

# THE SEXUAL DOUBLE STANDARD: LANGUAGES OF INEQUALITY

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JULIA CARTER

CONTACT:

[J.CARTER5@BRADFORD.AC.UK](mailto:J.CARTER5@BRADFORD.AC.UK)

CENTRE FOR APPLIED SOCIAL RESEARCH

ASHFIELD BUILDING

UNIVERSITY OF BRADFORD

BD7 1DP

## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the extent to which young women in Britain experience freedom in their sexuality and sexual encounters in their day-to-day lives. Over the summer of 2008 I interviewed 23 heterosexual women between the ages of 18 and 30 to discover their views on marriage, relationships, love and sexuality. I found that in their discussions of sexuality, the women highlighted dangers and risks involved in sexual activity. Far from the plastic sexuality seen by Giddens (1992) and other individualisation theorists, young women today are still concerned with sexual reputation, policed through the use of sexual slurs, and the possibly difficult emotional and physical consequences of active sexuality. This paper contextualises these women's accounts within current discussions of sexuality that couch sexual freedom within dilemmas and dangers.

**KEY WORDS:** Sexuality, Women, Double Standard, Inequality, Plastic Sexuality

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Giddens (1992) suggests that sexuality- especially since the development of artificial reproduction- has become ‘plastic’; it is now totally autonomous and separate from conception<sup>1</sup>. Under plastic sexuality, sex is liberated from reproduction and the focus is therefore on pleasure for the individuals involved. Since this thesis was put forward there have been numerous and varied responses reporting to greater or lesser extents the, at best, optimistic nature of such conclusions. For example, writers note the remaining power differentials in heterosexual relations (Holland et al., 2004), the existence of both pleasure and danger for women’s sexuality (Tolman, 2005), and the continued dominance of institutionalised heterosexuality (Weeks, 2007). This paper situates interviews with young women conducted in 2008 in Britain within these discourses and seeks to determine whether any change has occurred in their experience of (hetero)sexuality; for while young women certainly seem to have greater manoeuvre in expressing their sexuality, ‘sexual girls continue to make and get into trouble’ (Tolman, 2005: 9). The findings presented from my own research will build on these existing pieces of research on young women’s sexuality, particularly Tolman’s *Dilemmas of Desire* (2005) documenting teenage girls discussions of sexuality in the USA, and Holland et al.’s book *The Male in the Head* first published in the UK in 1998.

Marriage has traditionally been the socially accepted, legally sanctioned and religiously sanctified means of having sex, at least since the triumph of ‘Victorian values’ in the mid-nineteenth century. In contrast, sex outside marriage has normatively been perceived as both risky and deviant, however common it might have been in practice. As the British Social Attitudes Surveys show, this position has changed in recent decades in that pre-marital sex is now accepted, even seen as normal, while extra-marital, and other extra-relationship sex, is overwhelmingly condemned. Considering they were found by the British Social Attitudes surveys to be the most liberal in social matters, it is the purpose of this paper to investigate whether young women in Britain are displaying increasingly plastic sexuality, or whether their sexuality is still hedged about by social mores, norms and even policing.

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<sup>1</sup> This concept is perhaps only relevant for Western societies; a fact that Giddens largely overlooks.

The language of sexuality is almost always heterosexual and upholds patriarchal notions of passive, feminine women and aggressive, masculine men. This issue of language will be the first analytical focus of this paper, looking at sexual stereotyping, the sexual double standard and sexist sexual slurs (section 3). This sexualised and unequal language has led to the maintenance of power differentials in intimate sexual relations, which places the responsibility for the consequences of sexuality firmly on women's shoulders. This will be the focus of the next section of the paper (section 4), highlighting in particular the dangers of sex, including STIs, pregnancy and emotional harm. While the majority of accounts of sexuality were cautious and showed limited recourse to sexual desire and pleasure, some women talk about agency within their accounts (see section 5). Finally, the paper will end with a conclusion about the extent of sexual freedom and sexual dangers presented in young women's accounts of their lives and relationships. I will now turn, in section 2, to a discussion of the research approach and methodology.

## 2. THE RESEARCH; APPROACH AND METHODS

Sayer (1984, 1992) distinguishes between 'intensive' and 'extensive' research (see also Brannen 1992, 2005). The idea of intensive and extensive research goes beyond the traditional notion of depth versus breadth; each approach involves asking different types of questions and they answer these questions using different techniques and methods. Intensive research focuses on understanding how and why certain things happen and what the connection is between cause and effect. Such research is best at explaining patterns and relations for particular cases but these cannot be representative of, or generalised to, a wider population. Extensive research, on the other hand, investigates the common properties and general patterns present in a whole population. Such results are generalisable and representative but they lack explanatory power.

