Women's stories of power: Exploring reclamation and subversion of heterosexual sex.

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WOMEN'S STORIES OF POWER:
EXPLORING RECLAMATION AND SUBVERSION OF HETEROSEXUAL SEX

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A Dissertation
Submitted to the College of Graduate Studies and Research
through the Department of Psychology
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the
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ABSTRACT

Recent attention has been drawn to the need to theorize heterosexuality (Hollway, 1993; Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1993; Richardson, 1996; Segal, 1994). While the critical emphasis in gay and lesbian, and queer theory has focused on heterosexuality as a normative/foundational identity, radical feminist theory has targeted heterosexuality for its embeddedness in a gender system that disempowers and subordinates women (Jeffreys, 1990; Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1994; MacKinnon, 1987). Given the problematic nature of heterosexuality from this vantage point, heterosexuality has at times been painted as a "political anathema" for feminists (Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1994). However, heterosexual feminists and other women have also begun drawing attention to the ways in which their personal experience of heterosexual sex (heterosex) is not consistent with the picture of heterosexuality offered in feminist systemic critique. In the theoretical literature, a call has gone out for research that examines heterosexuality at the level of experience and practice, in addition to critiquing it as identity and institution (Jackson, 1996). In answer to this, the following study used a feminist emancipatory praxis (Lather, 1991a) to engage sixteen women in dialogue, via in-depth, open-ended interviews, regarding the operation of power and heterosex in their lives. Emphasis was placed on feeling powerful in sex with men and the potential for subverting heterosexuality. Interview transcripts were subjected to a grounded theory analysis in order to extract common themes and ultimately a theory of power for these women. The resulting themes revealed a split between personal and social power. The notion of personal power was invoked as participants considered their intimate relations with specific men and included such constructs as control, choice, desire, seduction, and pleasure. The theme of social power emerged as participants dealt with the ways in which larger social forces, including men as a group or society as a whole, affect their lives, seeking to impose specific gender roles, sexual scripts and meanings that are disempowering for women. A third theme revealed participants' struggles with the often contradictory worlds of personal and social power, including how their conceptions of power and sex have changed with experience, and the role of resistance in their personal politic. The theory of power that emerged out of these themes was noted for its functional and tactical significance, that is, participants'
attempts to retain personal power and resistance alongside the possibility for broader social change. Consideration was given to the rhetorical positions underlying the personal and social power themes, specifically, the reliance on particular discursive constructions of the self that were both essentialist and constructivist. Discussion focused on how feminist theorizing of heterosex might benefit from an acceptance of the contradiction in women's lived experience as a space for critical engagement. The ramifications of this for feminist pedagogy were also considered. Finally, thought was given to the ways in which one could usefully consider heterosex as subvertible through the experiences offered by participants. Attention was drawn to the need for new ways of speaking about and scripting heterosex in ways that better reflect experience at the level of the personal.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The task of thanking all the people that have made this project possible is a daunting one. However, it is also something I do with great pleasure. To begin I must thank my parents, Cameron and Yvonne Fraser. There are no words to express my profound gratitude for your support and love, given freely and in so many ways. To my Grandmother Murcar, I thank you for your abundant curiosity about my life, your pride in your grand-daughter, and for being stubborn enough to live to see the completion of this work. To "The Auntie Pat," in addition to love and support, you have given me many fond remembrances, good stories, and that very helpful “allowance!” I also want to thank the Sadler’s for providing me with another home, and Emma and Christopher in particular, for reminding me that happiness in life can be as simple as a peanut butter sandwich with the crusts cut off. Thanks must also be given to my extended family, whose closeness I cherish and value greatly. Thanks also to those in my family who are not here to share in my achievement, in particular my Grandmother and Grandfather Fraser, whose quiet fortitude made me part of who I am today.

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Finally, I come to my friends. Popular movie lore has it that life is like a box of chocolates. Well, if that is true, then grad school is like a box of cracker jacks, you meet a lot of nuts along the way. This final section is for all the nuts that have helped me in so many ways. To Kevin Smith, who was there at the beginning and is still here at the end. Your love and friendship have sustained me. To Linda Reinstein and Andrew Wright, for friendship in so many incarnations and for always being ready with shoulders to cry on. To Lisa Keith, for being a true friend and always willing to have marathon phone calls when most needed. To Darryl Hill for helping to keep my brain and body exercised, and for so much more. To Shula, Michael, and Persia Day-Savage, for listening to me whine, feeding me, and giving me a sense of family here in Windsor. To Janet Mantler for listening and commiserating about anything and everything, from school to aerobics to love. To Stuart Gibson for those much needed doses of Scottish pragmatism and being an unwavering presence in my life. To Jacque Gahagan for never letting my thoughts go unchallenged and for always letting me know that I’m loved. To Sherry Bergeron for taking me away from it all. To Kirsten Schmidt for keeping the rest of my life in order while immersed in my school work. And finally, thanks to Deb Gonda and Elaine Lesonsky for keeping me healthy in both body and soul. All of you have enriched my life and will continue to do so.
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INTRODUCTION

Of all the things this work might be, it first and foremost reflects a personal struggle, the struggle to position myself as a feminist who sleeps with men. While the genesis of this project may have begun with this struggle, the completion of this project has not represented the end of this struggle either. The many challenges posed by inquiry into the topic of women, power and heterosex have continued to provide me with important points of consideration and critique, as well as hope for envisioning a different world. Through this introduction, I hope to situate the reader within the context of my own personal questioning, as well as the streams of thought that have informed the structure and content of this paper.

As a woman and a feminist, I have long been familiar, both personally and academically, with the difficulties of a gendered system that has privileged men. That structural inequalities, based on a naturalized system of gender differences, exist and profoundly influence the lives of men and women has been central to my experience. However, where such influences have become murky and confusing for me has been in the realm of the sexual. I have been taught that heterosex for women can be dangerous, and certainly if one considers the frequency of sexual crimes against women, such would seem to be the case. Nevertheless, my own personal sexual experiences with men, while not all positive, have hardly reflected such danger and at times have been fulfilling and empowering. I have been challenged by feminist friends to defend my object choice as regards my sexual life and at the same time, have felt angered for having to do so. I have also felt guilt at my enjoyment of certain kinds of sexual pleasures, the enjoyment of erotic or even pornographic images as one example. I have not, however, felt guilt for my sexual relationships with men. Thus, my questioning began with an examination of these reactions.

By way of explanation, the first and most convenient narrative was one of sexual repression. Examining the messages about sexuality that I received from a conservative family, as a woman growing up in this culture, a culture that denies women’s sexuality, it was initially tempting to suspect that sexual guilt was a product of receiving specific narratives about what my sexual experience with men was "supposed" to be about. While such an explanation could conceivably explain my
experience of guilt, it does little to explain my experience of pleasure in sex, nor my understanding of myself as a sexual being. Nor does it address the role of my feminism in the constitution of myself in sexual terms.

A second narrative that made itself apparent was one that vilified feminism, often monolithically referred to as radical feminism. Such a narrative told me that the guilt I might feel at certain kinds of sexual pleasures, the anger at having to justify my choices, came from running headlong into a feminist politic that disallowed my experience, my pleasure, and provided me with little room to construct my own sexual life as positive and, at times, powerful. Such a narrative is echoed by students in my classes who largely disavow feminism, claiming, as part of their narrative that it is anti-sex and anti-male, a stance that they are unwilling to embrace. Although frustrated by their refusal of a feminist label, something I have unswervingly maintained, I could not ignore their position. However, the gentle challenges of colleagues and my own immersion in feminist literature pertinent to sexuality, has served to make me question such a narrative as well. What I have questioned is the extent to which this portrayal of feminist theory of sexuality is valid, or at least the whole story. I have also sought to make a separation between my experience with specific feminists and their interpersonal approach to such topics and the spirit in which feminist theory itself has been offered. I have also questioned the extent to which my own experiences of power in sex may not stem from sex itself, but from my own positions of privilege as white, middle-class and well-educated. Such concerns aside, what remained salient for me, however, was that my experience of heterosex still did not appear consistent with the larger critique of heterosexuality and heterosex.

After considering these narratives, what was I left with? Mainly questions, questions about the nature of power in heterosexual relations, the significance of many straight women seeming to share my own frustrations and experiential frame regarding heterosex and power, whether or not power in heterosex is theoretically defensible from a feminist standpoint, and a concern about those women who are willing to discard feminism over this particular issue.

With what do I begin this specific project? I begin with the assumption that all women's experience of power in heterosex is legitimate and deserving of consideration. I also begin with the assumption that heterosex, while needing attention, is theoretically
defensible, or at the very least that such a critical defense should be undertaken. In part, I assume that this defense lies with understanding the ways in which heterosex, as practiced and experienced by women, may be subversive of larger social forces pertaining to the normative constitution of heterosex.

To begin to address these issues, a number of preliminary steps must be taken. First, inquiry will be situated historically within the context of the many relevant socio-sexual happenings of the past decades. Emphasis will be placed on intellectual history, particularly the study of sexology, psychiatry, and psychology, as such discourses represent constitutive elements of popular understandings of sexuality. Secondly, specific movements, such as the Women's Movement, the Gay Liberation Movement, and the discourses emanating from these communities, that is feminist, gay and lesbian, and queer theory, will be accounted for. As well, a specific consideration of research and theory pertaining to the notion of power will also be undertaken. In all instances, the more recent role of postmodern theory will be considered. Lastly, attention will be turned to a brief treatment of the possibilities for revisioning heterosex and the specific concerns of this research project.
The Study of Sexuality and Sexual Deviance

The very marginality of sexology, however, has been its saving grace. When working with the grain of accepted orthodoxy it was a force that could lock people into pre-set positions - as degenerates, perverts, sex dysfunctionals or what you will. At critical times, nevertheless, the findings of sex research had an alternative, potentially liberating effect. (Weeks, 1985, p. 92)

An understanding of the changes in our cultural and social conceptions of sexuality must begin with an examination of the accompanying sites of discursive production that have informed and influenced these conceptions. That such changes have been heralded by an increase in discourse concerned with sexuality has been well documented (Foucault, 1976/1984). Of particular interest to many has been the discourse that has accrued from one especially influential site — the pen of the sexologist.

Indeed, sexology, the study of human sexual behaviour, and its earlier variants, served a pivotal role in the formation of modernist conceptions of sexuality in North America. However, not all theorists are in complete agreement as to the significance and meaning of the sexological legacy. Foucault (1976/1984) eloquently draws attention to the role of sexology as one manifestation of socio-sexual control through discursive production. Others take pains to emphasize the liberatory intents of many of the early sexologists (Gagnon & Parker, 1995; Weeks, 1985). Feminist scholars, on the other hand, have criticized sexology for shoring up gender divides and contributing to women's oppression through a variety of prescriptions for female sexual behaviour (Jeffreys, 1990; Tiefer, 1988).

Nevertheless, few would deny that sexology has had formative effects on western constructions of sexuality. Thus, this paper now turns to a brief examination of the history of sexology, a delineation of its key contributions to modernist constructions of sexuality, and a final consideration of more recent crises as theorists have struggled to envision sexology within a postmodern paradigm.
The Sexological Period and The Legacy of Modernism

Although sexuality had already been the object of secular, sacred and scientific scrutiny, it was roughly during the time span between 1890 and 1980 (Parker & Gagnon, 1995) that a science devoted in its entirety to the study of sexuality was formed. Until recently (Bullough, 1994) a concerted history of sexology was missing, and researchers attempting to provide useful origin myths faced the daunting task of sifting through scattered bits and pieces of scholarship. Tiefer (1988), in presenting a picture of early sexology, roughly divides sexologists by geography with beginnings in England, Germany, and later, after the disrupting effects of the first world war, in America.

In the search for "founding fathers," opinions differ. The English sexologists, whose ranks include John Addington Symonds, Edward Carpenter, and particularly Havelock Ellis, were long considered more familiar to many, and as such were easily identified as pioneers of sexual science. Despite an obvious English presence, however, Tiefer (1988) draws attention to the arguable stronger paternity claims of the German sexologists like Iwan Bloch, Magnus Hirschfeld, and notably, Richard von Krafft-Ebing. Nonetheless, the legacy of the German sexologists, and indeed that of European sexology more broadly, was compromised by the ravages of World Wars I and II. The result was a gradual shift of the centre of sexological research from Europe to America.

American sexology emerged in a climate that was progressive, democratic and strongly individualistic. According to D'Emilio and Freedman (1988), a change in the social ethos was observed in America in the years preceding and following the 1920s suggestive of a greater sexual liberalism. While not as explicit and pervasive as that in the 60s and 70s, America embraced a new eroticism notable for existing outside of the traditional confines of the marital union. The movement toward a consumer economy and a valuing of self-expression and gratification was linked to an emphasis on greater sexual expression and pleasure. This was aided by the "contraceptive revolution" spearheaded by Margaret Sanger throughout the 20s and 30s. The emphasis on personal choice, individual rights and pleasure was focal. In true democratic style, the sex survey, popularly associated with Kinsey, rapidly became the tool of choice for
researchers interested in studying sexuality (Parker & Gagnon, 1995). Later, the sex survey as methodology was challenged by the controversial laboratory-based studies of Masters and Johnson.

Finally, there are a number of other figures whose work, although not necessarily considered part of sexology per se, contributed greatly to modernist conceptions of sexuality. Parker and Gagnon (1995) draw particular attention to the works of Freud, Malinowski, Stopes, Sanger, Guyon, Reich, and Mead. Ranging from the realms of psychoanalysis to anthropology, these figures played especially prominent roles, standing as they did between the individual and society, between the political and the personal.

Situating the Emergence of Sexology

A variety of social factors shaped the emergence of sexology. Weeks (1985) describes the nineteenth century in terms of a struggle to make orderly a social body increasingly dissolved by urbanization and industrialization. The growth of the American social purity and moral hygiene movements of the late nineteenth century, including anti-prostitution campaigns (D’Emilio & Freedman, 1988), attests to a growing concern over the sexual ethos of the social body. A loosening of public religious authority, although still present in standards of morality and normalcy, meant that the regulation and control of behaviour, including sexual behaviour, came to be under the purview of a variety of non-religious institutions. Control was established through the codification of sexuality both in medical and scientific discourses. As proof of this, Foucault (1976, 1984) offers the enormous nineteenth century outpouring of scientific and popular texts dedicated to the understanding and control of the sexual function. Specifically, he draws attention to the “multiplicity of discourses produced by a whole series of mechanisms operating in different institutions...an explosion of distinct discursivities which took form in demography, biology, medicine, psychiatry, psychology, ethics, pedagogy, and political criticism (p.33).”

One manifestation of such discourse was the publication of a variety of complex taxonomies of sexual perversion and deviance, the best known of which is Krafft-Ebing’s Psychopathia Sexualis. While many found consolation and company in the
person of like-minded "perverts" as described by Krafft-Ebing, the role of such texts can still be understood as primarily functioning to affirm existing normative standards of sexuality through the description of abnormality (Foucault, 1976/1984). In form, works like Psychopathia Sexualis and others similar to it contained what to the scientific and medical community were detailed case studies of a medico-forensic nature and increasing numbers of diagnostic labels. Nor was this format inconsistent with a more general tendency toward history-taking and diagnosis of sexual disorders in medico-psychiatric circles. Such history-taking for Foucault bore a striking resemblance to the religious confessional, disguised with the trapping of scientific inquiry, that functioned along with the growing plethora of other writings regarding sexuality, to create increasing avenues for control over sexuality.

Such work existed not only in the medico-scientific realm; it also had strong ties to the juridico-legal constitution of sexuality. Weeks (1985) describes sexology as emerging in tandem with a consolidation of legal codes whose aim was reform and the remoralization of the sexual rather than punishment. Medical experts became the holders of privileged knowledge regarding the nature and disposition of those who were brought before the law for sexual reasons. What all this points to is the manner in which sexology served to assist in constituting particular sexual persons before the law. Arguably, the medicalization of sexuality had greater impact on those whose behaviours were deemed "unnatural," and thus, constituted a threat to established norms of sexuality.

Victorian sensibilities, including an outward disdain for things sexual, were also influential in terms of an emerging science of sexology. Here, however, the wedding of science/medicine with sexology under the watchful eye of a disembodied religious authority served another important purpose — it worked to normalize the science of sexology. By adhering to the accepted conventions of medicine and science, and the normative standards of sexual conduct as implied by religious doctrine and inherent in social morals, the early sexologists secured legitimacy and respect for what might have been understood at that time as a questionable scientific endeavor. In point of fact, the legitimization of sex research through a pairing with the scientific and medical traditions continued well into the twentieth century (Tiefer, 1988; Weeks, 1985). The result of this ongoing pairing has had profound effects on our conceptions of sexuality and on the
form of sexological research. More specifically, it has led to a belief, consistent with the
tenets of positivism, that sexology must be, and is, apolitical/value neutral. This in turn
has led to charges that the discipline has been blinded to inherent ideology that
individualizes, naturalizes, medicalizes, and biologizes sex, that sees it as something to
"treat" like a disease, and takes it out of its social context (Tiefer, 1988).

It would be overly simplistic, however, to see the emergence of sexology only in
terms of attempts to regulate, control and normalize sexual behaviour. Parker and
Gagnon (1995) and Weeks (1985) draw attention also to the liberatory potential that
many sexologists believed their work held. In fact, in a climate understood by many as
sexually repressive, a number of the early sexologists did indeed envision a libertarian
sexual reform. The early agitation of Magnus Hirschfeld for the decriminalization of
homosexuality, although not uniformly respected by all sexologists, reflects this
libertarian impulse. Likewise, Kinsey's ground-breaking survey work is also commonly
understood as providing a more freeing picture of American sexual diversity. Finally,
Henry's Sex Variants study, which involved the active participation of homosexual
research participants, has been described as a turning point for American studies of
homosexuality (Minton, 1997), not to mention Evelyn Hooker's clever hoisting of
oppressive forces of American psychiatry and psychology on their own scientific petard
by providing empirical evidence against the prevailing view of homosexuality as
pathological (Hooker, 1957).

Assumptions Underlying Sexology

In terms of understanding the sexological legacy, what is perhaps more
germaine is specific consideration of the theoretical assumptions about sexuality that
accrued from this discipline. To begin, sexology has traditionally assumed that
sexuality is best understood as essential and naturally constituted. The desire and
motivation to act sexually, the sexual impulse, has been understood in terms of a fixed
quality inherent in the individual, ideally manifesting itself in a normative fashion. Given
this assumption, sex also becomes a measure of identity, with behaviour and identity
inextricably and unproblematically linked. What one does sexually, becomes one's
identity. Speaking of male homosexuality, Foucault (1976/1984) draws attention to the
fact that with the location of the sexual instinct within the individual, the "pervert"
becomes a kind or type (e.g., the homosexual) rather than one who merely exhibits a
particular kind of behaviour. While a distinctly "male" homosexual identity emerged in
the late nineteenth century, it was not until the earlier twentieth century, that the
heterosexual as person and identity emerged (Katz, 1995). Nevertheless, the
underlying assumption was still the same — that one’s behaviour and corresponding
identity emerge from an essential and natural base.

