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Jane M. Ussher

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V. The Meaning of Sexual Desire: Experiences of Heterosexual and Lesbian Girls

Jane M. USSHER

Regardless of their sexual identification, the recognition of feelings as sexual desire, the negotiation of first sexual experiences and the development of sexual pleasure are stages of young women's development potentially fraught with conflict and confusion. Negotiating sexual subjectivity in the context of a phallogocentric culture generates additional complexities. Despite recent discussions of 'girl-power', post-feminism, and the celebration of woman as agentic sexual subject, hegemonic sexual scripts still position woman's desire as a response to man, 'sex' as heterosexual intercourse, and practices or desires that deviate from this narrow norm as problematic or perverse (Ussher, 1997). Fifteen years ago, Michelle Fine (1988) called for an end to the silence on the 'missing discourse of desire', providing fertile ground for feminist scholarship and debate, as well as significant interventions in sex education and policy. One of the important issues which emerges from this debate is that of the different needs, difficulties and dilemmas of heterosexually identified girls, and those who identify as lesbian.

Popular culture may have begun to provide us with glimpses of lesbian lives (e.g. Hamer, 1994), but young women who identify as lesbian necessarily negotiate sexual subjectivity and desire in a cultural context where fears and fantasies associated with the lesbian 'other' are rife, and where on an everyday level they can be subjected to rejection, threat and abuse. Lesbian sexuality is invariably invisible, or staged for titillation – the Madonna/Britney kiss at the 2003 MTV awards being one recent example. But it isn't a totally bleak picture. Young lesbians' experience of desire can sometimes be positive and powerful, freed from the constraints of the heterosexual matrix.

In this article, I will draw on two separate interview studies conducted with young lesbian and heterosexual women to examine some of these issues and

differences, focusing on the recognition, meaning and experience of desire (see also Mooney-Somers and Ussher, 2000; Ussher, 1997; Ussher and Mooney-Somers, 2000). Participants were eight lesbian identified women, who were members of a non-violent direct action group, the Lesbian Avengers, and twelve heterosexually identified women, recruited through a local university. Aged between 17 and 24 years, all lived in Southern England at the time of interviewing; 75 percent were of UK origin and the remaining four were German, Irish, Israeli and Pakistani. During the course of the interviews, 40 percent self-identified as working class and 60 percent as middle class. Sixteen were on undergraduate courses, one had completed an MA, one was doing a BTEC and two were completing secondary school. Semi-structured face-to-face interviews, lasting 90 minutes, were conducted to explore the meanings women gave to their experiences of desire and of being 'woman'. The questions were: 'Can you remember when you first became aware of your sexual desire; can you tell me about it?' 'Can you tell me about your first sexual encounter or experience?' 'What does being lesbian/heterosexual mean to you?'

IS THIS DESIRE?

Interpreting a feeling, thought or bodily change as 'sexual desire' is not a straightforward or automatic process. This is because the meaning of sexual experience is socially or discursively constructed, and thus sexual desire is partly a learnt phenomenon. In a social context where young women's sexual desire is discursively represented as heterosexual response, the recognition of sexual feelings towards another girl is potentially a difficult process. One young lesbian described feelings she would now categorize as desire as initially being experienced as nervousness, or as a feeling of being impressed by another woman. 'I don't think I had a crush on her or something, it was just like I was really impressed by her whole personality. I think that was really the first time when a woman made me really nervous.' The categorization of 'nervousness' as desire is more straightforward in a heterosexual context: fairy stories, teenage magazines, romantic fiction and Hollywood films provide us with representations of women feeling 'nervous' in the presence of men as a sign of sexual attraction – even if romance, rather than women's agentic sexuality, is emphasized (Ussher, 1997). For young lesbians, there is a dearth of such imagery. One consequence of this for the women in the studies was that it was only when an unequivocally sexual encounter occurred that they could recognize their feelings towards another girl to be those of sexual desire. 'I was only probably really aware of kind of perv feelings (laughing) or sexual feelings when we kissed which was completely a big surprise; completely out of the blue.' Recognition is one thing. What to do about this desire is another.

HEGEMONIC CONSTRUCTIONS OF DESIRE: SEXUAL OBJECT, SEXUAL SUBJECT

Hegemonic discourses of heterosexuality provide a clear script for young women to follow – sexual object, not too voracious, who needs to attend to the sexual vulnerability and fears of men (Hollway, 1989). This is reflected in comments from two of the heterosexual women we interviewed: ‘I have to let him make the first move, not appear too keen, so that he can feel as if he’s in control’; ‘I don’t want to seem easy, so keep my sexual feelings to myself.’ In order to maintain a sense of personal agency, yet still engage in sexual relationships with men, many young heterosexual women masquerade as feminine by ‘doing girl’ – knowingly taking up a position of archetypal femininity, of acquiescence and coquettishness, yet doing so as an act (Ussher, 1997: 450). Thus they avoid the condemnation and material risk associated with resisting or subverting heterosexual femininity – such as being positioned as ‘easy’, as slag, tart or whore (Kitzinger, 1995; Lees, 1993), or being at risk of sexual violence (Ussher 1997) – yet are still able to maintain a sense of personal empowerment. In contrast, many of the young lesbians interviewed felt little need to masquerade in this way: ‘I feel I can take the initiative, and be dominant, and be active, whereas in straight relationships I’ve had, ah, I never felt that was allowed, or was okay, or I would be seen as masculine if I did.’ In this account, being lesbian is positioned as oppositional to being ‘straight’, and as such as giving a freedom to be passive or active, to desire or be desired, to be sexual subject or object – standing in contrast to recent critiques of the restrictive nature of impermeable sexual categories (Garber, 1995). This representation of the multiplicity of lesbian desire, and the ability of individual women to adopt different subject positions at different times is common in lesbian erotica (e.g. *Kiss and Tell*, Blackbridge et al., 1994) and suggests that being outside the heterosexual matrix may have positive consequences for young lesbians.