This research followed an intensive approach since extensive research on the overall patterns of sexuality, relationships and attitudes already exists; see for example the annual NatCen British Social Attitudes Survey and the NatCen National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles, currently in its third round. These surveys have shown that pre-marital sex with a number of partners is almost universally accepted, especially by the young, but sexual relations outside of an established relationship were almost

universally frowned upon. However, we still need to know why these changes are occurring and how they are understood and experienced; do they indicate an advancing 'plastic sexuality', or rather a sexuality, which although in some respects is 'freer' (e.g. to have a number of sexual partners before marriage), in other respects is still morally bound and socially policed? This is why intensive research is needed, which aims to focus on how and why individuals behave in a particular way.

I have therefore taken a small, purposive sample so as to obtain in-depth information in context. While large statistical samples often misrepresent particular social groups because of their categorical sampling, purposive samples can be designed to more accurately reflect real world social groupings. Thus the purposive sample used here is of young women, whom we might expect to be at the forefront of both social change and its possibly ambivalent and contested nature. While the results may go some way to explaining why this group of young women behave in particular ways, they cannot be generalised to any wider populations because they are not representative of any such populations.

This research used semi-structured interviews with 23 young heterosexual women, conducted over the summer of 2008. Heterosexual women only were interviewed because of time and sampling constraints: these were the only women available for interview in the allotted time. Although the sample was not deliberately restricted to exclude non-heterosexual women, this unintentional result does impose a control on the diversity of the sample; the experience of sexuality for homosexual women could, arguably, be quite different from that experienced by heterosexual women.

Semi-structured interviews elicit a roundness of understanding, taking into account the context in which talk is produced and participants' own understandings of their social reality, as well as being efficient and easy to reproduce. Rather than accurate reflections of social reality, interview accounts will have been reworked and reinterpreted by the participant and researcher. In addition, semi-structured interviews operate at a discursive level; only the interviewees' talk can be analysed. Since much agency may be unconscious, this method cannot uncover hidden motivations, although a sensitive interview over an hour or so can access habitual behaviour that might otherwise escape

comment. By making these assumptions and complexities clear, I can reflect on them and attempt to produce a more balanced account of the responses given.

I sampled participants using convenience and snowball sampling, which are practical and efficient, and particularly useful for research that is not reliant upon representation and generalising findings (see Bryman, 2004). These sampling tools are, however, limited in a number of respects. While some effort was made to vary the sample, interviewing people who are 'convenient' will often result in participants similar to the researcher. Moreover, snowballing is likely to attract further participants who share certain features, resulting in a sample of young women who share definable characteristics. Most significantly, decisions about who to include and exclude in the research are taken out of the researcher's hands and placed into the hands of the participants (see Mason, 2002).

The research was explained to participants as an investigation into young women's beliefs and attitudes towards marriage, relationships, and sexuality. They were told that there were no right or wrong answers and that I was solely interested in their interpretations of the topics. Participants were asked to reflect on their thoughts and attitudes towards sexuality as well as their experiences in their own romantic relationships, past and present. The women ranged in relationship status from single to cohabiting to married, and the scope of the research was limited to include only heterosexual women because of strict time constraints. Participants were mostly similar in terms of ethnicity; 22 were white British, one was mixed race British. They ranged in terms of education level from secondary school qualifications through to Ph.D. level. Around two thirds of the participants were from middle to upper middle class backgrounds, and one third were from working class backgrounds. Participants ranged from 19 to 30 years old, with an even spread throughout the range.

I implemented a thematic analysis to code recurrent topics emerging from the discussions. I was then able to use this information to address current debates about sexuality. The resulting analysis represents the thoughts and beliefs of this particular group of young people, as related through the personal narratives of their attitudes and lived experiences. While there is a clear distinction between beliefs and experiences, it

became apparent that many of the respondents' beliefs were built upon their own experiences of intimate relationships.

### 3. LANGUAGES OF INEQUALITY

It appears from women's accounts that the use of sexual judgements, stereotypes and derogatory name-calling for women is still common. Women are objectified; their sexuality judged by the clothes they wear (Duits and Van Zoonen, 2006) and how many sexual partners they have had. The following are just a few examples from the interviewees when they were asked about the double standard: 'men can sleep with loads of girls and [be] called players but if a girl was to do it she be called a slag' (Abigail), 'it conjures up the stereotype is like a tart' (Adele), 'girls are still called slappers and men are still you know get a pat on the back' (Fiona), 'I think it's still unfortunately accepted that if a guy sleeps around then he's a stud and if a girl sleeps around then she's a whore' (Susan) and 'she'd be viewed as a slag basically' (Zoe). The policing of women's sexuality is, in part, regulated with the use and re-use of such derogatory terms referring to sexuality. Such labels are used by both men and women to 'police the boundaries of female sexuality' (Holland et al., 2004: 152). For men sexual activity represents a gain in reputation but for women it represents a loss in reputation. Hermione sums this up nicely,

I think it's fine for a man to sleep with as many people as he wants but if a woman's got that amount of sexual freedom if she's that confident in her sexuality I think she gets looked [down] upon for it

The same sexual behaviour by men and women is clearly interpreted in different and contradictory ways, resulting in different standards of acceptable behaviour. Despite differentiating feminine from masculine behaviour, the double standard means that it is only the behaviour of women that is judged (Holland et al., 2004).