An important corollary to the notion of sexuality as an essential component of
human motivation was the characterization of the sexual drive as natural or rooted in
nature, and thus, animalistic and not easily controlled. Primed by romantic notions of
savage instincts and lustful desire, coupled with religiously inspired depictions of
"man's" inherently evil nature, early sexological theories could not help but be affected
by such constructions. The understanding of sexuality as a wild natural force and fears
about the power of the sexual instinct gave rise to a concomitant belief that the social
good would generally be served by providing controls over sexuality at a social level,
further supporting social campaigns aimed at promoting normativity and controlling
perversion and sexual excess. What emerges is a dichotomy in which the sexual
instinct is pitted against "cultural norms, social laws, and (sometimes) history" (Weeks,
1985, p.97).

Despite the formal role of medical and psychiatric sciences in exploring and
treating sexuality, the Christian Church maintained a presence most obviously as a
source of cultural notions regarding normative sexuality, a stance upon which sexology
based its claims. Normativity, according to predominantly Christian values and ethics,
is defined strictly in terms of procreative sexual acts within the confines of a religiously
sanctioned marital union between man and wife. Thus, normative sexuality has been
largely considered heterosexual in expression. This is not to say, however, that sexual
expression within a heterosexual coupling was thought to be uniform. Rather,
differential prescriptions for male and female sexuality, in keeping with existing gender
roles, permeated the sexological literature. Krafft-Ebing (1939/1965) provides an
obvious example of these tendencies. Of "man" he writes:
Man has beyond doubt the stronger sexual appetite of the two. From the period of pubescence he is instinctively drawn towards woman. His love is sensual, and his choice is strongly prejudiced in favour of physical attractions. A mighty impulse of nature makes him aggressive and impetuous in his courtship (p.14)

However, of “woman” he states:

Woman, however, if physically and mentally normal, and properly educated, has but little sensual desire. If it were otherwise, marriage and family life would be empty words...Woman is wooed for her favour. She remains passive. Her sexual organization demands it, and the dictates of good breeding come to her aid. (p.14)

What these quotes speak to is the role of sexology in codifying and differentiating appropriate sexual and gendered behaviour for men and women, as well as normalizing sexual expression in a heterosexual frame. Furthermore, sexuality is by and large defined solely in terms of heterosexual, specifically male, sexuality. Sexuality and the expression thereof, was first and foremost, predominantly a male expression and concern.

Finally, sexology inherited what at the time was considered the ultimate form of inquiry into any human issue, that is the objective of science, reflecting the world view of positivism (Gagnon & Parker, 1995). Weeks (1985) describes the task of the early sexologists as “no less than the discovery, description and analysis of ‘the laws of Nature’” (p.64), a task perfectly consistent with the reigning naturalistic, scientific and positivist paradigm. The use of the term positivism, however, should not be taken to imply that there exists a single agreed upon understanding of the philosophies or methods of positivism. For the sake of common points of reference, I will refer to Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) outline of what they consider to be some of the more salient assumptions of positivism; these include the belief in a single, tangible reality, a separation of observer from observed, temporal and contextual independence of observations, assumptions of linear causality, and value neutrality. Regardless of how one understands positivism, its epistemological foundation and the methods of science associated with it defined sexology for almost one hundred years. This was so, in part, because of the belief that such methods and philosophies were the road to truth and
social betterment.

In closing, Parker and Gagnon (1995) provide a useful summary of the common assumptions, or in their words, "cultural baggage" of twentieth-century sexology. Specifically, they identify six commonalities uniting European and American approaches to sexology, the first four of which construct sex as; (1) a powerful natural force that exists in opposition to civilization, culture, or society; (2) a drive or instinct embedded in the individual that exists prior to social or cultural order; (3) fundamentally different in men and women as follows from accepted differences in masculine and feminine natures and; (4) patterned normatively on that which is heterosexual and male. Additionally, American and European brands of sexology have been strongly informed by a faith in positive science leading to a conviction that scientific knowledge: (5) is the route to social betterment and; (6) constitutes a privileged form of knowledge.

After Sexology? The Crisis and Postmodern Alternatives

Much as the social and political upheaval of the sixties created changes in the constitution of sexuality in society, these same forces had important ramifications for the science of sexology. While previously meandering along in the protective cocoon of modernism, sexologists were forced to deal with critical challenges from a variety of sources, challenges that by the middle of the 1960s spelled serious trouble for the sexological paradigm (Parker & Gagnon, 1995). At this time and in the decades to follow, those writing from feminist perspectives and from within the growing domain of gay and lesbian studies produced voluminous amounts of theoretical discourse pertinent to the study of sexuality, much of which questioned previously unassailable sexological "truths" regarding sex, gender, identity, behaviour, and objectivity. In addition, the arrival of critiques of modernism more generally from poststructuralist and postmodern philosophical positions added further fuel to the fire and raised serious doubts about the feasibility of the entire sexological world view.

The feminist emphasis on gender and gender oppression provided a "new" lens through which to view the world. This, in turn, led to criticism of male bias in regard to the generation of research products and the norming of sexuality. As well, attention was directed toward the priority given to gender socialization in human development
and the role power and gender oppression play in women’s lives (Parker & Gagnon, 1995). Gay and lesbian studies, while drawing much of its initial impetus from feminist theory, particularly critiques of heteronormativity, expanded to consider the relationship between identity and behaviour, questioning prevailing assumptions of a rational, necessary and tautological link between the two, and a picture of identity as fundamentally derived from an essential nature (Parker & Gagnon, 1995). Increasingly, research conducted by women about women, or similarly, by gay men and lesbians about gay men and lesbians came to be represented within sexological circles (Parker & Gagnon, 1995). While thinkers from previous decades feared that such a practice would result in unscientific propagandizing, newer perspectives instead criticized the mis-representation of these communities at the hands of “outsiders” and claimed the right to define their own realities.

Finally, the critiques of modernist philosophy associated with Derrida, Foucault, and Lyotard (see Hill, 1997 for a useful review) also provided the impetus for important revisions to sexology. Loosely, postmodernist writings can be unified by their critique of modernism, and within that, positivism, and in particular modernist belief in notions of subject/object dualism, rationalism, and the enlightenment project of progress through the accumulation of knowledge and approximation of universal truths (Rosenau, 1992). While postmodernism is, as one might expect, far from a singular and uncontested entity, its basis in critiques of modernism raised obvious questions for the science of sexology, a discipline founded on, and based in an entirely modernist world view.

Constructionism: A Response to the Crisis

In part, the response from sexology came in the form of a new critical epistemological position that provided a welcome alternative to the prevailing hegemony of empirical positivism. Social constructionism, which variously derives its beginnings from sociology, anthropology, symbolic anthropology, symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, literary deconstructionism, existentialism, phenomenology, and to some extent, social psychology (Collier, Minton, & Reynolds, 1991; Gergen, 1985), assumes an emphasis on the individual’s active role, guided by social, historical and cultural factors, in structuring the nature of reality (Tiefer, 1990).
The emergence of social constructionism as a viable epistemological stance fueled wide ranging debate within sexological circles. First and foremost, social constructionism has stood directly in opposition to essentialist notions of sexual being and identity, and as such has created a lively debate between constructionists and essentialists. Stein (1990) points to the importance of this debate when he suggests that social constructionism "if true, has deep ramifications for the historical, scientific, sociological, philosophical, anthropological and psychological studies of sexuality because these studies often assume that the objects of their investigations are natural rather than cultural entities" (p.5). In response to this debate a number of writers adopting a constructionist position have sought to explore how understandings of sexuality and sexual identity have arisen from within specific social, cultural and historical contexts (e.g., Foucault, 1976/1984; Katz, 1995; Kitzinger, 1987; Laws & Schwartz, 1977; Weeks, 1985). Also of importance were those theories that used constructionism to challenge and deconstruct oppressive and totalizing pictures of particular sexual identities as pathological, often by utilizing constructionism to launch a more global critique of science itself as a value-laden and socially and culturally embedded endeavor. For example, Tiefer (1990) takes an especially close look at the language, images and metaphors that have guided the psychological world view of sexuality in the context of constructionist challenges.

**Postmodernity: New Directions**

While constructionism formed the beginning of the end of the modern sexological era, numerous and variegated theories emanating from within a postmodern paradigm have continued to stretch the boundaries and question the parameters of sexological inquiry. Parker and Gagnon (1995) describe sexology as riding the tides of a postmodern world that is increasingly understood as "fluid, fragmentary, contingent, and uncertain" (p.12). Within this context, a number of important issues have surfaced that continue to be the stuff of debate. Specifically, Parker and Gagnon identify issues pertaining to context and desire; desire and identity; identity and behaviour; sex, gender and the deconstruction of gender; and social/sexual communities/networks. While each of these topics is worthy of attention,
they have in many respects emerged from the studies of feminist, gay and lesbian, and queer theorists, rather than as specifically sexological contributions. Thus, the next section turns to examine in greater detail the contributions of feminist, gay and lesbian, and queer theorists to the understanding of sexuality.
Feminism and Sexuality

Once I was able to get rid of that feminist training and just read it for what it is and recognize that I could give myself permission to go with the fantasy instead of resisting it, it was such a revelation for me...I realized that, for me anyway, politics and sexuality don't really mix. At least not in the private bedroom or wherever you choose to explore that. (Gill, 1997)

Maya Gallus, film maker, and director of documentary film Erotica

The porn debates were very bitter -- it wasn't just that porn was bad but that heterosexuality was bad. And it became impossible to talk positively about it in political circles...as a result, the movement lost the chance to transform sexuality. Now we are paying the penalty in a new generation of post-feminist feminists who are “aiming their fire right there” and who grieve that it has become difficult to justify theoretically that they are feminists who sleep with men. (Kostash, 1996)

Judy Rebick, Canadian broadcaster

Something called 'cultural feminism' is the fashionable substitute for the sex dualism of our grim and painful youth, and this, goddess help us all, is what younger women have been presented with as feminist consciousness (Assiter & Carol, 1993, p. 2)

A number of different movements have arisen under the broader umbrella term feminism and while it seems trite and obvious to say so, there is not one feminism, rather there exist competing theories that differ as to the nature of women’s oppression and the necessary conditions for social change and empowerment. For many, however, that there is one feminism seems an indisputable, yet seldom examined assumption. Those individuals, relying upon biased media reporting and reductionist representations of feminist thought have little else by which to know contemporary feminism, not to mention past incarnations. As such, the alienation of many women, not to mention men, from feminism has to be, in part, firmly placed on the doorstep of
mainstream media reporting. The media have at times presented a skewed or erroneous picture of feminism as monolithic, anti-sex and anti-male based on little real grounding in actual feminist theory or organizing. Whether it reflects a conspiratorial design to discredit the cause entirely or merely the ignorance of mainstream reporters, the effect is the same. Women who do not subscribe to those views are left with the disappointing feeling that feminism has nothing to offer them.

Similarly, some men are also alienated and enraged by their perception of feminism as a system that allows them no way out of their role as evil oppressors and does not take into account the lived experience of many men. It has been long recognized that for things to change, men need to be just as much a part of the solution as women. Thus, in many ways, reporting that presents a picture of feminism that is alienating to men may ultimately be doing a disservice to many women. Some variations of the fledgling men's movement may be beginning to help men genuinely address their piece of the larger puzzle, but in its infancy, it is perhaps too soon to tell.

In a more nuanced and timely examination of media presentations of feminism, other writers have emphasized the tendency for the popular press to push simplistic binarisms that polarize feminist debates into familiar, yet ultimately unenlightening campings. Such binaristic reductions are the major topic of "Bad girls"/"good girls": Women, sex, and power in the nineties (Maglin & Perry, 1996) wherein a variety of feminist authors debunk the dichotomies like victim/power feminism, good girls/bad girls, pro-sex/anti-sex, and challenge the spokesperson status of such writers as Katie Roiphe, Naomi Wolfe, Camille Paglia, and others dubbed searingly as "faux feminists" (Faludi, 1995). Criticism emerges over the lack of appreciation of the full breadth and history of feminist writings (Willis (1996) asks "what new feminism?"); the fluffy portrayal of a "new" genre of "babe feminism," "do-me" feminism (Quindlen, 1996), and "valkyrie feminism" (Pollitt, 1996), and a general ignorance of the paradox and complexity of women's lives.

What is perhaps most disturbing about these presentations of feminism, however, is that for some women, they are more than merely media manipulation, but instead speak to lived experience. While frequently associated with a younger generation, the quote from Judy Rebick at the beginning of this section suggests that even women who presently consider themselves to be feminist have at times felt that
feminist thought has worked to subtly or not so subtly disallow specific aspects of their experience. While older feminists like Reibick who have lived to benefit from a feminist politic continue to affiliate themselves with feminism, the movement in some respects seems to have been lost to many women, perhaps most notably a new generation of young women. In conversation with friends and students, many young women are loathe to label themselves feminists and attempt to utilize newer terms or more satisfying euphemisms like “non-feminist feminist,” “humanist,” “equalist” or “egalitarian.” Making a very similar observation, Assiter and Carol (1993) state:

Today, some of the brightest women we meet, the ones who seem to have the most developed feminist understanding of sexual issues, are women who refuse to call themselves feminist at all, so loathe are they to be associated with a movement that has become steeped in an ideology of punitive and restrictive attitudes toward women. (p.5)

While Assiter and Carol's picture of feminism as "punitive and restrictive" is over-stated, their experience with women eschewing a feminist identification is consistent with my own. Nonetheless, many of these self-same women express a desire for something akin to feminism, knowing that there is a need for discourse on issues pertinent to the lives of women. The question then arises, what has served to alienate women from a movement that from its inception has struggled to put women's needs and lives foremost? The following sections will attempt to consider how at least strands of feminist theorizing about sexuality and difference may have contributed to the drifting of some women from the feminist movement. In concluding, a consideration of more recent developments in feminist theory that may stand in the gulf will also be presented.

**Feminist History and Sexual Theory**

One place where many women [and men] claim to have been alienated from feminism has been in the context of specific moves to theorize sexuality. In writing this section, not wishing to replicate reductionistic accounts of feminism, every effort will be made to try and present the full breadth of feminist theorizing about sex, albeit in a limited space. However, emphasis will be placed on contested aspects of sexuality
within feminism, including those that bear on the theorizing of heterosexual experience.

Feminist approaches to sexuality have been central both to the building of feminist theory and the movement itself. Such theory has also served as a point of division and fragmentation of the feminist cause. Initially, feminist thought focused on a critique of gender and structures of oppression emanating from a socially entrenched gender system that meted out power according to patriarchal privilege (Millet, 1970; or see Morgan's (1970) edited collection). True freedom was thought not to be possible until such time as gender is not a meaningful social category (Echols, 1984). The primary site of gender oppression was seen to be in institutions pertaining to sexuality (e.g., marriage, heterosexuality). As an answer, the sexual revolution served to place women's sexuality and their emancipation from sexual oppression as central. Within that movement, women sought to gain control over their own sexuality (reproductive rights, abortion, objectification etc.), and fight sex roles that relegated women to the position of passive sexual objects. Notable but often forgotten, it was thought that such a project could conceivably provide freedom for both men and women.

For women, the emphasis very quickly became one of the more sex the better, this seen as emancipatory in and of itself. Women were taught to claim their right to sexual pleasures and agency, whether by insisting on the right to orgasm with their partners, by themselves, or with other women. Such projects were assisted by the work of prominent sexologists like Masters and Johnson whose then timely claim that men and women differed little in regard to their sexual response was used to reinforce the rights of women to sexual agency and thereby, assist women in stepping out of traditional sexual roles (see Segal, 1994 for a review).

However, this attempt was to sour somewhat for a number of reasons. Jeffrey's (1990) is highly critical of the "so-called" sexual revolution, claiming that it amounted to nothing more than "the freedom for women to take pleasure from their own eroticized subordination" (p.1). Nor does Jeffrey's' criticism end here, as she also indicts the field of sexology at this time, in both its academic and popular manifestations. Referring to its premises as "sexologic" she states that it reflects mainly "...a way of expressing and maintaining male dominance and female submission" and that "The sexologists of the twentieth century have been the high priests who have organised the worship of male power" (p.1).
More specifically, what appeared to have happened was that many of the men who applauded the new sexual woman failed to make the necessary step of attempting to challenge their own heavily gendered sex roles. Thus, they were in the position of having greater sexual access without having to change their behaviour one iota (D'Emilio & Freedman, 1988). Violence against women and children, rape, and many other unacceptable practices were still very much in evidence in North American society, and the constant traffic at women's health centres set up to deal with such problems bore strong testimony to their prevalence.

Others were critical of a movement that had at first blush seemingly turned into women adopting a male version of sexual freedom. What sexual agency became for women was merely acting sexually like men. Such a view was fostered in contemporary media and publications as well as by popular sexological thought. While Masters and Johnson may have constructed an understanding of male and female sexual response as highly similar, they did little to question whether the underlying social norm was male. Furthermore, the cultural emphasis on orgasm and prowess, consumption and competition, the reduction of sex to the biological potential for orgasm, all bore the strong stamp of traditional masculine values, and many women, and some men, began to question the universal applicability of such a model (Segal, 1994) as well as the ideological stance behind it (Tiefer, 1988).

In answer to such discontents, the emphasis in feminism shifted. The seeming similarity of men's and women's sexual experience and the potential for freedom through sexual revolution felt like a lie when compared to the harsh realities of many women's lives. As a result, a new strand of feminism, one that Echols (1984) refers to as cultural feminism, began instead to explore that which is unique to female experience, and thus the focus shifted to emphasize differences in men's and women's sexual experience. Consciousness-raising groups that had sprung up early in the feminist movement served as fertile ground for exploring women's lived experiences of oppression and a more woman-centred sexuality.

In large part, the process of exploring women's sexuality in the absence of male defined parameters was aided by the expanding tension between heterosexual and lesbian feminists. White, middle class, heterosexual feminist organizations like the Nation Organization for Women (NOW), founded by Betty Friedan, came under much
needed criticism for marginalizing lesbians in their ranks. In response, lesbian feminists forwarded a politics defined by the woman-identified woman, insisting that supporting a man before a woman was unacceptable and counter to the cause of challenging women's oppression. Hence, the emergence of the political lesbian. From this, many women previously identified as heterosexual explored a new world of woman-centred eroticism. The nature of woman-centred eroticism was further defined by its dissimilarity to conventional heterosexual norms and roles. "Women-loving-women meant gentler, non-possessive, non-competitive, non-violent, nurturing and egalitarian relationships" (Segal, 1994, p.52).

