which we can infer that they do not perceive their relationship with the magazines in this way. As we will see, although the magazines might try to position readers as members of a 'synthetic sisterhood', readers themselves do not readily allow themselves to be positioned in this way.

The following quotation is taken from the editor's introduction to a new women's magazine, *Grazia*, and exemplifies how some of the strategies discussed by Talbot are put into practice:

We are living in fast times. Sometimes it's difficult to keep up. Life-changing news stories can flutter and die, and fashion trends that are hot today are gone tomorrow. **We all** want to keep up with this changing world, but **we** want it made easy and **we** want it now. **Like us**, you want to

know about the latest trends, gossip, fashion and news in easy, bite-size pieces.

You want to read the kind of interviews and reports that make you think seriously about your own life. **You want** to find something fabulous to wear on a Friday night, or something quick (but spectacular) to cook for friends. **You need** easy, chic ideas to help you simplify your frantic life and – this is the important bit – **you don't want** to wait a whole month for them (Grazia, February 2005, emphasis added).

In this editorial, the inclusive 'we' is used to imply a connection between the editor and the reader, and create the impression that they are all members of a community of women. The repeated use of 'we' suggests that the editor can give the readers what they want because they lead the same lives, and share the same interests and desires; in other words, the readers are encouraged to think that the editor is 'one of us'. The personal, intimate tone is further developed through the use of a picture of the smiling editor at the top of the column, and the column is 'signed' 'Fiona' in a reproduction of the editor's handwriting. The use of her first name, and the reproduced handwriting, suggest informality and intimacy, invoking the style of a letter from a friend.

Having suggested that she shares the same worldview as the readers, the editor is then able to speak on their behalf and express their wants and needs. The repeated use of the second person pronoun 'you' exemplifies the strategy of 'synthetic personalisation' in that the text is addressing a vast number of women, the entire readership, but in such a way as to suggest that the editor knows and understands, and is speaking to the readers as individuals.

Although Talbot does not have any data from readers themselves, she does stress the need to avoid treating readers as cultural dopes, passively absorbing and putting into practice the magazine's ideologies. As Cameron and Kulick argue: '[t]he question is how speakers 'take up' the ideological resources available in a given community to construct identities for themselves in practice' (2003: 136). As discussed in Chapter 1, by privileging the perspective of the readers in this research, I hope to provide an alternative, but equally interesting analysis of how readers reproduce, redefine or resist this notion of sisterhood and femininity based on consumption.

Some previous research, e.g. by Ballaster *et al.* (1991) and Hermes (1995) (previously discussed in Chapter 1) has also turned to the readers themselves (although the former was still mostly based on analysis of the magazines). Hermes' research is based on the identification and analysis of the 'interpretative repertoires' used by readers when talking about reading women's magazines and how they fit into the women's everyday lives. She does not, however, examine how readers position themselves in relation to the imagined communities created by the magazines. In this chapter I explore this issue, looking at how readers position themselves in relation to the producers of the texts, as well as in relation to other readers.

4.1.5 Advice in men's magazines

Research on men's magazines has suggested that there are many similarities with women's magazines, both in the way they are produced and consumed (see Chapter 1). Jackson *et al.*'s (2001) study of men's magazines is based on a combination of content analysis, interviews with editors and focus group interviews. Their content analyses of a variety of men's magazines (including *Attitude*, which is aimed at gay men, and titles such as *Xtreme*, a magazine about extreme sports, and *Stuff for Men*, a consumer magazine) show that men's titles also offer their readers advice. Jackson *et al.* point out that this advice tends to take the form of lists of easily digestible tips or rules, which they suggest are 'similar to those that might be found in self-help books and women's magazines' (2001: 87). However, they found that relationship advice was more likely to be found in more 'upmarket' titles such as *Esquire* and *GQ*. On the other hand, *Loaded* and *Attitude* ran overtly ironic, tongue-in-cheek problem pages, which seem to parody this form of advice-giving. Although this tongue-in-cheek attitude is not generally found in the problem pages of women's magazines, it does echo the way they are read by many women.

This construction of problem pages as an object of fun, or even derision, was also taken up in Jackson *et al.*'s focus groups:

Those who read the magazines in an instrumental fashion – in search of serious advice on personal or emotional problems; for example – were frequently ridiculed by those who saw them primarily as a source of entertainment, with little or no serious content. Readers' letters and problem pages, in particular, were regarded humorously as the domain of 'sad losers' ([comment from] Bristol lecturers) rather than as a source of practical information or serious advice (2001: 121).

As will be discussed in more detail later, these responses are similar to those given by my informants when asked about their attitudes towards the advice sections in magazines, and problem pages in particular. In my data, however, the criticism of readers who seek advice from magazines was considerably less bald and on record than in the comments of Jackson *et al.*'s focus groups. This similarity is particularly noteworthy given Jackson *et al.*'s informants' construction of women's magazines as 'po-faced' and lacking in 'that wink, wink, nudge, nudge kind of irony' (ibid: 123). In some cases, male readers also drew a distinction between themselves as readers and how they felt women read magazines, constructing women as being 'addicted' to magazines, reading them 'religiously' and taking them much more seriously than they would themselves (ibid: 126). Jackson *et al.* point out that this view of women readers is contradicted by other research on women's magazine readers, and this is indeed the case with my data, as we will see in this chapter. However, it is also the case, as we saw in Chapter 3, that although most of my informants claimed not to take the magazines seriously themselves, they often suggested that other women do take the magazines seriously and 'believe every word' (Alice, extract 3.1). This perception of women's magazine readers as following the magazines religiously, while it could be based on experience and knowledge of actual readers (some of my informants' insisted that they did know women like this), could also be based on a stereotype, not only of women's magazines readers, but of women in general, according to which women have no sense of humour. This is not an issue which I am able to examine in this thesis, as humour was not a subject which arose often during the course of the interviews, but I would like to raise it as a possibility.

Jackson *et al.*'s research also points towards similarities between the relationship men's and women's magazines construct between writer and reader. They argue that:

In general, the magazines address the reader as a 'mate'. They attempt to become the 'reader's friend' by offering handy hints [...] [t]he language used is, then, familiar, in an attempt to produce a sense of mediated intimacy between the lads who run the magazine and their (equally laddish) readers (ibid.: 76).

Although Jackson *et al.* do not offer the sort of linguistic analysis used by Talbot to back up their claims, or look at how readers themselves construct this relationship,

they do give some insight into editorial views on this matter. Having interviewed seven editors, they found that a common concern was finding the right tone for addressing their readers, particularly regarding the giving of advice and information. They report editors expressing the need to represent and relate to their readers, and to be their 'friend'. The editors of women's magazines appear to have similar concerns about being the readers' friend and striking the right balance between informing and entertaining (White 1977; Winship 1983), although as will be discussed later, readers themselves do not always accept this construction of the magazine as a 'friend'. Furthermore, some women are critical of those readers who would take advice from a magazine, particularly those readers who write letters to problem pages, suggesting that women who do so must be 'sad' or 'desperate', and not have friends or family they can turn to.

4.2 PERSONAL VS. PRACTICAL ADVICE

One thing which features very strongly in my data is the way in which my informants construct two qualitatively different categories of advice, which can broadly be defined as a distinction between the 'personal' and the 'practical' (I have chosen to gloss the categories in this way as many of my informants used either one or both of these terms when describing different types of advice). Whether or not readers think it is appropriate to take advice on a particular subject seems to depend on which category of advice the subject falls into. The general consensus seems to be that, in theory at least, it would be acceptable to take advice from a magazine on 'practical' matters, but that 'personal' advice should be sought elsewhere. Readers' discussion of the 'personal' tends to construct this as being primarily to do with romantic/sexual relationships, whereas issues to do with appearance, such as fashion and beauty advice, as well as advice on cooking and other areas of domestic labour, and also problems to do with health, including sexual health, are deemed to be areas of practical knowledge which can appropriately be sought and gained from a magazine. This construction of relationships as being outside the realm of practical knowledge is particularly interesting as it goes against the discourse found in self-help literature and women's magazines, which does take relationships to be an area which can be improved by following practical advice and certain prescribed 'rules'. It also shows that the behaviour and attitudes of actual readers do not always correspond with those of the implied or target reader inscribed in the text.

Hermes (1995) identifies the ‘repertoire of practical knowledge’ as the interpretative repertoire used by her informants in their talk about certain types of advice. She found that her informants were keen to stress that by reading and taking note of recipes, household tips, dress patterns, health advice, and even film and book reviews, they were able to gain useful practical knowledge from reading women’s magazines. Hermes argues that this focus on the practical aspects of women’s magazines serves as a means of legitimating the time and money readers spend on them. Notably, however, Hermes also found that her informants seemed to be more interested in simply having this knowledge rather than putting it into practice. This is echoed in my own data, particularly when it comes to recipes or health and diet tips. Many women professed an interest in reading this type of advice, but very few could recall an occasion when they had actually made a point of following the advice (see extract 4.4 below).

In the following extract Maggie is talking about when she might take advice from a women’s magazine, and we see her drawing a distinction between beauty tips on the one hand, and articles on how to find and keep a man on the other:

Extract 4.1: Maggie

(38, teacher, white, heterosexual)

- 185 D: mmh [.] you don’t know anyone who you think would (take the advice seriously)
- 186 M: [I don’t think I do
187 actually – I mean I think [.] erm [.] I s’pose there’s **certain** articles
188 that you might take seriously – sort of beauty tips – you might think
189 oh that’s a good idea if you’re in the sun – or oh – better take an –
190 you know that cream sounds really good and **that’s** sort of – more =
- 191 D: [mmh
- 192 M: = serious in a way because you are kind of taking note – but I think
193 this kind of – how to find a man and how to keep a man – it’s – it’s [.]
194 it’s **fun** to **read** but I don’t – I’m I’m not **aware** – that I sort of I
195 would live my life by it (laughing) I hope not! [.]
- 196 D: [(laughing)
- 197 M: (still laughing) I’d be quite depressed if I did actually! [.]
198 suicidal! [.] can’t go out till I’ve read this!
- 199 D: so what about the – this – the sort of fashion and beauty and stuff –

200 do you think – do you often go out and buy things that (inaudible)?

201 M: [I do] I

202 mean I do sort of erm cosmetics-wise yes – I **do** – em – I'll kind of

203 read about – em some new cream that's out – **not** that it's going to

204 make you look a hundred years younger but I've got very dry skin

205 and I'm always looking out for something that's really **good** – so I

206 **will** try things from that o:r [.] maybe make-up [.] but [.] yeah! – I

207 mean sort of – cosmetics – yes I would – I would

In line 192 Maggie says that for her, advice on cosmetics is 'more serious in a way because you are kind of taking note'. In line 204 she goes on to give an example of a specific problem she has, very dry skin, and says that she is 'always looking out for something that's really good'. This suggests that she actively looks to magazines for tips on how to deal with her skin, as opposed to just taking note of any tips that she happens to come across (note also her emphatic 'yeah!' in line 206, which strengthens this interpretation).

This disclosure of her problem to me, a researcher whom she has never met before, in a semi-public context, reinforces the divide between practical and personal issues. Informants often brought up problems they had with their health or appearance when discussing this type of advice. However, informants very rarely discussed their own relationship problems. When they did talk about relationship problems it was usually in more general terms, or in relation to other people's problems. As will be discussed later, my informants constructed personal advice, unlike practical advice, as something that should not be sought from strangers. Therefore, Maggie, like many of my informants, was happy to talk to me, a stranger, about problems with her appearance, but not about problems regarding her personal relationships.

We have seen, then, that Maggie is quite happy to admit to buying beauty products that have been recommended in a women's magazine. It could be argued that in this way, as far as practical advice is concerned, Maggie is buying into the concept of the synthetic sisterhood and notions of femininity based on consumption. As discussed earlier, much of the previous research on women's magazines has analysed the imagined community offered to readers as being based on a consumerist ideology. Femininity is presented as something which must be worked at and the way to achieve it is through the consumption of certain products.

Maggie's comments suggest that she does not question the idea that women need to work at their appearance, and that this can be done by buying beauty products. Also, I would argue that by mentioning her dry skin to me, Maggie is actively helping to construct the synthetic sisterhood described by Talbot, in that she is appealing to the idea expressed in the magazines that a concern with their appearance is something that all women share. Maggie assumes that as a woman myself, I will be able to understand and appreciate the fact of, if not the details of, her problem. Indeed, following on from this disclosure I reciprocated by telling her about my own fondness for products dealing with frizzy hair.

Talbot argues that readers 'are both actively agentive and unwittingly acted upon' (1995: 145) when reading women's magazines. My data suggest that readers are certainly not blind to the ideological working of the magazines. Several of my informants, including Maggie, made reference to the effectiveness of the advertising in women's magazines. Later in the interview Maggie commented that the magazines make her aware of problems, and products which solve these problems, which she would not have been aware of, or concerned about, before. In this sense Maggie is aware that she is being 'acted upon'. Indeed, she says 'it's funny isn't it – I mean there are just things that you *know* you're falling into the trap – and you just think – oh sod it'. Thus Maggie, rather than being a cultural dope, is complicit in her take up and reproduction of the magazines' consumerist ideology.

Maggie's attitude towards relationship advice is markedly different, however. In line 194 she characterises the 'how to find a man' type articles as being 'fun to read', implying that that is as far as it goes, and that although she reads them she certainly would not take their advice on the subject. These comments seem to echo the attitude of Jackson et al.'s focus groups (2001) towards men's magazines, although they contradict the men's view of women as taking everything in women's magazines seriously.

As Maggie continues, we can see from her self-repair that although she starts to say that she does not live her life by this advice, she then shifts to a less definitive, more hesitant response, that she is not 'aware' of following the magazine's advice. She then uses hyperbole to construct a light-hearted, tongue-in-cheek stance, joking that

she would 'be quite depressed actually! [...] suicidal!' (lines 197-198) if she realised that she was living her life according to the relationship advice offered in magazines. In this way Maggie emphatically positions herself as someone who does not take relationship advice seriously and would not want to be seen as someone who did.

In extract 4.2 below Louise talks about the difference between problem pages and sex advice:

Extract 4.2: Louise

(21, student, white, heterosexual)

- 42 D: em [...] so what about em – in Marie Claire and those kind of
43 magazines – em – do you read sort of advice sections or – problem
44 pages and things like that?
- 45 L: e:m – yeah I do – I don't really read the problem pages – I might skim
46 them and if there's a funny letter then I'll read that – and the advice
47 pages – well they'd be like the sex advice ones and the how to get
48 yourself a boyfriend ones?
- 49 D: | yeah yeah
- 50 L: if they're the how to get yourself a boyfriend's or ten ways to make
51 him marry you – then no – I don't – cos I just think they're **really** =
- 52 D: | (laughs)
- 53 L: = **stupid** – and if a boy doesn't wanna marry you then advice from a
54 magazine is **not** going to be the right way to go – but em – like the
55 ones like how to have the best orgasms – and how to – yeah =
- 56 D: | (laughs)
- 57 L: = then I read those ones – they're hil- they're much more interesting
58 (laughs)
- 59 D: so – **why** do you think that they're more – more interesting?
- 60 L: er it's more practical advice the other ones – the self-help like
61 the ones like how to – snag your man and stuff – I just think it's all
62 hearsay and it's all – not going to get you anywhere
- 63 D: mmh
- 64 L: but the sex stuff that's like – can give you little tips for what you might
65 like to use yourself – so they're a bit more useful
- 66 D: | (laughs)
67 so do you think you – you know – do you actually – would you

- 68 actually think about – you know oh I might try that?
- 69 L: [**yes** [.] I did – I
70 would – and I have – yes (laughs)
- 71 D: [laughs)
- 72 L: so yeah definitely – they're **really** - there's a **whole education** in
73 those magazines if you want them – yeah – I would use them
- 74 D: but so you wouldn't describe the sort of – how to get your man kind
75 of advice – you wouldn't think of that as practical advice then
- 76 L: [no – not at
77 all – I don't think – I don't see much [.] point in – that kind of thing –
78 like I've got – at home my mum recently has started buying she's
79 quite a religious person – so she'll buy the kind of **God** self-help
80 books but she's also got that Men Are From Mars, Women Are
81 From Venus
- 82 D: [mm
- 83 L: and I think I've tried to pick it up – two or three times – and I just can't
84 - get into it – I'm just not interested in all the psycho American babble
85 - I just – no – don't like it at all – so I'd say I probably view those in
86 the same way
- 87 D: right
- 88 L: they're not gonna – anyone who believes in those [.] who thinks
89 they're gonna work – I just don't – they're **not** [.] either a man likes
90 you or he doesn't – or he's gonna marry you and he isn't – or – you
91 know – I just don't think that they're really gonna work

In extract 4.2, what is particularly interesting is the distinction Louise makes between the 'how to get yourself a boyfriend' type advice and sex advice. In line 60 she describes sex advice as 'more practical advice' and therefore 'more useful'. This construction of sex tips as a type of practical knowledge which can be acquired from a magazine, in much the same way as one can get advice on skincare or cooking, is unusual in my data. Most of my informants described the sex advice as being amusing and/or silly, and not to be taken seriously. Louise's interest in sex tips as a form of practical advice could be reflective of a change in the discourses of sex available to younger women, but it is difficult to explore this any further on the basis of the limited examples in my data. However, I have selected this extract for analysis because it points up an area which would merit further research, namely

the ways in which teenage girls and young women talk about sex and sex advice/education.

Louise reads *Cosmopolitan*, which is well known as the magazine which first introduced sexually explicit content to the genre of women's magazines and which Louise herself describes elsewhere as 'the sexish one' (several other women described Cosmo as being obsessed with sex). This focus on the physical rather than emotional aspects of sex may also be connected to the increasing medicalisation of sex in public discourse, in which lack of sexual pleasure is constructed as a physical problem which can be treated with drugs.

In lines 69 to 73 Louise is more than happy to admit that she has taken sex tips from a magazine in the past and would certainly do so in the future, as can be seen by the way she gives an affirmative response to my question not once, but four times, and by the lack of hedging or false starts. The directness of her reply is evident when we compare it with the indirectness of her speech in lines 76 to 91. In this latter section, when Louise is explaining why she does not like the magazines' relationship advice, her talk shows a marked increase in the incidence of false starts (e.g. line 77, lines 88-89), hedges, discourse markers like 'that kind of thing' (line 76) and 'you know' (line 90) and epistemic modals, indicating that this is a more problematic subject for her, and that like Maggie, she too is finding it difficult to explain her resistance to the relationship advice.

Like Maggie, Louise completely rejects the idea of getting relationship advice from a magazine. In line 51 she describes this type of advice as '**really stupid**', which suggests that the problem is with the quality of advice given by magazines. She then adds in line 61 that 'I just think it's all hearsay and it's not going to get you anywhere'. Here again she seems to be criticising the quality of advice. Her description of the advice as 'hearsay' suggests that she sees it as based on some kind of myth, or unreliable second- or third-hand information, whereas perhaps she regards the more 'practical' sex tips as being tried and tested, or somehow scientifically proven. This interpretation would make sense within a discourse which constructs sexual problems as physical/medical, rather than emotional/psychological, issues.

In line 77 Louise adds that not only does she not see relationship advice as practical advice, but that she 'doesn't see much point in that kind of thing'. It seems then that she thinks relationship advice is never useful, regardless of the nature or quality of the advice, because 'either a man likes you or he doesn't'. There also seems to be an implied criticism of women who do believe in the efficacy of this kind of advice, because they do not understand that such advice is useless, although this seems self-evident to Louise herself. In lines 88-89 Louise says 'anyone who believes in those [...] who thinks they're gonna work', as if she is about to criticise readers who take relationship advice from magazines. She then changes tack slightly, so the subject is no longer other readers, but herself. Instead of saying 'they are X', she makes herself subject, beginning 'I just don't', but does not finish what she was about to say, finally concluding that 'they're [the relationship advice] *not* [going to work]'. This series of false starts and pauses suggests that Louise is having trouble finding a suitable way to express her opinion, perhaps because she does not want to go on record as criticising other readers. Although she is not explicitly critical, by describing relationship advice as being '*really stupid*', and insisting on the black-and-white view that 'either a man likes you or he doesn't', Louise allows us to infer that women who listen to 'really stupid' advice must be stupid themselves.

Although Louise's comments show that she is resistant to the idea that relationships can be improved by following the advice of magazines, she does not appear to reject the assumption, upon which much of the magazines' advice is based, that heterosexual relationships (finding and keeping a man) are central to being a woman. Louise does not question the idea that a woman would want to find and keep a man, she is simply doubtful that this is a skill which can be learnt; for Louise, the success of a relationship seems to be more a question of fate. Some of my informants, as will be seen later in this chapter, did question the magazines heavy emphasis on the primacy of sexual/romantic relationships, but this was relatively unusual, and was most common in (although not unique to) the talk of those women who identified themselves as feminists and/or lesbians. What this suggests is that what feminists and queer theorists have described as the ideology of 'compulsory heterosexuality', has become naturalised and taken on the status of common sense, so that it goes unnoticed by many people. Those women, however, whose sexual identity is marginalised or made deviant by such heterosexist discourse, are more likely to question this ideology. Similarly, as feminism is based upon the idea of

questioning and attempting to overturn patriarchal and heterosexist relations and institutions in society, feminists will also be alert to examples of heterosexist discourse.