The double standard and resulting sexual reputations distinguish between acceptable feminine and masculine behaviour; this is policed and controlled through 'the-male-in-the-head' (Holland et al., 2004). This concept refers to male power under

heterosexuality that leads to the unequal relationship between femininity and masculinity, and relates to the control of both female and male sexuality. A characteristic of the-male-in-the-head is the silencing of sexual female voices and the simultaneous noise of male dominated conversations in the area; one result of this is the sexual double standard. Recognition and reproduction of this double standard was common in accounts, but often the differences in gendered expectations were put down to biological explanations. As Grace summed things up, sex was seen as a greater risk for women because they can become pregnant and, while men can easily walk away from this situation, women have to shoulder the responsibility. Similarly, for Penny, women are criticised more than men for an active sex life because they have this extra responsibility of pregnancy. It is assumed therefore, that sexual behaviour is biologically determined because of this link between sex and reproduction (see also Sharpe, 2004). Although this link is no longer predetermined, it is still commonly considered that sex is a 'natural' biological imperative for the continuation of the species and sexual behaviours are determined by biology. Interviewees commonly interpreted this in 'pop' socio-biological terms where men are biologically freer, even pre-determined, to sleep around whereas women should be more sexually conservative. In addition, the 'risk' of pregnancy was clearly still on interviewees' minds; pregnancy is a more immediate concern when having sex than the fear of infection (see also Holland et al. 2004).

The double standard was also apparent in accounts of emotional (and social) involvement in sexual relationships. For Eleanor, men are more able to walk away from sex whereas women will form an emotional attachment. Eleanor comments,

I suspect that women seem to get, feel more of an emotional attachment than men do, men just seem to be able to walk away much more easily and women seem to be the ones that get more messed up by it.

Alice talks in a similar vein where marriage is seen as most women's ultimate aim,

Women I think get more I think we are more emotional with our hormones and everything, anyway it's a whole different thing but I think we get more attached

and see it as more than that even quite early on. I think most women you know if you like someone you just think oh this is it there's going to be marriage.

This gendered difference in emotional attachment and sex was also found by Holland et al. (2004) in the accounts given by young men. This view that men want sex while women want love and a meaningful, even long term, relationship implicitly reproduces the absence or subordination of female sexual desire (Holland et al., 2004). This view is sometimes based on socio-biological deterministic discourses. Men are viewed as needing to 'sow their wild oats', while women and their 'hormones' become attached to a man because of a 'basic human instinct that says I need to have a mate' (Eleanor). Lees (1997) explains that female sexual desire is linked with negative emotions and consequences: attachment and pregnancy, whereas male desire is seen as natural. This view is also very likely influenced by traditional, heavily gendered, discourses around women, men and relationships. According to Allen (2003), these discourses assert that women want love, are passive and vulnerable while men just want sex. In addition, Chung (2005) found that young people view heterosexual relationships as involving rational men and emotional women. Women are supposed to be the ones forming the (irrational) emotional attachment while men (rationally) just want sex. The statements quoted above by Eleanor and Alice echo these discourses.

These views are also, of course, influenced by standard gender stereotypes. Sex and desire are not feminine, while they are expected from men. Heterosexuality is constructed under a male gaze (Tolman, 2005) so men are in the position of power, they have access to discourses of sex and desire while women's desire is silenced. This is evident throughout respondents' accounts, both explicitly stated and implicitly assumed. As Zoe comments, 'I think it's just different expectations for men and women and she, yes she would be basically looked down on I suppose because she's just not what's expected I suppose'. Fiona says something similar, 'it's expected of men to sort of be like that whereas ladies are meant to be more feminine more lady-like'. Abigail believes men just want sex because 'like they get more horny and things than women do' - women are supposed to hide their desire and make it invisible (Tolman, 2005), while heterosexual men can openly express it. Jackson and Scott (2004) claim that although the double standard may have been eroded, at least formally, it has not yet disappeared

in practice. They go on to say that the double standard remains because women are still concerned with their perceived sexual reputation, they remain unable to utilise a language of desire, and still experience unwanted sex (Jackson and Scott, 2004).