In tandem with this came a renewed attention to issues couched in terms of male violence against women (Segal, 1994). This was expressed in campaigns and rallies against pornography, prostitution and the organized sex trade. Spokespersons like Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon represented strong voices at this time, often locating women's sexual oppression in objectifying pornographic images and even in penetrative sex itself. However, their roles as feminist theorists have been somewhat clouded and overly vilified in many respects. This alone, demands a more careful consideration of their work.

While perhaps best known for their active anti-pornography work, both Dworkin and MacKinnon have added richly to debate pertaining to sexuality and feminism. Dworkin's controversial book Intercourse, although only one of her many publications, provided a thoughtful and damning examination of the social meaning of penetrative sex. Dworkin cogently makes the point that intercourse, its social definition as an act of objectification, a symbol of female passivity and male dominance, is an act that establishes women's inferior status relative to men (Dworkin, 1987). She is critical of much liberal thought pertaining to the meaning of intercourse, including attempts to make intercourse unproblematic by resorting to the concepts of choice, pleasure, nature, repression or a split between the personal and the public. Of attempts to resignify the meaning of intercourse, she states:

These visions of a humane sensuality based in equality are in the aspirations of women; and even the nightmare of sexual inferiority does not seem to kill them. They are not searching analyses into the nature of intercourse; instead they are deep, humane dreams that repudiate the rapist as the final arbiter of reality.
They are an underground resistance to both inferiority and brutality, visions that sustain life and further endurance. (p.129)

Ultimately, however, she ends with the statement that such visions "do not amount to much in real life with real men" (p.129).

Of all her objections to a liberal philosophy of intercourse, the critique of pleasure appears most disturbing. Dworkin argues that pleasure itself, created under a system of male dominance, is fundamentally flawed as it is reflective of the eroticization of female submission. She states: "The quality of the sensation or the need for a man or the desire for love: these are not answers to questions of freedom; they are diversions into complicity and ignorance" (p.125). While Dworkin does not limit the problematic nature of intercourse to heterosexual unions alone, it nevertheless presents a decided challenge to heterosexual feminists.

MacKinnon's work likewise poses problems for heterosex to the extent that heterosex is understood to be linked to a gender system that systematically oppresses women. For MacKinnon (1987), sexuality is gendered, and gender is sexualized, and feminism's role is to draw attention to this problematic conflation. According to MacKinnon:

In other words, feminism is a theory of how the eroticization of dominance and submission creates gender, creates woman and man in the social form in which we know them. Thus the sex difference and the dominance-submission dynamic define each other. (p. 50)

Similar to Dworkin, she is critical of the extent to which women are complicit in their own domination through the eroticization of their own submission, seeing female power as a contradiction in terms.

While some have painted radical feminist theory as essentialist in nature (e.g., Baylies & Bujra, 1995), MacKinnon (1987) is critical of understanding women's oppression in terms of biological reductionism, and situates oppression clearly in gender as a socially constructed category. In speaking of criteria of falsifiability of radical feminist discourse, MacKinnon states this very succinctly:

In other words, to show that an observation or experience is not the same for all women proves only that it is not biological, not that it is not gendered. Similarly, to say that not only women experience something—for example, to suggest that
because some men are raped rape is not an act of male dominance—only
suggests that the status of women is not biological. Men can be feminized too
and they know they are when they are raped. (p.56)

Finally, in addressing the question of whether women are oppressed by
heterosexuality she takes what she refers to as a post-Marxist feminist stance.
The question is posed as if sexual practice were a matter of unconstructed
choice. If heterosexuality is the dominant gendered form of sexuality in a
society where gender oppresses women through sex, sexuality and
heterosexuality are essentially the same thing. This does not erase
homosexuality, it merely means that sexuality in that form may be no less
gendered. Either heterosexuality is the structure of oppression of women or it is
not...Those who think that one chooses heterosexuality under conditions that
make it compulsory should either explain why it is not compulsory or explain why
the word choice can be meaningful here.” (p.61)

I would suggest that MacKinnon can be associated with the belief that heterosexuality
is indeed the structure of women’s oppression.

While Dworkin and MacKinnon have been unfairly associated with a global “anti-
sex” position, their work nonetheless is profoundly troubling for heterosex. Whether it
could be called “anti-heterosex” is perhaps debatable, but what is clear is that
heterosex is problematic, along with choice and pleasure, and obviously gender. It is
entirely unclear from the vantage point of these writers how heterosex could fit into a
picture of female emancipation. Jeffreys (1990), in writing of the reaction of the
radicallesbian paper suggesting that only women with women will bring about “the
revolution” suggests that the reaction was in large measure a response to the deep
knowledge that this is, in fact, the only way for change to happen. Regardless if one
accepts this premise, the response to such ideas has been loud and often, angry.

To return to feminist history, some have considered this time as marked by an
emphasis on the dangers inherent in sex for women. Segal (1994) states:

Once feminists started listening to the untold tales of women, there was an
increasing awareness of the continual fear and danger some women faced in
their daily lives with men. It was this which threatened to snuff out the flame of
feminist hopes for changing men, and the world they dominated. (p.55)
While undoubtedly the acknowledgment of women's very real oppression, sexual and otherwise, is of extreme importance, a sizeable group of women of varying races and orientations became uncomfortable with the singularity of this emphasis and began to organize yet another shift in feminist thought, largely emanating from academic circles, that not all were willing to follow. The Barnard Conference of 1982 stands as a sign of impending challenge for the feminist movement.

Organized under the banner of "Pleasure and Danger," the conference sought not only to acknowledge the danger associated with sexuality for women, but also bring about a reemphasis on sex as a pleasurable and potentially liberating force in many women's lives. In many respects, this represented a return to earlier feminist thought, but with the additional grounding in explorations of oppression as well (Rubin, 1984). Of central concern to many was the fear and guilt that women faced, not at the hands of patriarchy but at the hands of a feminism that was painted by some as largely focused on danger and denounced sexual pleasure itself as potentially problematic (Hollibaugh, 1984; Vance, 1984b). Encouraging women to explore that which is pleasurable about sex while being mindful of its dangers was a resounding theme. For some, notably the S/M contingent, exploring pleasure through danger was also considered.

Included in this conference was also an acknowledgment of many groups of women who had already been disenfranchised. Gayle Rubin's (1984) powerful treatise spoke directly of communities of women whose experience in the sexual realm was at odds with much prevailing feminist thought. Of note, she mentioned bisexuals, women engaged in prostitution, pornography, butch/femme and lesbian S/M, as well as women who just plain enjoyed sex. In examining the current state of affairs from a historical/constructivist perspective, Rubin argued that feminist thought pertaining to sexuality threatens to become part of a more general sex panic wherein innocent perverts become scapegoats for larger social unrest. The presence of sex workers and other women representing these communities only served to highlight their need for inclusion in feminist discourse. Also of particular note, as will be further discussed under the section on queer theory, Rubin decried a theory of sexuality based on a theory of gender, calling for a separate domain of study aimed at sexual oppression. Both Marxist and feminist thought, Rubin argued, are limited by the nature of their tools,
tools whose purpose is to highlight gender and class inequities. While useful for those ends, she argued that the study of sexuality is in need of its own tools for uncovering sexual oppression and domination.

Opinions about the conference differ. Vance (1984a) constructs a picture of "anti-sex", particularly anti-heterosexual activists impeding the conference itself. Other writers (Jeffreys, 1990) described protest as centring almost exclusively around the conference's defense of pornography and S/M only, with charges of protesters being "anti-sex" unfair and inaccurate. Regardless of the specifics, this conference has been used as a symbol of a particular division in feminist thought regarding sexuality and associated concepts. Sometimes referred to as the "sex wars" or "lesbian sex wars", the period spanning the decade from 1980 to 1990 was a time when such divisions seemed especially visible. Of importance to this project is how heterosexual desire fared through this period. That much radical feminist critique had made heterosexual desire problematic has been well established. That heterosexual women experienced difficulty and anger with this position is also suggested.

It is perhaps instructive to ask whether heterosexual women's anger was a reaction to the theory, or perhaps a reaction to how the presentation of such theory has been handled. Take, for example, the following from Jeffreys (1990). After encouraging women to trust their own feelings about sex she says:

But if we listen to our feelings about sex sensitively instead of riding roughshod over them through guilt or anxiety about being prudes, we can work out what is positive and what is negative. The negative feelings are about eroticised subordination or heterosexual desire. (p.305)

While Jeffreys' remark should be contextualised in terms of her criticism of sexology and popular sexual advice for denying women's experiences of sex, I found it irritating to the extent that it presupposed to tell me what I would find if I did listen carefully. Also, the assumption that one negative that I would find would, in fact, be heterosexual desire is far from assured. This does not mean that I reject the theory on which such notions are based, nor that I refuse to be challenged, merely that the presentation at times may leave much to be desired, particularly as it perhaps cavalierly criticizes an experience that is highly self-defining. I open this rupture between theory and its presentation in part for a consideration later on of some women's anger toward
feminism, as well as the call for a better theorization of heterosex.

**Bringing It Together: Sex and Subversion**

In surveying this history of feminism and sexuality, a number of different schools of thought have emerged with differing positions in regard to the project of sexual liberation. One understanding has been that which is encapsulated in the work of Chapkis (1997) who makes divisions between what she sees as different branches of feminism in terms of their understanding of sexuality and oppression. In doing so, Chapkis relies on broad cuts between what she refers to as the romantic and radical feminist anti-sex positions, and the libertarian and socialist pro-sex positions. While in principle I have problems with the labels affixed to these camps, seeing them as reductionistic and at points, misleading, I have chosen to retain them in part because they speak to what I suspect are popular (mis)understandings of feminist theories of sexuality. I would ask the reader to consider them with this in mind.

Relying on Seidman, Chapkis acknowledges the presence of two streams of radical feminist thought pertaining to sexuality: the romantic and the anti-sex positions. The romantic approach to sexuality posits that sexuality is not in and of itself a bad thing, rather that masculinist constructions of sexuality have created a sexual system that is oppressive to women. The solution to oppression is located in the creation of a new sexuality, one that has been painted as stressing sharing, commitment, emotional bonding, closeness, and mutuality – in short, an eroticization of equality and caring. Under this system, heterosexual relations are somewhat suspect.

The radical feminist anti-sex position sees sexuality as a completely male construction. Our language, our images, our very thoughts are an intrusion of male norms and ways of thinking about sex that are, needless to say, oppressive in all ways to all women. Under this system, sex itself is problematic and there is no such thing as building a new, more empowering sexual system from what we currently have. If sex is redeemable at all it must be totally destroyed and rise anew from the ashes in some yet unidentifiable form. Prostitution and pornography as particularly virulent symbols of male sexual desire and female oppression, are seen as intolerable, and heterosex is generally vilified.
Chapkis (1997) also draws attention to two strands of feminism loosely labeled pro-sex or sex radical feminism. Within this camp are found both libertarian and socialist factions. The libertarian perspective is pro-sex with the only important distinction between sexual acts being one of consent. Any consensual sexual act is allowable and power is there for anyone to use for their own ends. In short, there is no need to change the current sexual system, only to make sure you have power on your side and exercise your right to choose. Furthermore, it assumes an equal and unimpeded capacity for choice.

In contrast, the socialist perspective, while also pro-sex and not in favour of the elimination of the current sexual system in its entirety, nonetheless considers context to be as important as consent. It acknowledges that there are societal contexts where power is not equally distributed and easily accessible to all. Therefore, the key seems to be subversion *within the current sexual order*. Prostitution, pornography, and even heterosexuality are fine, but need to be considered within the context in which they occur and can be part of a subversive project just as any other sexual act. To sum up, Chapkis (1997) sees this position as “reject[ing] a politics of purification or abolition in favor of one of subversion from within sexual practice...from this perspective, acts of apparent complicity may also be acts of subversive resistance” (p.26).

If we accept Chapkis' characterization of streams of feminist thought, we can consider how such perceptions of feminist theory may have sundered individual women from the cause of feminism and the way in which at least some aspects of feminism have become less pertinent to some women's sexual lives. For many, the "anti-sex" stance is all they know of feminism, yet their experience is such that sex itself is far from an evil act and, in fact, has provided pleasure and even control in many women's lives. It is little wonder then that many women, believing that feminism is equated with anti-sex and man-hating, feel little like taking part in, or owning, feminism. On the other hand, sex radical factions, always good fodder for a media circus, may also appear to hold little relevance to the "average" woman. One may wonder if calling oneself "egalitarian" or "humanist" is one way that some women have tried to reclaim sexuality for themselves, discarding a feminism that seems oppressive or irrelevant. However, the problem with this state of affairs is that it tends to leave sexuality for many women unquestioned and untheorized, and the extent to which these women have perhaps
crafted new and more liberated or potentially subversive understandings of their sexuality remains unexamined.

Feminism and Difference

Overlaying the previous issue are the attempts of feminism to cope with an increasing recognition of difference among its members. In terms of sexual difference, early feminist organizing was criticized for an unwillingness to confront the reality of lesbians in the women’s movement. While this gained ground for many lesbians, this change was, ironically, to have a negative impact on many lesbians’ lives as well. As elaborated by Rubin (1984), some lesbians came under scrutiny for enacting butch/femme roles in their relationships, with the prevailing belief that such gendered roles were thought to lend support to heteronormativity and ultimately, patriarchy. Similarly, those lesbians whose sexual lives were more radical or marginal (e.g., S/M dykes) also felt harshly judged.

Just as problematic, criticism has been raised that feminist theory has at times ignored racial differences. For women of colour who experience the double oppression of both race and gender, a white middle class feminist movement seemed to hold little promise. White women, hesitant to acknowledge their role as oppressors of racial minorities (Moraga, 1994), often sought instead to gloss over race as an important source of experiential difference. The glorification of the “slave” role in S/M was also criticized for its racist overtones. Furthermore, strategies that simplistically attempted to sever women’s connections with men both sexually and socially ignored the reality of many women of colour. The Combahee River Collective (1994) in its manifesto outlined the dual role of woman of colour, who while needing to combat sexism from men of colour, also sought to unite with men of colour against the issue of racism.

Without models to acknowledge difference yet provide a basis for a common struggle, many activists instead preferred to present a false homogeneity, and conformity. That said, ignoring of differences within the community of women served an important political purpose as the “fiction” of a homogenous community of women united against patriarchal oppression provided the basis for larger social movement. Given the utility of this strategy, the fear is that to acknowledge difference is perhaps to
invite the powers that be to divide and conquer. Ironically, however, the uncritical maintenance of such a strategy has worked at times to create further division.

The question of difference has led to an explosion of work designed to elucidate the experiential reality of various communities of difference (see Jagose, 1996 for a review). As Gayle Rubin predicted, women from the S/M community (Califia, 1994), sex workers (Chapkis, 1997; Nagle, 1997) and bisexuals (Weise, 1992), have all in recent years come forward to stake their claim to difference and challenge their general disenfranchisement from the feminist and gay communities. Similar explosions have taken place from feminists describing difference in terms of race and class as well.

Attempts to deal with difference have challenged feminism and informed a number of theoretical and methodological advances. The early emphasis in feminism on women’s lived experience fostered methods, like those used in consciousness raising groups, that sought to evoke women’s stories. However, such endeavours have been criticized for the assumption that women’s experience is universal and transhistorical (Gavey, 1989). In more academic circles, constructionism, arising as a response to positivistic models that were steeped in male, heterosexist norms, also encouraged the voices of the disempowered. While constructionism’s emphasis on the individual’s active role in creating and interpreting their own reality provided for the examination of unified communities of the oppressed, it also laid way for an enumeration of even smaller points of difference. Thus, the question then became one of how to acknowledge difference yet at the same time leave room for a united front. To this end, Donna Haraway’s (1991) notion of situated knowledges provides a framework for understanding difference within a larger social context. Similarly, Griscom (1992) suggests a need to look toward social location rather than difference and advocates the replacement of notions of social difference with that of “particularities.”

Probably the most interesting suggestions bearing on political coalition building in the face of difference have come from the growing literature of queer theory which will be considered in greater depth in the next section. Regardless of how one conceives of it, however, difference has provided feminism and the pursuits of sexual liberation with great challenges. Nor has the acknowledgment of difference and the rights associated with difference affected only feminism. Society as a whole is
struggling with the project of accommodating difference in a society structured according to "apparent" majority democracy. To return to the struggling woman of today, it is not difficult perhaps to imagine how confusing it might be to conceive of, and adhere to the notion of a united feminist ideal in the face of a bewildering forest of differences, particularly with no ostensibly common goal in site.

Ironically, what may currently be the case is that those holding to a heterosexual desire perceive themselves to be a "new" community of difference within feminism. While one can easily argue that heterosexuals are far from an oppressed minority in any circle, the perception of heterosex as problematic appears to be a theme as is the problematic of being a heterosexual feminist. Thus, in closing, I would finally like to turn to more recent attempts to theorize heterosex.

**Theorizing Heterosex**

While some would suggest that much remains to be done to adequately theorize heterosex as practice and heterosexuality as a hegemonic identity, the recent decade has been marked by an increased awareness of the need for just that. The edited work of Wilkinson and Kitzinger (1993) stands as one notable early attempt to provide a format for discussion of heterosexuality. Heterosexual academics and theorists were asked to speak to how their heterosexuality had contributed to their feminist politics and specifically, a feminist psychology, all of which provided for interesting results. Many were wary or hesitant to accept the label of heterosexual, fearing that in so doing they were contributing to an invariant conception of sexual desire they felt was experientially inaccurate and selling short the fluidity and indeterminacy of identity. Others expressed concern that the use of such labels further supported entrenched standards of heteronormativity, understanding the refusal to label as a way of destabilizing normative assumptions. While Wilkinson and Kitzinger emphasized, in part, the melancholy nature of many respondent's accounts of their heterosexual experience, and most spoke of the difficulty of reconciling a feminist politic with their heterosexuality, a number of respondents spoke very positively of their own experiences with specific men. Finally, although most respondents spoke very highly of their relationships with other feminists, more than one respondent related their
experience of having been given the impression from some feminist friends that their heterosexuality experience, outside of the consideration of heteroprivilege, was unimportant at best and dangerous at worst. Gill and Walker (1993) address their anger and questioning at this state of affairs in saying “There must be a way of being able to speak our anger without it being taken as an attack on our sisters” (p.71). However, they suggest they are still searching for the solution to this dilemma.

The works included in this collection provide an interesting grounding, but in many ways they fall short of actually taking up the challenge of theorizing heterosexuality and heterosex. Although respondents suggested that there is a way to understand heterosexual experience in a more positive light, few gave very concrete suggestions for how this might be accomplished.