4.3 INFORMATION OR ENTERTAINMENT?

As discussed in the introduction to this chapter, women's magazines aim to provide a combination of instruction and entertainment, and these two functions converge in the advice pages. What is missing from much of the previous analysis, however, is a discussion of how readers themselves construct the function of the advice.

As we have seen in the above extracts, my informants tend to distinguish between advice 'practical' and 'personal' advice. My informants were keen to construct themselves as the type of reader who would not take personal advice from a magazine, and would certainly never write a letter to an agony aunt. This rejection of the magazines' advice also indicates a rejection, at least in part, of any 'imagined community' or 'synthetic sisterhood' created in the magazines, and a recognition that any impression of a sisterhood is synthetic, because agony aunts and magazine journalists do not know readers personally and are not their friends. Nonetheless, they were happy to admit that they read this advice, constructing it as 'entertainment' rather than as a source of useful information.

In extract 4.3 below, Irene is talking about the advice given in problem pages, and draws a distinction between the type of advice which serves as entertainment, and advice which she might actually find useful:

Extract 4.3: Irene

(23, scientific report writer, white, heterosexual)

- 50 I: problem pages are always good – for a laugh (laughs)
- 51 D: would you actually take the advice – I mean do you take it seriously
52 or is it just entertainment?
- 53 I: well – sometimes it's entertainment – like – but then some of it -
54 erm – I take – I think I would – if I thought it was relevant to me I
55 would
- 56 D: and do you think it is?
- 57 I: do I think it's? sometimes it is – yeah (inaudible) sometimes it's just
58 about things like I suffer from – oily – skin on my forehead or

59 something and dry skin elsewhere or something – and they'll say oh
60 use this or something or do this – and I go ooh I'll try that (laughs)
61 but I don't know – some of the things like – I don't know - the sex
62 problems are just – a laugh – like people saying – I don't know –
63 (inaudible) my boyfriend's got a really small willy or something –
64 you're obviously reading that for entertainment (laughs)

In the first line of extract 4.3 (line 50) Irene says that 'problem pages are always good – for a laugh' suggesting that for her they serve as entertainment. When asked if she would take the advice or if it is just entertainment she becomes more hesitant. Her response in line 53 begins with the discourse marker 'well', which often prefaces a dispreferred response (Schiffrin, 1987). Here, it suggests that she is backtracking from her initial dismissal of problem pages as being only 'good for a laugh'. She then goes on to qualify her previous remark by saying 'sometimes it's entertainment'. When it comes to the possibility that she might actually take the advice, Irene is reluctant to commit herself, as can be seen from the false starts, hedges and caveats when she says 'I take – I think I would – if I thought it was relevant to me I would' (lines 54-55).

In lines 57-64, Irene describes which types of advice might be useful to her, and which types are just entertainment. In lines 57-60, Irene explains that if the advice is about 'things like I suffer from', and she gives the example of oily or dry skin, then she might try the products that the magazine recommends (Maggie also mentioned problems with her skin in extract 4.1). Sex problems, on the other hand, are dismissed as being for entertainment only. Again, as in line 50, she describes the sex problems as 'just – a laugh'. She gives an example of someone writing in with the problem that 'my boyfriend's got a really small willy' and states that 'you're obviously reading that for entertainment' and laughs. Her use of 'obviously' suggests that to her it is perfectly self-evident that this type of advice is irrelevant to her and only for entertainment, and her use of the second person pronoun 'you' implies that this applies, or should apply to all readers. Note also that she uses the somewhat childish word 'willy', which is usually used among adults when joking about or mocking a man's genitalia, which indicates that she is not taking the problem seriously.

This brings us back to the notion that it is acceptable to take practical advice from a magazine, but not to take personal advice. Irene seems to be orienting to this idea

here. Irene's comments echo those of Maggie in extract 4.1, who was happy to say that she would take recommendations of beauty products from a magazine, but that relationship advice is just 'fun to read'.

Irene becomes a lot more hesitant when she starts talking about sex problems. For example, in lines 61-62 she says 'I don't know' three times. This suggests some discomfort with the topic. Although she does not mind talking about someone else's problem with their boyfriend's 'really small willy', it seems that Irene is keen to avoid positioning herself as someone who might have sex problems, or might look to a magazine for help with such problems. This links back to my earlier point that women seem happy to talk to a stranger (me) about problems with their appearance, but are much more reticent when it comes to any problems they might have with sex and/or relationships. It may be, then, that by taking a tongue-in-cheek attitude towards the sex advice, and by constructing as entertainment, Irene is able to present herself as someone who does not need help with that aspect of her life.

Even though many of my informants suggest that they would take practical advice from a magazine, it seems that there is a big difference between reading the advice and picking up practical tips on the one hand, and actually putting those tips into practice on the other hand. Many women I spoke to described magazines as a useful source of information on healthy eating and exercise, but also admitted that acquiring the information was often as far as it went; knowing what they ought to do makes women feel virtuous, but acting on this information proves too difficult, or too much effort for them. Studies looking at the readers of self-help books (Lichterman, 1992; Simonds, 1992) have also come across similar accounts, with readers claiming that they read self-help, not with the specific intention of following the advice, but rather because they enjoy recognising themselves and their problems in the texts. This recognition that their flaws or problems were common ones reassured readers, but did not particularly inspire them to make any changes to their lives.

In extract 4.4 below, Lisa comments on this discrepancy between reading about fitness and health and actually becoming fit and healthy.

Extract 4.4: Lisa

(22, white, middle class, heterosexual, medical student)

- 40 L: erm I like the – the health and fitness pages =
- 41 D: = mmh
- 42 L: so – I try and get motivation from them
- 43 D: (laughs)
- 44 L: rarely works! (laughs)
- 45 D: (laughs) what what sort of motivation? – motivation to
- 46 L: | to
- 47 to actually get up out of my chair and (laughing) do some – God =
- 48 D: | (laughs)
- 49 L: = damn exercise mainly!
- 50 D: (still laughing)
- 51 L: um and they always seem to be promoting – eating [.] healthily and
- 52 D: mmh
- 53 L: that's something I **always** – fail at so [.] maybe – try and gain some
- 54 inspiration
- 55 D: and does it work?
- 56 L: no
- 57 D: (laughs)
- 58 L: maybe for a day after I've read it
- 59 D: right
- 60 L: and then [.]
- 61 D: so does it make you feel **guilty** then?
- 62 L: yeah it can do
- 63 D: | because you don't – do it
- 64 L: yeah but – I've got enough to do in my life without worrying
- 65 about [.] being too strict on – on myself
- 66 D: mmh

- 67 L: but sometimes it [...] yeah if you're – especially in in the holidays I
 68 always get more magazines in – holiday time – when you've got
 69 less to do =
- 70 D: = mmh
- 71 L: and then you think oh I've got the time I can [...] go out and make
 72 myself salads and – go jogging – as they suggest and [...] but
 73 obviously – the that never happens! (laughing) put on daytime =
- 74 D: |(laughing)
- 75 L: = TV again!

In this extract Lisa freely admits, as can be seen by the lack of hedging or false starts, that although she reads the magazines' health and fitness sections with the intention, or at least the hope, of taking the advice, she rarely manages to put the advice into practice. In line 42 Lisa says that she reads these sections in order to 'try and get motivation from them', but then adds, without being asked, that it 'rarely works!'. Her readiness to admit this, and the laughter which follows her comment, suggests that this is a state of affairs which Lisa finds amusing rather than guilt-inducing. Throughout this extract Lisa positions herself as quite a lazy person, but constructs this laziness as something which she finds funny. This is evident when I ask her what kind of motivation she hopes to get from the magazines, as Lisa continues to laugh while she suggests that she is looking for the motivation 'to actually get up out of my chair and (laughing) do some – God damn exercise mainly!'.

In line 53 Lisa describes healthy eating as 'something I **always** – fail at', and then in line 58 she admits that reading magazines for inspiration only works 'maybe for a day after I've read it'. By using the word 'fail', Lisa invites some form of negative judgement, suggesting that healthy eating is an ideal which she aspires to, and which others might evaluate her against, but which she has not been able to attain because of some deficiency on her part. However, elsewhere in this extract her talk suggests that this is not a failing she feels particularly bad about, and in fact she seems quite happy to present herself in this way. In lines 71-75 Lisa talks about how she reads more magazines when she is on holiday, and has more time, not only to read magazines, but also to make the effort to 'make myself salads and – go jogging – as they suggest', but concludes that 'obviously – the that never happens!'

(laughing) put on daytime TV again!'. For Lisa, then, it is 'obvious' that she will not follow up on her good intentions, and the fact that she does not have any difficulty positioning herself in this way suggests that she thinks that she is not unusual in her failure to follow the advice. It would seem that Lisa is not alone, as many of my informants said that although they do find magazines a useful source of information about healthy eating, diets and exercise, they do not necessarily have the time, energy or desire to take up the advice and put it into practice. Similarly, some women mentioned that they enjoy reading and cutting out recipes from the magazines, but rarely get around to actually making the recipes.

When I ask Lisa if not acting on the advice makes her feel guilty, she initially responds that 'yeah it can do' (line 62), but then qualifies her agreement, saying 'yeah but – I've got enough to do in my life without worrying about [...] being too strict on – on myself' (lines 64-65). Here Lisa positions herself as someone who should not, and does not, feel guilty about her inactivity as she already has 'enough to do in my life', the implication being that taking up the magazines' advice is not high on her list of priorities.

Lisa's attitude towards the health and fitness advice, which was quite common amongst my informants, suggests that although women do read some types of advice for information, that is no guarantee that they will actually make use of this information and put it into practice. So, although Lisa does orient towards this advice as being useful, and representing an ideal which she aspires towards, she does not appear to judge herself negatively for not living up to this ideal. More broadly, this suggests that although readers might orient towards certain aspects of the magazines as representing preferred or ideal versions of femininity, they do not necessarily strive towards that ideal in any active way, accepting it as a fantasy and not judging themselves badly in comparison.

4.4 PROBLEM PAGES

4.4.1 Feminist analyses of problem pages

As mentioned earlier, many feminist analyses of women's magazines have regarded problem pages as playing a major role in the creation of the 'synthetic sisterhood'. Other than letters to the editor, the problem page is usually the only section of a magazine which can be seen as a genuine interaction or dialogue between writer

and reader (although, as will be discussed later, the authenticity of this 'dialogue' is open to question).

Problem pages are perhaps the most explicitly normative sections of women's magazines, in the sense that the advice offered is presented as the 'best' or 'right' way to do things, and readers may be criticised if their past behaviour is judged inappropriate in some way. As such, they have been criticised for reinforcing a highly conventional view of femininity (see Ferguson, 1983; McRobbie, 2000). For example, Myra Macdonald argues that:

[T]he problem pages in women's monthly magazines reinforce the mythology that relationships are women's work, and that women have to take the initiative if improvements are to be achieved (Macdonald, 1995: 175).

Although my informants rejected problem pages as a valid source of relationship advice, none of them raised Macdonald's point as a criticism. I did not ask my informants about this issue specifically, which would have prompted them to give an opinion, but I did ask them to explain their resistance to problem pages and relationship advice. The fact that none of the women I spoke to mentioned the notion of relationships as women's work suggests that this belief is so widespread and ingrained that it is accepted as the 'natural' state of affairs, and goes unnoticed and unmarked. Similarly, as mentioned above, very few women questioned the importance the magazines place on finding a man.

Many analysts have also argued that the very existence of problem pages is testament to the socially constructed, rather than biologically determined, nature of femininity. As discussed in section 4.1.3 above, underlying the advice offered in the magazines is the implicit assumption that femininity is not 'natural', it is something which can only be achieved through labour and consumption. Paradoxically, however, this assumption always remains implicit, as the discourses of femininity found in the magazines are predicated on the notion of femininity as 'natural' and 'normal'. Problem pages can be seen as examples of women who are orienting to notions that there are 'correct' ways of being a woman, but who do not know what that involves, or who cannot reconcile their own lives with the lifestyles presented as normal or desirable by the magazines.

This point is raised by Sara Mills, who writes that:

Femininity is [...] a special form of textually mediated relation, that is, where texts mediate or are the focus or instigator of activities, for example, in conduct books or advice columns where the reader examines herself from the standpoint of a text. Problem pages in women's magazines are displays of women finding it difficult to negotiate discourses; these pages of problems offer solutions, but they are also important in the sense of their foregrounding the difficulty women often have inserting themselves 'correctly' within the perceived norms of feminine behaviour [...] They negotiate relations also between women as subjects, since they help to establish positions for individual women within the reading community of the particular magazine (Mills, 1997: 92).

For Mills, the existence of problem pages demonstrates the socially constructed and textually mediated nature of femininity, as well as showing the difficulties individual women face in trying to fit with and adapt to social norms concerning appropriate feminine behaviour. As discussed in much of the previous work on women's magazines, the magazines mediate women's understanding of femininity and their own identity as women. They do this by constructing and reproducing dominant discourses and images of femininity which are held up as ideals, against which readers are expected to examine and judge themselves. For example, the glossy magazines constantly offer advice on dieting (including a lot of features on celebrity diets and how to follow them) and getting a better body, providing glossy, airbrushed pictures of models and celebrities for readers to compare themselves against and aspire towards. Problem pages are unusual in that they feature the problems of individual readers (at least they are presented as such, although some of my informants suggested that the letters might actually be written by journalists), and offer advice on how to deal with these problems, thereby evaluating women's behaviour, and advising them on the most appropriate and desirable ways to behave as women. Mills argues that problem pages highlight the disparity between feminine ideals and real women's experiences, as women write in because these norms do not come naturally to them, and because they feel that in some way they do not, or cannot, live up to these ideals.

As problem pages are provided for the benefit of all readers, rather than just the particular readers whose letters have been published, we can assume that the letters are chosen to represent typical or common problems which the wider readership will identify with. In this way, problem pages seem to be intended to

facilitate a sense of community or sisterhood, as readers are encouraged to share in, and empathise with other women's problems. My data show that readers do not necessarily read the problem pages in this way. They might feel sympathy or pity for the letter-writers, but they do not appear to identify with these women, choosing instead to distance themselves from the type of woman who might write to a problem page. In my interviews women do use the problem pages, as Mills suggests they do, to negotiate their position within the readership of the magazines they read, and to negotiate their relationship with other women. The nature of these relationships, however, may not be as intended by the producers of the magazines, or anticipated by scholars analysing the problem pages themselves.

What these analyses cannot tell us, however, is how readers reconcile their own experiences with the norms of femininity advocated by the agony aunts. When, if at all, would a reader consider writing to a problem page for advice, and to what extent do readers evaluate their own, or others' behaviour by the standards put forward in the problem pages?

4.4.2 Readers and problem pages

As we have seen from the previous extracts, my informants do not blindly follow the advice found in the magazines. However, my informants tended to be critical of the idea that advice should be taken from a magazine, rather than criticising the nature of the advice, or questioning why women should need such advice. My informants are also implicitly critical of other readers. This negative evaluation of readers who take personal advice from magazines is particularly evident in my informants' attitudes towards problem pages and the readers who write in to them. Problem pages are different to the advice given in features and articles in various ways. Firstly, it should be noted that some of my informants expressed doubts about the authenticity of the letters found in problem pages. They argue that they are either written by journalists or that the problems are invented by readers who are hoping to get paid for their letters. This belief seems to be fairly widespread, as can be seen from the recent appearance on a television chat show by the agony aunt from teenage magazine *Sugar*; she was asked if the letters were made up, but her response was that they did not need to fabricate letters as they received hundreds every week (*The Wright Stuff*, Channel Five, June 2003).

Assuming then that the letters are written by actual readers, problem pages are one of the few sections of the magazine which contain some kind of interaction between reader and writer. Problem pages allow individual readers to actively seek advice to a specific problem, typically regarding relationships or health-related issues. It seems reasonable to assume, however, that the selected letters are published not only for the benefit of those particular readers, but also because the agony aunt or editor feels that they address the concerns, whether actual or vicarious and prurient, of the readership in general. Furthermore, because the advice is given by an agony aunt or some other designated 'expert', the role constructed for the writer tends to be one of 'authoritative expert' rather than 'friend'; readers are encouraged to accept the advice of the agony aunt or uncle because they are qualified experts.

Many of my informants read problem pages, but they were all adamant that they would not take advice from a problem page, let alone consider writing in to one, unless the problems dealt with were 'practical' and not 'personal', as can be seen in the following extract:

Extract 4.5: Venus

(41, musician, white, heterosexual)

- 121 D: erm – do you read – does it have an advice page or letters page or
122 anything like that?
- 123 V: erm – yes they have advice on all sorts of things – in that they have I
124 think they've got two advice pages they've got a personal one – and
125 also you know a how to get that mark out of your carpet type advice
126 which is quite interesting
- 127 D: aha
- 128 V: so – yes I do look at those – yes
- 129 D: and would you – er – do you read the advice for entertainment or do
130 you read it because you think you might get some useful – useful =
- 131 V: | both
- 132 D: = advice for yourself?
- 133 V: both – I mean you read it in case it's interesting to you and also you
134 read it to see what problem it is that they're dealing with and
135 whether – you know – how interesting that is
- 136 D: mmh – so have you ever taken the advice given in one of these
137 magazines?

- 138 V: possibly only when it comes to getting marks out of the carpet
- 139 D: right
- 140 V: but I can't say that I would take personal advice from the er agony –
141 the agony aunt
- 142 D: why not?
- 143 V: I don't know [...] cos usually the questions that are asked are very
144 broad
- 145 D: [mmh]
- 146 V: and often not specific enough to an individual – unless it's that
147 particular individual but they choose the questions according I think
148 for a broad interest rather than a particular thing
- 149 D: but do you think the advice itself is [.]
- 150 V: [generally quite sound I think]
- 151 D: right

In this extract Venus is talking about *Good Housekeeping*, which has two problem pages, both of which she reads. In line 124 she describes them as 'a personal one' and a practical, 'how to get that mark out of your carpet type' one. What is interesting here is that although in line 150 she describes the personal advice as 'generally quite sound', she claims to have only taken advice on practical problems. In line 140 she says 'I can't say that I would take personal advice from the agony aunt'. When asked why, she responds in line 143 that 'usually the questions that are asked are very broad and often not specific enough to an individual'. Her initial response, however, is that she does not know, followed by a pause, which indicates that formulating her resistance to the personal advice requires some additional work of her, as was the case with Maggie in extract 4.1. Venus' comments certainly seem to suggest that she is against the idea of taking personal advice from a magazine on principle, as she does not seem to take issue with the quality of the advice given.

In the following extract Gayathri is talking about problem pages, and we can see that she seems to share Venus' attitude towards the idea of taking advice from them:

Extract 4.6: Gayathri

(18, student, Asian, heterosexual)

125 D: ok [...] and you said you read problem pages – or you would read one
126 if there's one in a magazine – em – would you ever write in to a
127 problem page? =

128 G: = no

129 D: no? [...] em – can you tell me why?

130 G: em – well – A I couldn't be bothered [...] B – I would rather ask – I'd
131 rather ask a friend for advice o:r [...] you know family – than [...] than
132 writing in to someone who doesn't even know me

133 D: and why

134 S: | cos I don't think I don't think [...] I think people who expect their
135 pro- you know – I – I just don't think someone who – someone can
136 tell what exactly what your problem is – from one letter [...] unless it's
137 something – like [...] I don't know – something like – a physical
138 problem – a medical problem or something [...] then – you know like
139 if it's a psychological problem then I don't think – it's like you
140 know – I don't think taking the advice of – someone – when they've
141 just read one letter of yours – is – necessarily a good idea

When asked if she would ever write to a problem page for advice, Gayathri's answer, on line 128, is a definitive 'no'. There is no pause between my question and her response, and no use of hedging or epistemic modals (c.f. 'I don't think I don't think [...] I think' in line 134), as is common with dispreferred responses. She does not preface her answer in any way, nor does she offer any elaboration or explanation for her answer. This is particularly striking, as in the rest of her interview her responses tend to begin with some form of hedge, as for example in line 130 ('em – well'), and through the directness of her reply Gayathri clearly distances herself from the type of reader that would write to a problem page. Furthermore, I have received the same response from all the informants who were asked this question, which suggests that there is a uniform and strongly perceived stigma attached to the act of soliciting personal advice from a women's magazine. As discussed in the section 4.1.5 above, this stigma is also evident, and perhaps stated more explicitly, in the comments of men's magazine readers (Jackson et al. 2001), in their construction of men who look to magazines for advice as 'sad losers'.