Zoe goes even further, however, when she outlines how she believes gender differences *should* justify a difference in sexual expectations:

I think men and women are different so they should be expected different and as much as it's bad to expect women to like be like all good and only sleep with like people that they know well and all this, it's bad for men to be expected to always want sex and everything. I think it's just the way it is I don't necessarily think it's a bad thing I think there's good and bad things about both being a man and like expected to always want it and... I can't see it any other way to be honest

Zoe invokes the notion of 'good' girls only sleeping with people they know well in opposition to invisible 'bad' girls who do not. The good girl/bad girl dichotomy dictates that women must learn to be 'good' feminine objects of male desire, precluding desires of their own. This is set up with the imperative to avoid becoming a 'bad' girl who has sexual desire and sex with whomever she pleases (Tolman, 2005). Zoe acknowledges this dichotomy with the justification that men and women are different; this perceived biological separation allows gendered stereotyping to continue because biology cannot be changed. Therefore the situation cannot be altered. This is just one example of the male-in-the-head (Holland et al., 2004) in action; it enables this young woman to access a hegemonic language to collude in her own subordination.

The use of the bad girl/good girl dichotomy was used by a number of participants in talking about sexual behaviour; for example: 'in this day and age girls can be just as bad [as men] as they're very easy now' (Abigail). Rather than being 'good' girls and having less sex and being more discriminatory with their sexual partners, women are, in Abigail's eyes, becoming as 'easy' (bad) as the traditional representation of men. The use of the word 'easy' to describe sexually active women is an alternative to using 'slut' or 'slag': a derogatory term used as an insult (almost exclusively for women) based on

her sexual experience; real or perceived. A woman's sex life becomes public property, as it is currently acceptable for other individuals, the media, criminal courts and so on, to judge a woman by her sexual behaviour. According to Johnson (1988), however, women can resist the silencing of their desire through the male gaze by becoming 'bad'. Women can become prostitutes and take control of their sexuality as well as gaining financially and exploiting male desire; they can become lesbian and desire the 'wrong' sex; or they can seduce men, initiating the sexual contact and retaining power over the situation. It is perhaps this last practice of 'bad' women that upholds the 'bad' girl side of the dichotomy. Yet the image of 'bad' girls goes beyond this definition; it is not just initiating sexual contact that results in the label slut or slag, it may simply be talking to a lot of boys or going on a number of dates. This is the power of the gendered language of sex and patriarchy's dominance over it.

Catriona defends the existence of a double sexual standard and, in doing so, reproduces the Madonna/whore distinction. She explains, 'I think girls that do that get more of a reputation but I think then they should do cause it's more intrusive to a girl's body so I think you have to respect yourself more'. Sex is viewed as an act of bodily penetration and historically, according to the formal laws regarding sexual consent, the female is constructed as the passive receiver (see Waites, 1999). Women should 'respect' themselves more and take greater responsibility for sex because it is their bodies that are invaded. With sex defined in such binary terms; women being passively intruded upon, men actively intruding, Catriona implies that women who are more sexually free deserve to be labelled as bad because they not only allow the invasion of their bodies, but any such invasion must necessarily be their responsibility. This view, that women should be judged more harshly than men for sexual activity and that women should 'respect' themselves more, reinforces gender stereotypes of femininity and masculinity that silences female desire and agency in sexual relations. At the same time this positions men as less responsible for their actions. This supports Waites' suggestion that '[b]ecause boys are believed to 'mature' later than girls, adolescent girls are brought up with expectations that they will act as the "responsible' partner' (2005: 13).

Almost all participants acknowledged the existence of a sexual double standard (see Allen 2003). According to Lees (1997), amongst others, the double standard in viewing

sexually active men and women differently, raising men's status while lowering women's, is a form of control by men over women. By degrading sexual young women and their agency, this steers them into more acceptable forms of sexual behaviour and loving relationships that will eventually lead to marriage: the most controlled sexual environment of all (Lees, 1997). This social expectation goes so far as to convince women that other women behaving in sexually active ways should justifiably be degraded and this is evident in Zoe and Catriona's accounts above. Tolman, (2005) concludes that such controlling of women's sexual lives fits in with a 'feminine ideology' of ignoring agency and ascribing to dominant discourses of romance and love, which determine that meaningful sex should only take place within a loving, committed relationship. Subscription to this notion then leads to a policing of women's sexual conduct by both women and men.