A more thoroughly theoretical approach, however, can be found in the edited work by Diane Richardson, Theorising Heterosexuality (1996). In this collection, a variety of authors consider heterosexuality from the vantage point of domestic life (VanEvery, 1996), social policy (Carabine, 1996), the desire for gender (Jeffreys, 1996), psychoanalytic theory (Hollway, 1996), and a variety of other platforms. Although each provides an interesting look at different aspects of heterosexual experience, I wish to focus on the work of Stevi Jackson and her treatment of heterosexuality and feminist theory, as it provides a rather clear framework from which to consider a workable theory of heterosexuality.

Jackson (1996) examines various constructionist approaches relevant to the study of heterosexuality, identifying the emergence of three streams of thought, each of which differ in terms of the object of study or what they see as being socially constructed. One stream of thought, identifiable in the work of Catherine MacKinnon and Sheila Jeffreys, has focused on the centrality of male domination and has located analysis at the level of patriarchal structures. Jackson is critical of attempts to characterize such work as essentialist, but does voice concerns about it as well. Specifically, she sees this work as providing a limited exploration of the positive aspects of sexuality, needing a better link between the structural base of power and how it might be exercised and resisted at the individual level, and requiring a consideration of how sexuality is constructed at the level of the individual.

Jackson also draws attention to work that examines sexuality in terms of its
historical construction as an object of discourse most commonly associated with Foucault. While providing a provocative understanding of power as the effect of discursive production, Jackson is critical of Foucault's work specifically for showing a peculiar gender blindness and for a lack ability to understand power in terms of structural analyses of inequality. This particular criticism of Foucault will be considered in the section Foucault on Power and Feminist Revisions. Jackson is also critical of the tendency of much of this work to be unapologetically libertarian and lacking a critique of a heterosexualized desire, that is desire defined by dominance and submission.

Finally, Jackson also faults such theory for a focus on bodies and pleasure as points of resistance that does little to take into account the ways in which power may actively create desire.

Finally, Jackson identifies a third stream of thought that concerns itself with the construction of desires through analysis at the level of individual subjectivity, of which Wendy Hollway is a notable contributor. However, such work is limited, according to Jackson, by an over-reliance on psychoanalytic theory, notably that of Lacan as a framework for explaining the origins of individual desire.

In concluding her consideration of contributions to a theory of heterosexuality, Jackson calls ultimately for a synthesis. She states:

It is my contention that each of these strands of social construction theory is essential to an adequate feminist perspective on sexuality, and that a critique of heterosexuality should find a means of weaving them together. All three are necessary if we are to transcend the difficulties we have in maintaining a critical perspective on heterosexuality without implicitly or explicitly condemning individual heterosexual women. This is not a plea for compromise, for some disinterested middle ground, but for a more rigorous radical feminist theorisation of sexuality. (p.23)

By way of suggestion, Jackson advocates that such work on heterosexuality would ideally focus on institutionalization within society and culture, social and political identity, practice and experience. The focus on experience is particularly pertinent to this paper, as it has sought to foreground individual women's experiences of their heterosexual relations. Jackson, while supporting a structural critique of heterosexuality, cautions against the assumption that experience is determined directly
by structure, fearing that such a singular focus "leaves no space for the contestation of patriarchal power within heterosexual relations nor for exploring the interconnections between gender, sexuality and other power relations" (p.30).

New Directions for Feminist Thought on Sexuality

In closing this section, I would like to suggest that there is a need to provide a view within feminism that better speaks to the experiences of some heterosexual women. I would also suggest that such a focus desperately requires a re-theorization of heterosexuality and an acknowledgment of the positive experiences of heterosexual women. While this may ultimately pose more questions than it answers, it may also serve to give some women a reason to re-embrace feminism, as well as better tools to constructively question their own lives and desires - and this is badly needed. One potential contender for the reclamation of heterosexuality, as odd as it might sound, can be found in the work of queer theory, and it is to a history and explanation of queer theory that I now turn.
Queer Theory

Although indebted to those theoretical fields that came “before” it (e.g., feminism, lesbian and gay studies), queer theory represents the most recent and one of the more controversial contributions to a theory and politics of sexuality. Queer theory has been constituted not only through postmodern and poststructuralist ideas, particularly anti-identity critiques and Foucauldian notions of power and resistance, but also through relations with a strong queer activist movement, reacting against identity politics and minority rights political strategizing. At best, queer theory purports to provide a non-hegemonic political identity that allows for radical resistance, yet at the same time accounts for a diverse and shifting constituency. At worst, queer theory may elide difference, and uncritically foster a new hegemonic identity that looks suspiciously like a queer, white, male. The following pages will provide a history of queer theory, examine claims and critiques associated with queer theory, and finally, put forward for scrutiny the “straight queer.”

History and Genesis of Queer Theory

Minton (1997) discusses the historical roots of queer theory as emanating from the Sex Variants studies published by George W. Henry in 1941. While the details surrounding the Sex Variants study could be read as indicative of the oppressed status of homosexuals in the early parts of this century, Minton emphasizes the goals of community empowerment inherent in this work:

The Sex Variants study represents a turning-point in the study of homosexuality in the United States because it is the first instance in which the research participants were able to engage in a collaborative relationship with the investigators, albeit a disguised and limited form of collaboration. (p.342)

Subsequent to the Sex Variants study, Kinsey and later, Hooker, played their respective parts in trying to depathologize homosexuality (Hooker, 1957) and establish sexuality along a continuum rather than as straddling the bounds of normalcy and perversity (Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948; Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin & Gebhard, 1953). However, it wasn’t until the gay liberation movement of the 1970s that gays and
lesbians finally won the battle to speak to their own experience without the distorting lens of hetero-science.

From early on, the gay liberation movement adopted a liberal political base. Duggan (1995a) describes the rhetorical strategy of the liberal position as "...aimed to align lesbian and gay populations with racial, ethnic, and religious minority groups and women in a quest for full economic, political and cultural participation in U.S. life" (p.158). In the quest for equality and basic human rights, the gay and lesbian liberation movement united around the notion of an essential gay identity. What has been called identity politics, although subsequently criticized, can be read as a necessary form of political resistance in the early years of gay liberation (Halperin, 1995). As society changed with gay rights agitation, so did academia. Seidman (1996) sees the sociological study of sexuality as moving from an unquestioned norm of heterosexuality and a focus on sexual deviance (e.g., prostitution, pornography, and homosexuality), to a recognition of homosexuals as oppressed minorities and victims of discrimination, a focus in keeping with the rights orientation of gay liberation.

Back on the activist front, while the gay liberation movement made definite strides based on liberal appeals for equal rights, the success was limited (Duggan, 1995a). While the AIDS crisis further assisted the Right in repealing the gains of gay and lesbian liberation it also incited what Duggan refers to as "the call to militant nationalism" (p.159). Associated with activist organizations like ACT UP and its spin off Queer Nation, militant nationalism rejected the goals of privacy, toleration and assimilation associated with a liberation agenda in favour of publicity and self-assertion, confrontation and direct action (Duggan, 1995a). While creating a highly visible presence, gay nationalism was criticized by some for the "ethnic" model underpinning nationalist agendas that assumes a monolithic and unitary gay identity and nation.

Thus, questions continued to be raised about the issue of difference and the struggle of including and theorizing a diversity of voices, voices diversified by race, class, and gender. What was becoming clear for many was that a single, coherent, essential identity, whether it be woman, lesbian, middle-class, or Black, was more fantasy than reality. With this came a crisis as activists sought to maintain coherent political movements that were increasingly fragmented by difference. If identity was not unitary, then on what basis could groups cohere and enact political change?
Once again, changes within academia mirrored this struggle. In speaking of sociology, Stein and Plummer (1996) identify two strands of sociological study, the earlier tending to accept existing sexual categories (sex as naturalized), and the latter tending to problematize existing categories through a focus on sexuality as a culturally and socially specific construction, rather than a biological or natural given.

Applied to the vexing question of identity, under the latter constructionist paradigm, homosexual identity, for example, is not essential, natural or unitary. Epstein (1996) speaks to the dynamic between essentialism and constructionism:

Broadly speaking, whereas essentialism took for granted that all societies consist of people who are either heterosexuals or homosexuals (with perhaps some bisexuals), constructionists claimed that such typologies are socio-historical products, not universally applicable, and deserve explanation in their own right. Also, whereas essentialism treated the self-attribution of a sexual identity as unproblematic — as simply the conscious recognition of a true, underlying "orientation" — constructionism focused attention on identity as a complex developmental outcome, the consequence of an interactive process of social labeling and self-identification. (p.151)

Diversity of identity and experience, rather than being problematic, becomes an avenue for examining differences in cultural and social experiences that led to the constitution of various identities. Given mainstream concerns about identity politics and the fragmentation of identity within previously united political coalitions, constructionism provided a way of understanding a very real issue faced by activists.

Of particular note for the study of sexuality, and the formation of queer studies in particular, was also the critique voiced by Gayle Rubin at the Barnard conference. As understood by Williams (1997), Rubin critiqued the wide scale ignorance or hostility toward many kinds of sexual differences within the feminist community, as well as finding fault with the feminist assumption that a theory of sexuality could be derived from a theory of gender. What was advocated was a unique field of study with sexuality as its primary focus, as well as a politics of sexuality, a challenge that Williams saw as being taken up by lesbian and gay studies, queer theory and politics.

Constructionist and ultimately queer theories were further aided by the presence of European poststructuralist and postmodern philosophies that provided both support
for constructionist thought as well as challenging problems. Of the many important influences (e.g., Derrida, Lacan), Foucault is still most frequently cited as the “progenitor” of queer theory (e.g., Minton, 1997). Foucault offered not only a legitimation of a previously marginal body of theory (i.e., gay and lesbian studies) (Duggan, 1995a), but also a solid grounding of sexuality as historically contingent and produced through the interplay of discursive practices, strategies, and knowledges — in short, sexuality as the effect of power rather than its object (Jagose, 1996). Sexual categories under Foucault’s pen became products of particular “constellations of power and knowledge” (Epstein, 1996, p. 150). Of special importance, also, was the perspective forwarded by Foucault on power. Rather than understanding power as something from which one could gain freedom or liberation, Foucault posited the notion that one cannot exist outside of power relations. This in turn, had profound ramifications for the goals of activism, suggesting subversion through resistance to hegemonic discourses of normativity (Minton, 1997), rather than an activism based on the goals of empowerment or emancipation from oppressive structures.

In summary, the emergence of queer theory required the interweaving of a number of academic and activist forces. From the side of academia, queer theory adopted many of the tenets of postmodern/poststructural theory — the notion of identity as historically, socially and culturally embedded, as well as transitory, fragmented, and provisional; the loss of the “subject”; and the notion of resistance. In terms of its roots in activism, it is somewhat unclear whether queer theory grew out of gay nationalism (Stein & Plummer, 1996), or in reaction to it as suggested by Duggan (1995a). It is perhaps safest to assume that queer theory seems to have adopted the confrontational and non-assimilationist stance of gay nationalism, yet at the same time, has struggled to maintain an anti-identity politic consistent with poststructuralist theory that seeks to accommodate difference. The result of this melange has been queer theory and the accompanying queer politics. The next section turns to an examination of the defining aspects of queer theory and the claims associated with it.
Queer Theory: Claims and Contentions

Like any movement, queer theory has its seminal works. Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) and Warner's *Fear of a Queer Planet* (1993) both stand as likely contenders, although a wide variety of writers from the academic and popular press have contributed to the quickly growing body of queer literature. Differences still emerge, however, over the precise understanding of queer theory. Some of this difficulty may be a result of the wide variety of understandings of the term queer (Walters, 1996). To better understand queer theory as it is used in an academic setting, I refer to Stein and Plummer's (1996) identification of four hallmarks of queer theory, each of which will be considered briefly.

First, Stein and Plummer state that queer theory provides "a conceptualization of sexuality that sees sexual power embodied in different levels of social life, expressed discursively and enforced through boundaries and binary divides" (p. 134). As such, one project of queer theory has been the interrogation of discursive structures, such as the taken for granted categories of homosexual/heterosexual, male/female, masculine/feminine, etc. A central feature of queer theory has been attempts to destabilize these boundaries, in part by presenting experience that transcends or challenges such binarisms (e.g., the experiences of transsexuals, bisexuals, etc.). One such destabilizing entity, the "queer heterosexual" has caused particular consternation.

Second, queer theory is notable for "the problematization of sexual and gender categories, and of identities in general," and the assumption that "identities are always on uncertain ground, entailing displacements of identification and knowing" (p.134). It is perhaps this more than anything else that holds out queer theory as a promising theoretical and political endeavour. Issues of identity and diversity of identity as previously stated created a large problem for many social movements and their accompanying theoretical base (e.g., feminism, lesbian and gay studies) to the extent that they relied on notions of essential and shared identities. Queer theory holds the promise of a discursive space that allows, even encourages difference, but nonetheless provides a unifying political identity (i.e., queer) from which to base a politics of resistance. Minton (1997) states that "the underlying theme of queer identity as a space of marginal positionality affords the opportunity to interrogate and resist all forms
of hegemonic normativity, including patriarchy, racism, and elitism" (p.347).
Theoretically then, queer theory provides an arena of resistance that encapsulates
differences in race, class, gender, as well as sex.

Thirdly, queer theory includes "a rejection of civil-rights strategies in favor of a
politics of carnival, transgression, and parody which leads to deconstruction,
decentring, revisionist readings, and an anti-assimilationist politics" (p.134). Finally,
queer theory also espouses "a willingness to interrogate areas that normally would not
be seen as the terrain of sexuality, and to conduct queer "readings" of ostensibly
heterosexual or non-sexualized texts" (p.134). These aspects of queer theory have
been seen most clearly in the recent plethora of queer readings of a wide variety of
cultural products, from films (e.g., Miller, 1991) to TV sitcoms (e.g., Doty, 1993).

While such a rendering of the claims and "hallmarks" of queer theory is
undoubtedly brief, it provides a springboard to consider the plethora of critiques of
queer theory, keeping in mind the words of Annamarie Jagose (1996):

Clearly, there is no generally acceptable definition of queer; indeed, many of the
common understandings of the term contradict each other irresolvably.
Nevertheless, the inflection of queer that has proved most disruptive to received
understandings of identity, community and politics is the one that problematizes
normative consolidations of sex, gender and sexuality—and that, consequently is
critical of all those versions of identity, community, and politics that are believed
to evolve 'naturally' from such consolidations. By refusing to crystallize in any
specific form, queer maintains a relation of resistance to whatever constitutes
the normal. (p.99)

Criticisms of Queer Theory

I would like to begin this section with an extended quote from Walters who
speaks in short hand to a number of concerns voiced about queer theory. She states:

...queer is thought to signify a new kind of politic as well as a new kind of
theorizing, a theorizing marked by the very openness that allows so many
definitional possibilities. Now, many would argue that this indeterminacy—this
inability to ascertain a precise definition and framework for the term queer—is
precisely what gives it its power: queer is many things to many people, irreducible, undefinable, enigmatic, winking at us as it flouts convention: the perfect postmodern trope, a term for the times, the epitome of knowing ambiguity. Good-bye simulacra, adios panopticon, arrivederci lack, adieu jouissance: hello queer! But what is lost in this fun deconstruction of the cohesion of identity? If queer becomes the new reigning subjectivity for hip activists and intellectuals alike, what kinds of politics and theories then become “transcended,” moved through and over in the construction of the queer hegemony? (Walters, 1996, p.837)

With no particular order in mind, the following section will deal briefly with some of the more salient concerns regarding queer theory.

In beginning to read queer theory, one of the first questions that came to this writer’s mind was how one could have a movement critical of identity politics that banded together under the banner of queer without creating just another problematic identity or as Walters (1996) fears, a new “uber-identity?” While queer theory presents itself as decidedly anti-identity, the articulation of queer as non-identity is difficult to sustain. Minton (1997) describes queer theory as incorporating identity politics as a theoretical and political strategy, with queer identity serving as a site for resistance to normativity and objectivity. Jagose (1996) presents a picture of queer identity as adopted provisionally for political advantage but ultimately fluid, temporary, and fictive. She states:

The discursive proliferation of queer has been enabled in part by the knowledge that identities are fictitious—that is, produced by and productive of material effects but nevertheless arbitrary, contingent and ideologically motivated...Queer, then, is an identity category that has no interest in consolidating or even stabilizing itself. It maintains its critique of identity-focused movements by understanding that even the formation of its own coalitional and negotiated constituencies may well result in exclusionary and reifying effects far in excess of those intended. (p.130-131)

In a related vein, others have voiced concern over the loss of still meaningful and seemingly common sense gay and lesbian identities under the queer umbrella, and a corresponding loss of a politic based on identity. Jagose (1996) cites counter-
arguments, however, which take umbrage at the truth claims of self-evident or common sense identities, stating that it is the precise role of queer theory to interrogate how such identities belie the working of a particular politic. As such, the loss of a gay or lesbian identity is not thought to be synonymous with a lack of the political, rather queer theory articulates the political in terms of how identity is formed.

Concerns over queer as a potentially new theoretical hegemony have also been voiced hand in hand with worry over losing touch with the positive aspects of prior theoretical systems (e.g., feminism). While the postmodern emphasis in queer theory rejects grand narrative, it has been suggested that queer theory may have, in fact, created its own. Many lesbian and feminist writers (Walters, 1996; Williams, 1997) have reacted against the unfair portrayal of queer theory as the antidote to a rigid, frigid monolithic feminism. In the colourful words of Walters (1996), queer theory in effect creates the need for the "old, bad, exclusive, policing lesbian feminism" as necessary for the "bad girl" (dildo in tow) to emerge as the knight in leather armor" (p. 850). Not only is this construction of feminism singular and limited, it also creates an antithetical and antagonistic relationship between the two domains. Furthermore, feminists remain concerned over the extent to which queer theory has included a meaningful incorporation of gender into its theory, and conversely, whether queer theory has at times painted a picture of feminism as having little useful to say where theories of sexuality are concerned.

Again, Jagose (1996) cites a number of counters to such charges, including the fact that queer theory owes much to the methods and critique of feminist analysis, as well as to the many queer theorists who are also women and feminists (e.g., Rubin, Butler, Sedgwick, deLauretis, Fuss, Merck, and Traub to name but a few). Many of these same authors have begun in earnest to examine the relationship between feminism and queer theory, queer theory and gender. What is hoped is that the understanding of gender will be enriched by an understanding of sexuality and vice versa.