This view is also evident in the talk of some of my informants. Irene, for example, told me that ‘problem pages are always good – for a laugh’. She expands on her views in the following extract, in which she is talking about reading problem pages as a teenager.

Extract 4.7: Irene

(as in extract 4.3)

65 I: but as well at school we used to go to the library and pick
66 up Just Seventeen and there'd be a whole load of us looking at the
67 problem page – and vandalising it and that – and like writing
68 people's names in the problem page and saying – like – this is so-
69 and-so (laughs)

In the above extract Irene describes the act of ascribing problem page letters to people she knows as a way of making fun of them. In this way, Irene and her friends are participating in a kind of interaction with the text, constructing problem pages as a source of amusement and entertainment, and those who write to them as objects of laughter and ridicule. It is significant that Irene does not read the problem page on her own; rather, it is a group activity, with a ‘whole load of us’ who look at and ‘vandalise’ the problem page together. The fact that Irene describes herself and her friends as ‘vandalising’ the magazine suggests that she sees their actions as being subversive, or even morally wrong in some way, that this is not how the problem page was designed to be read. As such, this co-constructed ‘subversive’ reading of the text serves to unite Irene and her friends as an in-group. Positive identity for the in-group is achieved, at least in part, through their ridicule of the problem page, and by distancing themselves from the type of person who would take advice from a problem page. Attaching people’s names to the letters functions, then, as a convenient way of excluding them from the in-group. As discussed earlier in this chapter, Mary Talbot (1995) uses the term ‘synthetic sisterhood’ to describe the imagined community of women which the magazines attempt to create. For the teenage Irene and her friends, it seems that the magazines do serve to bring the girls together as a kind of sisterhood, but the in-group identity of this sisterhood is achieved by distancing themselves from other girls they know. Their vandalism of the problem pages, using them as an object of fun, also suggests that they do not feel any solidarity towards, or identify themselves with other readers, or indeed with the magazine writers. This suggests that Irene and her friends, at least to some extent, reject the ‘synthetic sisterhood’ created by the magazines.

It is also interesting to note that Irene is describing a difference between her present self and her self in the past, in terms of how she reads the magazines. The act of reading the magazines as part of a group, and using the problem pages as a means of ridiculing other girls, is associated with her youth, and described as something she used to do, from which we can infer that she no longer reads the magazines in this way.

Returning to extract 4.6, we can see that Gayathri is somewhat more reticent than Irene in discussing her attitudes towards problem pages and those who write to them. When asked to explain why she herself would not consider writing to a problem page for advice, Gayathri's talk becomes noticeably more uncertain. The first reason she gives, in lines 130-132, is that she 'couldn't be bothered', which implies that she does not object in principle to seeking advice from an agony aunt, but that she is simply too lazy to do so. However, she then goes on to say that she would prefer to ask a friend or family member for advice, rather than 'someone who doesn't even know me'. Here Gayathri sets up a distinction between the agony aunt, who is constructed as a stranger, and her friends and family. As becomes clear in lines 134 to 141, Gayathri rejects the authority of the agony aunt or 'expert' to give personal advice, because they are strangers and personal advice can only be given, and should only be sought from, people who 'know' you. Physical and medical problems, however, are constructed differently, as problems which can be addressed by a stranger. Gayathri seems to be struggling here, as we can see from the number of pauses and false starts in her speech. She also mitigates her assertions with 'I think' or 'I don't think', and by using hedges such as 'like' and 'you know'. I would argue that this is evidence of Gayathri's awareness that she is entering sensitive territory here, and she is trying to avoid making explicit criticism of those readers who would write to a problem page, while also distancing herself from that group.

Initially, Gayathri focuses on her own situation, saying in line 130 '*I'd rather ask a friend [...] than someone who doesn't even know me*', but then she shifts to speaking more generally about '*your problem*' and '*one letter of yours*', making it clear that she does not feel it is appropriate for anyone to seek personal advice from a magazine, and not just that it is inappropriate for her. This could also be a way of

strengthening her personal opinion by positioning herself as part of a group of women that feel the same way. In line 134 she begins to say 'I think people who expect their problems', as if about to criticise the readers (just as Louise did in extract 4.2, line 88), but then she appears to decide that this is in some way problematic and shifts her focus to the advice-giver instead ('I don't think [...] someone can tell ...'). In line 140, however, she shifts her focus back again, saying 'I don't think taking the advice of someone when they've just read one letter of yours is necessarily a good idea'. What she is implying here is that those women who do seek personal advice from a magazine are somehow misguided or lacking in judgement, although she does attempt to mitigate the force of this criticism by saying 'I don't think' and it's not '*necessarily* a good idea'.

In this extract Gayathri constructs a distinction, not only between the producers of the text and its readers, but also between two groups of readers: believers (i.e. those readers who trust and believe in the value of the advice given in the magazines) and non-believers. Gayathri positions herself as part of an in-group of non-believers, who would always take the better option of seeking personal advice from friends and not from a magazine. In setting up these distinctions she seeks positive distinctiveness, both from the producers of the magazine and also from the out-group of readers who believe in the magazine's advice. This extract also shows Gayathri rejecting any notion of friendship or sisterhood constructed by the magazines, as she draws a clear distinction between her friends and family on the one hand, and the magazine agony aunts on the other. Journalists and agony aunts might position themselves as people who understand the readers and their problems, but Gayathri is strongly resistant to this idea, making it clear that, as far as she is concerned, they are strangers who do not know her, and could not understand her (or other readers') problems on the basis of one letter.

In the following extract Maggie discusses the difference between herself and those women who would seek personal advice from a women's magazine.

Extract 4.8: Maggie
(as in extract 4.1)

- 69 D: what do you think of the advice that they give?
70 M: em [...] I mean generally it's – it's reasonable – there's nothing sort of
71 particularly unreasonable there – it can come across I think as a

- 72 wee bit patronising – but then again if you’ve – I suppose if you’ve
73 actually got to the stage that – you’re having to write to a magazine
74 rather than chat to somebody [...] it’s really quite sad
- 75 D: so – if you ever **had** [...] one of these sort of problems would you ever
76 **consider**?
- 77 M: [no
- 78 D: no?
- 79 M: no I wouldn’t because I think [...] I think just the nature of the person I
80 am I’ll either sort of like – try and sort it out myself – or talk to a friend
81 about it – I wouldn’t – I wouldn’t really feel I’d want to get advice
82 from a stranger who doesn’t really know me from Adam
- 83 D: so what is it – do you think – that makes **other** people decide to
84 write into a magazine rather than doing what you would do and - ?
- 85 M: I don’t know – I mean perhaps it’s – it’s just [...] an inability to sort
86 something out for yourself – and that you’ve reached the end of your
87 tether you can’t see where else you can go with it [...] and maybe
88 just feeling that there’s nobody that – you feel close enough to to
89 actually talk to about it – o:r – there’s nobody that you want to admit
90 to – that you’ve actually got this problem o:r [...] that – it’s just not
91 something you feel – you want to make public in any way amongst
92 friends and family

In extract 4.8, Maggie, like Gayathri, questions the authority of the magazine as a source of personal advice rather than the quality of the advice itself, which she evaluates in lines 70 to 72 as being generally reasonable, if a ‘wee bit patronising’. Also echoing Gayathri’s comments, Maggie constructs personal advice as something which should ideally be sought from friends and family rather than an agony aunt, positioning the former as people who know you and the latter as ‘a stranger who doesn’t really know me from Adam (line 82). In lines 72 to 74 Maggie changes topic from the quality of the advice given to an evaluation of the type of reader who would seek a magazine’s advice. She presents the act of writing to a problem page as a last resort and sees women in this situation as pitiable, saying ‘if you’ve actually got to the stage that – you’re having to write to a magazine rather than chat to somebody [...] it’s really quite sad’ (lines 72-74). Although Maggie, unlike Gayathri, generally positions herself as being sympathetic towards these women, there is an element of judgement and fault-finding in her talk, as is evident in line 85 when she describes them as having ‘an inability to sort something out for yourself’. This comment, because of the larger opposition she has created between herself

and these women, implies that she herself is capable of solving her own problems. Maggie's use of the word 'sad' recalls the words of one of Jackson *et al.*'s (2001) focus groups, who described men who write to problem pages as 'sad losers'. Maggie appears to be using the word in its more conventional sense, suggesting that such women are unfortunate and worthy of sympathy or pity, whereas describing someone as a 'sad loser' suggests that they are worthy of contempt.

Like Gayathri, Maggie is adamant that she would never even consider writing to a problem page, as we can see from the way she responds before I have finished asking the question. The nature of her response demonstrates her desire to distance herself from this type of reader and to seek positive distinctiveness from them, which suggests that she does indeed find fault with this group. As such, we can see that she chooses not to participate in the community of women set up for her by the magazine.

4.5 DOES AGE MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

Many of my informants suggested that problem pages, and much of the more general advice, would be more relevant and useful to younger readers, particularly teenagers. It was also frequently suggested that teenagers were more vulnerable to any negative influence the magazines might exert, and were more likely to succumb to problems of negative body image. It would be interesting to look at how teenagers themselves talk about advice, but as I only interviewed one teenager (Gayathri, 18 years old), it is difficult for me to explore this issue in any detail. As we saw in extract 4.6 above, Gayathri's attitude towards taking advice from problem pages is very similar to that of the older women I interviewed. Interestingly, however, unlike the older women Gayathri did suggest that girls her age were *less* likely to judge themselves negatively in comparison with the norms set by the magazines, and I will return to this point in more detail later in this section.

In the following extract, Caroline, who is divorced and has two daughters, is talking about how she felt when her youngest daughter first started buying magazines, and we can see that while she is worried about the effect that the magazines might have on girls her daughter's age, she also suggests that they might provide some useful information that girls would not find elsewhere.

Extract 4.9: Caroline

(49, white, working class, heterosexual, support worker)

- 215 C: well when my youngest daughter first started buying them when she
216 was about eleven or twelve and I'm like look at this! I just thought =
- 217 D: | mmh
- 218 C: = this is a load of – I mean it was **all** about sex – from what I could =
- 219 D: | mmh
- 220 C: = gather – um – sex and – fashion – but with a heavy emphasis on
221 boyfriends and snogging and Christmas snogs and all this sort of =
- 222 D: | yeah | mmh
- 223 C: = stuff – and all this stupid language the words that they make up –
224 em [...] you know they tend to put things on the end of words and
225 make th- like snogeroony and things (laughter) um – I – I was
226 actually quite worried – um I thought ooh – you know – and I and
227 I **do** have an objection to – the idea that – um – I mean – reading
228 them you would think there was nothing else in the world other than
229 boyfriends and sex and snogs and things – and I do – I do find that
230 quite difficult [...] but – I mean I can turn it on it's head and say that
231 how many eleven and to sixteen year olds are going to come to their
232 parents?
- 233 D: mmh =
- 234 C: = for advice – and – um – I mean I think that's probably very few –
235 they'd rather ask their friends they'd rather discuss it with their =
- 236 D: | yeah
- 237 C: friends – and they'd rather read it – read about it and work their way
238 through it – and um – I mean – you know in amongst it all I s'pose
239 there's some fairly – there's some fairly basic – stu – I mean stuff
240 about – you know – how you do certain things and what happens
241 when you do and – and um [...] it's better to be informed than not
242 informed so – I I'm – I've sort of thought well – you know – at least
243 there's something in there – um – which is in some way informative
244 it might be very dressed up and it might – it might put pre- you know
245 bit of it think – me thinks well it puts pressure on people to be feeling
246 they have to do these things
- 247 D: | yeah
- 248 C: but the other bit of me thinks well if people **are** doing these things –
249 it's better to read about it – and to get as much information as you =
- 250 D: | they can get information – mmh

In this extract Caroline is talking about the magazines her youngest daughter read when she was eleven or twelve, and her concerns that the magazines placed undue emphasis on boyfriends and sex. In line 216 Caroline describes her shock when she looked at the magazines (“I’m like look at this!”), and how she ‘just thought this is a load of – I mean it was **all** about sex’. We can see in this extract that Caroline is aware of, and somewhat alarmed by, the discourse of compulsory heterosexuality which pervades the magazine text, arguing that ‘reading them you would think there was nothing else in the world other than boyfriends and sex and snogs and things’ (lines 227-229). She is, however, somewhat hesitant in her criticism, as can be seen from the number of pauses, false starts (‘and I and I **do** have an objection ...’), and hedges (‘um’, ‘I mean’, ‘you know’) in these lines. Caroline’s hesitation here indicates that she is attending to the possibility that her criticism of the sexual content of the magazines is sensitive or potentially problematic in some way.

When raising her concerns she says ‘I was *actually* quite worried’ (lines 225-226), and then adds ‘I **do** have an objection...’ (line 227). Broadly speaking, ‘actually’ is used as a marker of contrast and revision (Clift, 2001), and here I would argue that it is used to indicate a disjunctive topic change. The change here occurs as Caroline shifts from talking about the sexual content of the magazines, to making a critical comment about this content. The shift could be heard as disjunctive because previously her remarks seemed more light-hearted than serious, as shown by our laughter in line 225, but now Caroline wants to make a serious point about the magazines’ emphasis on boyfriends and sex. Similarly, when Caroline says ‘I **do** have an objection...’, the emphatic ‘do’ suggests that this response is unexpected or contradictory in some way.

As discussed in section 4.1.4, Mary Talbot (1992) looks at how the writers of a beauty feature in *Jackie* use lexical items (she gives the examples ‘lippy’ and ‘cutesy’) which are meant to approximate the readers’ way of speaking, as one way of constructing a friendly, intimate tone. Caroline has also noticed this strategy, and is unimpressed by ‘all this stupid language the words that they make up [...] they tend to put things on the end of words and make th- like snogeroony and things’ (lines 223-225). Of course, if this language is used to appeal to pre-teen or teenage

girls, then it is not surprising that older women like Caroline notice it as something unusual or wrong, and my data cannot tell us how younger readers respond to this strategy. What Caroline's comments do suggest, however, is that readers who lie outside the target readership are perhaps more likely to notice these attempts at fostering a sense of community and sisterhood.

In lines 230-251 Caroline presents an alternative viewpoint, suggesting that despite her concerns about the kinds of information and advice her daughter might be getting from the magazines, they do provide some useful information which young girls might not get elsewhere because they are unlikely to ask their parents. In the earlier extracts in this chapter we saw women claiming that it was preferable to get personal advice from friends and family, rather than turning to a magazine. Here, on the other hand, Caroline suggests that younger readers, although they might turn to their friends, would prefer to get information about sex from magazines rather than asking their parents. In this case, Caroline accepts that magazines can be a valuable source of basic information about 'how you do certain things and what happens when you do' (lines 240-241), and although she does not say this directly, she might regard magazines as a more reliable source of information, as other young girls are likely to be equally uninformed, or worse, misinformed (I say this based on my own personal experience of having been misinformed by my peers, and labouring under those misapprehensions for some years!). Many of my other informants also remarked that when they were teenagers, magazines had been a valuable source of information about potentially embarrassing subjects like periods and sex, particularly if they did not wish to reveal their lack of knowledge to their friends.

In Caroline's talk we can see her trying to weigh up the advantages and disadvantages of her daughter reading the magazines. When describing the positive side of the sex advice she seems hesitant, as we can see from the number of false starts (e.g. 'there's some fairly – there's some fairly basic – stu – I mean stuff' in line 239) and hedges (e.g. 'and um – I mean – you know' in line 238) found in lines 237-246. Caroline also tries to mitigate and downgrade her positive assessment of the magazines. For example, in line 238, she says 'I s'pose [there's some fairly basic stuff]...'. By prefacing her proposition with 'I s'pose', Caroline indicates that she is doubtful about the validity of her assertion. Similarly, she says

'I've sort of thought well – you know – at least there's something in there – um – which is in some way informative' (lines 242-243). Here, 'sort of' and 'in some way' both serve to express Caroline's reservations about proposition, indicating that she is not entirely committed to her suggestion that if young girls are going to start becoming sexually active anyway, then it is important that they can look to the magazines for practical advice and information. Caroline expresses these doubts more directly in lines 244-251, where she states that part of her thinks that the magazines '[puts] pressure on people to be feeling that they have to do these things', but that 'the other bit of me thinks well if people *are* doing these things – it's better to read about it – and to get as much information as you can'.

In this extract, then, Caroline expresses a similar argument to that put forward by many feminist scholars: that the magazines try to define what it means to be a girl or a woman, and disseminate heterosexist ideologies of femininity which place men at the centre of women's lives, so that everything they do becomes about finding and keeping a man. However, Caroline also argues that magazines can provide useful information, although her uncertainty in making this point suggests that she is not entirely convinced by this. I would argue that this is because she would prefer young girls like her daughter not to be so concerned with boys, but feels that it is unavoidable.

In the following extract Gayathri, the only teenager I interviewed, offers a different take from Caroline (although she is not specifically talking about advice), suggesting that older women are more likely to find magazines depressing than teenage readers. As we saw in the previous extract, Caroline was concerned that young girls reading magazines would come to think that 'there was nothing else in the world other than boyfriends and sex and snogs and things'. In extract 4.10 below we will see that Gayathri herself has also noted the magazines' discourse of compulsory heterosexuality:

Extract 4.10: Gayathri

(as in extract 4.6)

316 G: yeah – generally yeah – I mean – I suppose it is a bit [...] you know –
317 they sort of – they go on about how – girl power or whatever – and
318 how women should be strong and independent and all this – and
319 then they sort of say – you know – but then they remind you – say if
320 you're single – and then reading magazines is just a constant

321 reminder – basically saying – you **should** be in a relationship – this
322 is what you should have – you should have the clothes and the
323 boyfriend and the job – and – whatever – and be all stylish and
324 fashionable – and in that sense it's not so good

[...]

330 G: just a bit of fun – I don't take them seriously – and I'd rather read
331 about – you know – famous people – silly things – expensive clothes
332 which I can't afford and all that kind of stuff – it doesn't depress me it
333 doesn't make me think – it doesn't make me feel sad or anything [.]
334 mm – I don't know – maybe it's different because I'm just a teenager
335 - maybe it's different when you're older – and then it just makes –
336 you know – when you're just a teenager – all the things you read
337 about is stuff that should be happening to you in the **future** – and so
338 it doesn't – you know – stuff about – you know – all the – most of the
339 women they interview aren't my age – they're all older than me –
340 and so it just – it actually makes – it's just more aspirational kind of
341 thing – and it just makes you feel **more** ambitious – whereas **maybe**
342 - if you're say – in your late twenties and you're reading about all
343 these successful women – who are just turned twenty or early
344 twenties – then maybe that does – it is detrimental – I don't know –
345 I think it's definitely easier reading this stuff when you're younger [.]

In lines 316-324 of the above extract, Gayathri comments on the contradictory discourses which can be found in the magazines, noting that on the one hand, 'they go on about how – girl power or whatever – and how women should be strong and independent and all this' (lines 317-318), while also placing a heavy emphasis on the importance of heterosexual relationships, and 'basically saying – you **should** be in a relationship' (line 321). The expression 'go on about X' implies that someone talks/writes about X on a regular basis, and that this is something of an annoyance to the speaker, which suggests that Gayathri is not particularly interested in or impressed by the magazines' expressions of 'girl power'. This is backed up by her talk elsewhere in the interview, where Gayathri says she finds 'serious' political or news features in the magazines hypocritical when juxtaposed with more 'superficial' content on fashion and make-up. She also says that she reads women's magazines as an escape, and therefore only wants to read 'trashy' content.

Gayathri emphasises the normative nature of magazine discourse through her use of 'should', particularly with the emphatic stress on 'should' in 'you **should** be in a relationship'. She also uses a three-part structure ('you **should** be in a relationship – this is what you should have – you should have the clothes and the boyfriend and the job'), a common rhetorical device, particularly in political speech-making (see

Atkinson, 1984), which is used to make the speaker's argument more emphatic and persuasive. Gayathri clearly recognises the way in which the magazines seek to define and prescribe what it means to be a woman, which involves not only having a boyfriend, but also living a certain kind of lifestyle, with the right clothes and the right job. Nevertheless, her criticism remains somewhat muted, concluding in line 324 that 'in that sense it's not so good', but not taking her criticism any further.

In lines 330-333 Gayathri positions herself as someone who does not take the magazines seriously, and is not adversely affected by the ideologies of femininity they construct and convey. Instead, she constructs the magazines as being 'just a bit of fun' (line 330). Previously (in lines 325-329, which are not included in extract 4.10) Gayathri remarked that she is not interested in reading stories about 'real' women, and in lines 330-333 she goes on to state that she prefers reading about 'silly things – expensive clothes which I can't afford and all that kind of stuff'. It seems, then, that although Gayathri has noted that the magazines do not simply provide entertainment, but that they also act as the purveyor of ideologies which might be detrimental to women, she nevertheless is happy to continue reading them and would not particularly want them to change. She argues that the magazines do not have a negative effect on her, claiming that 'it doesn't depress me it doesn't make me think – it doesn't make me feel sad or anything' (lines 332-333). Comments like this were common amongst my informants, as we saw in Chapter 3, as many women are keen to emphasise that they are immune from any detrimental effects the magazines might have on other women.