This policing of women's sexuality is so thorough that women who do engage in what is perceived to be 'too much' sexual activity are considered to have something wrong with them; the tension between femininity and desire positions promiscuity as unsafe. Thus for Abigail, deviant sexual behaviour is caused by insecurity: 'I think people who do that they obviously very insecure they wanna be wanted even if it's just for like a couple of minutes'. Rather than women actually desiring and wanting sex, they are viewed as insecure and needing sex to feel 'wanted'; desire is buried under feminine insecurity and emotion. Similarly, Mandy says she would worry if a woman was overly promiscuous, 'if a woman was sleeping with hundreds of men I'd worry if she was feeling alright about herself and would start to think maybe there was something going on there'. Michelle says, 'I would probably question why they were doing it, check that they were okay in themselves and weren't you know seeking some kind of validation'. Thus, sex for women is viewed as a source of validation and excess sex may therefore, be a symptom of illness (although sex with 'hundreds' of men does seem rather extreme). Despite Mandy's assertion that 'it takes 2 people to have sex so I don't have a better or worse judgement of either of them', clearly if a woman has a lot of sex there might be something wrong with her; this is not normally the case for a man in a similar position. Since an excess of sex is so at odds with suppositions about being feminine and relationship rules for women, then if a woman engages in this much sex she must be deviant in some way - insecure, unwell or seeking 'validation'.

This pathologisation of sexually free women is not only applied to other women; a few of the women interviewed applied this discourse to themselves (seemingly the surveillance power of the-male-in-the-head in action). Mandy, Lauren and Eva all had periods of sexual freedom and experimentation and now all reflect on this past in negative ways. Eva sees this way of life as messing up peoples' emotions and she finds it 'sordid'. At the time, as Eva says, she found it all 'just a bit of fun [...] I just thought who cares it doesn't matter I don't feel any guilt so I'm still young'. It was only later, she explains, that she understood 'how much it affects you as a person and only now am I starting to feel the repercussions of sort of lack of self worth and feeling a bit shit about myself and what I'd sacrificed'. Having recently converted to Christianity, Eva sees her past life through a different gaze, perhaps imposing a discourse of insecurity and 'lack of self worth' to justify and explain her behaviour and avoid expressing discourses of desire at odds with Christianity. Reflecting back on her own past, Lauren comments, 'I was quite promiscuous for the time I was single and that made me a lot more unhappy than any other time and I think it would be nice in a way to reclaim some physical intimacy'. Lauren is now in a loving, committed relationship and seems to be more comfortable expressing her sexuality within this safe dyad, where physical intimacy can be 'reclaimed'. Lauren expresses discomfort about having sex without this intimacy and it is perhaps the prevalence of regulations enforcing the notion of sex only within loving relationships that causes this discomfort and unhappiness.

Loving relationships are one arena in which it is possible for women to express desire, as long as this behaviour fits in with what is socially acceptable for femininity (Tolman, 2005). This freeing up of sexual mores for women in relationships and the explosion of sexual discourses in contemporary society led some respondents to claim that certain elements of the sexual double standard are on the decline. Amy for example, says that there is a decrease in the sexualised judgement of women: 'I don't think like girls get as much flak now as they used to', perhaps reflecting a loosening of the regulations guiding young women's behaviour. Yet two other participants, Shirley and Elizabeth, see the reduction in double standards coming from the opposite direction: 'I think it's becoming less of a good thing for most men um or for most decent men that you'd wanna be with anyway' (Elizabeth). Rather than women's sexual freedom reaching the

level enjoyed by men, the norms for men may be becoming increasingly strict as women begin to pass negative judgements about those who are seen to be too sexually active. For Michelle also, the double standard seems to be levelling out: 'maybe previously it was okay for men to have more partners than girls but I think now it's not. If anyone's sleeping around a lot then I think that would get frowned upon whatever sex you were'. Again, rather than prescriptions guiding sexuality loosening or freeing up for women, sexually active individuals, both men and women, are 'frowned upon'. Sexual mores appear to be tightening and becoming more restricted for men among a certain group of young women. This perceived reduction in the sexual double standard may, therefore, be less to do with women gaining sexual freedom and more to do with men losing some of the sexual privileges they have traditionally held. The notion of 'decent' men invoked by Elizabeth may imply a class division in this process, with 'decent' men needing to match up to her middle class standards. Sexuality and sexual expectations may therefore, be an issue interrelated with social class.

Alternatively, the double standard could be receding for participants because of their life course progress. School encompasses the transition of young people from childhood to adolescence and therefore sexuality comes to constitute much of the fabric of schooling at all ages (Epstein, 2000). It is at school where the distinction between virgin/whore or stag/slag first emerges (Measor, 1989; Cowie and Lees, 1987). It is here that boys first learn to degrade girls; their lack of respect for female pupils is accepted as the norm and becomes an expected behaviour (Measor, 1989). By turning against each other, girls maintain the sexual divisions imposed by boys and uphold the derogatory labels. This strict gendering process can be less apparent in later life.

This was certainly the case for my participants. Claire, for example, comments, 'when I was at school you know girls that met a lot of boys were slags and things like that whereas the blokes weren't at all'. At school the sexual labels begin and yet, as Claire goes on to explain, 'although I think when I went to university there was a lot more of a banding around about the male tarts and things like that so maybe it's becoming more equal'. As Claire moved into different environments she noticed the double standard becoming less significant and being applied more equally to both men and women. Alice also comments 'as you get older you don't have a big network of friends that all

know each other so you probably aren't labelled unless you still live in the area and people know of you'. Sexual labels are only routinely applied when younger (or at school) because this is when an individual has a wide social network that can easily maintain such labels. It is as one grows older and moves away from this initial circle of friends that such sexual labels can be dropped.