Continuing on with a related theme, another point that once again has been particularly salient for feminist and particularly lesbian feminist writers, although equally important for other marginal identities within the queer coalition, involves the question of whether queer theory actually provides a meaningful place for difference, or whether
it merely ignores, dismisses, or "transcends" it – in effect, de-racing, de-gendering, and de-classing the queer body. (Walters, 1996; Williams, 1997). More specifically, these writers charge that queer theory has explicitly or implicitly set up as a norm the person of the gay, white male. Walters in particular expresses great concern over the apparently uncritical acceptance of gay male norms by a whole plethora of young lesbians who do little to question the male models of queer (e.g., the celebration of lesbian backrooms). Walters (1996) states:

Although lesbians are occasionally mentioned (usually when speaking of S/M), gay men most assuredly have become the model for lesbian radical sex (e.g., the celebration of pornography, the “reappropriation” of the phallus in the fascination with the diildo, the “daddy” fantasies, and reverence for public sex of Pat Califia, etc.). (p.847)

Others fear that queer may become a hodgepodge of liberal pluralism and allow for a process of gay despecification (e.g., straight queers), lumping gays and lesbians in with other coalitions who may not share a political agenda directed against homophobia, or who may compromise the cause due to problematic sexual identities (e.g., bisexuality) or practices (e.g., pedophiles, snuff film aficionados).

A persistent cloud of tension hangs around queer theory at points where the academic meets the activist (Duggan, 1995c). Many fear, according to Jagose (1996), that queer theory is a movement primarily associated with institutions, that benefits those aligned with institutions (i.e., academics), and is not responsible or even accessible to those members of the gay and lesbian community outside the academy. As a response to this criticism, supporters of queer theory draw attention to a number of points (Jagose, 1996). In the call for legibility of queer discourse, of primary importance is the observation that the only currently accessible discursive strategies are those that queer theory has set out to problematize, specifically the minoritizing discourse of liberation politics that relies on a contested politics of identity. If queer theory were to rely on such accessible structures, it would in effect be failing at the very task of denaturalizing such categories. In turn, queer theorists also seek to problematize the theory/politics divide implied by discussions of an academic/activist split. According to queer theory, a breakdown between theory and politics can itself be interrogated, particularly the assumption that writing a paper is less an act of activism
than other more conventional activist tactics (e.g., picketing).

In a related vein, given concerns that queer theory is steeped in the rather dense, non-linear prose of postmodernity, queer theory has also been called to task for whether or not it can usefully translate pomo jargon into an arena of hetero politics. Duggan (1995b), in her writing Queering the State draws attention to the difficulty of translating constructionist notions into a culturally legible product. Jagose (1996) presents the views of many who are loathe to forgo liberal political strategies that have been responsible for the gains made to date. Once again, however, queer theory makes reply by calling into question the utility of such traditional political strategies, seeing the desire to work in democratically sanctioned ways as a manifestation of how the gay community has been assimilated into mainstream cultures and values with concerns over legitimacy largely made from the class positions of those who are able to benefit from such legitimacy (e.g., white, middle-class). However, such bickering may ultimately be missing an even more fundamental point. As Jagose (1996) suggests, both traditional and queer views that pitch liberal politics against queer politics are guilty of a lack of understanding of politics as a set of effects and instead posit politics as an entity that exists a priori to any particular political action.

**The Straight Queer: From the Absurd to the Sublime?**

In closing this section on queer theory, what I wish to focus on for a moment is the constitution of the queer straight or straight queer. While the juxtaposition of queer and straight may seem odd, queer has already been called "the oxymoronic community of difference" by Louise Sloan (as cited in Duggan, 1995a) and as such is not bothered by seeming contradiction. Various writers have attempted to put to words what the notion of queer straight is about (Kamp, 1993; Powers, 1993) and have done so, according to Jagose (1996) "marked by an almost painful tentativeness and self-reflexivity and couched in terms of anti-homophobic analysis" (p.114). It is interesting to note that the voices of straight feminists have also been characterized in a similar fashion.

Nonetheless, the reaction of some to such resignification has been derisory or disbelieving. Powers (1993), in comparing straights passing as queers to whites
adopting the identity of "white negro" in the fifties states that "The current wave of lesbian and gay chic mirrors this reverse racism, as it ascribes tempting attributes such as hot sexuality, tragic courage, and devastating wit to homosexuals" (p.24). Although arguing from a position as a "straight queer," Powers seems to suggest that this phenomenon is more about passing and less about resistance than one might wish.

On the other hand, Sedgwick (as cited in Jagose, 1996) observes:

There are some lesbians and gays who could never count as queer, and other people who vibrated to the chord of queer without having much same-sex eroticism, or without routing their same-sex eroticism through the identity labels lesbian or gay. (p.104)

However, the question to which I return is why is it important to queer heterosexuality? Why has there been an attempt to do so? Is it a strategy to co-opt and deflate the power of queer or, conversely, is it a strategy to expand queer coalitions? To what end might it work particularly for heterosexual or straight women? What might be gained for straight women out of such a project? What might be lost? And finally, I ask with Kitzinger and Wilkinson (1994), although I suspect I have a different rationale for the asking: "What makes straight heterosexuality 'queer'?” (p.455).
Psychology, Feminism and Foucault: Theories of Power

In endeavoring to speak of power, I experienced what I feel Griscom (1992) puts well, namely that "attempts to define the protean phenomenon of power in any useful way are probably fated to fail because it is an extremely general concept, sometimes comparable to life itself" (p.405). However, the need to try remains. Discourses of power are necessarily embedded constructs, embedded within the various "isms" (e.g., Marxism, Feminism, Socialism, Postmodernism) that have struggled with definition and delineation. The discourse of psychology provides another frame for understanding power that is no less an "ism," despite being an "ology"! More recent philosophical challenges in psychology have changed the way in which some theorists, psychological and otherwise, conceptualize power. Specifically, power has been considered to a greater or lesser degree both as an "object" of study and as an oppressive relation operating within traditional psychological practice. The following sections examine the varying notions of power coming from the literatures of psychology, feminism, and poststructuralism. In doing so, it will be possible to locate, in each, places for empowerment, resistance, transformation, or subversion. Attempts will also be made at this time to briefly consider the implications of each for the study of sexuality.

Psychology and Power

Historically, one finds a relative lack of theories of power in psychology. In fact, the literature that does exist, predominantly work organized around the theme of empowerment, seldom theorizes, names, or discusses that which it implies, namely, power (Bayles & Bujra, 1995; Kitzinger, 1991). In attempting to ascertain how social psychology in particular has historically constituted power, Henderson (1981) draws attention to topics as varied as influence, leadership, persuasion, conformity, social learning, attitude change, communication, group processes, and socialization, as well as general theories of social power from the realms of field theory, exchange theory, decision theory, and role theory. Confusion over terminology is one result of such breadth, with terms like influence, control, persuasion, force, threat, authority, and dependence all used within the formal literature as synonymous with power. A current
search through a psychological research data base for the term power yields a similar hodge-podge with synonyms located in such related terms as social influence, authority, coercion, dominance, empowerment, and omnipotence.

A quick history of power research in social psychology sees Cartwright’s (1959) *Studies in Social Power* as the first call for attention to social power as an important facet of social psychological theory, although Griscom (1992) cites Adler as undertaking work on power and social interest as early as 1927. In the mid-sixties Cartwright (1965), Clark (1965), and Schopler, (1965) all made contributions to the literature on power but drew attention to the lack of research on social power concerned with interpersonal relationships. Collins and Raven (1969) launched a review of literature concerned with social power and social influence that included work in psychoanalytic, reinforcement, social exchange, and field-theory. Later J. T. Tedeschi (1972) wrote *The Social Influence Processes*, dealing explicitly with social influence and power, and contributed further critiques of existing theory. At the same time, work on decision theory (Pollard & Mitchell, 1972), experimental games (Tedeschi, Schlenker, & Bonoma, 1973), and the power motive (e.g., Winter, 1973) also provided new articulations of power. Finally, Kipnis (1976), in particular, restated the need to consider power in interpersonal relationships, and criticized the tendency to focus on the target of social power to the exclusion of the analysis of the power act and power holder.

However, much criticism has also been directed toward psychology’s attempts to theorize power or, more generally, the lack of a consistent tradition of discussions of power (Griscom, 1992; Henderson, 1981; Kitzinger, 1991). Henderson mentions time and again the need to move into a more dynamic and relational understanding of power and power processes, yet traditional conceptions of power, drawing as they have on the study of communication, are very much mired in the notion of power as existing in static, uni-directional interactions between individuals, the agent and the target, or among small group members. Furthermore, although larger social forces may be implied (e.g., personal-institutional dimensions of power), seldom does research deal with larger social groupings or social structural entities, nor does it question the presence of a seldom challenged person/society split implicit in research on power (Griscom, 1992; Kitzinger, 1991). In short, traditional psychological understandings of
power have been faulted for over-emphasis on the micro-social at the expense of macro-social analysis, as well as a largely incomplete conception of power as an active, ongoing, relational process. Similarly, Lips (1990), who provides a brief overview of social psychology’s attempt to theorize power, faults an emphasis on power as a commodity or something we have. Rather, she suggests that power is a relation or something we do. She states “We cannot think of power as a “thing” that only the powerful possess; it is a process in which we all engaged as long as we are part of a network of human relationships” (p.4).

Another way to approach the question of psychology’s examinations of power, specifically in terms of relationships, is to examine the literature that is drawn on when considering various aspects of gender differences. A review of a number of sexuality and gender texts reveals a fairly consistent body of literature pertaining to power differences in relationships. For example, although most couples believe that relationships should involve an equal sharing of power, research by Peplau and Campbell (1989) also suggests that only half these individuals feel that their relationship has achieved an equal balance of power. Earlier research by Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) revealed a similar pattern but added the observation that in cases where the balance of power is unequal, men are more likely to be seen as more powerful. In looking cross-culturally at claims of black matriarchy and Latino machismo, Peplau and Campbell (1989), while finding subtle differences, identified a similar pattern of power relations within these cultures as well. A great deal of documentation exists that suggests that women have less power in relationships when conceptualized in regard to decision making (Peplau & Gordon, 1985), money/paid employment (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Peplau & Campbell, 1989; Peplau & Gordon, 1985; Steil, 1989), division of labour (Hochschild, 1989; Livingston & Luxton, 1989) and patterns of influence (Schneider & Gould, 1987; Paul & White, 1990; Thompson & Walker, 1989). In a specifically sexual context, Lips (1990) situates women’s lack of power squarely with the socially accepted discourse of the double standard and accompanying ideology and practice of male sexual dominance.

A less frequently asked question involves a consideration of ways in which women may be thought to have power in their sexual relationships. Traditionally, women have been considered to have sexual power to the extent that they are able to
refuse sex (Lewin, 1984). This is also consistent with Lips' (1990) analysis. Although traced by Lewin to Victorian times, more recently Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) found in their work that couples interpret women's refusal of sex as a way of exerting power in their relationships. Initiation of sexual activity was also seen by these couples as a way for women to express their sexual power, circumventing the male initiation-female refusal pattern. The image of woman as seductress or object of desire has had a certain amount of power associated with it, although interestingly, this image, along with images of female sexual desire or agency, has seldom emerged as a cultural product without a concomitant painting of the seductress as a dangerous force in need of control (e.g., for an historical treatment see Simmons, 1992).

While Lips (1990) acknowledges that sexual attraction is a power resource for the attracting person, capable of influencing another, she is critical of the portrayal of this as a stereotypically female power. She argues that the problem lies not only in the fact that women can also come under the attracting power of another, but also that the power of female as seductress is only made possible through the discourse of the double standard that naturalizes male sexual desire as overwhelming and beyond their control, a questionable premise at best. She continues by saying that "One probable reason for the stereotype of female sexual power is that for many women sexuality is the major or only power resource available" (p.121). While perhaps useful in a limited sphere, Lips concludes that:

with rare exceptions, women's sexuality-based power fades somewhat as a woman ages and falls victim to the societal insistence that beautiful means young...Clearly, a long-term reliance on sexuality or any other single power resource disadvantages a person compared to those with more diverse resources (p.121).

Nonetheless, Lips argues that while our culture may lead us to expect men's dominance, that sexual/romantic relationships "may be the one realm where a man and woman find the personal motivation to transcend the cultural messages about male dominance" (p.115).

Asking men about the power that women have in relationships reveals a slightly different picture. Pleck (1995) considers men's perceptions of women's power as emanating from their expressive power and their masculinity-validating power.
Specifically, women are thought to have power to the extent that they are able to connect men to their own emotional experience, and also to the extent that they engage in roles that allow men the opportunity to validate their own masculinity. However, Sattel (1976) in "The Inexpressive Male: Tragedy or Sexual Politics?" critically examines the discourse of the inexpressive male, suggesting that instead of being indicative of women's power, that male inexpressiveness is instrumental in maintaining positions of power and privilege for men.

**Feminism and Feminist Psychology**

Throughout its relatively short history, at least compared to how long psychology has been around, feminism has provided a great deal of theory pertaining to power that has been instructive as well as highly variable. Such writings share a common goal of elucidating sources of power that have been traditionally closed to, and oppressive of women, yet differ in where they locate the sources of power. In turn, feminist theories of power have critically impacted psychology.

Kitzinger (1991) provides an especially strong critique of power specifically within feminist psychology. She argues that the concept of power, at least in a political and social sense, is largely absent in this literature, used as a "rhetorical flourish" or backdrop, and often defined out of the purview of the study of the "psychological." This state of affairs she situates not only as psychology’s failing but feminism’s failing as well. To remedy this, Kitzinger calls for engagement over the meaning of power:

What is necessary, then, is not to seek some elusive ‘correct’ or ‘objective’ definition, but rather to locate the different discourses within which power-talk is embedded, to examine the rhetorical functions of different conceptualizations of power, and their sociopolitical implications and effects. In short, we need to deconstruct the different ways in which ‘power’ is understood within psychology and within feminism, and to construct our own theories of power and powerlessness in terms which are useful to feminists. (p. 427)

This has strong resonances with Hartsock’s (1990) call to distinguish between theories of power about women that merely include women’s subjugation as a variable and
theories of power for women, which begin with women's experience and point of view stating that "Such theories would give attention not only to the ways women are dominated, but also to their capacities as guides for a potential transformation of power relationships—that is, for empowerment of women" (p.158).

Kitzinger (1991) goes on to look carefully at then current understandings of power operative in feminist literature and considers their political implications. What she finds are both arguments that construct women as powerless and as powerful. Women's powerlessness, inherent in descriptions of women's victimization, is seen as consistent with what Foucault calls 'sovereign' power: women as victims of rape and murder, victims of physical force and coercion. However, on the other side of the coin there has also been discourse looking at women's "unique" forms of power within an overarching system that renders them powerless. Women's power is aligned with the power of the oppressed, "the exercise of personal agency under oppression." In short, "against men's overt powers are set women's covert powers, and a celebration of women's survival and achievement against the odds" (Kitzinger, 1991, p.429). The "powers of the weak" have also been considered at length in work by Janeway (1981).

Alternatively, Kitzinger also examines the definition of power in terms of the freedom to act as one chooses. While she identifies this as a sociological definition of power, it also speaks to a liberal feminist standpoint as well, wherein choice, voiced as the right to choose based on equal opportunity to resources is seen as the basis for freedom. This would include choices in regard to sexual activity (with whom, how, etc.), as well as in regard to the disposition of the body (e.g., choice for abortion, contraception, etc.). While seemingly sensical on the surface, Kitzinger reminds us that such assumptions have been problematized by feminists who assume that "women's 'choices' too are constructed under male supremacy" (p.430). Given this state of affairs, women expressing their power by exercising their right to choose remain under the shadow of false consciousness, unaware of the extent to which their choices are not of their own making.

More problematic than the arrogance implicit in the assumption of a theorizer not suffering from such delusions is what Kitzinger notes as the main difficulty with this theory; the fact that "male power is now located *inside women's heads*" and with it, "the solution to male power is located there too" (p.430). What falls out from this state of
affairs is that the target of resistance becomes the minds of women. Conversely, this also means dislocating power from larger structural realities. Tending to women’s minds as a form of resistance is quite consistent both with many feminist notions of empowerment as individual change and with the rise of “therapeutic feminism,” an enterprise that Sandell (1996) strongly criticizes as a largely North American ideology of the individual, self-improvement, and capitalism that does little to promote social change. In short, Kitzinger is critical of psychological theories of power that ignore larger socio-structural realities in the interests of a focus on the individual psyche.

In concluding her examination of this branch of feminist thought regarding power, Kitzinger suggests that what is even more disturbing than the victim blaming, apolitical fallout of such an approach, is the assumption of authenticity, of an essential inner self that is womanhood. In short, it assumes that “there is a concept of a true authentic inner self, which can spontaneously generate its own actions and free choices, a self that could be free of external influences” (Kitzinger, 1991, p.432). As such, it circumvents the question of whether choice is ever possible and in so doing, fails to problematize the nature of the subject itself.

Other theorists, however, are more optimistic about the possibility of change. Lips (1990), in situating power as a relation, draws on the notion that as a relation, it also requires the powerless to continue it. Given this, what she calls “power from under” can be exerted by “doubting and questioning the status quo instead of quietly accepting it. They can share their doubts with one another, and work together to bargain with the more powerful for a beneficial arrangement” (p.8). Yet, she acknowledges that the power of social structures or disciplinary powers operate “almost independently of the will of a particular individual” (p.5), including gender as a disciplinary power. Furthermore, the institutionalization of power, and the naturalization of power inequity, including the gender system, often makes it invisible to those affected by it. The difficulty is this: “the first step in resisting someone else’s power over oneself is to doubt and question the arrangement; but if that power is institutionalized, the doubting and questioning become more difficult and dangerous” (p.11). In summing up, Lips suggests that where men, women, and power are concerned, power relations operate at personal, collective, and institutional levels, but she retains the possibility for social change emanating form any of these levels. She
states:

We will see that these different levels of power reinforce one another and are closely enough linked that changes in one can set off changes in the others. For those who are interested in changing the power process in female-male relationships, the trick is to discern, for a particular situation, how power is operating at various levels, and at what level intervention would be most helpful (p.13).

Debates concerning the extent to which we are able to operate outside the various power structures that affect us, define us, and determine the extent to which we are able to act as autonomous agents of change have also been heard in the realms of postmodernist and poststructuralist thought and will be considered shortly. However, what remains evident is indeed the need for better theories of power, ones that with Hartsock (1990), are theories of power for women.