In line 335, Gayathri raises the possibility that age might play a part in how women respond to the magazines, but unlike my older informants, she suggests that although younger women like herself might regard magazines as 'just a bit of fun', 'maybe it's different when you're older'. Gayathri argues that the feminine ideal found in the magazines she reads (principally *Glamour*, and other magazines such as aimed at women in their twenties and thirties, like *Marie Claire* and *Cosmopolitan*) is not something she judges herself against, because 'all the things you read about is stuff that should be happening to you in the **future**' (lines 336-337). Because the women who appear in the magazines are older than Gayathri, she feels that she does not have to judge herself by their standards. However, she does admit to being influenced by the magazines, in that she describes them as being

'aspirational' (line 340), and claims that they make her 'feel *more* ambitious' (line 341). Gayathri compares her own situation with that of women in their late twenties, who might feel bad when comparing themselves with 'all these successful women – who are just turned twenty or early twenties'. Gayathri's repeated use of 'maybe' (note the emphatic stress on 'maybe' in line 344), as well as the added disclaimer 'I don't know' (line 344), express Gayathri's uncertainty about the validity or truth of her suggestion that the magazines are detrimental to older women, as she cannot speak from any personal experience, or know how she will feel about magazines in the future. She concludes in line 345 that 'it's definitely easier reading this stuff when you're younger', but prefaces this comment with the personalised form 'I think', presenting her proposition as a statement of opinion, rather than fact.

4.6 CONCLUSION

As argued by Talbot (1992, 1995) and others, problem pages and other advice sections are constructed to invoke shared experiences and feelings of identification with the women who write in with their problems, and with the writers who give advice, but as we have seen in this chapter, this relationship is not necessarily accepted by readers. My informants distance themselves from other readers by comparing those readers' lives unfavourably with their own, and from the magazines' writers by positioning them as strangers. This rejection of intimacy between reader and writer is made most explicit by one of my informants, Meera (see extract 3.2) who says 'I suppose also if you read magazines over a long period of time – you just assume that there's a bond between – the reader and the writer and er – I don't think that's true'.

My data suggest that readers do position themselves as members of a group of women with shared beliefs. However, this in-group may not necessarily correspond with the imagined community, or 'synthetic sisterhood', which they are invited to participate in by the magazines. For example, the fact that all of my informants said they would never write to a magazine's problem page for advice, and would generally never take any personal advice from a magazine can, at least in part, be interpreted as a rejection of a 'synthetic sisterhood'. Talbot (1995) argued that the simulation of friendship between reader and writer(s) was central to the establishment of the synthetic sisterhood. It is evident from the data that readers actively reject this idea of a close, confiding relationship between themselves and

the writers and refuse to be positioned in this way. This does not mean, however, that they entirely reject all aspects of the imagined community created in the magazines' advice pages.

For example, my data show that readers are actively resistant to the simulation of friendship constructed in the advice pages, thereby also rejecting the magazines as an appropriate source of relationship advice. However, in the case of my heterosexual informants, there was very little evidence of resistance to the heteronormative discourses which underlie the magazines' relationship advice. Heterosexual readers did not question the fact that in any discussion of sexual relationships in the magazines the focus is almost exclusively on heterosexual relationships. However, as we saw with Caroline and Gayathri, some readers do question the heavy emphasis the magazines place on relationships, arguing that this could make single women feel bad, or put pressure on young girls to feel that they have to find a boyfriend and become sexually active, although comments like this do not occur that frequently in my data. More often, I found that readers might question the quality and effectiveness of the advice given in the magazines, or argue that relationship advice should be ideally be sought from friends and family, but there is very little questioning of the underlying assumption that all single women are in search of a man, and that once in a relationship with a man, it is the woman who bears the primary responsibility for working at and maintaining that relationship. Talbot (1995) argues that the more an actual reader has in common with the implied reader the more likely she is to accept the discourses found in the magazines uncritically and unconsciously. My data suggest that this is indeed the case, although not universally so, with the majority of heterosexual readers uncritically reproducing the magazines' discourses on finding and keeping a man. The lesbian women I interviewed tended to dismiss problem pages as being irrelevant to their lives, noting that they only deal with heterosexual relationships. They did not seem to expect or desire the situation to be any different, however, perhaps because, as Shazia suggested in Chapter 3 (extract 3.3), this is what they have come to expect from a heterosexist society and so they are not surprised by being marginalised by the magazines in this way.

As well as the simulation of friendship, the conflation of femininity with consumerism was another central factor in the creation of the magazines' imagined communities.

Here again we find evidence of resistance but also evidence of constraints on how critical (including self-critical) readers are of the magazines' discourses of femininity based on shared consumption. My data suggest that readers are well aware that advice on fashion and cosmetics is not altruistic, but rather that it is designed primarily to sell consumer goods. Nonetheless, this awareness does not always lead to readers resisting this consumerist message. In this respect it could be argued that readers are participating in the synthetic sisterhood created by the magazines, but in the knowledge that this community is 'synthetic', and that there is a commercial, rather than genuinely 'sisterly' imperative behind the advice. As we saw with Maggie, many readers know that they are being encouraged to keep consuming cosmetic products, but are willing to accept this aspect of femininity as it is presented in the magazines for various reasons, not least because they find it pleasurable.

We have seen, both in this chapter and the previous one, that readers are not cultural dopes who will unquestioningly accept the identities constructed for them in the texts. Readers are actively agentive in the ways they interpret and take up the ideologies of femininity found in the magazines, although they are not completely free in their interpretations. Although many readers are actively and consciously resistant to being positioned as members of the 'women's world' produced by the magazines, in other respects it seems that they are positioned or constrained, both actively and passively, by the discourses of femininity made available in the magazines. In terms of what readers' talk about advice can tell us about femininity, it seems that many women do accept the notion of femininity as something which requires work, and the resolution of certain 'problems'. As we have seen from the data discussed above, many readers do not question the magazines' construction of certain issues as being central to being a woman, such as looking after your appearance, or finding a boyfriend/husband. They also seem to accept that these issues are not only important, but also potentially problematic for women, although they might question where to go or who to turn to when trying to solve these problems. In this sense then, even for women like Gayathri and Maggie who reject the idea that personal advice can or should be taken from a magazine, the magazines still seem to serve the function of identifying and articulating what it means to be feminine, and the problems involved in defining oneself as a woman,

although they may not necessarily actively strive to conform in all aspects to the ideal femininity presented in the magazines.

In the next chapter I take a slightly different approach to the data, drawing on membership categorisation analysis (MCA) to look at how women invoke different gender categories in order to define themselves and others, and to identify with, or distance themselves from, certain types of woman. In the next chapter I also use MCA to take a closer look at how certain activities and interests are normatively tied to gender categories, and the discursive strategies women use reproduce or resist these ties when constructing a feminine identity for themselves.

CHAPTER 5

MEMBERSHIP CATEGORISATION ANALYSIS: REPRODUCING AND RESISTING GENDER CATEGORIES

5.1 INTRODUCTION

5.1.1 Aims of this chapter

In this chapter I examine some of my data using the analytic tools provided by membership categorisation analysis (hereafter MCA), in order to explore how my informants orient to notions that certain activities and interests are tied to gender categories, and how they negotiate identities for themselves by reproducing or resisting and redefining these categories.

MCA is based on the early work of Harvey Sacks (1992) and looks at the locally occasioned ways in which speakers categorise themselves and others as a means of organising the social world around them. In the methodology chapter I provided an overview of MCA (section 2.3.3), looking at its development as a branch of conversation analysis (CA), and also at the current status of MCA within both CA and feminist research on language. I also introduced some of the central concepts on which MCA is based, principally the membership categorisation device (MCD), the standardised relational pair (SRP) and the notion of category-bound activities (CBAs).

In this chapter I begin by looking in more detail at some of the previous feminist/language and gender research which has incorporated MCA in its analysis, and consider what this work has contributed to the field. I then consider some data extracts: firstly, I look at how my informants do membership categorisation work when describing the target reader; secondly, I focus on several extracts of data from one interview, looking at how one informant attempts to account for her interest and participation in activities (sport, and reading men's magazines) which are category-bound to men.

Through this analysis I demonstrate the utility of membership categorisation analysis in examining the ways in which dominant constructions of gender identity and gendered behaviour are reproduced or resisted in talk.

5.1.2 MCA and feminist/language and gender research

As discussed in section 2.3.4, CA and related methodologies such as MCA have often been regarded as being incompatible with the political aims of feminist research on language and gender. In recent years, however, a number of researchers have argued that (some) conversation analytic methods can provide a useful tool in the empirical analysis of 'doing gender' (see section 2.3.4.3). CA's focus on the fine-grained, turn-by-turn analysis of everyday interaction, as well as its perspective that the social order is constructed through such mundane interaction, fits well with the aims of much recent language and gender research; treating gender as a fluid construct rather than a fixed property, and exploring how gender is achieved through talk, moving away from previous research which concerned itself with the notion of gendered speech styles, and how to define and characterise those styles.

This growing interest in conversation analytic methods within the field of language and gender research is reflected in the publication of a special issue of the journal *Discourse & Society* in 2002 (13(6)), which was devoted to this theme. As stated by the guest editors Elizabeth Stokoe and Ann Weatherall, the aims of the issue were to bring together conversation analytic studies of language and gender in order 'to lend coherence to a previously disparate but distinct strand of language and gender theorizing' (Stokoe and Weatherall, 2002: 707). As there was, and indeed still is, much debate on the compatibility of CA with feminist aims, this issue of the journal also aimed to 'revisit the language and gender arena from an explicitly conversation analytic (CA) perspective, asking what it can contribute to the field [...] so that the academic community can engage with, and see the potential of feminist conversation analytic work' (2002:707).

Three of the articles published in this issue of *Discourse & Society* explicitly make use of MCA in their analyses. Ann Weatherall (2002) draws on MCA to look at how children negotiate gender categories and the category-bound activities (CBAs) associated with them. Weatherall argues that the analysis of interaction between

children is particularly fruitful for researchers using MCA, as children are in the process of becoming acculturated as members of their society, which requires them to acquire competence in the use and interpretation of membership categorisation devices.

Weatherall's research is based on audio and video recordings of six four-year-old children. The children were placed in different combinations to form all-male, all-female and mixed groups, and were recorded while playing. When playing with a train set the association between the category 'boy' and the activity 'train driving' (as well as the disjunction between 'girl' and 'train driving') is made relevant. The train set the children are playing with comes with three dolls. In two examples Weatherall looks at how the children negotiate the gender identity of the dolls, and decide who gets to 'be' each doll. Specifically, it is the role of train driver which seems to cause problems for the children, as they jointly attempt to establish which child (and which doll) can legitimately take the role of train driver. In one example, two girls in an all girl group both want to 'be' the train driver, but encounter difficulties over whether either of them can, as girls, take this role, because they have identified the train driver doll (this doll was depicted as the driver on the box, and was dressed in blue with a cap) as a boy.

In another extract, a girl and two boys are trying to decide where to place the dolls, and have problems deciding if a doll in a red dress, clearly identifiable as a girl, can sit in the front and be the driver. Although there are conflicting responses and they attempt to seek clarification from the adults, finally the little girl decides that 'it's a girl one the red one so that doesn't go there' (Weatherall, 2002: 777).

Weatherall states one of her aims as being to demonstrate the value of a conversation analytic perspective to feminist research on gender and language. She shows that gender is demonstrably relevant to the interaction between these children as they negotiate and learn to reproduce gendered patterns of behaviour. These exchanges demonstrate that gender norms are not innate, but rather socially constructed and acquired through socialisation. However, in Weatherall's data we see that young children orient to these norms as being important from a young age, and seem to treat them as prescriptive. The problems encountered by the children seem to stem in a large part from the way in which gender had been assigned to the

toys themselves: the way in which the doll depicted as the train driver appears to be male reinforces a link between boys and train driving which the children treat as normative, even in play.

Secondly, Isabella Paoletti (2002) combines CA and MCA to explore how caring for the elderly is constructed as a gendered activity, category-bound to female kinship categories. Paoletti shows how providing care is strongly (and normatively) associated with the category of 'wife' or 'daughter' (the implication being that if the female relative were not to accept the role of carer, they would then fall into the category of 'bad' wife or daughter), whereas male kinship categories do not seem to entail the same level of obligation.

Paoletti argues that the construction of caring as women's work is a product not only of socialisation, but is also 'finely ingrained in ordinary talk' (Paoletti, 2002: 808). When asked to account for why they took up the role of carer, Paoletti's informants often invoked kinship categories, particularly standardised relational pairs such as 'mother-daughter' or 'husband-wife', explaining that 'I do it because she is my mother', or 'I must do it because he is my husband' (2002: 810). Paoletti's data demonstrates that kinship categories carry with them category-bound responsibilities and obligations, and that there is a moral imperative to fulfil these obligations. This is demonstrated by the way in which the women interviewed presented their familial ties as being the main reason for them taking on what is a difficult, and often thankless, task. However difficult this task might be, Paoletti found that many of her informants accepted their obligations unquestioningly, some taking on sole responsibility for care-giving, even where others were able and willing to help. Paoletti suggests that:

Caring practices are bound to feminine identity and contribute to defining the feminine subjectivity as well as her moral worthiness. Female caregivers can easily get trapped in construction of caring as their exclusive duty, responsibility and ineluctable destiny. They identify with it: their lives are organized around and by caring, with no time off from it (Paoletti, 2002: 814).

The disjunction between men and caring was also invoked in Paoletti's data, with some informants saying that they were not, or did not expect to be, cared for by their children because they only had sons. Furthermore, when male relatives did act as

caregivers, even if only on a limited basis, they were often presented as acting out of kindness and virtue, rather than a sense of duty. Paoletti also describes how a male carer being interviewed (not by Paoletti herself) was put in a position where he had to account for why he, rather than his wife, had assumed responsibility for the care of his mother.

In this way we can see how the construction of caring and nurturing as distinctly feminine qualities (and responsibilities) is reproduced and perpetuated through talk and practice. More generally, Paoletti's research provides a persuasive example of the role that membership categorisation devices play in the construction of the moral order. Through their talk, Paoletti's informants construct their category-tied obligations as being the main motivation for their actions, and the gendered nature of these obligations has become so ingrained that women do not question that they should bear the sole burden of caring for elderly relatives. Male relatives, on the other hand, are not expected to take on caring duties, even if there are no suitable female relatives to fill the role of carer. If a male relative does become a carer, this is noticeably disjunctive, and he may be required to account for this disjunction, or else praised for taking on a burden that should not have been his.

Finally, Peter Eglin (2002) looks at how the categories of 'women' and 'feminists' are invoked and constructed in data related to the massacre of female engineering students in Montreal. Eglin's research is based on data taken from a corpus of media coverage of the 'Montreal massacre', in which a man on an 'anti-feminist crusade' shot female engineering students at a polytechnique in Montreal (see also Eglin and Hester, 1999a; 1999b).

As Lepine, the killer, also killed himself, Eglin suggests that he was faced with a dilemma as to how to ensure that in the aftermath, the world would correctly interpret his actions as 'anti-feminist'. Lepine dealt with this problem by leaving a suicide note and by making an announcement at the scene of the crime. He also separated the male and female students, ordering the men out of the room before shooting the women. The murderer's announcement was reported to be: 'You're women. You're going to be engineers. You're all a bunch of feminists. I hate feminists' (Eglin, 2002:820). Eglin points out that 'women' can be heard both as a stage-of-life category and as a gender category, and that Levine therefore had to

ensure that he was seen to be targeting women as opposed to men, rather than women as opposed to girls. He makes gender observably relevant through the act of separating the women from the men, as well as by stating 'you're women'.

However, Lepine was not targeting all women, only women he identified as 'feminists', and so he also had to make this categorisation available and relevant to the interpretation of his actions. Eglin shows how Lepine's (reported) announcement identifies his victims as well as the reason for their victimisation. The statement 'you're going to be engineers', which follows 'you're women', while it makes the women's identities as engineering students relevant, is not immediately hearable as disjunctive or derogatory. Eglin argues that the disjunctive relationship between 'women' and 'engineers' is hearably prompted by the further identification of the women as 'feminists'. Eglin notes that the statement 'you're all a bunch of feminists' is hearable as a denunciation because it 'utilizes a conventional format for denouncing, 'you are all a bunch of [X]', where X is a place holder for a set of (hearably) derogatory descriptors' (Eglin, 2002: 820-821). In this way, Lepine made clear, not only that he categorised his victims as feminists, but also his negative evaluation of feminists. Witnesses could then use their cultural knowledge about these categories to make a connection between 'women', 'engineers' and 'feminists' and come to a conclusion about Lepine's anti-feminist motives (whether or not they agree with or share Lepine's evaluation). Eglin argues that Lepine's announcement hearably constructs engineering as a job that is category-bound to men, and that these women are feminists because they are training to do men's jobs, and doing men's jobs is something that feminists do.

One of the first examples of feminist research which explicitly utilised MCA was Maria Wolk's 1984 analysis of a murder suspect's confession. In her analysis of the confession, Wolk demonstrates how the suspect attempts to transfer blame onto his female victim through the subtle invocation of gender categories and common sense knowledge about what does or does not constitute gender-appropriate attributes and behaviour.

In his confession, the suspect explicitly categorises his victim as a 'girl' but, Wolk argues, implicitly invokes the gender category of 'slut' or 'tramp' through his description of her behaviour. Firstly, the suspect suggests that the victim

'propositioned' him three times. He also suggests that she was 'pretty well loaded' at the time and asked him if he 'would like to get laid'. He then claims that she called him 'a prick and a no good son of a bitch' and threw a bottle of beer at him.

As discussed in Chapter 2, categories are 'inference rich': when a membership category is applied to an individual, members can draw inferences about the attributes and behaviour of this individual on the basis of their category membership. Equally, by describing an individual's actions or characteristics, members can make assumptions about the individual's category membership, without the explicit mention of that category. In Wowk's data, there is explicit mention of both a membership category ('girl') and of this 'girl's' behaviour. There is, however, a lack of fit between the victim's ascribed categorisation as a 'girl' and her reported behaviour; getting drunk, propositioning men, and being both verbally and physically abusive, are not activities which are normatively associated with 'girls'. This incongruity leads to what Watson and Weinberg (1982) describe as a 'category puzzle' for members trying to interpret the confession, which requires members to engage in further categorisation work. Wowk suggests that:

The 'solution' to this puzzle can be found by trying to relate the activities outlined by the suspect to the category 'girl'. That is, the recipient can make inferences as to 'what kind of girl' would do this and one available solution is, for example, the category 'tramp' or 'slut'. In other words, these descriptions of the victim do not select one definitive categorization for her so much as they select a sub-set of categories from the MCD 'moral types of female' (Wowk, 1984: 77).

If a person does not fulfil their category-bound obligations, or behaves in a way which is incongruous with their category membership, then they can be subject to praise or censure (Sacks, 1992). In Wowk's data, the murder suspect exploits the normative power of gender categories, and trades on shared cultural knowledge about what constitutes appropriate behaviour for incumbents of these categories, in order to recategorise his victim as a 'slut' (without actually having to explicitly label her as such), and thereby transfer some of the blame for her death onto the victim herself.

Susan Ehrlich (1998, 2000) has written extensively about the language of sexual harassment and rape trials, examining how dominant notions about rape, gender and heterosexuality are constructed and reproduced by the various parties involved

in the trials. Ehrlich draws on CDA as the basis for her analysis rather than MCA or other conversation analytic methods, but covers some of the same ground as Wowk and reaches similar conclusions. Both demonstrate the normative nature of dominant discourses of gender, and the way in which these discourses shape the way an individual's actions are represented (in the account of both themselves and others) and made culturally intelligible.

I have raised Ehrlich's work not only because it deals with similar subject matter, but because it shows how similar data can be approached and analysed using different methods and from different theoretical perspectives. Wowk's work (as well as the other studies described in this chapter) demonstrates the utility of MCA in providing the analytical tools with which to show *that* and *how* gendered identities and gendered behaviour are locally occasioned through talk. However, that is not to say that MCA is the only or the best way to examine the discursive construction of gender, rather that it is a useful and valid addition to the 'analytical toolkit' available to language and gender researchers.

More recently, Elizabeth Stokoe (2003) has used MCA in her analysis of neighbour disputes. Like Wowk, Stokoe shows how participants in interaction draw on categories from the MCD 'moral types of female' in order to justify or pass moral judgement on the behaviour of themselves or others. Stokoe notes how the membership category of 'mother' can be used both to warrant complaints against neighbours as well as to defend against complaints. For example, one woman, who had been the subject of a neighbour's complaints about excessive noise, defends herself against these accusations by constructing her behaviour as simply fulfilling her obligations as a 'good' mother: Hoovering in order to keep a clean house, and allowing her children to play in the house.