There is a sense from these accounts that sexual labels and the double standard are especially acute at a certain stage in the life course: when young or at school. As one moves away from such highly sexed arenas, the double standard fades, sexual labels are less significant and applied equally to both men and women. This might then indicate that rather than the sexual double standard actually decreasing in our culture, it is perhaps perceived to be decreasing because participants are progressing through their life course. Thus, the double standard is most prevalent at school, while later in life it fades into the background of dominant feminine discourses and masculine heteronormativity. The obvious sexual double standard between men and women becomes subsumed under the more discrete and normalised bastion of heterosexuality.

Yet there does also seem to be a real difference in the way sexually derogatory terms can now be used. As Allen (2003) found, one girl accommodated and resisted the subject position of 'slut' by using it to refer to herself. Rather than using 'slag' or 'slut' as derogatory terms, women can reclaim them to a certain extent and resist their negative assumptions by using them to define themselves. Although this was not common in my study, Mandy did explain to me, 'I had quite a lot of partners before David I was quite a slapper basically'. By employing 'slapper' for her own use she subverts the insult; she does not avoid it and alters the meaning by applying it to her own behaviour. When women use terms for themselves that are traditionally intended to suppress them, they can subvert this suppression and the term is reclaimed. In this way, the word or phrase loses its power to hurt or degrade. On the other hand, there are those who argue that such words can never be reclaimed. If this latter argument is true, Mandy is colluding in her own suppression by using insulting terms to describe her own behaviour. Either way, this was not common in participants' accounts and women were more likely to apply derogatory terms to other women utilising their traditional meaning, rather than using them to refer to themselves in some subversive manner.

#### 4. THE DANGERS OF DESIRE: WOMEN'S SEXUALITY

As Tolman (2005) demonstrates, it is necessary for women to – paradoxically – cover their sexual desires while continuing to appear sexy in order to appeal to male sexual desire. The idea that young women might be interested in sex and sexuality is still met with resistance and discomfort (2005: 6). Since desire is positioned as masculine in its conception, it is at odds with femininity and the acceptable development of girls. Young female sexuality is, therefore, contextualised by conflating it with disease, victimisation, exploitation and repression. An example of this is the way in which teenage mothers are demonised in the UK and seen as victims of ignorance and mis-information, when the reality for many teenage mothers is quite different (Duncan, 2007). In this way women are controlled and kept apart from (male) desire. The way the women I interviewed talked about sexuality in terms of sexual freedom leading to disease and emotional and physical harm, highlights the point raised by Tolman that women end up locating the source of danger associated with sex within their own sexuality. As Tolman comments, such young women describe ‘how social processes and meanings that clearly originate outside the body end up incorporated into its physiological demeanor and both unconscious and conscious behaviours’ (2005: 47).

Nine participants said that there is too much sexual freedom now and this was illustrated by highlighting the spread of sexually transmitted diseases, the pressure on young people to consent to unwanted sex, and detrimental emotional consequences of sexual activity. There is clearly a wariness towards sexuality, surrounded by tensions and contradictions that sit ‘side by side with an acceptance of greater sexual freedom and diversity’ (Jackson and Scott, 2004: 235); sex and sexual activity is not something freed from constraints of worry and emotional and physical consequences. STIs were a frequent concern for young women and as Alice says, ‘well I don’t think it’s good [...] I think everything’s on the increase like sexually transmitted diseases’.

Likewise, Fiona believes there is too much freedom but her account also gives an indication as to how these views have taken shape: ‘I think there is too much freedom with sex nowadays they’re sort of promoting it on telly sort of you know use condoms

all these sexually transmitted diseases'. Thus, heightened exposure to these ideas through the media creates the view that sexual freedom is linked with an increase in sexually transmitted diseases. Increased exposure and awareness of the spread of STIs does not necessarily indicate that their incidence is increasing; rather our knowledge and their representation grows. Adele says there probably is too much freedom, 'especially with all the STIs being you know raised' and she also goes on to talk about other problems associated with sexual activity. Adele says, 'I think it could probably affect your, you know, your mind if you if you kept sort of [making] the wrong choices and all that kind of thing'. Here Adele uses 'wrong choices' to refer to temporary sexual relationships or one night stands. Such sexual freedom may have not only physical consequences embodied in STIs, but may also impact negatively upon a person's state of mind.

