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8 Stories of Desire: Women's Accounts of their Early Sexual Feelings and Behaviours

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This chapter examines women's accounts of how they make sense of sexual development in their biographical context. It uses in-depth, semi-structured interviews to collect data with the focus on participants' biographical reconstruction of their sexual knowledge and sexual experiences. Interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. 33 women volunteer respondents were interviewed whose ages ranged from 19 to 60 (Mean age 28.8). All had had some heterosexual experiences although some identified themselves as lesbian or bi-sexual at the time of the interview. The data were examined using a symbolic interactionist and interpretive approach, specifically to identify and describe a) the context in which women enacted their early sexual experiences and b) the emotional content implicit and explicit in their accounts.

The findings indicated that even the younger women whose parents grew up in the 1960s had been told very little affirming information about women's sexuality and grew up with a sense of ignorance, mystery and taboo. This impacted upon their subsequent experiences and attitudes to sexual health. What they did come to 'understand' was a sense that there was a sexual double standard, which meant that boys 'needed' sexual intercourse and girls were 'responsible' for the couples' behaviour. They also accepted that coercion was a component of heterosexual experience.

Women thus incorporate a sense of sexual guilt about their feelings, behaviours and desires into their biographical knowledge of sexuality and identity.

Introduction

When young women begin to negotiate heterosexual relationships and to explore and practice their sexual identities, there is often much that they do not know. In the absence of personal experience to draw on, they have to try to make sense of the information they get from, for example, their own childhood experiences, school sex education, their parents and siblings, their peers and the mass media. These varied sources can give them contradictory information about what constitutes sexuality, how to manage their sexual relationships, and what to expect from heterosexual intercourse. (Holland et al., 1992: 647)

Women's sexuality is complex. Biology, psychology and social context conspire to produce in each of us a typically female expression of sexuality, which is 'of' women, but defined and controlled by men (Jeffreys, 1990; Nicolson, 1993). It is experienced by women, through their bodies: as subjective desire for another, and being desirable (or not) to another; through psychological interpretations of these feelings which take account of personal histories and social context; through intellectual understanding of female sexuality via interpretations of scientific and media discourses; and through interpersonal relationships with women and men. Women are socialised to have an understanding of what are considered 'normal' sexual desires and practices, and accordingly demarcate their own boundaries of behaviour and expectations. Each of us is made aware of the extent to which we have a sexual value; which relates to individual and overall female desirability, which in a heterosexual patriarchal society is driven by appearance and behaviour in relation to men (Wolf, 1991).

Evidence from feminist sociologists (eg. Holland et al., 1992) and psychologists (Jackson, 2001) is that young women's early heterosexual encounters frequently include coercion, violence and commonly lack pleasure (Holland et al., 1996). Despite this, young women seem to engage in heterosexual intercourse on a regular basis as witnessed by the high rates of pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections in teenage women, as well as self report data (see for example Hart and Wellings, 2001). What is apparent from the research literature is that despite the increased professional and media interest in sexual behaviour over the latter half of the twentieth century, young people still embark upon their sexual careers in *relative ignorance*, not only of the risk of pregnancy and disease, but of what place sexuality and sexual intercourse has in their own lives.

This study reported here is concerned with how women come to understand their sexual development and account for and interpret their early experiences retrospectively.

Methodology

In-depth interviews with 33 women were employed to explore respondents' accounts of their sexual development and experiences over their life course. As far as possible their own subjective perceptions and evaluations of their experiences were emphasised in the data collection and analysis. The part of the study specifically considered here, is the women's accounts of their first sexual experiences and how they considered that they became sexualised beings.

Design

This was designed as a qualitative study using in-depth interviews with female participants who were volunteers. Two interviewers were involved, the lead investigator and a trainee sexual health counsellor.

Following the stated aims and objectives, which required a discursive and developmental approach, the interviews focused upon women's retrospective, subjective accounts of the biographical context of their sexual development. The interviews were structured along the lines of a focused conversation or discussion (Bott, 1957; Rapoport and Rapoport, 1976; Nicolson, 1998) in order to cover the ground relevant to the research questions. This approach also enables flexibility for spontaneity and the inclusion of unexpected data that might have relevance.

Sampling and Recruitment

Adverts were placed in female toilets and public notice boards around a major teaching hospital and in university departments. The name, affiliation, professional details, telephone number and office address of the principal investigator were given for those who wanted to discuss further the possibility of being interviewed. Those who agreed to be interviewed made an appointment over the telephone. The interview was conducted in one or other of the investigators' offices in the teaching hospital. A consent form was signed giving permission to use the data anonymously for research reports and presentations.

Thirty-eight people contacted the researchers via the advertisements. Following discussion on the telephone, 34 agreed to be interviewed although only 33 eventually kept the appointment. All were middle class by present occupation (students or health service employees) although five had come from working class backgrounds. Thirty-two identified themselves as mainly heterosexual, one as a lesbian (although in the past she had had mainly heterosexual relationships) and eight other women said they had considered or been involved in same sex relationships at some point in their lives. The age range of the sample was between 19 and 60, with a mean age of 28.8 years.

Ethical Considerations

Anonymity of data was ensured for transcripts by removing respondents' real names. Tapes were wiped after transcription and the biographical information sheets were locked in a cupboard in the principal investigator's home until the data could be collated onto an anonymous record. Then these papers were destroyed.

Interviews took place in a confidential context. Someone outside the city where the interviews took place transcribed most of the tapes.