In another example, participants account for their complaints about a neighbour, and the bad behaviour of her son, by invoking an incongruence between the neighbour's behaviour and her incumbency of the category 'mother'. The woman is described as 'never there', 'out at night' and 'effing' in front of her children (2003: 326). Stokoe notes that from this description members can infer the woman's 'absent' activities (Sacks, 1992: Vol. I: 585), activities which are bound to the category of 'good mother', such as not swearing in front of the children and being at home to look after

them and monitor their behaviour. The way to make sense of this disjunction between category and activities, or 'category puzzle', is to search for an alternative, more suitable, membership category, in this case that of 'bad mother'. As Lena Jayyusi (1984) notes, members make moral judgements as to whether a category incumbent is a 'good [X]' or a bad [X], based on whether they can be seen to be fulfilling their category-bound duties and obligations:

[S]ome categorizations are usable in explicitly moral ways, so that the fulfilment of moral duties and commitments is basic for the assessment of the performance of category tasks and thus for a person's being constituted as a *good X*, which is itself central to the notion of being a *genuine X*, e.g. a good mother, a good doctor, a good policeman (Jayyusi, 1984: 44; emphasis in original).

The neighbours also invoke the woman's status as a 'single woman', and moreover 'single mother' as being relevant to their complaint, when one of the participants comments on the fact that she 'doesn't have a bloke'. The invocation of the category 'mother' also makes relevant the SRP 'mother-father' as well as the MCD 'family', which normatively includes not only 'mother' and 'child', but also 'father'. The implication, Stokoe argues, is that their neighbour has breached the moral order by failing to fulfil her obligations as a mother, which include providing a father for her children, and therefore can be judged as immoral.

5.2 MEMBERSHIP CATEGORISATION AND THE TARGET READER

As discussed in Chapter 1, many analysts have written about the ways in which women's magazines seek to define what it means to be a 'woman', and present themselves as catering for all women, regardless of the ways in which differences in socio-economic status, sexuality and ethnicity affect women's lived experience. It is clear from my data that my informants do not see all women as sharing the same attributes, experiences and interests, although they make use of membership categories which define different types of woman. My informants often make explicit reference to different categories of women, particularly when trying to describe the target readership of a given magazine or magazines. Moreover, what is noticeable is that while my informants are willing to ascribe category membership to other women/readers, they tend to construct their own behaviour and interests as being aspects of their personality as an individual.

Extract 5.1: Alice

(23, white, heterosexual, middle class, recent graduate)

217 A: em – well it's the kind of – em [...] Sex and the City lot isn't it –em [...]
218 you know – the young trendy professionals – that's a really broad
219 category but – em – oh – people who have – em – you know – feng
220 shui in their houses and (laughter) they – they have – you know –
221 ach! – sort of Bridget Jones style maybe I don't know – that sort of
222 thing just pop culture – really [...]

In extract 5.1 above, Alice is trying to define the target reader of *Cosmopolitan*. In doing so she describes these readers as the 'Sex and the City lot', and 'the young trendy professionals' (lines 218-219). In line 222 she also describes them as being/having 'Bridget Jones style', which Alice could be using as a membership category, or as an attribute of the two previous categories.

In line 218 Alice begins her turn with some trepidation, as can be seen from the pauses and hedges here ('em', 'well'). She says 'it's the kind of', which indicates that she is about to introduce a category or type, but then pauses and hedges, as she searches for the right category. The first category she introduces is the 'Sex and the City lot', in reference to the American television series of the same name, which ran for six seasons and revolved around the lives of four female friends living in New York. The four main characters can be seen as representing four 'types' of woman: neurotic, fashion-obsessed Carrie; Miranda, the ambitious, cynical and sharp-tongued lawyer; confident, sexually assertive and commitment-shy Samantha; prim and proper 'Park Avenue princess' Charlotte, who wants nothing more than to get married to her Prince Charming and have children. The show has been much discussed by media commentators (e.g. Bunting, 2001; Flett, 2003; Guardian, 2004), particularly with regard to its representation of single women. Although men are still very much central to these women's lives, and despite the rampant consumerism of the characters' lifestyles, the show has been praised for the way in which it foregrounds female friendship, as well as for its portrayal of women who talk freely and in detail about sex and relationships (including the pleasures of masturbation), and who are able to seek sexual pleasure (not necessarily as part of a long-term relationship) without being punished for it. However, while the broadsheets may have concentrated on this aspect of the show, *Sex and the City* was equally, if not more, renowned for its extravagant displays of designer fashion, with the four women wearing up to fifty different outfits between them in each

episode (Flett, 2003). The central character Carrie, with her designer shoe obsession, has become something of a style icon, as indeed has the actor who plays her, Sarah Jessica Parker, and many women's magazines ran features on how to imitate the style of the four main characters. Indeed, the deputy editor of *Heat* was quoted in a newspaper article as saying '[o]ur style pages breathe sex and the city' (Flett, 2003).

The 'isn't it' which follows Alice's introduction of this category in line 218 serves as an appeal to shared knowledge; Alice does not think she has to explain what she means by this reference to *Sex and the City*, assuming that we both (as women in their twenties?) know not only what the programme is and what it is about, but also understand the whole host of associations which it invokes. She does go on, however, perhaps because I do not show any particular sign that I know what she means (like 'mmh' or some other form of backchannel), to expand on her use of this category by adding 'you know – the young trendy professionals' (line 219). The category of 'young trendy professionals' can be heard as being closely related to, if not exactly synonymous with, the category of 'Sex and the City lot', as Alice is using it in reference to the same group of women, and seems to be using it to clarify and expand on the previous category. As with 'isn't it', the 'you know' functions as an appeal to shared knowledge. Deborah Schiffrin describes 'you know' (or 'y'know') as:

[A] marker of meta-knowledge about generally shared knowledge: y'know marks consensual truths which speakers assume their hearers are likely to share (because of co-membership in the same culture, society, or group) as well as general descriptions within which specific descriptions are assumed to be included (Schiffrin, 1987: 278).

Alice uses this discourse marker several times in this extract, in lines 219, 220 and 221. This may be because she is uncertain as to whether I agree with her description, and is unsure how I would position myself in relation to the target reader (when conducting the interviews I generally tried to avoid mentioning my own attitudes towards the magazines and their readers). Earlier in the interview, Alice has explicitly stated that she's 'not in the sort of – target audience – you know – when I buy the magazine' (see extract 3.1). She has also described the magazines as 'trashy' and said that the women who read them on a regular basis 'aren't that intelligent'. From this we can infer that for Alice, the categories of 'Sex and the City

lot' and 'young trendy professionals' carry negative connotations, and by distancing herself from these categories she wants to position herself as a more intelligent category of female. Therefore it is particularly important to Alice that I acknowledge and share her construction of the social and moral order.

This hesitancy continues in line 222 when she adds that the target reader has/is 'sort of Bridget Jones style maybe I don't know'. Rather than using the epistemic modals 'maybe' and 'I don't know' because she is unsure if this is an appropriate or accurate description, I would argue that Alice hedges her statement as a face-saving act, to guard against any possible disagreement on my part.

As with her earlier reference to *Sex and the City*, here Alice introduces another fictional female character as representative of a particular category of women. The novel *Bridget Jones' Diary* (Fielding, 1997) and its sequel *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason* (Fielding, 2000), grew out of a column in *The Independent* newspaper, and both novels were adapted into highly successful Hollywood films. The eponymous heroine has become a common cultural shorthand for representing a certain type of woman: single, city-dwelling women in their late twenties and thirties, with a close circle of friends but unlucky in love, who drink and smoke but feel guilty about it, and who are neurotic about their weight. The extraordinary influence of the books is evident in the way the categories 'singleton' and 'smug married' became popular after being used in the novels. Again, Alice does not offer any explanation of who Bridget Jones is because she assumes that we share this knowledge as members of the same culture.

Alice's use of the general extender 'that sort of thing' (Overstreet and Yule, 1997) also suggests an assumption that I will be able to identify the category and its cultural associations. As discussed by Overstreet and Yule, general extenders have a category-implicative function, inviting the hearer to regard the preceding referent as one example from a broader category. They also invoke shared knowledge, in that the speaker presupposes that the hearer will be able to identify the general nature of this implied category.

It is interesting to note that in line 223 Alice sums up the target readers' interests as being 'just pop culture'. Her use of 'just' here could be heard as 'they are only

interested in pop culture and nothing else' and/or 'it's only pop culture – nothing important'. Either way, this can be heard as a rather dismissive and disparaging remark. However, Alice herself has displayed ample knowledge of pop culture through her referencing of *Bridget Jones' Diary* and *Sex and the City*. Alice's use of pop culture references also provides an example of the cultural hold exerted by media representations of women. Bridget Jones and the four main characters from *Sex and the City* (as well as the real women that play these characters) have become so widespread, appearing in the pages of women's magazines, and discussed in the tabloid and broadsheet newspapers, that they have gained iconic status. As such they can be used as discursive resources, and invoked, as we saw Alice do, as a means of describing and defining oneself or others.

In extract 5.2 below Louise also invokes notions of class when defining, and distancing herself from, the target reader. Unlike Alice, Louise tends to read more gossip-based magazines like *Heat*, *Now* and the *National Enquirer*, rather than glossy magazines like *Elle* or *Marie Claire*, although she does like *Cosmopolitan*. Without directly raising the subject of class, Louise implies that the readership of the magazines she reads is primarily working class.

Extract 5.2: Louise

(21, white, heterosexual, middle class, student)

- 368 L: I don't think I'm a **typical** target reader [...] I think [...] er – no I suppose
 369 I am and I aren't – I am and I'm not – em [...] typical target reader – to
 370 me – would be what I call a townie girl – and that's re- from where I
- 371 D: | right
- 372 L: live there were – the town's divided into townies and skaters – and a
 373 townie girl is somebody who – shops in – Oasis and Topshop and
 374 Warehouse – but is in the whole – absolute – the whole wardrobe –
 375 and it'll come from maybe a Nineteen fashion shoot – you know –
- 376 D: | mmh
- 377 L: and that they – they work in an office – or – nine to five – and they're
 378 - they can live at home or they're living with their boyfriends – I think
 379 it's that kind of – and it's sort of like eighteen to twenty-four [...] but
 380 then – the magazines spread way beyond their target audience

In lines 368-369 we can see that Louise is reluctant to identify herself wholeheartedly as a target reader of the magazines that she reads. In line 370 she

describes the typical target reader as 'what I call a townie girl'. Louise presents this category of 'townie girl' as being her own term, based on the community in her home town, and therefore not something which she can assume is based on knowledge shared by both of us. Accordingly, she goes on to offer a full explanation of the attributes which are category-bound to the 'townie girl', including age (between 18 and twenty-four years old), occupation (office worker), where they live (at home or with a boyfriend), and where they buy their clothes (Oasis, Topshop and Warehouse). Louise does not hedge or mitigate her description in the way that Alice does in extract 5.1. This may be because she sees herself as imparting information to me that I would previously have been unaware of, rather than relying on presumed shared knowledge, and therefore does not expect me to question her use of the category.

Although Louise constructs the category 'townie girl' as being specific to her home town or region, the term 'townie' (used in reference to both males and females) is widely used throughout England (and is similar in usage to the Scottish terms 'ned' and 'schemie'). Louise describes her town as being 'divided into townies and skaters (line 372), but 'townie' is also often used by university students as a derogatory term referring to the non-student or non-campus based population ('town' and 'gown'), and the two groups are often perceived as being in opposition to each other, particularly in towns such as Oxford and Cambridge.

Categories are 'inference rich' (Sacks, 1992), and speakers can exploit this in order to avoid having to perform potentially problematic interactional work, such as making claims or criticisms that might be considered racist or sexist, blatantly and on-the-record. Although Louise does not make explicit reference to class or socio-economic factors, the category 'townie' is strongly associated with social class. 'Townie' is similar in usage to the more recent term 'chav', which became something of a linguistic and cultural phenomenon in Britain in 2004 (see the website www.chavscum.co.uk, which lists 'townie' as a variant of 'chav'; Wallace and Spanner, 2004; Barton, 2004; Hodsdon, 2004). Chavs are defined by the authors of *Chav! A User's Guide to Britain's New Ruling Class* (Wallace and Spanner, 2004) as 'the non-respectable working classes', leaving little room for doubt that 'chav' is primarily a class-based categorisation. Like 'chav', 'townie' is often used euphemistically by middle class speakers as a means of passing judgement on what

is seen as working class behaviour, without having to explicitly categorise the objects of their criticism as 'working class', which could attract accusations of snobbery. In a recent documentary on the satellite channel Sky One, the journalist Julie Burchill presented a defence of the 'chav' lifestyle, in an attempt to reclaim the term and argue against its use by the middle classes as a term of abuse.

Louise does not offer any definition of the category 'skater', as this category is introduced only as the alternative to (or opposite of) being a 'townie'. As she does not return to this category, we can assume that the activity of reading women's magazines is not one which Louise associates with skaters. By introducing the distinction between 'townies' and 'skaters', however, Louise can be heard as raising a distinction between working and middle class youth (sub)cultures. Typically, in Britain at least, skaters are often characterised as being predominantly white, middle class and male (although Louise does not construct this category as a gendered one), and this class-based distinction is seen as one of the reasons for animosity between the two groups. For example, in a news story discussing skaters being robbed and picked on by gangs, one skater argues that 'the townies are always trying to take my board', while another suggests that skaters get picked on because they tend to be from middle class backgrounds (Dent, 2004). The opposition between 'skaters' and 'townies' (or variants thereof) is also raised on the website www.urbandictionary.com, where readers can post their own definitions of slang terms. Several definitions make reference to 'stupid townies' or define a skater as someone who 'hates them stupid chavs' and likes 'everything anti-chav'.

As Sue Widdicombe (1998) notes, ascribing category membership to someone can be used as a way of introducing unfavourable inferences about that person, without having to be explicit. This point is also made by David Silverman, who remarks that:

Of course, it is always possible that when we invoke category-based explanations, other people may accuse us of 'prejudice'. One way to protect yourself against such a charge is simply to use a category and let others construct the explanation. In this way, if necessary, you can deny that you intended that explanation to be derived while knowing that that was *precisely* the explanation that people would derive (Silverman, 1998: 75; emphasis in original).

Although Louise does offer some explanation of the category 'townie girl', she does not explicitly mention anything that could lead to a charge of snobbery, but by

invoking a category which is so rich in associations she can let me, as her interlocutor, read between the lines and make these associations for myself.

In the following extract, Meera is describing the type of woman she thinks is the target reader of magazines like *Elle* or *Cosmopolitan* in India. Like Alice, she too invokes notions of class and urbanity in categorising the target reader.

Extract 5.3: Meera

(24, Indian, heterosexual, middle class, postgraduate student)

468 M: | mmm – ok – they would be
469 aiming at [...] probably eighteen? till about thirty – definitely em =

470 D: | mmh

471 M: = middle – middle upper class middle class really – um – well
472 educated [...] single – good job [...] er living with the parents – maybe –
473 or living separately – m- metropolitan – I mean I don't know if that
474 means living in a metro – (laughing) metro city - you know living in
475 a metro city [...] er travelling [...] a sort of a – definitely a a world
476 traveller [...] e:rm yeah [...] and with money to spend on things like =

477 D: | mmhm

478 M: = you know clothes that change with er fashions that change with
479 every season and – and you know – expensive make-up [...] um [...]

480 D: | mmh

481 M: somebody who's in a position to care what other people think and to
482 act on that – and to want to be part of of a group – and willing to =

483 D: | mmh

484 M: = put money into that [...] ideal

Meera reads the Indian versions of *Elle* and *Cosmopolitan* every month, and occasionally the American versions of *Glamour* and *Vogue*. Despite being a regular reader of these magazines, as we saw in Chapter 3, elsewhere in the interview she describes them as being 'tedious' and 'disappointing', as well as saying that she regards them 'with a bit of disdain'. She also states that she wouldn't read them in public, which suggests that she would not want to be associated with the magazines or positioned as a target reader.

Like Louise in extract 5.2, Meera is able to give a detailed description of the attributes and activities which are tied to the category of target reader, although her description is explicitly tied to notions of class and socio-economic status. In lines 469-471, Meera describes the target readership as 'definitely em middle – middle upper class middle class really', explicitly categorising the target readership as middle class, and thereby implying that the concerns of the magazines are not just 'feminine' concerns, but *middle class* feminine concerns. Having invoked the idea of class, this sets up an interpretative frame within which the description which follows can be heard and understood. Like Louise, Meera provides quite a comprehensive description of the target readership, including age, education, financial status, where they live, interests and aspirations. Meera's description of a single city-dweller, with a 'good' job, disposable income, and an interest in travel and fashion echoes Alice's use of the categories 'Sex and the City lot' and 'young trendy professionals'. However, as we saw in Chapter 3 (extract 3.2), elsewhere in the interview Meera has constructed a very middle class identity for herself, positioning herself as partaking in middle class activities such as reading newspapers and 'serious' political magazines. She also seems to fulfil the criteria she uses for defining the target reader: she is between eighteen and thirty years old, middle class, well educated and well travelled (this is evident from the fact that she has come from India to do a postgraduate degree in Edinburgh). Yet, she does not want to be associated with the target readership, so what are we to make of this? What this apparent discrepancy demonstrates is the context-dependent and rhetorical nature of categorisation work. Analysts working with MCA have emphasised that membership categories are a locally used participants' resource, invoked in a particular interactional context in order to serve specific rhetorical aims (see for example Edwards, 1998; Hester and Eglin, 1998; Sacks, 1992). In extracts 3.2 and 5.3, Meera invokes different activities and characteristics associated with a middle class identity, but she does so for different interactional purposes: in the first case, in order to construct a well-educated, intellectual identity for herself and distance herself from women's magazines; in the second example, she is trying to define the target readership. In the first example she emphasises middle class associations with intellectualism, whereas in the second she foregrounds the bourgeois lifestyle.

Membership categories are used to invoke shared knowledge, and as such, in order for a member's categorisation work to have the desired rhetorical effect, the

categories used must be recognisable to the other participants in the interaction. This does not mean, however, that categories and the attributes associated with them are fixed in stone, having an existence outside interaction. Those working with MCA are interested in looking at how members make use of membership categories in different contexts and for different purposes. In this case we can see that Meera invokes a middle class identity in slightly different ways, depending on the interactional work at hand.

In extract 5.4 below, Venus is describing the target readership of *Good Housekeeping*, which she has a subscription to. This extract is particularly interesting because Venus presents an account of the changes in her life which led her to become interested in *Good Housekeeping*. In this account we see Venus constructing gender identity as being closely tied, not only to social class, but also to age and marital status.

Extract 5.4: Venus

(41, white, middle class, married, musician)

- 157 V: [...] I remember looking at a friend's
158 Good Housekeeping magazine and thinking this is *so boring* [.]
159 (laughs) this is like *so middle aged woman* – and then a few
160 years later I found myself reading it and I couldn't honestly say when
161 that was – but it was – it certainly wasn't ten years ago – and an' it's
162 been in the last – I don't know – maybe five years? something like
163 that so I've obviously had a bit of a life change – in those years
- 164 D: (laughter) so you think you think you just found yourself reading it
165 one day
- 166 V: | yeah
- 167 D: and then realised you probably liked it after all
- 168 V: | yeah – yeah – again I
169 think I probably borrowed one from someone and it was more
170 interesting to me all of a sudden – and so [...] I think my lifestyle
171 changed – er because I stopped being a – student – because I went
172 back to college as a mature student and was wor- studying and
173 working at the same time – and then when I eventually moved back
174 to this country – then I was working and stopped studying – and erm
175 - stopped doing that particular course – and erm met somebody and
176 got married as well – and so the whole lifestyle changed – so that
177 would have been – relevant I think
- 178 D: mmh [...] do you think that it's a magazine aimed just only at a
179 specific age group of women or do you think it's aimed at – you

180 know – women who stay at home and look after the house – do you
 181 think – does it have articles about work and?