Penny views sexual freedom as 'promiscuity' and sees this as causing unhappiness: 'a lot more people just don't seem happy in one-night-stands'; a view that is repeated by Rebecca and Lauren. One-night-stands are viewed as lacking in physical intimacy and romance and are, therefore, a less satisfying sexual experience for women that will make them 'unhappy'. For Eva, the emotional and mental affects of sexual freedom are even greater, 'I used to love it but I just don't like it any more I find it intimidating and sordid and difficult and I think it fucks everything up it really does, it messes people's emotions and hormones'. Despite a previously active sexual life, Eva renounces this behaviour and goes on to describe how she has been emotionally hurt by her experiences. Sexual freedom is perceived to be at odds with emotional well-being.

Another perceived negative consequence of sexual freedom was the pressure to live up to the promises of such freedom. As Elizabeth articulates, this is the mentality of 'oh crap is that what I've got to do' after seeing representations of sexuality in the media. For Hermione, this pressure means the age of first sexual activity is becoming younger, with 'a lot more going on' among teenagers of 14, 15 and 16 years old. Again this pressure is related to an increased exposure to sex that has made the topic acceptable in daily conversations for school pupils. It is perceived that sexual freedom has created a large amount of emotional distress, as it is contradictory to notions of 'happy' monogamous relationships.

The benefits of freer sexual practises were rarely discussed even among those who welcomed this freedom. For those who did view the increased sexual freedom as a positive development, this was still expressed cautiously and with a set of conditions for securing the 'safety' of these new, freer, sexual encounters. As well as focusing on the dangers already discussed, this group of women were also concerned about the 'risk' of pregnancy; that sex was conducted when 'you're like in your right mind when you're doing it' (Amy); and that it was 'safe' (Mandy) and 'careful' (Michelle and Rebecca). Freedom was, on the whole, seen as a good thing as long as these conditions were met and potential dangers, such as emotional hurt, were averted. Claire, Eleanor, Hermione and Michelle, share this view: 'I'm all for the idea of people being free to do as they please as long as no one else gets hurt in the process' (Claire). By expressing this view repeatedly, these participants make the common assumption that it is all too easy to get hurt or hurt someone else in sexual liaisons.

The various dangers discussed throughout conversations with participants, with the emphasis on dangers and restrictions rather than pleasure and desire, highlight the continuing control of female sexuality: women are steered into relationships and eventually marriage, where sexuality can be expressed safely and sexually derogatory terms are avoided (Tolman, 2005). It could be argued, therefore, that the 'sexual revolution' (as in Weeks, 2007) and increased sexual freedom has in practice strengthened the link between sex and disease, sex and reproduction, and sex and danger, rather than assuaged it. Women have been freed from unsatisfactory sexual partnerships, there is now increased awareness of sex and what to expect, and young women now have a voice within sexual relationships. Yet simultaneously, the pressure on younger and younger people to engage in sexual activity, and a wider range of sexual activities, has increased. This increased freedom is perhaps the reason why these young women hedge sexuality in with so many conditions. The importance of this 'safety' discourse becomes paramount, as women can no longer rely on access to more traditional routes out of unwanted sex, such as adhering to the concept of saving sex for marriage (Houts, 2005). Sexual freedom must be welcomed but because femininity is traditionally at odds with desire and active sexuality (Tolman 2005; Levine, 2002; Holland et al., 2004), women are hesitant in fully embracing it; highlighting its dangers,

focusing on emotional well-being, and creating a variety of conditions dependent on safety that restrict any desire to be entirely sexually free. Jackson (2005) supports this view, suggesting that young people are not rampantly sexually active, despite depictions to the contrary in British media. Rather, young people are demonstrating a more considered, hesitant approach to sex as they try to negotiate their desire, the dangers involved, and ensure the necessary conditions are in place for 'safe', 'consensual' sex.

Yet not all young women are so cautious about their sexual desire. Houts (2005) found that young women are increasingly displaying their active agency as sexual actors, while Tolman (2005) and Allen (2003) note areas of resistance to traditional femininity in their research, suggesting women were increasingly aware of, and acting on, their desires. This positive agency also came through in some of my discussions with participants. Seven of the 23 participants mentioned personal choice in engaging in sexual activity. One participant, Eleanor, talks about sexual freedom and choice in terms of human rights, 'I think there has to be that freedom because you have to have an individual choice otherwise it's an infringement of human rights really'. Individual choice has become rhetoric of human rights discourses, which is perhaps another reason why young women in this sample seem to be more active in their sexual choices. Adele also mentions agency in her talk. In discussing short term sexual relationships, Adele comments, 'I think it's fine if the person feels ok with it, it's I mean it's personal choice isn't it really I mean it's not something I would really do or want'. Adele can see that it is a personal choice to engage in unrestricted sexual relations, and while this is fine for others, she chooses to refrain from doing so herself. Adele accepts sexual freedom as a concept while not accepting it as a personal way of life.