In response to concerns like those raised by Kitzinger, attempts have been made to expand on theories of power. Continuing to focus on feminist research, some theorists have distinguished between power-over (conventional power) versus power-to (empowerment) (Yoder & Kahn, 1992). However, such an understanding has often led to a simplistic equation of power-over=male=bad, and power-to=female=good. Griscom (1992), points out that this does not always hold true since both men and women can exert both kinds of power (e.g., white women as oppressors of black women), and power-over is not necessarily always “bad” (e.g., a mother controlling her child to protect it). Nor is empowerment as an ideology accepted uncritically, as it can potentially lead to a questionable radical liberalism (i.e., the oppressive assertion of one’s own rights and needs) and is not without connection to the realm of “power over” (Lips, 1990).

In struggling to understand power, other theorists have also stated the need to consider power on multiple levels of operation, that is, on societal, organizational, interpersonal, and individual levels (Ragins & Sundstrom, 1989). In social psychology, Parker (1989) expands the notion of power by his suggestion that an adequate understanding of power must be linked to the notion of resistance since, “Power reproduces particular relations between people in such a way that resistance is suppressed” (p. 27). Finally, in a Psychology of Women Quarterly edition dedicated to
an examination of power, Griscom (1992), in calling for a better theory of power, outlines four components of a good psychological definition of power, which include: reference to power as a process that occurs over time, as multiplicitous, relational in nature, and as operating at micro- and macro-structural levels. This also speaks to a need to transcend definitions of power that reinforce notions of person/society dualism, and those that consider gender as the primary and sole source of social difference. To sum up, Lips (1990) states the requirements of a theory of power relevant to male/female relations in terms of the following:

Power operates between women and men on personal, collective, and institutional levels, all of which are interconnected under the umbrella of a system of gender power relations. To understand female-male power relationships, all faces and levels of power must be examined (p.14).

Theorizing pertaining to power, however, changed radically with the work of Foucault and as such, the remaining section will consider in greater depth the conception of power forwarded by Foucault and the problematics of his theory for feminism in particular.

**Foucault on Power and Feminist Revisions**

As an oft cited postmodern/poststructuralist thinker, Foucault forwards a conception of power as a relation operating in discursive practices, particularly in the inscription of the subject with that which is categorical and foundational, and as reproduced in social relations. Fraser (1989) summarizes Foucault’s notion of the nature of power as being “productive,” “capillary,” and as located in social practices, and explores the ramifications of this understanding for more traditional conceptions of power. For example, characterizing power as a “productive” rather than a prohibitive force rules out liberationist politics that presuppose power as operating through repression or the exercise of sovereignty. Similarly, in positing that power is "capillary," that is, operating at the lowest extremities of the social body via social practices, Foucault can be read as ruling out state-centred/economistic political praxes (e.g., Marxism) that assume power resides on those levels. Finally, in situating power in social practices rather than belief, Fraser argues that Foucault also rules out politics
aimed at the "demystification of ideologically distorted belief systems" and rules in a "politics of everyday life" (p.18).

In turn, Foucault's conception of power implies that "one" cannot exist outside relations of power. In short, power is theorized as ever-present. On a more upbeat note, however, Foucault's work also suggests that power cannot exist without resistance, which likewise is ever-present. Social transformation (emancipation, empowerment) as a social goal, though, remains problematized by Foucault for its potential to create merely another hegemonic regime. Although Foucault has been faulted for not adequately spelling out the nature of resistance to power (Sawicki, 1996), his work is suggestive of forces of resistance as existing in nodes, as temporary and factional in nature, local, and involving limited collusion to achieve a particular end.

Drawing much needed attention to the operations of power within discursive practice, Foucault's work has come under scrutiny largely, although not exclusively, by feminist theorists for its potential depoliticization of power (Fraser, 1989; Prilettensky, 1997; Rosenau, 1992). Drawing heavily from Hekman's (1996) edited work, Re-reading the Canon, wherein feminists interpret Foucault's legacy for feminism, one can find both the hopes and concerns of many feminists in making use of Foucault. In general, Hekman sees Foucault's work as posing a challenge to subject, politics, knowledge, and truth. While many are positive on at least aspects of Foucault's work (Lloyd, 1996) and see feminism as ultimately benefitting from the interaction (Aladjem, 1996), others are more cautious, advocating picking and choosing based on political utility. For example, Allen (1996) advocates feminists adopting Foucault's analysis of microlevel strategies/analysis, but rejects his conception of the macrolevel as not suited to the feminist need to consider structural analysis.

What emerges as a main source of tension where feminism meets poststructuralism is the question of whether Foucault's conception of power allows for some notion of intentional political change or social transformation (e.g., Deveaux, 1996). Given Foucault's position that one cannot exist outside relations of power, that resistance is the only possible course of action, that the nature of this "resistance" is itself not well delineated by Foucault, that liberal discourses of emancipation and the very notion of subjecthood are themselves thought to be part of the deployment of oppressive regimes, what is left? Haber (1996) states this well:
...if power is everywhere, and if we cannot get outside it, and if indeed, individuals are created as its effect and articulation, how can it be resisted? Can we resist, even while we speak, both literally, and in our material or bodily constructions, with the tongue of patriarchal power? (p.140)

Fraser (1996) localizes this issue in the struggles over the possibility of an autonomous subject and it is here where we pick up on earlier questions regarding the possibility of a subject who is free to choose. As Fraser relates, those of the Marxist-oriented Frankfurt School, like Habermas, retain the goals of emancipation through autonomous, rational thought, and so retain a subject capable of such. Foucault in turn is read by Habermas as being anti-modernist, rejecting the goals of humanism along with a rejection of modernity and the Enlightenment subject, and with that the notion of emancipation and individual autonomy. Fraser suggests that Habermas' charge against Foucault is jumping the gun and argues that Foucault ultimately gives no normative reason to reject humanism and the goals thereof. Nor does Fraser (1989) feel that Foucault's work is unequivocal on that count as it neither supports wholly the suspension of normative frameworks in total, or even merely a liberal one. In the end, Fraser calls for a normative framework to be gleaned from Foucault's work:

Clearly, what Foucault needs, and needs desperately, are normative criteria for distinguishing acceptable from unacceptable forms of power. As it stands now, the unquestionably original and valuable dimensions of his work stand in danger of being misunderstood for lack of an adequate normative perspective. (p.33)

Such a normative frame would justify Foucault's intimations to resist oppressive forces. Furthermore, Fraser also suggests a more thorough-going investigation of the notion of autonomy, with the desire to keep open the possibility of an agentic, empowered subject.

In a somewhat more cynical tone, Hartsock (1990, 1996) is also critical of Foucault's version of subjectivity as endless variation and its concomitant inability to provide for emancipation by its challenge to the notion of a unified subject position. She states:

Somehow it seems highly suspicious that it is at the precise moment when so many groups have been engaged in "nationalisms" which
involve redefinitions of the marginalized Others that suspicions emerge about the nature of the "subject," about the possibilities for a general theory which can describe the world, about historical "progress."...Just when we are talking about the changes we want, ideas of progress and the possibility of systematically and rationally organizing human society become dubious and suspect. (Hartsock, 1990, p.163-164)

Further, she argues that Foucault, in suggesting that only resistance rather than transformation is possible, consigns the dominated ultimately to the margins (Hartsock, 1990). In contrast, she argues, from the position of standpoint feminism that it is possible to see "some things from somewhere." Being "somewhere," in this instance in the margins, makes for the retention of an emancipatory/liberatory impulse. Despite her criticism of Foucault, however, Hekman (1996) nonetheless sees Hartsock as adopting a Foucauldian perspectival nuance in her agreement with Foucault that you can't see "everything from nowhere."

Other theorists have also struggled to use Foucault and retain a vision of social transformation. Haug (1983/1987), as editor of the collective work Female Sexualization, seeks to place the deployment of sexuality on "firmer ground" by reconceptualizing "sexual ordering, taking an analysis of ideology as our starting-point, and to see it as the mode in which an ideological socialization into heteronomy takes place" (p.207). As such, Haug argues that we are both socialized and indeed sexualized by a larger social order, but also retain the capacity via our collective memory to reflect on and transform ourselves through such reflections.

Similarly, Weedon also suggests the possibility of change emanating from the level of the individual and, more particularly, at the level of the individual's production of discourse/knowledge. She writes:

Resistance to the dominant at the level of the individual subject is the first stage in the production of alternative forms of knowledge or where such alternatives already exist, of winning individuals over to these discourses and gradually increasing their social power. (Weedon, 1987; p.111)

However, Foucault and Nietzsche, to whom Foucault acknowledges an intellectual debt, might argue with Weedon's take on the power of the individual's discursive
production. Haber (1996) considers what Foucault might say given assumptions about
the embeddedness of language and the extent to which our imagination is confined by
normalized language:

And for Foucault, there can be no autonomous subject behind the mechanisms
of power. There is no possibility of a subject’s being able to stand back and
study a situation and make choices from some unaffected standpoint; the
subject is still that individual who is the effect, and vehicle, of power. (Haber,
1996, p.146)

Nonetheless, Haber (1996) also examines options for transformation. While
acknowledging embeddedness of the individual in a normalizing language, she states
that “Nietzsche’s worry about the leveling nature of language is misleading. Language
can be leveling, but it can also be made to speak new worlds” (Haber, 1996, p.153).

Although making broad groupings at this point in time is difficult, it is somewhat
safe to say that queer theorists, even those operating from positions both feminist and
queer, have been much less hesitant to accept Foucault’s work and to see in it room for
resistance and subversion. For example, Butler (1996) explores Foucault in part to
identify a space for resistance to the subjugating categories of sex/gender/sexuality.
However, she cautions that such resistance must involve more than being oppositional
or doing the opposite than the two categories demand (e.g., being queer is not enough,
the need is to be “critically queer”). Similarly, Simons (1996) makes use of Foucault,
along with Butler’s notion of “parodic performance,” to suggest the possibility of
transforming the identity of “woman,” specifically as it pertains to motherhood.

Haber (1996) also examines the tension between the notion of a created and
creating subject with respect to identity and situates the image of the muscled woman
or woman bodybuilder as a site of subversion. This individual is seen as self-created
by bodily construction, but also as a constructed subject of discursive practice, that is,
the discourse of body building. While acknowledging the possibility of cooption, Haber
ultimately sees the bodybuilding woman as subversive and breaking down gender
binarisms in particular, inasmuch as the muscled woman is read as embodying two
previously incompatible images – the muscle of the masculine and the body of woman.
From Power to Subversion

What remains to be done at this point is to bring together the numerous threads that have been laid out thus far. This work has considered the study of sexuality from the vantage point of sexologists, feminists, and queer theorists. Further, a brief excursion into varying conceptualizations of power has also been attempted. What concerns the final section of this chapter then, is a consideration of what all this has to do with women having sex with men? It will seek to tentatively consider how women might conceptualize or experience power in their sexual relations with men, and how they might seek to and succeed in actively subverting their sex with men.
Subverting Heterosex: Challengers and Contentions

In beginning this final section a number of niggling questions must first be answered. In regard to the notion of subverting heterosex, the following questions will be considered: (1) Is this needed?; (2) is it possible?; (3) What is assumed?, and finally; (4) What might this look like?

Is This Needed?

The question of whether there is a need to consider heterosex and its potential subversion is an important one. First and foremost, it asks who might such an endeavour benefit? One group who might undoubtedly benefit from such an undertaking are heterosexual women who have felt that radical feminist discourses pertaining to heterosexual relations do not reflect their reality. Hollway (1993) takes on this issue quite forcefully:

The absence/invisibility of heterosexual women’s satisfactions and pleasures in sexual relationships with men contributes to the undoubted dominance of a radical feminist discourse which construes heterosexual sex entirely in terms of oppressive one-way power relations. (p.412)

While creating a one-sided view of heterosexual relations, this state of affairs also creates a problematic vacuum in the theoretical literature. Segal (1994) understands both the lack of theory and the need for it in this way:

Straight women can offer something in return by helping to overturn those oppressive oppositions tying gender identity to sexuality via heterosexuality; at least, they can once they are no longer guilt-tripped into thinking of “heterosexuality” as, “at best, an embarrassing adjunct” to feminism, if not “a contradiction in terms.” (p.259)

As was illustrated earlier on in this chapter, many women who have male partners describe feeling disappointed with, and alienated from, feminism as a result of their perceptions of feminist discourse pertaining to heterosex, whether or not one considers their perceptions to accurately reflect the totality and spirit of much feminist writing on this topic. What can be concluded is that such discourse is needed not only for
heterosexual women seeking to find their place within feminism, but also for the body of theory pertaining to sexuality more broadly.

Another way to consider the issue of whether or not such incursions are needed is to ask who may suffer from such discursive production? One potential objection to this work is that in its focus on heterosex it may become a project of affirming heteronormativity. However, I will argue here that refraining from considering heterosex and, by extension heterosexuality, in theory does more harm than good. Namaste (1996) argues for the need to turn to an analysis of heterosexual identity in part to consider how heterosexuality as an identity is reproduced. Namaste argues that as long as gay and lesbian identities continue to be the focus of attention, they will continue to be the marginalized Other. Wilkinson and Kitzinger (1993) also state unequivocally that “Lesbians will become visible within feminism only when the institution of compulsory heterosexuality becomes a serious target for analysis and political action” (p.12). In another vein, Hollway (1993) also suggests that “one of the effects of a radical feminist critique of heterosexuality is to position lesbian sexuality as free of oppression and even as free of power relations” which “cannot help those lesbians trying to understand the complexity of their own relationships” (p.415). What these authors seem to be suggesting, therefore, is that the opening of discursive space pertaining to heterosex and heterosexuality may have benefits for more than just heterosexual women.

Lastly, it could also be argued that heterosexual women whose experiences are not that of positive empowered relations with men may also find such a project alienating, as not speaking to their reality, and perhaps, as blaming. In part, this hinges on the possibility that such discourses of empowerment are more likely emanating from the lives of privileged women, by race or class for example, whose empowerment stems in large part from the luxuries afforded by their positions of privilege. Such a stance may assume that women who are marginalized in other ways will have nothing to add to such discourse. Take as an example, the submissions to Wilkinson and Kitzinger’s (1993) edited collection. The majority of respondents write from the position of being predominantly white, academics, positions that would no doubt afford them privileges not available to other groups of women. While this is undoubtedly problematic, perhaps a better way to deal with this issue is to consider what this work is
This work does not attempt to make global assumptions about how all women's lives are or should be, although it undertakes this project with the assumption that some women may benefit from hearing stories of women's power in relations with men. Rather, it seeks to consider one discursive position among many. In examining the study of gender from within the postmodern, Hare-Mustin and Marecek (1994) state that "from a postmodernist perspective, there is no one right view of gender. Each view is partial and will present certain paradoxes" (p.70). Similarly, this work assumes that the stories told by women in this project are also partial and paradoxical but no less important than other stories that have already been told. This does not deny the plethora of different positions women occupy, but rather shares the goals laid out by Irigaray (1977/1985) who states:

I think the most important thing to do is to expose the exploitation common to all women and to find the struggles that are appropriate for each woman, right where she is, depending upon her nationality, her job, her social class, her sexual experience. (p.166-167)

And to this I would add Valverde (1985), who sees that the goal of feminism in the area of sexuality "is to establish true sexual pluralism, where no one choice is presented as 'the norm' " (p.106).

Is It Possible?

In asking, "Is it possible?," this refers to the basic question of whether or not subverting of heterosexual relations is in fact considered possible. As already alluded to, from the position of a radical feminist critique, heterosexuality itself is highly problematized. Kitzinger and Wilkinson (1994) put it this way:

The radical feminist critique of heterosexuality, by contrast, critiques even purportedly noncompulsory and nonabusive heterosexuality as reinscribing sex differences, and hence, inevitably, women's subordination and men's power. This latter critique would seem to render heterosexuality political anathema for feminists. (p. 445)

Yet at the same time, Kitzinger, Wilkinson, and Perkins (1992) acknowledge that
"heterosexual sexual activity is a central focus for reconstructive efforts" (p.312). If one adopts a radical feminist perspective, it is indeed very difficult to argue that heterosex could ever be anything other than oppressive.

One response to this would be to consciously decide to bracket or put aside this branch of feminist critique to allow for a less problematic consideration of the issues. While such a framework may at times be suspended, the out and out ignoring of a theoretical perspective would not seem to be in the best interests of scholarship. At this point, I choose to refer to the suggestions provided by Jackson (1996), that a complete theory of heterosexuality needs to deal with heterosexuality in terms of institutions and identity, but also as practice and experience. As stated by Jackson, such a focus allows for a consideration of radical feminist critique of sexuality in terms of an institutionalized oppression of women, as well as hegemonic identity as outlined by gay, lesbian, and queer theorists, but retains a space for investigating such structures within the context of individual lives and subjective experience.

In closing this section, I wish to argue that subverting heterosex is only possible to the extent that one begins with the assumption that it is possible. This is not to say that it is not open to critique, merely to state that such critique must begin with at least an admission of the possibility of discourse that is otherwise. On the topic of possibility, I tend to side with Segal (1994) who states, perhaps somewhat simplistically:

Every time women enjoy sex with men, confident in the knowledge that this, just this, is what we want, and how we want it, I would suggest, we are already confounding the cultural and political meanings given to heterosexuality in dominant sexual discourses. (p.266)

While I do not share Segal’s vitriol in her challenge “How Dare You Assume What It Means to be Straight,” I do believe that just what heterosex is, and is not, remains to be seen.

What Is Assumed?

Finally, before considering what a subversive heterosex might look like, I need to address some assumptions that this work makes. Firstly, this project does not deny that heterosexism is a pervasive problem. Secondly, however, this project assumes
that the subversion of heterosex may also be subversive with respect to the broader
category of heterosexuality and, by extension, that problematizing the category of
heterosexuality has subversive potential for sexuality more broadly, including a
challenging of heteronormativity. Finally, it also assumes that women who experience
power in their heterosexual relations with men are subverting norms pertaining to
heterosex and heterosexuality.

What Might It Look Like?

Finally, this project turns to consider what subversive heterosex might look like
and asks, “How might heterosex be subverted?” or “What might characterize women’s
heterosex as empowered?” or “How might women understand or claim power in their
heterosexual relations?”. The following theoretical forays are not considered by any
stretch to be exclusive. Rather, they draw from a wide range of feminist, queer, and
generally postmodern theories to envision how women might understand or construct
their heterosexual relations as powerful. This does not assume that women necessarily
will or should refer to such ideas, nor does it exclude alternative conceptualizations.
The following sections are loosely grouped under the headings of resignification,
queering, proliferation, and embodiment.

Resignification

To start on one of the simplest levels, it is possible to conceive of subverting
heterosex through a process of resignification, that is, telling new stories about and
ascribing new meaning to heterosex and its parts. Plummer (1995) investigates sexual
story telling and emphasizes the importance of such stories in changing both individual
lives and communities. Using the term “intimate citizenship,” Plummer speaks of “a
cluster of emerging concerns over the rights to choose what we do with our bodies, our
feelings, our identities, our relationships, our genders, our eroticisms and our
representations” (p.17), and it is choice over representation that grounds the
resignification of heterosex.