182 V: yes it does – it does articles on work and erm [...] all sorts of things I
 183 would say it's aimed at an age group rather than a particular – life –
 184 oh no not lifestyle because I think it is aimed at quite a particular
 185 lifestyle – very middle class – Volvo driving [...] erm [...] that sort of
 186 person – erm – with a certain amount of money to spend – because
 187 for example the clothes aren't usually – erm – cheap – but they're
 188 not – it's not exclusively designer labels – it's quite sort of em -
 189 again middle range – and erm – and people who are moderately sort
 190 of comfortably off in a fairly settled lifestyle – I think they're aimed at
 191 - which is obviously where – I've become – where I've gone to rather
 192 (laughter) yeah

In lines 158-159 Venus (who is 41 years old) describes her thoughts when she first came across *Good Housekeeping* as being 'this is **so boring** [...] (laughs) this is like **so middle aged woman**'. Venus' use of emphatic stress and the discourse marker 'like' (which is often perceived as being predominant in the speech of young people), as well as her self-deprecating laughter, indicate that here Venus is mimicking the speech of a stereotypical 'stroppy' teenager. It seems likely that the occasion she is describing in fact occurred when she was in her twenties, but she adopts the persona of a teenager for rhetorical effect, in order to suggest that she is laughing at a much younger self. By explicitly invoking the category of 'middle aged woman' and assuming the voice of the 'young woman' or 'girl' that she once was, Venus introduces age as a factor in determining what a woman will find interesting. She also raises the notion that 'young women' and 'middle aged women' are not only different, but also oppositional categories, in that she implies that to a young woman, middle aged women and the activities and interests associated with them, are perceived as 'boring' (the notion that women's interests vary according to age, and the belief that older women's interests and the magazines which cater for them are boring, is also raised in extract 5.5 below).

Venus then goes on to explain that she has since become a regular reader of *Good Housekeeping*, and has been reading it for the last five years or so. In line 160 she says 'I found myself reading it', implying that this was something that simply happened to her, rather than being the result of a conscious decision or change of heart. Venus continues by stating that she 'couldn't honestly say' when this happened, but in line 163 she accounts for her new interest in *Good Housekeeping* by suggesting 'so I've obviously had a bit of a life change – in those years'.

When I ask her how she thinks this happened, Venus adds in line 169 that she might have borrowed the magazine from a friend and that 'it was more interesting to me all of a sudden'. Again, Venus positions herself as being unaware or unable to remember how and when this change occurred, but that when it happened, when she changed from being a 'young woman' to a 'middle aged woman', 'all of a sudden' her interests changed accordingly. In this way, Venus constructs ageing, and the idea that women do and like different things at different stages in their lives, as a natural and inevitable process, something which happens to you whether you like it or not.

Nevertheless, in lines 170-176 Venus is able to describe a series of changes in her lifestyle which she presents as being relevant. As well as the transition from being a student to working full time, Venus also invokes her change in status from single to married woman. In lines 175-176 she adds 'met someone and got married as well – and so the whole lifestyle changed', constructing her change in lifestyle as a logical consequence of getting married (through her use of 'and so'). Here Venus is orienting to notions that the largely domestic concerns dealt with in *Good Housekeeping* are category-bound to married women in a way that they are not tied, or at least not so strongly, to single women. By invoking her status as a married woman, Venus makes relevant the SRP 'husband-wife' and the attributes and obligations associated with it. Within this category environment, we can hear Venus' description of the target readership, as well as her earlier description of the magazine itself, as a description of what it means to be a 'wife', and of the differences between being a 'wife' as opposed to a 'single woman'.

In lines 178-181 I ask Venus if she thinks the magazine is aimed at women of a particular age group, or at homemakers. Initially, in lines 182-183 Venus begins to say that it is aimed at an age group rather than a particular lifestyle, but then changes her mind, as we can see from the self-initiated self-repair in lines 183-185, where she cuts herself off and says 'oh no not lifestyle because I think it is aimed at quite a particular lifestyle – very middle class – Volvo driving'.

Here Venus invokes a category of woman who is not only middle aged but also 'very middle class' (line 185). When elaborating on this she describes incumbents of this

category as 'Volvo driving [...] erm [...] that sort of person'. This is reminiscent of the way in which Alice (extract 5.1) extends her example with the general extender 'that sort of thing'. In this case, Venus invites the hearer to draw on their cultural knowledge about Volvo drivers in order to infer other CBAs associated with this category. It is worth noting that Venus says 'that sort of *person*' rather than that sort of *woman*', which reinforces her construction of this category as being primarily to do with class rather than gender. Moreover, as Venus associates *Good Housekeeping* with this type of middle class lifestyle, we can infer that Venus sees the magazine as addressing, not just feminine concerns, but *middle class* feminine concerns (her earlier comment in line 159 that she had previously thought of the magazine as being 'so middle aged woman' indicates that she does think of *Good Housekeeping* as a *women's* magazine).

Class and age are also made relevant in the following extract, in which Jackie draws a distinction between glossy magazines and the cheaper weeklies, as well as between magazines for women from different age groups.

Extract 5.5: Jackie

(24, white, heterosexual, middle class, accountant)

- 1 J: I think – well – I wouldn't think oh that's definitely aimed at me – but I
 2 think it portrays an image of what people would want to be seen as –
 3 and they – you know – want to be a Cosmo woman or whatever
- 4 D: so what do you think a Cosmo woman *is*?
- 5 J: I think probably some high-flying suited businesswoman type – with
 6 an exciting sex life and (inaudible)
- 7 D: do you think women's magazines – or do you think Cosmo for
 8 example – is a more middle class magazine?
- 9 J: [...] em – yeah probably – well – because it's all glossy and – and
 10 fatter (laughs) – you know – it's not like *Bella* or something – but –
 11 probably cos it's aimed at the twenty-something market
- 12 D: so what magazines would you not think about reading?
- 13 J: em – well – things like *Woman's Own* and stuff – I don't know if
 14 they still have that but – things that you always see your Mum –
 15 picking up going – ooh nice cookery article in here – you know –
 16 or knit your own – vest – you know –
- 17 D: so basically things that – probably have an image – as – being for
 18 an older – an older woman or a housewife?

- 19 J: the frumpy ones – yeah – nice glossy ones
- [...]
- 111 D: but could you see your taste in magazines changing as you get
112 older?
- 113 J: em [...] I don't know – well probably – not till I'm like – forty or
114 something – and I want to knit my niece a – nice little pair of booties
115 or something I don't know – but em – I mean probably as you get
116 older your taste changes – you don't want to be reading about –
117 some celebrity's sex life – or whatever – so yeah

In lines 84-85 Jackie responds to my question about the characteristics of a 'Cosmo woman' by describing her as 'some high-flying suited businesswoman type – with an exciting sex life'. In this way Jackie constructs her definition of Cosmo woman as a 'type', which indicates that she is referring to a specific and culturally recognisable category of woman, which invites the hearer to use their cultural knowledge to infer the characteristics and activities associated with this category.

Jackie's description is very similar to the one produced by Shazia in chapter 3 (extract 3.3), who constructed the target reader of magazines like *Cosmopolitan* as 'a professional career woman', the sort of woman who works in 'management' or 'Wall Street'. However, whereas Shazia argued that this type of magazine set unrealistic standards for the majority of women who do not have that sort of career and lifestyle, Jackie appears to be less critical of this lack of realism. Jackie presents the magazines as being aspirational, suggesting in lines 80-82 that 'I think it portrays an image of what people would want to be seen as –and they – you know – want to be a Cosmo woman or whatever'. It is noteworthy that Jackie does not specify whether she herself would want to be, or be seen as, a Cosmo woman. Jackie's comment is in response to a question (not included in the extract) about whether she feels that the magazines are aimed at, and are addressing her personally, but after saying 'I wouldn't think oh that's definitely aimed at me' she answers in only the most general terms. She does not say 'I' want to be seen as Cosmo woman, but rather 'people' would want to be seen in that way, and 'they' want to be Cosmo women. This rather non-committal response suggests that Jackie does not want to position herself as reading the magazines in an aspirational way. This depersonalised approach to talking about the magazines and their

readers links back to chapter 3, and the reluctance of many women to identify themselves as women's magazines readers, and their insistence that they themselves did not take the magazines seriously.

Although Jackie's categorisation of Cosmo woman as a 'high-flying suited businesswoman type' implicitly invokes notions of class, in lines 88-90 she seems reluctant to go on-record as stating a connection between class and the readership of *Cosmopolitan*. When I explicitly ask her if she thinks that *Cosmopolitan* is a middle class magazine, Jackie's reply includes several features commonly associated with dispreferred responses (see Levinson, 1983; Yule, 1996). Firstly there is a pause (of longer than a second), then the filler 'em', which indicates hesitation, and then another short pause before she gives the mitigated response 'yeah probably', which suggests only partial or reluctant agreement with my suggestion. The discourse marker 'well' which follows, usually indicates that what is to follow is a topic shift, or an unexpected or undesirable response (see Schiffrin, 1987). Jackie then offers an account for her response, 'because it's all glossy and – and fatter', followed by what seems to be nervous laughter, and an appeal to shared knowledge ('you know'). This account refers to the expensive and luxurious look of the magazines, but notable by its absence is any reference to the magazines' subject matter (cf. Shazia in extract 3.3). She then contrasts the glossiness of magazines like Cosmo with the cheaper weekly magazines, saying 'it's not like *Bella* or something'. The strong emphasis on 'Bella' indicates that for Jackie, *Bella* is the polar opposite of *Cosmopolitan*, but she does not offer any explanation for her comment, assuming that I will know what she means. 'But' indicates that what follows is in opposition to the preceding talk (see Schiffrin, 1987). In this case, Jackie shifts away from the subject of class, instead invoking age as the reason for the difference between *Cosmo* and *Bella*, suggesting that *Cosmo* is big and glossy 'probably cos it's aimed at the twenty-something market'. She also mitigates the force of this statement by prefacing it with 'probably', thereby softening what is a potentially face-threatening act (Brown and Levinson, 1987).

This is an example of the way in which categories and their category-tied attributes and activities are routinely negotiated through talk. Firstly, Jackie constructs a connection between *Cosmopolitan* and the images and lifestyle it portrays, and high-flying businesswomen. Then, in my question in lines 86-87, I infer from Jackie's

description that there is an association between the magazine and middle class women. Jackie offers a partial agreement but then goes on to construct the relevant association as being one of age, suggesting that the attributes of *Cosmo* are tied more to twenty-something women than middle class women.

In line 91 I ask Jackie which magazines she wouldn't read, and she continues to invoke age, making associations between certain activities and older women, and constructing these activities as being unattractive and uninteresting to her. In line 92 Jackie says that she would not consider reading 'things like Woman's Own and stuff'. 'things like' and 'and stuff' serve a similar function to general extenders like 'and that sort of thing', indicating that the example given is representative of a wider category. She elaborates on what she means by this by describing them as magazines that mothers read, referring to mothers in general rather than her own mother specifically ('things that *you* always see *your* mum picking up'). She then suggests articles on cookery and knitting as examples of the sort of thing that mothers enjoy reading, explicitly constructing these interests as being category-bound to mothers. She uses the discourse marker 'you know' twice in these lines, which appeals to our shared knowledge of the category 'mothers' and the activities and attributes associated with them.

Extracts 5.6 and 5.7 below are taken from an interview with a lesbian couple, Emma and Sarah. In the following extract, Emma takes a different approach to the women in the previous extracts, in that she deliberately refrains from making associations between certain activities and types of women, preferring instead to talk about individual interests.

Extract 5.6: Emma

(26, white, lesbian, middle class)

273 E: I think it's catering towards certain *interests* [...] which – some women
274 have and other women – have less of =

275 D: = mmh

276 E: and (inaudible) you could specify a certain type of woman but – it'd
277 be a certain part of [...] some people which some people were
278 interested in and other people – less interested in

In the previous extracts in this chapter, we saw my informants making clear connections between certain interests and activities, and different categories of

women. In the above extract, Emma (who is not talking about a specific magazine) contends that the magazines are ‘catering towards certain *interests*’ (line 273), but is reluctant to tie these interests to specific categories of women, instead suggesting that ‘some women have [these interests] and other women – have less of’. Her emphatic stress on ‘interests’ suggests that she is drawing attention to the idea that magazines cater for specific interests, but not specific types of women. Emma then goes on to concede that ‘you could specify a certain type of woman’ but clearly she does not want to do this herself, as she then returns to the idea that it is simply a question of some people having an interest in these things, while other people will be less interested.

Emma’s stance in this extract is striking because, unlike many of my informants, she does not categorise or stereotype the target reader. Although many women are resistant to the idea of categorising themselves, instead defining themselves and their preferences using a discourse of individualism, they are much more likely, as we have seen in this chapter, to assign categories to other women. We cannot know, of course, to what extent Emma’s stance is due to the research interview context, but it is unusual when compared with my other informants. Elsewhere in the interview, she notes that she has only bought a women’s magazine two or three times in her life, and argues that her lack of interest is simple a question of individual preferences, and nothing to do with and membership categories to which she belongs.

In the next extract, however, Emma introduces the issue of sexuality by talking about magazines for gay women, and the differences between these magazines and mainstream women’s magazines. In doing so, she suggests that there is a difference between the interests of lesbians and those of heterosexual women.

Extract 5.7: Emma and Sarah

(Emma: as in extract 5.6; Sarah: 28, white, lesbian, middle class)

- 478 E: one thing I *have* bought on various occasions as a complete – con-
479 counter to what I’m saying which might be interesting – is – bought
480 *gay* women’s magazines =
- 481 D: = mmh
- 482 E: on various occasions [...] which are *completely different*

- 483 D: how how are they different?
- 484 E: er:m – again they are dealing with things like – they will deal with
 485 fashion or whatever – but they’re dealing with issues that *I* think are
 486 more relevant to *me* – eh:m – obviously they deal with gay issues –
 487 it’s quite a big thing – eh:m – some of it as well it just washes over me
 488 all these – an article about – KD Lang or whatever – and I’m just like
 489 yeah yeah whatever (laughter) but I do find it of more relevance and
 490 more interesting
- 491 D: yeah
- 492 E: em [.] and they don’t have all these articles about how to stay thin
 493 and [.] this and that er =
- 494 D: | mmh
 495 = it doesn’t then just become – how to – how to get a girlfriend and
 496 how to keep her happy =
- 497 E: = no! (all laugh)
- 498 S: is that it?
- 499 E: yeah [.] there are – well [.] there’s pro- problem pages there are =
- 500 S: | there are problem pages
- 501 E: = sex pages there are – em [.] but they *are* different – I’m trying to
 502 think [..] I’d say they’re outwith [.] they’re outwith the conventions to a
 503 degree which allows them to be more experimental – mm – em
- [...]
- 519 S: = like and they wouldn’t have loads of adverts for – loads of make-up
 520 and stuff because they know most people aren’t really interested in
- 521 E: no =
- 522 S: = I don’t know *why* most gay women aren’t interested in make-up but
 523 they’re just not – and – don’t know

In the above extract Emma, and her partner Sarah, are discussing the differences between magazines aimed at lesbian women and mainstream women’s magazines. In the preceding talk, Emma had stated that she never buys women’s magazines, and introduces the subject of magazines for gay women ‘as a complete [...] counter to what I’m saying’ (lines 478-479). It seems here that Emma is unsure about whether lesbian magazines are classified as ‘women’s magazines’, and therefore whether they are relevant to the interview (I had not specified what I meant by

'women's magazines'). The fact that neither Emma nor Sarah had mentioned them earlier in the interview shows that they had been orienting to the idea that the lesbian magazines are not prototypical examples of women's magazines, and Emma's suggestion that the subject 'might be interesting' indicates that she is uncertain as to whether these magazines would be relevant to my research. However, Emma also remarks that the fact that she has bought magazines aimed at gay women acts as a 'complete counter' to her earlier claim that she never buys women's magazines, which implies that she does classify them as women's magazines, at least to some extent.

Like Emma, the other gay women I interviewed also interpreted the question 'do you read women's magazines?' as referring to glossy magazines like *Cosmopolitan* and *Marie Claire*, and also to gossip magazines like *Heat* (although it seems that these are regarded as a less prototypical example), whereas magazines like *Diva* were assumed to be excluded from, or marginal to the genre (they were never mentioned by any of the heterosexual women I interviewed). What this shows is the largely unstated assumption that women's magazines and the feminine world they portray are overwhelmingly heterosexual. Emma's talk shows an orientation to, although not an acceptance of, this heteronormative ideology.

In line 482, Emma describes gay women's magazines as being '**completely different**' to the glossy magazines we were discussing previously. When asked to explain the differences, Emma states that although they may have some similar features, such as fashion and problem pages, and although some parts might not interest her, 'they're dealing with issues that *I* think are more relevant to **me**' (lines 485-486). It is interesting to note that again, Emma describes the differences in terms of what the magazines mean to her, and how they relate to her interests. She does go on, however, to add 'obviously they deal with gay issues – it's quite a big thing'. Although Emma does not elaborate on what she means by 'gay issues', she is clearly invoking notions of certain interests or concerns being tied to sexuality, and that the interests and concerns of gay women will differ, at least in part, from those of straight women. Emma also points out that, although in general she finds these magazines 'of more relevance and more interesting' (lines 489-490), 'some of it as well just washes over me' (line 487), and she gives the example of an article about KD Lang (a gay singer-songwriter) as the sort of article which would not

interest her. In this way Emma draws attention to the fact that just because a magazine is aimed at gay women, that does not mean that she, as a gay woman, will necessarily find everything in the magazine interesting or relevant to her.

In lines 492-493 Emma comments that lesbian magazines 'don't have all these articles about how to stay thin', implying that a concern with dieting and physical appearance is tied, not to women in general but specifically to heterosexual women. In lines 519-523 Sarah adds that the magazines do not have adverts for make-up and beauty products, 'because they know most people aren't really interested', so again we see a concern with beauty being tied to heterosexual women, and disassociated from gay women. Sarah does not, however, speculate as to why this might be the case, concluding in line 522 that 'I don't know *why* most gay women aren't interested in make-up but they're just not'. Although Sarah qualifies her assertion by saying 'most gay women' rather than just 'gay women', it seems that for Sarah there is a clear association between being a gay woman and not being interested in make-up.

As we have seen so far in this chapter, my informants use categorisation in order to define themselves and others, and to account for their own, or other women's interests and attributes. In the following section I look at how one woman invokes, and contests, membership categories and category-bound activities in order to account for her interest in activities which are conventionally bound to men.

5.3 A 'CATEGORY PUZZLE': WOMEN AND SPORT

In the previous section I focused on how my informants make use of membership categories in order to define the target reader. In all the examples above, my informants have, to varying degrees, tried to distance themselves from this group, and so the process of categorisation is largely a process of defining the 'other', and emphasising the differences between themselves and other readers.

In this section I look at three extracts taken from the same interview, focusing on the multiple ways in which one individual can do membership categorisation work in order to provide an account for her own actions and orientations. In this section I examine the problems which arise when a female member invokes an association between an interest in sport and masculinity, while also wishing to go on-record as

having an interest in sport herself. The difficulties she encounters in trying to negotiate an identity for herself which reconciles being female (and feminine) with being interested in sport clearly demonstrate the prescriptive nature of the link between some activities and gender categories.

In extract 5.8 below Smita is discussing her keen interest in sport, an interest which is catered for by men's magazines, but which is almost entirely absent from the content of women's magazines. It should be noted that this interview was unusual in that we spoke mostly about men's magazines, as Smita had been reading her partner's men's magazines, and was not a regular reader of women's magazines.

Extract 5.8: Smita

(23, Asian (British-born), heterosexual, middle class, engineer)

- 115 D: d- do you think – do men's magazines have more sport? [.] cos I –
116 I'm assuming that that would be [.] something that would – appeal to
117 you more [S is a keen cricket and hockey player]
- 118 S: [that's – that's a good point – yeah exactly [.] men's mazamine-
119 magazines – put in articles about sport for instance that – that –
120 oh God! (inaudible) – there was – there was an article on Robbie
121 Keane for instance – now I'm not sure if Robbie Keane would appeal
122 to you
- 123 D: [(laughing) I don't know who he is!
- 124 S: [right ok – but I – I found it *really*
125 interesting (inaudible)
- 126 D: [is he a footballer?
- 127 S: [yeah he's a footballer – he plays for
128 Leeds – and he's – he's Irish – and em [.] that sort of article like
129 really appeals to *me* [.] er – but because I love sport – not because I
130 - I – you know – I'm a bloke – (laughs) obviously – e:rm – but yeah –
131 there's loads of sort of sporty bits in there which appeal to me
- 132 D: hmm [.] so if women's magazines had sport in – or more sport – I
- 133 S: [mm
- 134 D: don't think they really have any sport actually [.] do you think you'd be
- 135 S: [no
- 136 D: more inclined to buy one?
- 137 S: [.] yes I would [.] yeah definitely – definitely – I mean I'm the sort of
138 person that picks up the Sunday Times – and goes straight for the

139 sports page – as opposed to the front page – which is slightly sad –
140 em – but true – like that’s just the – the one I like – what I like to read
141 and what I wanna hear about [.] em – obviously I’m interested in
142 other areas but sport is really what I’m – what I – want to – to read –
143 and I’d say that that’s true for – quite a few of my friends who are –
144 like me – quite sports orientated [.] erm –they wanna read more
145 about sport and not about – you know – the latest lipstick out there
146 that sort of thing [.] but that’s our own personal taste that’s the way

147 D: |mmh

148 S: that – that we are – yeah

In extract 5.8 above Smita has gone on-record as having an interest in two activities which are category-bound to masculinity: sport, and reading men’s magazines, but she is also trying to avoid aligning herself with a ‘masculine’, and therefore ‘unfeminine’ identity. In order to account for her own behaviour, Smita attempts to present an alternative view of the social world. She does this by constructing two groups of people who would be interested in articles on sport in men’s magazines; men on the one hand, and people who love sport on the other, with herself as a member of the latter group.