Procedure

Each interview was tape-recorded, transcribed verbatim and then analysed according to the procedure described below. All names and identifying details were changed in the transcripts. Interviews lasted from between 45 minutes and in one case 2 hours. Most interviews lasted for about an hour and a quarter/hour and a half.

Data Analysis

The method of data analysis employed here was an interpretive conceptual qualitative analysis (see for example Nicolson and Anderson, 2001) that focused upon extracts from the data that identified accounts specifically about memories surrounding early sexual awareness and development. Following transcription, the transcripts were explored to take up and engage with emergent conceptual frameworks derived from the women's accounts of their sexual experiences. The data analysis here takes account of the *processes* by which the data was collected (ie. the conditions of the interview itself, the relationship established between respondent and interviewer, reflexivity at various levels) as well as the *contexts* in which it can be given meaning (Denzin, 1992).

Findings

Memories of early sexual experiences suggested that a sexual double standard was conveyed to the young women and this was communicated in three ways:

- a) in part through parental behaviours in which mothers in particular seemed to be ignoring the young woman's sexuality in the hope that it might 'go away';
- b) through interaction and early relationships with young men who were perceived to be unable to engage in equal and mutually satisfying sexual relationships unless they employed an elaborate camouflage to suggest dominance;
- c) through coercion by the young men.

Some brief but representative examples follow.

Hoping It Might Go Away

There were numerous cases of parents trying to ignore inquiries about sexual feelings or sexual behaviours, which was clearly significant in the respondents' memories. For instance:

I was about 6, that was my earliest memory and then I can also remember if I was watching television with my mum and if something sexual was on television I would say "mum I've got a funny tingling feeling" and she'd say "Oh have you?" and then kind of forget about it and turn over the channel.

I think though as I got a bit older then you realise that it is something that you don't admit to. But she never really said that "Oh that's disgusting" or anything, she just sort of didn't really discuss it just sort of said "alright".

What is particularly important here is the potential impact that the side-stepping of the issue had upon the women's sense of sexuality. In neither case outlined above was there any overt condemnation, but the avoidance itself conveyed a strong message to the young women that sexual feelings and sexual behaviours were somehow to be avoided.

Good Girls Don't Have Sex

Although, again, this was not made explicit through parental behaviour, it appears that on reaching adolescence the message was 'acceptable' or *accepted* in that the young women were prepared to be seen as 'not good' in order to have a sexual relationship.

A complex 'juggling' process was enacted in order for the young women to be sexually active. This might mean taking on the identity of the 'bad' woman even if this did not represent the nature of the intimate relationship itself. For example:

I think there was a few rumours that went out. They weren't true at all, but it just suited his image to have these exciting rumours out about me. I think one or two of them had the wrong idea. When I met this lad who I got on well with, his friends thought I was a bit of a raver. They had seen me a few times in these places (clubs), but they had nothing to base it on, just thought I was. We got on well me and this lad. He'd only had one real girlfriend before that. We just sort of, it was quite a long time before we did anything and we, I can't remember. We slept together a few times before actually anything really happened. It was just a natural progression. We just really liked each other. He had a flat at that time so we used to go up and see each other there. After, I can't remember how long it was while we were going out.

In this extract (my emphases) it is clear that the young man was prepared to collude in the image of the young woman's 'reputation' despite the clear

innocence of the relationship itself in order to justify his own sexual behaviour. It seemed (at least to this young woman) that for the young man it was important for sex not to be part of an equal relationship but to be one of exploitation. She, it seems, considered that her relationship was more important than her reputation.

Coercion

This was present in the interviews in a number of ways. Some accounts clearly constituted rape - sex without the young woman's consent, but the overall picture was more subtle and once again potentially connected to the way female sexuality was perceived by the respondents (as taboo) and the assumptions made about sexual responsibility, ie. that women were responsible if they actively sought sex or gave in voluntarily while men were responsible if they were coercive and it was expected that they would as they 'needed' sex in ways that young women did not.

Well I was quite young when I first had intercourse. I hadn't really messed around before that, petting as it was called, and that happened by accident. I was very naive and I went with this slightly older boy than myself. I would have been 15 and he 18.

We went to look at something in his bedroom, I was going to have a look at, not etchings ... I've forgotten what it was, but I remember thinking I couldn't do anything about it, I was quite powerless, that I had got myself into this situation and I just had to put up with it. I didn't feel able to stop it.

Paula: Was it something you felt comfortable with or not?

I don't think I did. I was unhappy that it had happened without ... I had expected it to be loving and joyful and it was something quite cold.

Here it is clear that not only did the respondent feel coerced, but she was disappointed, reported being passive in the sexual encounter and felt powerless. Again these issues were repeated in several of the respondents' accounts.

Conclusions

Despite the sexual revolution of the 1960s and beyond, with expectations of greater sexual permissiveness and knowledge, there is increasing evidence that the beliefs about sexual double standard (ie. that young women are seen as morally lacking and at risk for engaging in heterosexual intercourse and young men are seen as more masculine and needing sexual intercourse) remain active among contemporary cohorts of young people. The interviews outlined here, indicate that the roots of this double standard are communicated initially through parental *failure to present positive images of female sexuality* rather

than a deliberate attempt to reproduce the double standard. This leads to 'normal' sexuality for young women as being seen as mysterious, taboo and covertly responsible and to blame for coercive male sexual behaviour.

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