One central idea for the resignification of heterosex may focus on a
deconstruction of the active/passive binarism commonly associated with heterosex and as fixed within gendered categories (male/female) and sexed bodies (man/woman). Segal (1994) speaks of the need to deconstruct the phallus:

The standard biological narrative of active penile prompting and passive vaginal receptivity as the paradigm for human sexual encounter thus serves above all to hide, as well as create and sustain, the severe anxieties attaching to the penis, while also revealing men's fear of recognizing the existence of women's sexual agency -- verbal, behavioural or physiological (p.221)

In such reconstruction, Lacan aside, the phallus is reconstituted in terms of vulnerability, is remembered as flaccid more frequently than not, and generally challenged as a site of transcendent power.

Segal also makes mention of the project of resignifying women's bodies, in particular questioning our culture's "vaginal iconography." Referring to Kristeva's notion of the "abject" object, Grosz (as cited in Segal, 1994, p.225) questions whether "It is discourse itself which confers the horror of 'abjection' onto female bodies, and whether there might thus be other ways to registering, or resignifying, the sexual specificity of female sexual bodies." Once again, such a task might include a resignification of the active/passive binarism associated with heterosex. For example, the vagina is reconstituted as no longer penetrated (passive) but resignified in more active terms as engulfing the penis, drawing it inside, or as a sheath for the penis. Segal also speaks of looking to images of sexual desire that women do have access to (e.g., "eroticized imagery of eating, drinking, kissing, sucking, licking, touching, stroking, rocking, closing around and opening up" (p.245). While she acknowledges that these are not usually coded as sexual, exploring that which is sexual or desiring in images that are more available to women may be helpful.

However, such attempts at resignifying sex, and the body in particular, have not been received unproblematically. Some have argued that the body itself may disappear in all this discourse. In reference to those theorists (e.g., Haraway) who have defended such attempts Segal (1994) writes:

the goal Haraway and others propose is certainly not to ignore the body [make it disappear in discourse]. It is to explore how it has been coded
and made meaningful, and above all, perhaps, how it might be radically
recoded or resignified to enhance the sense of women's entitlement to
desire and pleasure — on their own diverse terms. (p.227)

What remains at issue in all this however, is the possibility of a pre-discursive body. In
other words, a body that exists prior to its discursive constitution. Radical
constructionism, such as that espoused by Butler (1990), would suggest that we only
know the body through the discourse that exists about it.

Segal, for one, asks whether there are in fact limits that pre-discursive bodies
place on discourse? While not reductionistic, Segal does suggest that such trends
toward resignification and subversion at the level of the discursive need to keep in mind
that “the biological, psychic and cultural dimensions of bodily experience fuse together”
(p.228). The maturational state of the female body may place limits on the discursive
potentials of female bodies, for example, bodies in a state of pregnancy, menses, or
menopause. In summary, Segal (1994) suggests that “Bodies themselves are
implicated in the inscriptions they receive, and women’s distinctive reproductive cycle
and genital anatomy give them particular possibilities and vulnerabilities” (p.233).

Nods toward resignification have also been criticized for an over-reliance on
discourse at the expense of considering larger structures that may make such
linguistic sleight proposed by some feminists in renaming penetration...simply serves to
obscure the problem of the institutionalization of penile penetration under
heteropatriarchy” (p.313). Similarly, Valverde (1985) worries that some theorists may
“overestimate the power of individuals to determine at will the social meaning of certain
signifiers and roles” and that while

it may be possible to use these forms in order to defuse or undermine
their social meaning...one would have to be constantly struggling to
prevent oneself from sinking comfortably into the “usual” dynamics of
power and the “normal” meanings of the roles and images being used.

(p.173)
Queering

While a contentious notion, it is also appropriate to consider the possibility of queering heterosexuality. Segal (1994) situates this project in the assumption that, like the notion of queer, there are many heterosexualities:

Once we look for sexual diversity and fluidity, the fluctuating nature of heterosexual encounters or relationships is obvious: some are pleasurable, self-affirming, supportive, reciprocal or empowering; others are compulsive, oppressive, pathological or disabling; more move between the two. (p.260)

In looking at queer contributions, what is most evident is the way in which the identity of queer and queer practices are queer precisely because they seek to confuse, complicate, and problematize taken for granted assumptions and the binaries of male/female, hetero/homo, etc. How this is achieved is less straightforward. For one, Segal (1994) offers Butler’s notion of performativity that offers “gender and sexuality not in terms of inner capacities, attributes or identities, but in terms of a set of repeated performances ‘that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being’” (p.190). Subversion is thought to come from “gender trouble” or transcending binary restrictions from within the power dynamics of sexuality itself. Further, to the extent that “gender exists in the service of heterosexism” then disrupting gender is in effect disrupting heterosexism. By extension then, one could argue that disrupting normative assumptions of gender within heterosex, effectively destabilizes at least one form of power within heterosex.

Kitzinger and Wilkinson (1994) provide what is perhaps another take on what is meant by queering heterosexuality. Their understanding is as follows:

“queer” heterosexuality denoted the doing of (what used to be called) heterosex while actively subverting its constructive function. Rather than simply resisting the equation between sex (as activity) and sex (as gender), queer theory explicitly acknowledges this link, and by deliberately drawing attention to and playing with it, attempts to denaturalize and hence subvert the equation. “Fucking with gender” implies the possibility of doing sex in such a way that it not merely resists, but actively disrupts normative definitions of “sex” and
"gender". (p.451)

What is lacking, they argue is a clear notion of how heterosexual women are to queer their heterosexuality, asking somewhat tongue in cheek, whether it needs to be "queer-approved" by virtue of violating some other taboo (e.g., s/m or fetishistic sex). What is also viewed as problematic about queering heterosexuality is the potential elision of heterosexuality and homosexuality, suggesting that deeming them politically equivalent lets hetero women continue refusing to notice they are heterosexual and not acknowledging the privileges that go along with it.

Relying on Butler, other interesting suggestions in regard to queering heterosexuality have also emerged from the ranks of sex workers. Pendleton (1997) begins by forwarding the concept of sex workers as performing heterosexuality. Of sex workers she states:

What these women are doing is performing heterosexuality as they perform a sexual service for money. They do not go straight, they play straight. I would like to argue that the sex work in these texts represents a performing of heterosexuality, regardless of the sexual self-identity of the performer. (p.76)

Pendleton goes on to suggest that for sex workers who identify as heterosexual, the notion of performing heterosexuality works to effectively queer heterosexuality. As proof of this, she argues that the notion of performing heterosexuality works to bring heterosexuality into relief, highlights the heterosexual economy, and modes of exchange between men and women, but also subverts it by the overt demand of money for sex.

Ultimately, Pendleton advocates the importance for women to be able to choose their sexual partners for money, lust, fun or power. She concedes that while that would be limited in its ability to bring about sexual equality, it would bring sex workers into the discussion. In closing she argues that:

We know that the time for utopian feminist revolution is over. The forms of opposition we create are necessarily impure and draw from the very systems of oppression we wish to overthrow. We continue to find innovative ways to fuck with heteronormativity from within the sex industry. This holds more promise for effecting real change than radical
feminist tactics such as censoring porn or prosecuting johns ever could. (p.81)

While not queer per se, choice is also highlighted in Marilyn Frye’s offering of virgin heterosexuals as “females who are willing to engage in chosen connections with males, who are wild females, undomesticated females, thoroughly defiant of patriarchal female heterosexuality” (Frye, 1992, as cited in Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1994). While this may resonate with some women’s experience of power in heterosex, needless to say, that choice as an empowering strategy was not well accepted. Kitzinger and Wilkinson (1994) suggest that foregrounding choice, much as foregrounding pleasure as a measure of women’s emancipation in heterosex derides the construction of both these notions under conditions of heteropatriarchy.

Haber (1996), while not denying the possibility of cooption, remains optimistic over the possibility of subversion at the level of the body by women whose bodies can be read as messing with traditionally gendered reads of the body (e.g., the woman’s body that is muscled). Furthermore, she argues:

the image of the muscled woman is not the only image to be used in this re-valuation. Tattooed bodies, bodies practicing homosexual or lesbian revolts, flagrantly sexual bodies, flagrantly ambiguous bodies, wrinkled bodies, bodies that take up space, bodies that refuse to wear prostheses, surgically constructed bodies...many kinds of bodies will be needed for the aesthetic revolution. (p.154)

In closing, Segal (1994) relates that the assumption of sex and gender as regulatory fictions to be subverted has been criticized for being a “new kind of philosophical behaviourism, where there is no being, but only a doing” (p.192). As such, it may work to reduce women’s oppression to a struggle of representation which itself could be easily recuperated or coopted or even reinforce such binarism. One bottom line about deconstructive or transgressive inversions, theoretical or performative, is that such strategies “for displacing sexual and gender binaries through their subversive repetition...can succeed only if it can be seen as a collective struggle over representation: context, reception and, above all, articulation within wider political struggle makes the difference” (p.196).
Proliferation

Also related to queer theory, the notion of a proliferation of queer identities also has implications for heterosex. In particular, bisexuality, transgenderism, and S/M could be considered, although discussion here is limited to the consideration of bisexuality and S/M. In interrogating the inside/outside trope for understanding hetero/homo, Namaste (1996) is critical of this for ignoring identities, like bi and transgender, which fit into neither category. As such, he suggests that these categories in particular are resistive of heterosexual hegemony. To extend this then, women who have sexual relations with men and women, whether identified as bisexual or not, may also pose interesting questions as regards the subversion of heterosex.

As a community that has surfaced more and more of late as a source of theory, bisexual women provide a unique vantage point on both homosexuality and heterosexuality. Their very identity could be thought of as subversive in fact, as Valverde (1985) intimates when she says "Bisexuality defies the experts' attempts to classify everything as either male or female, normal or deviant, good or bad" (p.118).

In relation to the subversion of heterosexuality, Ochs (1992) talks about how being in a relationship with a woman made her realize how scripted heterosexual relations are. As a result of her relations with women she was able to explore different roles and ways of being in all her relations as she applied what she learned from her lesbian relationships to her heterosexual ones. She states:

At any rate, it is entirely clear to me that it was loving a woman that made me realize I had fallen outside my "script," which in turn forced me to realize there was a script. From there, I moved toward a critical self-awareness and the realization that I could shape and write my own life. (p.131)

Kaplan (1992) looks at what bisexuality has to offer by way of liberation, focusing on the bisexual feminist ideology of the right to choose sexual partners. Problems around discourses of choice aside, Kaplan states:

The primary focus is on the right to choose male or female lovers, but the concept of sexual choice can be expanded to include other issues, such as the right to choose nonmonogamy, to choose lovers of
traditionally "inappropriate" sociocultural groups and to choose not to have sex. The issue of sexual choice is one that lesbian, heterosexual and bisexual feminists should be able to embrace. (p.269)

She also considers the norm that relationships should be monogamous and with the opposite sex, but rather suggests that people have many ways of devising relationships and that individuals may desire different kinds of relations at different points in their lives. In what is particularly pertinent to this paper, Kaplan makes the point:

The imperatives to be heterosexual, monogamous and male-focused all force women into constrained roles. By challenging these imperatives, we allow for all people to see how their identities and relationships have been constructed and we facilitate thinking about changing those constructs, in the context of wider possibilities. (p.279)

Although only briefly considered, and not even properly considered an identity, individuals who consider themselves polyamorous may also pose subversive potential for at least normative heterosexuality.

In examining queer identities, another series of possibilities comes from the emergence of a series of critical writings from sex workers (Chapkis, 1997; Nagle, 1997). While not advocating that all women must become sex workers to find power in their heterosexual relations, sex workers have pointed to the ways in which women who engage in heterosex might be informed by the experiences of sex workers.

Pendleton (1997) looks at the tensions between radical feminism and sex work, saying that sex workers in many ways stand between the communities of queers and feminists and as such provide valuable insights. While many sex workers identify as feminist, they do not, cannot, will not espouse goals of separatism rather:

Much like queer politics, the goal is to destabilize heteronormativity. Destabilization is a partial and provisional strategy, but one that carries the possibility of proliferating sexual deviances and thus undermining the mechanisms under which women and queers continue to be subordinated. (p.73)

Such goals may be highly in keeping with those of heterosexual feminists who, while not wishing to espouse a politics of separatism, continue to look for avenues for subversion.
A more personal approach to the topic, although no less provocative, can also be found in the experience of one woman who reflects on her life as a dominatrix or pro-dom. Highleyman (1997) describes how even the “pro-sex” feminists who advocate for sex workers continue to be squeamish about doms or even more so about professional submissives (subs) who are women. From her understanding, such concerns come primarily from a fundamental misunderstanding about the workings of power in S/M. Such misunderstanding in turn may prevent learning useful things from this culture that may be of relevance to women in heterosexual relations.

In her own consideration of what has been useful, Highleyman draws attention to the power inherent in the person of the professional dominant, who is “the stereotypical representation of female power over men; she is the embodiment of the combination of power and femininity” (p.149). While she does not deny that this is far from an easy position to hold as she also “bears the brunt of the scorn with which powerful women are treated by mainstream society” (p.149), she nonetheless found a sense of power in her work. For example, she stated that she has become stronger and happier as a woman and more identified with her gender as a result of her work:

In retrospect, I think I resisted identifying as a woman as long as being a woman was associated in my mind with powerlessness and victimhood.

As a pro dom, I can combine womanliness and power in a seamless whole. (p.152)

In a more general sense, the possibilities for subversion associated with S/M have also been highly neglected by feminists, for many of the reasons suggested above. Again, while not advocating that women should take up S/M as a route to empowerment, the up-front and honest theorizing of power relations within a context of S/M may also be a fruitful place for women to go in attempting to understand power in relations with men. Foucault himself, toward the end of his writings began to consider S/M more seriously, Foucault states (as cited in Fillingham, 1993):

On this point the S/M game is very interesting because it is a strategic relation, but it is always fluid. Of course there are roles, but everybody knows very well that those roles can be reversed. Sometimes the scene begins with the master and slave, and at the end the slave had become the master. It is an acting out of power structures by a strategic game
that is able to give sexual pleasure or bodily pleasure. (p.150)

Although care must be taken to evaluate Foucault's claim about the fluidity of roles in S/M, this does not mean that such investigations are without merit.

**Embodiment**

In concluding this examination of subversive potentials for heterosex, I wish to bring to the fore the notion of embodiment. Sampson (1996) examines the notion of embodiment in psychology and is critical of both dominant discourses, as well as phenomenological and constructionist. The latter, according to Sampson, fall victim to "ocularcentrism" and focus on the object-body at the expense of a focus on embodiment and the "inherently embodied character of all social practices, including discursive practices themselves" (p.601). Included in embodied discourses, Sampson looks at how our bodies communicate and as such are themselves discursive:

> When I refer to embodied discourse, I am referring to the intrinsically embodied character of human endeavor: to the idea that we are socialized into both a linguistic and a bodily community of practices such that what we say and the embodied quality of how we say it are simultaneously engendered and inextricably intertwined. (p. 609)

Sampson goes on to include such things as speech formation (lips, vocal chords) and bodily movements as aspects of embodiment. In particular, he uses as examples how differences between male and female are evidenced in posture, gestures, and movements of the body. In part, he locates a return to the notion of embodiment as emanating from feminist discourses that seek to remind us of the importance of the body, particularly given the exclusion of the female body from philosophy and psychology. However, Bayer and Malone (1996) advocate caution in considering women's bodies and draw attention to the ways in which women's embodiment has been used to their detriment in traditional psychological theory. In concluding, Sampson discusses why an emphasis on embodiment is important from an emancipatory perspective:

> In short, if part of what we learn in growing up within a given society are its relations of domination and our places within that scheme, and if
those relations of domination are embodied—that is, learned in how we walk, talk, move in space, etc.—then part and parcel of any emancipatory techniques must be addressed to the body that also needs to learn a new way of comportment. (p.620)

**Project Summary**

In conclusion, what this project is concerned with is women’s experiences of power in their sexual relations with men. The present inquiry also represents the basis for a specific research project that attempts to address the aforementioned constructs of women, sex, and power through open-ended interviews with members of communities of interest. To that end, this project seeks to do the following:

- To provide a qualitative approach to the study of heterosexual sex with the intent of encouraging self-reflection, understanding, and the emergence of theory as participants examine the notions of women, sex, and power;
- To encourage a theory of power for women, with an emphasis on the way these women understand power and its workings in the context of their own lives and in particular, in their sexual experiences with men;
- To examine the relationship between participants’ experiences and existing discourses around heterosexual sex, including a consideration of the potential for subversion or transgression of heterosexual sex, and the relevance of radical and queer understandings of power, gender and sexuality to such an enterprise, and;
- To begin a critique of heterosexuality as an essential category through an examination of participants’ sexual experiences, desires, and identities.
METHOD

While the substantive content area of this research is understood to be women, heterosex, and power, the choice of content does little to expressly advocate a particular methodological treatment. However, with a strong debt to Lather (1991a) the method of this particular work can be seen as emergent from at least three positions: (1) concern over the failure of positivism and an acceptance of the value-laden nature of inquiry; (2) an interest in critical social science and the politics of empowerment as evidenced in the notion of research as praxis, and; (3) the challenges of postmodernism/poststructuralism. The following section will attempt to address how these positions have impacted upon the choice of methodology. This will be done by situating the project first in a postpositivist, and particularly postmodern space, and second, within the purview of feminist emancipatory praxis.

A Post-Positivist Space

*Psychology and the Growth of Hermeneutics*

On a number of different counts, positivism has been found to be lacking as an underpinning to inquiry in the human sciences. Challenges to the natural science paradigm have come in various forms, although probably the most well known are what have been loosely labeled the hermeneutic traditions, and, more recently, attempts at a postmodern social science.

While not widespread in psychology, a number of different theorists beginning in the late 1960's, unhappy with the state of American academic traditions, and influenced by European philosophical and social psychological trends, began to envision a new hermeneutic psychology. Although highly varied in form, such efforts were largely marked by a shift from the study of natural objects to persons, and from behaviour (observations) to speech acts. Harré's advocacy of an "ethogenic" approach to the study of human behaviour (1979), and Gergen's historicization of psychological inquiry (Gergen, 1973), stand out as two early exemplars embodying this stream of thought. Later, social constructionism (Gergen, 1985), social representation (Flick, 1995; Moscovici, 1981), discourse analysis (Potter & Wetherell, 1987), phenomenology
(Giorgi, 1995), symbolic interactionism (Denzin, 1995), discursive psychology (Harré & Stearns, 1995), narratology (Murray, 1995) and critical social psychology (Parker, 1989) also emerged as theoretical contenders.