A minority of participants had been through periods in their lives where they had conducted numerous sexual relationships (Eva, Lauren and Mandy) but all now reject that lifestyle and talk about that time as an unhappy period. Other participants who advocate sexual freedom do so in theory but do not live the stereotypical lives of sexual flings, one-night-stands and purely sexual relationships. This is perhaps because as Christian-Smith (1993a, 1993b) notes, through magazines and romance novels (as well as other media), women are encouraged to combine love with lust and so feel they should have sex only in loving relationships. Despite an increased focus on young

people and sexual freedom, women are still taught to have sex in loving relationships. Thus, as the connection between love and sex is eroded and young women explore their sexual freedom, the connection is at the same time reinforced with romance, as women are told to explore this sexuality within a loving, committed and emotionally 'safe' partnership. A tension therefore emerges for participants, between freedom of sexuality and ensuring emotional and personal safety.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This discussion can, of course, only take place in terms of subject's own interpretations of what is meant by sexual freedom. As is evident from these discussions, subjects saw this as a freeing of sexual mores guiding the practices between men and women. Since the perceived consequences of STIs, pregnancy and emotional scarring were so prevalent, it is likely participants interpreted sexual freedom as referring to the increase in numbers of sexual partners for their contemporaries, one-night-stands, 'promiscuity', extra-marital affairs, the display of sexuality, and increasing flexibility in choosing sexual partners.

It became clear when talking to young women that the language of sex and sexuality is itself gendered and unequal. Thus a double sexual standard remains, with many young women reporting the still common use of derogatory terms for young, sexually active, women as well as the continuing dichotomy of the good girl/bad girl. Moreover, any sexually deviant behaviour continues to be policed and this is also evidenced in the way the participants talk about sexual freedom and 'others' behaviour. While 'others' may enjoy free sexual pleasure, for participants this could only be established alongside safety, emotional and mental well-being, and should preferably take place within a stable relationship. Thus, it appears to be the case that, as Duncan suggests, 'Individualisation theorists confuse what people can potentially do' (in this case be sexually active and free from stigma or health concerns), 'with what they actually do' (Duncan, 2011: 4).

Thus many participants came to the conclusion that having sex outside relationships was acceptable and possible, as long as it was done for the 'right reasons' and not the

‘wrong reasons’, there were no dangers involved, and it was a personal choice to have sex. While a majority of these women saw sexual freedom as necessary and to some extent good, it was hedged in at all sides with conditions, restrictions and dangers (see Jackson and Scott, 2004). For those who believed there is now too much sexual freedom, these anxieties overwhelm the benefits of a sexually freer society. In discussing sexuality, the most important topic for young women seemed to be its dangers, including sexually transmitted infections (STIs), mental health problems, and pregnancy. Indeed, rather than an unplanned consequence of sex, pregnancy was viewed as a health risk or a result of ‘unsafe’ (dangerous) sex. These perceived dangers are muted once a woman marries.

The high incidence of safe sex narratives may also suggest that the women interviewed are less likely to adhere to feminine ideologies or that feminine ideologies are changing and developing to include safe sex practices and personal choice. This would perhaps not be entirely unsurprising given the prolonged and concentrated focus of public policy and media on decreasing the numbers of teenage pregnancies and containing the spread of STIs. The fact that the young women are all concerned with safe sex practices may also have something to do with their social class. Since a majority were from middle class backgrounds, it could be that these women have greater access not only to the resources for safe sex, but also to the discourses of ensuring safe sex in sexual encounters.

The evidence presented here supports the findings of Tolman (2005) and Holland et al. (2004), which show that we are a long way from the individualised and plastic picture of sexual autonomy posited by individualisation theorists such as Giddens (1992). The privileging of masculinity and male desire results in women often having little control over their sexuality and sexual encounters (Holland et al., 2004). This means the policing of women’s sexuality is still widespread and the double sexual standard remains an issue for young women. The persistent notions of femininity and masculinity and a possible backlash against increasing sexual freedom has ‘narrowed the margins between excess and deficiency, between being too sexual and not sexual enough, thus producing an even more slippery tightrope for women to walk’ (Jackson and Scott, 2004). It is possible that this tightrope is also tightening for men who are increasingly

judged (according to participants) by their sexual behaviours. Jackson and Scott (2004) go on to say that 'late modern sexual mores, then, are in tension between a celebration of sexual pleasure, experimentation and diversity and a wariness of sexuality as a source of anxiety and revulsion' (2004: 244).

Yet there is also some evidence of sexual agency; the participants are choosing when and with whom they have sex. It is also possible that the sexual double standard may gradually fade as men's behaviours become regulated and men and women are judged equally in terms of their sexual encounters. Although it is the dangers of sex that are most significantly focused upon and pleasure is rarely mentioned, young women are finding new ways of experiencing their sexuality and agency is, to some extent, becoming foregrounded.

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