It should be noted that unlike the majority of my informants, Smita is a good friend of mine, whom I’ve known for many years and went to school with. Therefore I knew prior to the interview about her interest and active participation in sport, just as she knew about my complete lack of interest in the subject. Given the nature of our relationship, I would argue that much of the accounting and face work that Smita engages in in this extract is a response to the research interview context, and suggests that she is attending to the possibility of an external audience. In social contexts, for example, Smita has frequently spoken to me about playing hockey or cricket without producing the kind of accounting work that she does here.

Categories are not fixed and inert, rather they gain meaning through the ways in which they are invoked and made sense of in talk in specific contexts. In the context of this interview, as mentioned above, the discussion was mostly about men’s magazines, as Smita rarely reads women’s magazines but is familiar with men’s magazines through reading her partner’s (see extract 5.10 below for Smita’s account of why she is so familiar with men’s magazines).

In line 115 I raise a comparison between men's and women's magazines by suggesting that men's magazines contain more sport. In her response in line 118 Smita affirms this proposition by saying 'that's a good point – yeah exactly'. Later in line 133, I return to this comparison by suggesting that 'I don't think [women's magazines] really have *any* sport actually', and again Smita's response suggests that she accepts this assertion as being unproblematic.

By making explicit reference to the opposition between men's and women's magazines, and thereby to the categories of male and female, this creates what Lepper (2000) calls a 'relevant category environment'. In other words, by invoking a particular MCD or SRP, participants are encouraged to interpret the surrounding talk in terms of these categories. Here, our orientation to the SRP 'man/woman', and to the associated practices invoked by these categories, foregrounds binary notions of gender and gendered behaviour. Smita's talk in this extract suggests that she recognises that her interests could be constructed as 'unfeminine', but tries to avoid this gender-based categorisation by recategorising herself as 'someone who loves sport', rather than a '*woman* who loves sport', and by trying to redefine an interest in sport as being a matter of individual, rather than gendered, preference.

Sue Widdicombe (1998; Widdicombe and Wooffitt, 1995), in her work on youth subcultures, spoke to young people whose appearance could lead them to be classified as 'goths'. When accounting for their appearance and behaviour, some of these young people were resistant to the label 'goth', preferring to construct their appearance as an expression of their individuality, rather than an attempt to copy others or subscribe to the conventions of a group. Widdicombe notes that:

[I]n resisting subcultural identity, speakers acknowledge and undermine [...] normative cultural assumptions, by rejecting the category-boundedness of particular attributes and transforming their meanings so that they are expressions of personal identity (Widdicombe, 1998: 69).

This is also what Smita does here, albeit for different interactional purposes. Smita invokes notions of gendered behaviour and the idea that sport is an interest in sport, particularly football, is category-bound to masculinity. By invoking these associations, Smita implicitly acknowledges that her own interests could be interpreted as being unfeminine, but resists this interpretation by attempting to

construct her interest in sport as relating to individual preference, and not to gender categories.

In line 121 Smita interrupts her description of the article on the footballer Robbie Keane with the aside 'now I'm not sure if Robbie Keane would appeal to you'. As mentioned above, Smita and I are old friends (although a strict CA analysis would not allow for discussion of this, unless our relationship was made demonstrably relevant to the interaction) and so she knows very well that I am not interested in football or footballers. As such, it is interesting to note that she mitigates her suggestion in line 121 by saying 'I'm not sure', rather than stating baldly and on-record that she knows Robbie Keane would not interest me. Given our shared history, Smita's comment is difficult to explain. It is possible that Smita softens her suggestion in response to the interview context, and that she is orienting to our contextual roles as 'researcher/interviewer' and 'interviewee', and responding accordingly rather than orienting to our more usual roles as old friends.

In lines 128-129 Smita counters my response that I have never heard of Robbie Keane by saying 'that sort of article really appeals to *me*'. The strong emphasis on 'me' suggests that she is constructing our differences as a matter of personal preference. However, she then goes on to add 'but because I love sport – not because I – I – you know – I'm a bloke – (laughs) obviously'. The pauses, hedging and false starts in these lines indicate that Smita perceives the subject matter as problematic. Here Smita invokes the belief that sport, particularly football, is a predominantly male domain, attending to the possibility that by positioning herself as a sports fan she could be seen as deviating from societal norms. This interpretation is strengthened by Smita's overt orientation to the idea that sport is what 'blokes' do. Smita's choice of the category 'bloke' here is noteworthy as it invokes a sort of prototypical masculinity which is associated with, among other things, a keen interest in sport, particularly football, but which does not denote the hyper-masculinity associated with the 'lad' ('laddishness' and 'lad culture' are discussed in more detail below). The category of 'bloke' can be seen as sitting somewhere between the 'lad' and the 'new man' on a scale of 'types of man', with the 'lad' representing a particularly macho, misogynistic construction of masculinity, whereas the 'new man' is portrayed as being 'in touch with his feminine side' (see Gill, 2003

for a detailed discussion of the emergence and reproduction of these types). The term 'bloke' is commonly collocated with 'nice' and 'ordinary' (Benwell, 2003; Wetherell and Edley, 1999), and it is this (socially and historically situated) notion of ordinariness that is central to the category of 'bloke'. In their study of men's magazines and their readers, Jackson *et al.* (2001) interviewed six editors of men's magazines. One of them, editor of the magazine *Stuff*, describes his magazine as representing 'blokeishness', which he defines as 'quite earthy, it's kind of a sensible person, you're not poncey but you're not some outrageous looney kind of beer-drinking, lager-swilling, get your tits out kind of lad' (Jackson *et al.*, 2001: 68). As the bloke is constructed as representing ordinary masculinity, rather than the 'outrageous' machismo of the lad, as described in the above quotation, it could be argued that the bloke is therefore the most unmarked, and therefore most naturalised, contemporary construction of masculinity.

David Silverman argues that '[g]iven the way in which activities are category-bound, we all have an interest in the inferences others will draw about the sort of person who would say such a thing about themselves or others' (1998: 92). In this extract Smita has gone on-record as having an interest in two activities which are category bound to masculinity: sport, and reading men's magazines. She realises that others could see a disjunction between her interests and her gender, and infer from this that she is a 'masculine', or 'unfeminine' woman, which is an interpretation she wants to avoid. Smita's comment in lines 129-130 can be heard as being what Sacks calls 'defensively designed', in that it shows her awareness of alternative, and undesirable, interpretations. By proposing that the reason she enjoys articles about sport is 'not because [...] I'm a bloke', Smita both concedes that her behaviour could be seen as 'blokeish', but also serves to pre-empt such an interpretation.

It is worth noting that Smita begins by giving the specific example of an article about a footballer she is interested in, but then shifts to talking about a more general interest in 'sport' and 'sporty bits' in magazines. Although, as Jennifer Coates (2003) suggests, talk about sport is stereotypically characteristic of British 'men's talk', football indexes a particularly 'laddish' form of masculinity, and invokes a whole host of cultural associations which are not so strongly tied to sport in general. In Jackson *et al.*'s (2001) study of British men's magazines and their readers, they found that football, beer and women were commonly listed, in the media as well as

by readers themselves, as being the main interests associated with 'lad culture'. Similarly, Rosalind Gill (2003) describes an interest in football as one of the central characteristics of the 'new lad', and suggests that '[n]o discussion of the emergence of the new lad would be complete without understanding the role football has played in this' (ibid.: 52). Therefore, a professed interest in sport is perhaps less masculine, and so less likely to lead to negative judgements, than an interest in football.

In lines 136-138 Smita describes herself as 'the sort of person that picks up *The Sunday Times* – and goes straight for the sports page'. Here Smita constructs sport as a central aspect of her identity (although her mention of *The Sunday Times* also invokes its own set of associations). In order to reconcile any perceived incongruity between her actions and her identity as a woman, Smita engages in what Sacks (1992) terms 'identification reformulation'; in this case by trying to reconstruct an interest in sport as a being unrelated to sex or gender (as discussed earlier, she used the same strategy in lines 129-130). Instead, she presents herself as being a member of a category of people who share her interest, and constructs this category as an un-gendered one, pre-supposing that my own experience will allow me to identify the 'sort of person' that she is referring to.

Smita also tries to pre-empt any anticipated negative judgement by conceding on-record that her behaviour could be interpreted as 'slightly sad' (which might refer to the 'sadness' of her preference for sport over news, rather than her being sad for having masculine interests), before going on to re-iterate her construction of sport as a matter of individual preference. She does this through her repeated use of the first person pronoun when she says 'like that's just the – the one I like – what I like to read and what I wanna hear about'. Her use of a three-part list here acts as a persuasive rhetorical device to further strengthen her argument.

In line 140 she adds the disclaimer 'obviously I'm interested in other areas' before reiterating 'but sport is really what I'm – what I – want to – to read'. This disclaimer adds further to the sense that Smita is constantly attending to the risk that she could be categorized as 'masculine' in some way, while the false starts which follow suggest that she is somewhat hesitant about asserting her interest in sport, or alternatively that she is not used to having to explain or justify her interests. Again, it is difficult to tell to what extent Smita is orienting to the interview context and/or to

our relationship and knowledge about each other; she could be addressing an external audience, or she could be responding to her perceptions about my opinion of sport and sport fans.

In lines 142 Smita adds that 'quite a few of my friends', with 'quite' suggesting that this is a significant number, share her interests. This appeal to a shared group identity can be seen as a way of formulating a new category of women who like sport. By establishing herself as a member of a group, rather than an individual 'outlier' who does not conform, Smita is better able to construct her activities as being a valid part of her group identity. This becomes particularly relevant when she says 'they wanna read more about sport and not about – you know – the latest lipstick out there that sort of thing'. Implicit in her talk is the presupposition that there is a different category of women who *do* want to read about 'the latest lipstick out there'. Smita then extends her example through her use of the general extender 'and that sort of thing' (Overstreet and Yule, 1997). Here Smita uses 'the latest lipstick' as a prototypical example of the category of 'things that women are interested in', assuming that our shared cultural knowledge will allow me to infer other activities which fall into this category. Like 'and stuff like that', the preceding 'you know' also serves as an appeal to shared knowledge, that I recognise and share the view of the social world she is constructing.

What Smita seems to be doing is acknowledging that she cannot break the association between men and sport, or women and lipstick. As an individual she stands alone outside both categories, but by positioning herself as being one of many women who share her interests she can construct a third, alternative category of women who like sport, and thereby reconcile her gender identity with her interests.

Extract 5.9: Smita

- 27 D: oh right [...] and what do you like about them [men's magazines]?
- 28 S: they're very *easy* to read – they are very *visual* [...] they – em [...]
- 29 provide me with interesting facts about the way men think (laughter)
- 30 which is always fascinating [...] a:nd em – well – it – yeah it – it's just
- 31 [...] it's just good fun – to pick up and read – yeah

In extract 5.9 Smita is discussing what she likes about men's magazines. In lines 28 to 29 she says 'they – em [...] provide me with interesting facts about the way men

think'. Here she constructs herself as someone who enjoys men's magazines, not as someone who has 'masculine' interests, but as a woman who regards them as a source of information about men. Smita implies that as a woman she cannot, or finds it difficult to, understand how men think, but men's magazines provide her with access to this information.

By positioning herself in this way, Smita is attending to the possibility that I might question why she, as a woman, enjoys reading magazines which are aimed at men. One way of dealing with this is to construct her behaviour as a way of 'learning' about men, which can in turn be seen as appropriate behaviour for a woman to engage in.

Extract 5.10: Smita

- 59 D: em you said that men's ma- by reading men's magazines you – you
60 sort of learn (laughing) interesting facts about the way men think –
61 em [...] what sort of facts?
- 62 S: [...] f- well [...] interesting facts I- I sort of picked up on – the fact that
63 they are **fascinated** – with bizarre concepts – like em [...] colonic
64 irrigation – there's an example for you [...] articles on that which – to
65 a woman I don't think would be – you know – they wouldn't – the
66 appeal certainly wouldn't be there but er – there – there're very sort
67 of strange concepts in there that men find very interesting – em [...]
68 I em [...] I don't know – they're just – they're – the sort of material they
69 put in there is so **stupid** that you can actually just switch off from your
70 actual – everyday life [...] and go into another – another world – which
- 71 D: | mmh
- 72 S: is great – that's really what you wanna try and do – but I mean some
73 of the articles are quite interesting – and on – on men's health – I
74 think that's – that's – the way – (laughing) it sounds like I'm an expert
75 here on men's magazines but I'm certainly not – ok? – it's just a week
76 away with seven magazines – men's magazines – opened my eyes a
77 little bit to it [...] e:r so [...] no – I just think that – I mean – I wouldn't go
78 out and **buy** a men's magazine [...] however – I just have access to
- 79 D: | mmh
- 80 S: them – but they are good fun – you can certainly pick them up –
81 they're – they're not **just** for men – I'll tell you that [...] everybody would
82 find those sorts of articles interesting – the sort of stuff that's in there

In extract 3 I ask Smita to elaborate on her previous comments. In line 62 she gives the example that she has 'picked up on – the fact that they are **fascinated** – with bizarre concepts – like em [...] colonic irrigation'. Through her use of the word 'facts',

Smita constructs an interest in 'bizarre concepts' and 'colonic irrigation' as unquestionably category-bound to being male, and she presents this as objective, common sense knowledge.

In lines 64 to 66 Smita goes on to say that these articles wouldn't appeal to women, explicitly reinforcing the view that men and women can be treated as monolithic, and opposing, groups, and that being a member of either of these groups automatically entails being interested in certain activities. Moreover, she implies that belonging to one category entails being uninterested, and even unable to understand, the interests of the other group.

Smita mitigates the force of her assertion by prefacing it with 'I don't think', and the number of hedges and false starts in these lines also suggest that she is somewhat hesitant here. In line 66, however, she uses the content-oriented booster 'certainly' (Holmes 1984), which, as with her use of the word 'facts', presupposes the objective truth of her assertion, and serves to pre-empt any possible disagreement.

Smita's construction of gender and gendered behaviour in extracts 5.9 and 5.10 is markedly different from her talk in extract 5.8. Membership categorisation is a locally accomplished activity (Edwards 1998; Hester & Eglin 1997), and Smita uses membership categorisation in different ways at different points in her talk in order to manage the discursive work at hand. In extracts 5.9 and 5.10, as Smita has no interest in these 'bizarre concepts' herself, she can construct her reading of men's magazines in a favourable light by reproducing hegemonic ways of categorising male and female behaviour. Widdicombe describes membership categories as a 'powerful cultural resource in warranting, explaining and justifying behaviour' (1998: 53), and indeed this is how Smita makes use of them. In extract 5.8 Smita cannot reproduce the culturally dominant categorisations without raising the possibility that her own behaviour will be seen as incongruous or aberrant. As a result she is forced to challenge the ties between sport and masculinity in order for her to maintain a feminine identity while still going on record as a sports fan.

Returning to extract 5.10, in lines 74 to 82 Smita attempts a different tack in trying to explain why she reads men's magazines, or has read them in the past. In lines 74 to 75 she says 'it sounds like I'm an expert here on men's magazines but I'm

certainly not – ok?’. Here Smita explicitly attends to inferences I might have drawn from the preceding talk, namely that I might think she is an ‘expert’ on men’s magazines, or in other words, that she is more familiar with them than a woman should be. She then goes on to assert that such an interpretation would be wrong. Her use of the content-oriented booster ‘certainly’ strengthens the illocutionary force of her assertion, constructing her statement as a matter of fact rather than opinion, while the concluding ‘ok?’ serves almost as a demand for my agreement.

In lines 75 to 80 she describes how she was simply in a situation where she had access to the magazines and that she ‘wouldn’t go out and **buy** a men’s magazine’. Here again she is trying to disassociate herself from activities which are category-bound to men by suggesting, through her emphatic stress on ‘buy’, that there is a difference between buying and reading men’s magazines. Smita implies that had she bought the magazines herself, her actions could legitimately be judged as inappropriate, but she goes to great pains to establish that that is not the case.

Finally, in lines 80 to 82 she changes tack yet again by trying to re-categorise the magazines as being of interest to ‘everybody’. In line 81 she says ‘they’re not **just** for men – I’ll tell you that [...] everybody would find those sorts of articles interesting’. Here, in contrast with her talk earlier in this extract, Smita challenges the idea that men’s magazines are only of interest to men, with the rhetorical device ‘I’ll tell you that’ strengthening the force of her assertion, and serving to pre-empt any possible disagreement by pointing the hearer explicitly in the direction of the intended interpretation.

5.4 CONCLUSION

Through their subject matter, women’s magazines explicitly construct certain activities and interests as being category-bound to women. Much of the previous research on women’s magazines has discussed the ways in which the magazines attempt to construct what Ferguson describes as ‘a collective female social ‘reality’, the world of women’ (1983: 185), based on hegemonic notions of what women are, or should be interested in. MCA, particularly the notion of category-bound activities, provides a useful tool with which to analyse the ways in which the dominant ideologies of femininity and feminine behaviour found in women’s magazines are reproduced or resisted by women in their talk.

In this chapter we saw the ways in which women draw on different gender categories, and their category-bound associations, in order to define the target reader and to position themselves inside or outside these categories. As we first saw in Chapter 3, women invoke various social categories, such as age and sexuality, in order to define themselves and others, and to position themselves in relation to the magazines and their target readers. Using MCA, in this chapter I have shown how notions of gender, age, sexuality and class are combined in the construction of membership categories like 'young trendy professional', 'townie girl' and 'middle aged woman'. We have seen how these categories, and the activities, interests and attributes associated with them, are invoked, drawing on broad social categories and presumed shared knowledge in order to serve specific interactional and rhetorical purposes.

More broadly, in this chapter we have also seen that, and how, MCA can contribute to the development of research on language and gender. MCA allows feminist researchers to combine a concern with how gender operates at a macro level, with an understanding of how participants 'do' gender on a moment-to-moment basis in everyday interaction. By using MCA to analyse Smita's talk we saw a clear example of how participants manage their identities in relation to normative expectations as to what women do, and how they should behave. Even when Smita was trying to resist or challenge the category-boundedness of an interest in sport, she was not able to do so without first acknowledging the existence of this association and its implications for her. This demonstrates the hegemonic nature of dominant gender categories, in that women have to define themselves in relation to these categories, even if we do not conform, or do not wish to conform, to them.

Despite their normative power, however, membership categories are not set in stone. Categorisation is a locally occasioned activity, and therefore categories are flexible and open to manipulation and interpretation by members. As Jack Sidnell notes, 'norms do not determine action, rather they provide for its intelligibility' (2003: 334). Smita is aware of the kinds of gender categories which others might draw on in interpreting her action and making them intelligible, and orients to these norms in her talk. She then, however, attempts to break the associations between men and sport and offer an alternative categorisation which she thinks is more favourable.

Smita's talk shows us that when existing categories cause problems for women's construction of their own identity, participants are able to exploit the ambiguous nature of these categories in order to challenge and attempt to reconstruct them, thereby demonstrating the possibility for social change.

Although MCA is by no means the only framework which allows analysts to explore the discursive construction of gender norms, it is certainly a valuable addition to the language and gender researcher's methodological toolkit, allowing for analyses which are rigorous and data-driven, but also socially and politically motivated.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSIONS

6.1 INTRODUCTION

Using what can broadly be described as feminist discourse analytic methods, I have in this thesis described and analysed how women talk about women's magazines. Through this analysis I have explored what these accounts can tell us about the discursive construction of gender identity, and how women's ideas about who they are and how they see themselves are mediated by the images and discourses of femininity found in women's magazines. I have also shown that gender should not be considered as an independent, self-contained aspect of identity, but that it is important to consider how gender intersects and interacts with other social factors and aspects of identity, such as age, ethnicity, sexuality and class.

In this final chapter I begin by summarising my main arguments and findings from the previous chapters. In this summary I pull together and synthesise the various themes and issues arising from the data analysis, in order to make connections between different aspects of the data and my analysis of it, and to provide a broader and more complete picture of what we can learn from readers' accounts. I conclude by considering particular aspects of my data which point to possible avenues for further research, and by looking at the implications of this study for current and future work, both in language and gender and in the feminist study of media and popular culture.

6.2 SUMMARY

Central to my informants' accounts were questions of identity and identification: Who am I? Who do I want to be seen as? Who or what do I identify with and want to be identified with? These questions arise throughout my analysis in Chapters 3, 4 and 5. As discussed in chapter 1, much of the earlier research on the magazines themselves described the ways in which the magazines attempt to position their readers. As I have argued in this thesis, however, we cannot assume that actual readers will unquestioningly assume the subject positions inscribed in the texts. As we have seen, just because a woman reads a particular magazine does not mean

that she will want to be identified with that magazine, or more generally as a 'women's magazine reader'.