DANGEROUS DESIRE

This is not to suggest that there aren’t dangers in lesbian desire, in openly taking up the position of sexual subject. A number of the lesbian interviewees talked of teachers counselling them to be discreet about their sexuality, and in one case to reassure the school that she would not ‘attack’ younger girls. Rejection by other girls at school if they were ‘out’ was reported as one of their most difficult experiences: ‘The comments from boys I can deal with no problem. It’s the comments from other girls that I find very difficult, ’cause you can see them sort of going “awh that’s disgusting”.’

In interviews with young women living in Scotland, Jenny Kitzinger (1995) found that being called a ‘lessie’ as a term of abuse was much worse than being called a ‘slag’ (a colloquial term for ‘whore’). Thus it isn’t surprising to find that

the experience of lesbian desire can provoke feelings of panic or confusion: 'I didn't know whether she fancied me I didn't know what I felt towards her. I was shit scared.' This stands in stark contrast to young heterosexual girls, where openly exploring fantasies about their objects of desire was a central component of their friendships with each other: 'We spend hours checking out the lads down the club, debating which of them is good in bed.'

THE MEANING OF DESIRE

Until recently, when the development of heterosexual identity has been explicitly examined (Worthington, 2002), heterosexuality has been a taken for granted subject position that is not even articulated. This is reflected in comments by heterosexual girls, who interpret desire on a personal level – 'when I get that funny feeling in my tummy, I know I fancy him', or as a signifier of adult womanhood: 'I felt like I'd finally grown up the first time I had sex' – rather than as a reflection of sexual identity. In contrast, the moment when they recognized their feelings towards another girl as sexual desire was described by the majority of the lesbian interviewees as the point when they recognized themselves as lesbian, dyke or queer: 'When she kissed me, I felt as if my whole life had flashed in front of me, and I knew I was a lesbian.'

Many interviewees represented this as coming to life, a positive, pleasurable transition, tied to a powerful experience of their own desire: 'the kind of electricity and chemistry that was there was like [sounds of electric sparks]'. For others, this 'revelation' following first sex resulted in their not speaking about, or not naming, the experience as sexual, in order to avoid naming themselves as 'lesbian': 'She masturbated me . . . and I thought wow so then the next morning, we were just shy, she would look at me and I just wouldn't look her in the eye and we were like best mates, we were girl friends.' Positioning each other as 'best mates' parallels other reports of same-sex experiences that are not categorized as 'sexual' or 'lesbian' by one or both parties (Kitzinger and Wilkinson, 1995) and shows that desire and sexual contact between two women isn't necessarily interpreted as a 'lesbian' experience. Alternatively, as desire is something that many young women report as arising during a sexual encounter, rather than precipitating it (Tolman and Szalacha, 1999), it is possible that in the encounter described above the interviewee might have expected more desire or pleasure to arise than actually occurred. When this didn't happen, there could then be a retrospective re-categorization of the other girl as 'just a friend', as a result of disappointment, or as a means of distancing herself from notions of not being sexually responsive. In contrast, heterosexual girls who are disappointed with their first sexual experiences tend to report a more global disappointment with sex (see Thompson, 1995): 'It was *so* not what I expected. I couldn't help but wonder what all the fuss was about.'

CONCLUSION

Experiences of sexual desire and first sexual relationships are central parts of the transition from adolescence to adulthood, and for many girls the first marker of being 'woman'. For young girls who identify as lesbian, experiences of sexual desire and first sexual relationships mark them not as 'woman' but as 'lesbian'. In a cultural context where lesbianism is positioned as deviant, dangerous or shameful, the categorization and acceptance of feelings as lesbian desire is a complex process, but not necessarily a negative one – as is evidenced by this research. Researchers and practitioners thus need to be aware of the multiplicity of young women's experiences of desire, acknowledging the positive and negative aspects of both heterosexuality and lesbianism.

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Jane M. USSHER is Professor of Women's Health Psychology at the University of Western Sydney, Australia. She is author of a number of books, including *Women's Madness: Misogyny or Mental Illness?* (Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), *Fantasies of Femininity: Reframing the Boundaries of Sex* (Penguin, 1997) and *Managing the Monstrous Feminine* (Routledge, 2005). Her research focuses on women's sexual and reproductive health, with particular emphasis on premenstrual experiences.

ADDRESS: Professor of Women's Health Psychology, School of Psychology, University of Western Sydney, Locked Bag 1797, Penrith South DC, NSW 1797, Australia.

[email: j.ussher@uws.edu.au]