As discussed in chapter 3, one of the most striking and surprising aspects of my data was the tendency amongst my informants to 'talk themselves out' of the category of women's magazine reader. An extreme example of this was Meera (extract 3.2), who buys several glossy magazines every month but is not willing to be seen reading them in public because she would be 'ashamed to be caught with one of them'. Whether or not Meera does in fact identify with the magazines in some way, there is something about her perception of women's magazines and women's magazine readers which is incompatible with how she sees herself and wants other people to see her. For Meera, Alice (extract 3.1) and other educated, middle class women, the problem appears to be that they want to be seen as cultured, educated, intelligent women, but this is at odds with their perception of women's magazines and their target readers as superficial, frivolous and trashy. To be identified with women's magazines devalues their cultural capital, and so rather than attempt to deconstruct or redefine stereotypes of women's magazine readers (or women in general?), they distance themselves from the target readership and try to align themselves with more valued forms of culture and media.

As we have seen, other women argue that they do not identify with the target readership by reason of their age, sexuality or ethnicity. Shazia (extract 3.3), for example, noted that women's magazines are targeted at heterosexual women, and suggested that they do not interest her because 'I don't identify myself as *that*'. Interestingly, Shazia also stated that she does not feel that magazines aimed at lesbians address her interests either, as they are aimed principally at white women. Nonetheless, Shazia did not express any surprise at this state of affairs, and suggested that she has become accustomed to being excluded or marginalized by mainstream culture and society, and would not expect things to be any different. In fact, I was surprised to find that other than Shazia, none of the Asian women I spoke to expressed any dissatisfaction with the absence of Asian faces from the pages of the magazines. Meera expressed annoyance that Indian women's magazines occasionally feature white models, but said she would not expect British magazines to feature more women of colour. Like Shazia, it could be that these women have simply come to accept the 'whiteness' of the world of women's magazines, as

magazines are certainly not unique in this respect. Nonetheless, if women are actively seeking to distance themselves from the magazines then we might expect them to raise the subject of ethnicity or colour as one of the reasons why they do not identify with the magazines (see section 6.3.1 below for further discussion of this issue).

Although magazine publishers target their magazines at specific demographic groups, this tends not to be explicitly acknowledged within the texts themselves, which instead construct women as a monolithic and homogeneous category, and present themselves as representing and catering for all women. As we saw in Chapter 3 and Chapter 5, however, readers do not necessarily accept this account of a universal femininity, as is clear from the detailed categorisation work they do in order to define themselves and other women, and in order to position themselves in relation to other groups of women. These women have clear notions about the cultural meanings associated with the magazines, and with the feminine behaviour and interests they depict, and they are attuned to the possible implications of how they identify themselves, and who and what they identify with.

Work by Mary Talbot and others (as discussed in Chapter 1) has described the ways in which the magazines construct the relationship between reader and writer as a close friendship, and encourage readers to see themselves as members of a community or sisterhood. In Chapter 4 we saw that women are resistant to the idea that the magazine writers know them and are their friends, instead constructing them as strangers from whom it would be inappropriate to seek advice on personal problems. Similarly, my informants were reluctant to identify themselves with readers who write to problem pages and seek personal advice from magazines. Although they might express sympathy for these women, they were careful to distance themselves and insist that they were different, as they had friends and family that they could turn to for advice.

In this thesis we have seen that women are reluctant to be identified with the magazines and their readers, distancing themselves in different ways and for different purposes. However, my data also show that this reluctance to align themselves with the magazines does not necessarily correspond with a total rejection of the discourses of femininity found in the texts. As we saw in Chapter 4,

for example, women's acceptance of the magazines as a valid source of 'practical' advice on fashion, make-up and so on, suggests that they do buy into hegemonic notions that physical appearance is central to being feminine, and is something which women should take care over and work at. Furthermore, although women might reject magazines as a source of relationship advice, and might deny that they themselves need such advice, they tend not to question that women in general do want to be in relationships, and do need advice on how to find a man and keep him happy. This suggests that the primacy accorded to men and heterosexual relationships in the magazines has become naturalised, and constrains the ways in which women are able to construct themselves as gendered beings.

6.3 THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

6.3.1 Language and gender research

When conducting this research I was not concerned with affiliating myself with a specific methodology or theoretical framework and then applying it to the data. Rather, I wanted to draw on a range of approaches and methods which would enable me to make the most of my data. I wanted to avoid the dogmatism which can be associated with the strict adherence to a conversation analytic approach (although this dogmatism can also be found in work from other perspectives and methodologies), but I also wanted to ensure that my analysis was data-driven and attentive to linguistic detail. My analysis has drawn on, but cannot be described as, (Schegloffian) conversation analysis, which involves using more detailed transcripts and close analysis of turn-taking structure. Moreover, I would argue that a strict CA approach would have led to a rather narrow and limited understanding of the data and what it can tell us about the discursive construction of gender identity, and how identity is mediated by media images and discourses of femininity. MCA, on the other hand, offers more freedom to feminist researchers who wish to explore the impact of broad social categories on the local construction of gender identity.

My analysis in Chapter 5 demonstrates the value of MCA as an addition to the methodological toolkit available to language and gender researchers, and showed that MCA is particularly useful in exploring how individuals account for behaviour which could be seen as breaching the moral order and norms for gendered behaviour. In doing so my analysis adds to the still small, but now growing body of language and gender research which utilises MCA and other conversation analytic

methods. MCA is compatible with current concerns within the field of research on language and gender in that it is a useful tool for scholars concerned with both the macro- and micro-discursive construction of gender (or to put it another way, for scholars whose work integrates Foucauldian and linguistic conceptions of discourse). MCA allows us to explore the way in which socially and historically situated gender categories and norms are maintained, or contested and transformed, in everyday talk. It is not the only framework suitable for such an analysis (see, for example, Sally McConnell-Ginet's (2004) work on the role of social labelling in the construction of gendered identities). However, MCA is particularly useful for its notions of category-bound activities, attributes, rights and obligations, which provide a framework for looking at how certain behaviour is tied to membership categories (and vice versa) and how members use these connections in order to account for and evaluate the behaviour of themselves and others.

6.3.2 Research on women's magazines

This study makes a novel contribution to the feminist study of women's magazines by applying discourse analytic methods to readers accounts of how and why they read the magazines. Previous work on the subject has focused on the magazines themselves and the ideological workings of the texts. This study adds to, and provides an alternative angle to earlier research by looking at how these ideological resources are taken up and made sense of by readers.

As discussed in Chapter 1 much of the research on the magazines themselves has looked at the conflation of femininity and consumerism, and we have seen examples which show some of my informants talking about their awareness that the magazines encourage the view that women must consume various products in order to be feminine. Although previous work has often assumed that readers will passively take up this consumerist ideology as common sense, my data show that readers can take a critical stance towards this aspect of the magazines, while at the same time constructing themselves as enjoying or 'falling for' the covert advertising.

As regards the way in which the magazines position their readers as members of an imagined community of women or 'synthetic sisterhood', my informants' accounts suggest that some women are strongly resistant to being positioned in this way, and distance themselves from the magazines and their target readership. In Chapter 4,

however, when talking about advice in the magazines, we saw readers demonstrating a greater ambivalence towards the magazines. They do not necessarily question the need for certain types of advice, or criticise the quality of the advice given in the magazines, but construct agony aunts as strangers who are not in a position to give personal advice, and distance themselves for the type of woman who would seek such advice from a magazine.

Overall, like much previous work on women's magazines, my findings suggest that readers are able to actively reproduce or resist discourses of femininity, but they are also limited in the way they construct themselves depending on the cultural availability and dominance of different discourses. This thesis shows, however, that readers' talk about women's magazines is more varied, ambivalent, contradictory and complex than could be learned from an analysis of the texts themselves, or from research which only looks at the propositional content of readers' accounts, and not the linguistic detail.

6.3.3 Research on mass media and popular culture

In terms of research on (gendered) forms of mass media and popular culture, this study is not unique in demonstrating the need to look at how media audiences and consumers use and interpret these media. This view is common within cultural studies, as shown by the large body of audience research which now exists. However, where work in media and cultural studies is concerned with language, it tends to focus on the identification and analysis of broad cultural discourses, rather than micro-discursive linguistic detail. On the other hand, within CDA and other more linguistics-oriented studies of mass media, the focus remains largely on written texts, and in such studies the agency of the audience in their interpretations is sometimes overlooked or underestimated. I would contend that there is much to be gained from applying a close linguistic analysis to audience accounts of media use, as I have done in this study, particularly where researchers are concerned with the construction of identity, and how it is mediated by media discourse and images.

There is a tendency in cultural studies to engage in 'redemptive' or 'celebratory' readings of accounts of popular cultural consumption, driven by the desire to respect consumers, and not treat them as cultural dopes (see section 1.3.2). As such, consumers' accounts can sometimes be taken at face value as revealing the reality

of how and why people consume popular culture. However, as discussed in section 6.3.6 below, these accounts cannot be seen as representations of the truth, but rather as accounts which reveal how people go about constructing their identities in specific contexts. I would argue that work in cultural studies would benefit from paying closer attention to the linguistic detail of readers/viewers' accounts, as this would act as a counter to this tendency, and allow a greater focus on the discursive details of how people position themselves in relation to the media they consume.

My informants' accounts show similarities with the accounts of female consumers of other mass media such as soap operas and romance novels (see Radway, 1987; Seiter *et al.*, 1996), in that they often use discourses of relaxation and escape when accounting for their enjoyment of the magazines. In Chapter 1 we saw examples of women emphasising the way that the act of reading the magazines allows them to take a break from the stresses of work and domestic life, rather than talking about any specific features which they find entertaining or informative, just as Radway found when speaking to readers of romance novels. These similarities suggest that it would be useful for researchers to look more closely at how women talk about their consumption of popular culture, or particularly so-called women's genres of popular culture, in general, and to compare these accounts with accounts of how women consume other forms of culture.

6.3.4 Absences

Schegloffian conversation analysts would argue that analysts cannot go beyond what can be found in the interaction itself. Gender, for example, is only relevant to the analysis insofar as it is observably relevant to the participants in the interaction (although what qualifies as observably relevant is open to debate). The long-running debate about the compatibility of conversation analytic methods with a feminist perspective was discussed in Chapter 2 and I will not rehearse these issues again now. I would suggest, however, that it is worth paying attention to what is *not* said, as much as what is said. For example, as discussed in Chapter 4, although all my informants questioned the idea that magazines are an appropriate source of relationship advice, it was unusual for my informants to question the idea that a woman must want to be in a relationship, or that women need to take responsibility for making their relationships work. Other significant absences include the absence of comments about the 'whiteness' of the images found in women's magazines (as

mentioned above), or any mention of the magazines' overwhelmingly heterosexual construction of female sexuality (other than by those women who identified themselves as lesbians).

Although absences cannot be subject to the close analysis which can be applied to what is said, the fact that these aspects of magazine discourse went largely unnoticed and unchallenged raises some interesting questions. That these aspects of the magazines remained unnoticed or were deemed unworthy of comment suggests that the magazines' white, heterosexual version of femininity has become naturalised, so that it has become part of women's common sense understanding of what femininity means. My data also suggest that the more one conforms with the construction of the target, or ideal, reader, in terms of age, ethnicity, sexuality and socio-economic status, the less likely one is to question the magazines' discourses of femininity.

In this way, we can see that what women do not say can also tell us a lot about the hegemonic workings of feminine ideologies, and the extent to which they constrain and set parameters within which women are able to make sense of what it means to be a woman.

6.3.5 Drawing generalisations from the data

In the body of this thesis I have only analysed extracts from sixteen of the thirty interviews in my sample, in some case using more than one example from a particular interview. As discussed in Chapter 2 (sections 2.4.5.1 and sections 2.4.5.2) I decided to do this so that I could examine how differences and contradictions emerge in the talk of individual women as they address different questions and construct themselves in different ways. I have tried to use a varied selection of examples in order to represent women from different groups and social categories. Furthermore, where I have noticed patterns in the data, for example, in the way women 'talk themselves out' of the target readership, I have pointed this out, in order to give a better picture of the corpus as a whole. I would argue that by not drawing attention to these patterns I would have been doing my data a disservice by providing only a limited view of the sample. However, my sample is not as large or as varied as I would have liked, and so it is difficult for me to make broad claims about similarities and differences between the accounts of women

from different groups, or to make generalisations which can be mapped onto the wider society. In addition, one of the limitations of my approach to selecting data examples for analysis is that I have not always been able to back up frequency claims with a full range of examples from the data. If I were to repeat this research, or to develop it further, I would hope to remedy this by both conducting more interviews, and by looking at a wider range of examples from the data, and so any patterns I have mentioned in this thesis can be seen as indicating areas which would merit further research.

6.3.6 Accounts vs. reality

Public debate about women's magazines has tended to centre on the extent to which women's magazines and those aimed at teenage girls exert influence over their readers, and the role which the magazines play in encouraging eating disorders and body image problems. As discussed in Chapter 3, when asked about this issue, most of my informants positioned themselves as being immune to any negative influence from the magazines, but suggested that other women might be more susceptible. However, it is important to remember that these are only my informants' accounts of their relationships with the magazines, and as such my data is incapable of telling us about the reality of how and to what extent women are influenced by the magazines they read. Nor can the data tell us if informants really do what they say they do regarding how often they read the magazines and why they read them. What my data *can* tell us is how women present their actions, beliefs and identity in the context of the research interview, but the data should not be seen as providing a means of accessing the truth or reality about what those actions, beliefs and identities actually are. Moreover, a social constructionist approach to discourse, such as the one I have taken in this thesis, is concerned with the construction of identity on a moment-to-moment basis in specific interactional contexts, and not with discerning any underlying motivation or uncovering a hidden reality. As such, when an informant tells me that she is not a regular magazine reader, this is interesting in and of itself because of what it tells us about how she is positioning herself in relation to the magazines and the discourses of femininity they contain, and not because of what it may or may not tell us about how often she buys women's magazines.

6.4 AVENUES FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

There are several interesting issues which arose during the course of my data collection and analysis which I have not been able to discuss in any detail in this thesis, either because these issues were somewhat tangential to the main focus of this study, or because the data I collected raised questions which could not be addressed without further research.

In chapter 4 we saw that for most of my informants, relationships are considered personal matters, and as such, they would turn to friends and family if they had relationship problems, and not the magazines. Most of the women I spoke to also described sex as a personal matter, and accordingly suggested that women with sexual problems should seek help from those close to them, or from qualified professionals. When talking about the sex tips, most women described them as being amusing and/or silly, but certainly not as a practical guide. Louise (extract 4.2) was an exception, as she regards sex tips as practical advice which she has made use of in the past, and would certainly use again. In chapter 4 I raised the possibility that this might reflect a change in the discourses of sex available to young women, and that Louise's focus on sex as a physical, rather than emotional, act could be linked to the medicalisation of sex in public discourse. What I mean by this is that, perhaps due to the popularity of Viagra, problems to do with impotence and lack of sex drive, both in men and women, are increasingly being pathologised, and constructed as medical problems which can be treated with drugs. This would be a fruitful area for further research, both in order to look more closely at how sex is dealt with in the magazines themselves, and also to examine how this might be reflected in young women's and teenagers' talk about sex. If, for example, lack of sex drive, or inability to reach orgasm are increasingly being regarded as having medical or physiological causes, a pertinent question would be how this affects young women's perception of their own sexuality and sexual experiences. Does this kind of discourse enforce norms about what constitutes 'normal' levels of sexual activity and sexual pleasure, making those who do fall short of the norm feel that there is something wrong with them? On the other hand, perhaps if sex is seen as a practical, rather than emotional issue, then young women and teenage girls would be more likely to seek advice when they need it, and not feel embarrassed about talking about their problems.

In chapter 4 I also discussed the related issue of how many of my informants suggested that problem pages and advice sections were of most use to teenage girls. It was often claimed that while older women would seek advice from friends and family, or else speak to an appropriate professional, younger women and teenagers might be too embarrassed or afraid to ask their friends and family for advice, or go to a doctor or sexual health clinic (although as we saw with Caroline, there are also concerns that magazines put pressure on girls to become sexually active too soon). As only one of my informants was a teenager herself, I was not able to explore how teenagers themselves talk about the magazines as a source of advice. Further research on this subject, looking at how teenage girls talk about sex, and who they regard as an acceptable and reliable source of information and advice, could have implications for the provision of sex education. As Britain has relatively high rates of teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, getting a better understanding of these issues could enable those working in sex education and public health to know how best to make available the necessary advice and information so that it is more likely to be taken up and put into practice by teenagers.

Previous research on women's magazines and their readers has focused on mainstream magazines, that is those aimed (although not explicitly so) at white, heterosexual women. Some research has looked at feminist magazines (Winship (1987) analysed the British feminist magazine *Spare Rib*, as well as *Cosmo* and *Woman's Own*) and their readers (Hermes (1995) interviewed fourteen women who read a Dutch feminist magazine, *Opzij*). Other non-mainstream magazines however, such as magazines for lesbians or for black and Asian women, seem to have been neglected in previous research, although this is an area which merits further exploration.

In Britain there are a number of magazines aimed specifically at Asian or black women, although there are not as many titles as there are in the U.S. and they are not nearly as widely available as mainstream women's magazines. Although I wanted to find as broad a range of informants as possible for this study, unfortunately I was unable to recruit any black women (I am using the term 'black' to refer to women of Afro-Caribbean origin, although it is also sometimes used more generally to refer to all women of colour), although I did interview five Asian women.

None of these women read magazines aimed at women of colour and therefore I was unable to explore how women talk about these magazines (although Meera, who was born and grew up in India, reads Indian editions of the glossy magazines, as well as the North American and British versions, but this is a somewhat different situation, however, as in India these magazines are mainstream).

From my own experience as a British Asian woman, I would argue that dominant discourses of femininity within Black and Asian culture are not the same as those which circulate within the wider (white) society, so that although women are still expected to work on their appearance, the ideals of feminine beauty might be somewhat different. For example, women of colour are marketed hair relaxing and skin lightening products, as well as cosmetics designed for dark skin, which do not feature in mainstream women's magazines. For Asian women, the question of finding a husband is also a serious business, and traditionally women are expected to get married rather than have a series of relationships, and finding a husband can involve concerns about a potential partner's education, family background, caste, and even complexion. One would expect, then, that magazines aimed at Asian women would place a greater emphasis on finding a suitable husband, rather than on how to have great sex. However, young women who have grown up in Britain are exposed to discourses from both communities, and these discourses intersect, and sometimes conflict with each other. It is often argued, for example, that black and Asian ideas about what is beautiful are unduly influenced by 'western' ideals of beauty, which places pressure on women to conform to standards which are not 'natural' for women of colour (note, for example that many famous black women, such as Beyonce Knowles, have relatively fair skin, and tend to straighten and lighten their hair).

It seems then that research into these magazines and their readers could potentially tell us a lot about not only gender identity, but also ethnic, cultural and national identity, and how these different aspects of identity intersect. It would also allow a greater exploration than was possible in this study of how women from ethnic minorities respond to, take up, or contest discourses of femininity found in both types of women's magazine, and how they resolve any possible conflicts between different aspects of their identity.

My data show that women's accounts of their experiences and identities as gendered beings are inextricably linked with other aspects of social identity, such as age, ethnicity, sexuality and class. As such we can see that in theorising gender, gender cannot be treated as independent and isolatable from other social categories. Rather, we should take into account the complex interaction of these different aspects of identity, and the way they are made salient in different interactional contexts. In this study I have also demonstrated that our sense of self, and what it means to be a woman, is mediated and constrained by the dominant discourses of femininity disseminated through women's magazines and other media. These discourses seek to limit the ways in which women can negotiate gendered identities for themselves, and in my data we can see women orienting to these discourses, even when they themselves do not conform to these norms. However, in not conforming, and in resisting or contesting these discourses, we can see that discourse is a site of struggle, and not simply a way of brainwashing the masses. Women's magazine readers are not cultural dopes, and the ways in which they make sense of, and put to use the ideological resources made available in the magazines are complex and varied.

Magazine publishers and editors claim to be giving women what they want, but readers themselves are often ambivalent and unsure about why they read the magazines and what it is they like about them. My informants often remarked that, prior to being interviewed, they had never given much thought to these questions, and a few women even suggested that following our discussion, they felt less inclined to read the magazines. What this suggests is that women's magazines and the ideologies underlying them are such an established part of our cultural landscape that they are often consumed unthinkingly, even apathetically. The flipside of this, however, is that when women begin to evaluate and question what they had previously taken for granted, they may look for alternative discourses of femininity, and seek to define themselves in different ways, thereby challenging and transforming the status quo.

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