Despite a dearth of wide-scale support, what Parker (1989) calls the "new" social psychology has continued to make an impact on the field. Nor have these perspectives remained static, as the influence of postmodern thought has of late provided a further springboard for the reconsideration of a post-positivist social science. Flick (1995), in tracing the origins of social representations theory, suggests that the historical, cognitive, and discursive turns of postmodernity were particularly influential in providing a critical impetus for revision. What is currently at issue is envisioning the nature of a post-positivist/postmodern social science.

**Psychology in the Postmodern**

Neutrality, objectivity, observable facts, transparent description, clean separation of the interpreter and the interpreted—all of these concepts basic to positivist ways of knowing are called into question. Science as codified by conventional methods which marginalize value issues is being reformulated in a way that foregrounds science as a value-constituted and constituting enterprise, no more outside the power/knowledge nexus than any other human enterprise. (Lather, 1991a, p.105)

Just what characterizes a postmodern psychology or social science remains highly open. Rosenau (1992) seems at least close to the mark when she states that the challenges of postmodernism for mainstream social science and social science research seem endless. Postmodernism itself could loosely be characterized by a problematizing of the author, text, and the reader; the subject, conventional history, linear time, and predictable geography or space, notions of theory and truth, representation, traditional epistemology and method, and politics and political action (Rosenau, 1992). It foregrounds the importance of discursive production particularly as it applies to problems of description and interpretation, the textual staging of knowledge, and the social relations of the research act (Lather, 1991a).
What has been most challenging and inspiring in all this for the social sciences in particular has been postmodernism’s treatment of the subject and the research process itself. While previously assuming a Cartesian subject/object split that allowed for a trans-cultural, trans-historical, and trans-social subject that is objectively knowable to a separate observer (i.e., the social scientist), postmodernism has sought to break down that split. Rather, the subject is decentred, the distance between observer and observed collapsed, and the notion of objective or value-free inquiry discarded. The subject and the observer occupy social locations that are contextually embedded and constitutive of differential versions of reality. The subject of inquiry is also problematized or decentred, seen as a construction, fiction, subject position, or discursive creation, as is that of the author. Similarly, identity is also constituted as fictive and temporal.

The practice of research itself, as a discursive production and a process of representation, is also seen to be constitutive of power relations between the inquirer and the subject of inquiry through the inscription and creation of an ostensibly fictive subject. The search for universalizing theory is problematized and theory generation is seen to be local and provisional, rather than foundational. As an approach to scholarship in general, Hekman (1996) sees postmodernity, implied in the work of Foucault, as positing an end to the “universal intellectual”, and heralding the rise of the “specific intellectual” whose concern is the “local and immediate forms of power and oppression” and “who utilizes a “local” scientific truth to formulate arguments” (p.10).

Notably, within psychology, those individuals who have chosen to take on the challenges of postmodernity in revisioning psychological practice have emerged from the margins. What constitutes the margins in psychology could arguably be feminist scholars, gay, lesbian, and queer theorists, and those expounding a history and theory critical of modernist and positivist assumptions and practices. That said, this work should be understood as emanating from my roots as a student of psychology, but as aspiring toward a postmodern praxis. Thus, it accepts the problematization of social science research and seeks to work within that frame. However, to assume that such is possible is to side with Rosenau’s (1992) affirmative postmodernists who, unlike the sceptics, do not dispute the possibility of a social science, albeit a radically engaged one.
Feminist Emancipatory Praxis

In addition to placing this work squarely within a postmodern social science, it should also be understood as coming from a place of feminist emancipatory praxis. While there is much debate as to whether emancipation, the seeking of justice and freedom from inequality and oppression (Rosenau, 1992), is desirable or even possible in a postmodern social science, particularly given the postmodernism scepticism of the emancipatory project of enlightenment, this largely depends upon who you read. Lather (1991a) provides strong arguments for retaining the emancipatory impulse in a postmodern social science. The following section describes the aspects of an emancipatory praxis that are relevant to this project.

Lather (1991a) sums up the goals of an emancipatory praxis as follows:
In sum, the development of emancipatory social theory requires an empirical stance which is open-ended, dialogically reciprocal, grounded in respect to human capacity and, yet, profoundly skeptical of appearances and "common sense." Such an empirical stance is, furthermore, rooted in a commitment to the longer-term, broad-based ideological struggle necessary to transform structural inequalities. (p.65) While she cautions that the application of technique is a necessary but hardly sufficient condition for social change, it nonetheless represents a first step along the way to emancipatory practice, toward a grounding of research in praxis.

That said, it is not so much that I conceive of my research participants as needing emancipation. In fact, I am more apt to think of them in perhaps the precisely opposite way – that they in fact, may hold a key to emancipation for other women, a notion in need of reflection that I will consider in depth later. Rather, in conducting research in a manner that is emancipatory, the attempt is to lessen the potential for the research process itself to be an exercise in subjectification, a thoughtless enactment of a set of power relations working against the interests of participants. In this way I also attempt to adhere to the demands of a feminist psychology, that according to Nicholson (1995):

...demands the recognition that the production of knowledge is a discursive, dynamic and political process occurring through the interaction between the researcher, the respondent(s) and pre-existing
discourses which are grounded in ideas attributed to science and popular culture. (p.135)

In giving more practical suggestions for emancipatory practice, Lather divides such work into two broad sections that deal with the relations between researcher and researched, data and theory.

**Researcher and Researched**

In regard to the relationship between researcher and researched, Lather makes use of the notion of maximal reciprocity. In speaking of the emancipatory imperative of reciprocity, Lather (1991a) describes this as implying a give and take, as opposed to the one-sidedness characteristic of positivist research. Furthermore, the goals of reciprocity go beyond merely getting better data (i.e., the hope that through involving participants in the process they will be better/truer data generating machines), to providing a serious challenge to conventional methods of conceiving research praxis.

Furthermore, Lather (1991a) makes the suggestion that maximally reciprocal research include the following characteristics: (1) interactive, dialogic interviews that require the researcher's self-disclosure; (2) sequential interviews of individuals and small groups to promote collaboration and deeper probing; (3) negotiated or collaborative research that entails "recycling description, emerging analysis and conclusions to at least a subsample of respondents" (p.61), and; (4) discussion of false consciousness that goes beyond simply dismissing it as resistance, and instead considers the factors that become the necessary conditions for people engage in ideological critique and go beyond their lived experience. Central to such a process is also a continual self-reflexivity which is seen as necessary to avoid the intrusion of the researcher's own, unexamined values onto the research process itself. Lather (1991a) refers to imposition and reification as the central dangers of praxis-oriented research, stating that "In the name of emancipation, researchers impose meanings on situations rather than constructing meaning through negotiation with research participants" (p.59).
Data and Theory

Conducting emancipatory research also implies a consideration of the relationship between data and theory. From the position of emancipatory research as praxis the relation between data and theory is one of interaction and continual emergence. Theory, loosely conceived, is seen to inform the collection of data, and data in turn works to modify and alter existing theory in an ongoing process. The dynamic nature of such a process is also ensured by the inclusion of participants in the generation of theory. This process in its entirety is what Lather (1991a) refers to as dialectical theory building. In this sense, "theory becomes an expression and elaboration of progressive popular feelings rather than abstract frameworks imposed by intellectuals on the messy complexity of lived experience" (p.62). As such, dialectical theory development also strongly implies the presence of a reflexive sensibility. This does not however, suggest that theory is wholly subordinated to experience, rather that data should be allowed to generate propositions that permit use of a priori theoretical frameworks, but it must also keep that framework from being a "container into which the data must be poured" (p.62). What is implied then is the need to openly move from theory to data in a way where they mutually inform each other. This is also consistent with grounded theory as a method of analysis (Rennie, Phillips, and Quartaro, 1988), the method that has been chosen for this study.

Lather also suggests ways in which such a process can be encouraged. These include the following: (1) needs to begin with the experiences, desires and needs of participants; (2) implies a dialogic arrangement whereby the teacher is pupil and vice versa; (3) focus on fundamental contradictions as a way of helping people see how their ideologies do not serve their interests, provides an entry point for the process of ideology critique; (4) must take place in a way that allows participant's critical reactions to theory, and; (5) researcher needs to join participants in a theoretically-guided program of action over an extended period of time.

With that said, what remains is to spell out more specifically how the methodology of this study attempts to adhere to Lather's recommendations for emancipatory research, as well as how it attempts to navigate this within a postmodern social science.
Participants

Selection Criteria

Because the focus of this study was on women's experiences of power in heterosex, participants self-selected based on meeting the criteria of being women who experience themselves as powerful in their sexual relationships with men. The use of specific labels (e.g., heterosexual) was avoided in soliciting participants in the hopes that the purposive lack of sampling labels would allow for a freer range of identities and subject positions to emerge.

Recruitment Procedure

Recruitment of participants was undertaken mainly via posters, advertisements and word of mouth. Posters and/or advertisements (see Appendix A) were placed at universities in southwestern Ontario. At the University of Windsor, posters were placed in a variety of locations frequented by students. As well, recruitment speeches were delivered in a number of classes and organizational meetings (e.g., Womyn's Centre). Publicity of the study at other universities, was limited mainly to posters and advertisements in women's studies programs and related publications. Participants were also recruited by snow ball sampling. This entailed one of two scenarios. In the first instance, existing personal contacts were used to solicit research participants. In the second instance, participants who had already been contacted and interviewed were asked to consider whether they had acquaintances who might be willing to become research participants.

There are a number of reasons for choosing to solicit participants in this fashion. First, given the highly specific subject population, the likelihood of having difficulty locating research participants, and the personal nature of the topic, casting a broad net, albeit in specific locations, was thought to be the most fruitful way of contacting participants. Furthermore, to the extent that theory generation was the goal of this study, the need for an informed, rather than diverse audience was considered paramount. Hence, sampling narrowly through university channels, was considered the best way of attracting a knowledgeable participant group.
In regard to the number of participants, it was established that a minimum of fifteen participants was required for this project, with sixteen actually interviewed. As an initial goal, fifteen was considered plausible given the difficulty of attracting participants. The personal nature of the topic, and the requirement that participants be sophisticated in their thinking about sexuality and power, also suggested that expecting a larger number of participants might be unreasonable. Kvale (1992) states that it is common for interview studies to be carried out with about 15 participants. While this is a helpful guide, what is a more important criteria is saturation. Typically, new interviews are conducted until they yield little new knowledge (Kvale, 1992). In the present case, sixteen interviews were deemed sufficient to meet the criterion of saturation.

Method of Data Collection

Interviews

The primary method of data collection involved in-depth, open-ended, face to face interviews whose purpose was, in part, to allow for the collection of participants' stories and understandings of power in their sexual relations with men. The interview protocol itself (see Appendix B) was constructed through engagement with the theoretical literature pertaining to women, heterosex and power, much of which has been reviewed in the introduction to this paper.

The questions utilized in the interview protocol were structured so as to encourage participants to speak about a number of salient topic areas. Specifically, participants were asked to speak of their understanding of power both in and out of their sexual relationships and were asked when they began to think about power in their relations with men. Participants were also asked to reflect on their own experiences and provide stories of feeling both powerful and powerless in their sexual relationships with men. More specific questions were also asked at appropriate junctures that encouraged participants to consider how popular opinions about women's and men's roles, relative to one another sexually, relate to their own views, how gender may play a role in their experience, and the extent to which their sexual relationships with men are reflective of their experiences with men outside of a sexual context. Opinions were also solicited about common understandings of power as
dominance or control. Participants were asked what they would want other women to know about being powerful in a sexual context and whether there are others who would disagree with their understanding of sex and power. Finally, participants were asked about their expectations for future sexual relations with men, whether there were other important areas of focus that were not covered in the interview questions, and whether they knew of others with different opinions from their own that would be willing to be interviewed.

An initial form of the interview protocol was pilot tested on a number of volunteers in order to ensure that the questions were comprehensible and prompted the desired responses. While the initial version of the protocol asked participants to provide stories of their experiences of power and powerlessness as a beginning question, pilot testing revealed that participants were unlikely to engage in such storytelling if asked to do so at that early stage. Instead, it was established that asking participants to speak of power in a more general sense first helped them to become comfortable with the topic and interviewer, and hence, more able to speak candidly when asked to relate their specific experiences. No other amendments to the initial protocol were required. The final protocol in Appendix B reflects this rearrangement of questions.

**Demographics Questionnaires**

Participants were also asked to fill out a demographics form (Appendix C). The purpose of this questionnaire was to obtain general information pertaining to the participants' sex, age, marital and relationship status, sexual orientation, occupation, educational attainment level, and ethnic background.

**Procedure**

After initial contacts had been made, participants were asked to meet for a potential interview lasting at least two hours. Meetings were arranged at the participants' convenience in terms of location and time, although some attempt was made to choose locations with less noise interference in the interests of later
transcription. At the meeting, the researcher explained more fully the procedures involved and the nature of the project. At this point, the researcher asked for the participants' verbal consent to take part in the study. Once verbal consent was obtained, a formal consent form (Appendix D) was explained and participants were encouraged to read these forms carefully. Participants were asked to sign two copies of the consent form, one to be kept by them and one retained by the researcher. In addition to the information on the consent form, the researcher also asked the participants to provide a mailing address on a separate sheet in order to facilitate subsequent ongoing research collaboration. Participants were reminded of the confidentiality of the research process and if they so desired, were encouraged to pick a pseudonym for subsequent identification. After this introduction, the formal interview itself took place.

In the interests of satisfying Lather's (1991a) criteria for maximal reciprocity, interviews were conducted in an open-ended fashion, albeit beginning with the semi-structured interview questions. This format encouraged respondents to more freely define their own reality. The need for reciprocity also made demands of the researcher in terms of self-reflexivity. Commitment to such goals meant that the researcher was part of the interview itself, actively involved, engaging in both self-disclosure and commentary. What was attempted throughout this project was an examination with subjects of their self-understandings, highlighting contradictions, and jointly interrogating those contradictions with an eye to their ideological underpinnings. In identifying and making apparent ideology, participants were free to engage in a reasoned choice of ideology that best served their interests, assuming that the choice of ideology would be dependent upon the differing conditions of their lives.

Interviews were audio-taped for the purpose of transcription by the researcher. Tapes were erased subsequent to transcription. After the completion of the interview, participants were questioned specifically as to their reactions to the interview itself and given a chance to discuss their reactions. As there was some possibility, given the nature of the topic, that participants could experience distress or embarrassment, time was also taken to probe for such reactions. No evidence of distress was observed.

Before the close of the meeting, participants were also asked to fill out the demographics questionnaire. No names were required for the completion of the
demographics sheet and participants were reassured about the confidentiality of all information. Participants were then thanked, reminded of how to contact the researcher should the need arise and given a list of counseling contacts in their area in the event that they became distressed subsequent to the interview.

Lest self-reflexivity and reciprocity be conceived of as easily obtained by walking into a single data gathering interview with the right attitude, Lather (1991a) also advocates the need to do both sequential interviews of individuals or small groups and engage in a collaborative research process that involves returning analysis to respondents for commentary and critique. Therefore, after initial interviews, preliminary grounded theory analysis based on those interviews was returned to participants for active engagement and critique. Participant feedback was in turn used to modify existing analyses and provide a more dialogic process of theory development.

Analysis

While it is much more accurate to conceive of data collection as overlapping with analysis, this section will focus on those activities more expressly concerned with the analysis of collected data. Analysis involved the generation of grounded theory according to the methods of Glaser and Strauss (1967) as outlined by Rennie, Phillips, and Quartaro (1988). The steps taken in analyzing the data will be detailed below. Along with these will be other steps interjected by the author that are considered important to the analysis process.

Grounded Theory Analysis

As a method of analysis, grounded theory relies on the use of the constant comparative method for the generation of theory. The utility of the grounded theory approach and the constant comparative method is that it foregoes extensive theory generation prior to data analysis and, as such, works to prevent the imposition of pre-conceived frameworks on the data, while at the same time allowing for the creation of theory through intimate and ongoing engagement with the data. This is consistent with Lather's (1991a) recommendation regarding emancipatory research praxis. As a
method, the constant comparative method encompasses the following strategies: data collection, categorization, memoing, the movement toward parsimony, and ultimately, writing of the theory. In discussing these strategies I rely exclusively on their conceptualization as laid out by Rennie, Phillips, and Quartaro (1988).

Grounded theory begins with the collection of data. However, in the interests of setting up good data gathering practices a number of steps were observed on an interview by interview basis. At the completion of each interview meeting, the researcher made notes regarding the interview itself. Included in such notes were ideas regarding alteration of the research protocol, preliminary notations of themes, particularly those stressed by participants, any important behavioural observations, or any other reactions the researcher had to the interview. This also represented an important opportunity for self-reflexivity on the part of the researcher, and as such, these notations were particularly careful to include any information of this type. This information was then appended to interview transcripts.

In regard to interview transcriptions, opinions differ along stylistic lines, although most agree that it is important to capture as much of the original interview as possible (Potter & Wetherell, 1995). In this instance, a verbatim transcription was generated including attempts to indicate other noticeable speech markers such as pauses, inflections, and non-word vocalizations where pertinent. With the overwhelming amount of information accruing from open-ended data gathering, constant immersion in the material is vital. Reading and re-reading existing material was carried out as a useful way of fostering clarity of thought and situating the researcher in the experiences of participants.

Within grounded theory, data collection is seen to be constantly influenced by the outcomes of ongoing analysis. Therefore, with the emergence of new information, data collection itself changes. One way of achieving this diversity as intimated earlier involved asking respondents to refer other participants who may hold views different from their own.

As data collection continued, efforts were turned toward categorization of research data. Rennie, Phillips, and Quartaro (1988) recommend breaking up of transcripts into meaning units of individual concepts as produced by participants. Such meaning units were in turn clustered based on shared meaning, with the resultant
groupings of meaning units constituting categories. As recommended, initial categories remained descriptive in nature and adhered closely to the language used by participants. With continued data gathering, new meaning units were compared to existing categories. This analysis adhered to a practice of open categorization wherein meaning units were applied to as many categories as possible in order to preserve the richness of the data.

As more categories emerged, new categories of a more constructive, less descriptive nature were also considered. Over time, descriptive categories were subsumed under constructive categories. At this time, categories were reconsidered based on the relations between them and further collapsed or organized in relation to one another. In generating ideas about categories and their relations, memoing was also a highly important component of the grounded theory analysis. Memoing involves the systematic recording of ideas that occur about patterns in the data as analysis progresses. Such recording not only fosters the generation of theory about research categories but it also allows the researcher time to perhaps consider more self-reflexively their own relationship to the data gathering process and the data itself.

Once categories became saturated, yielding no new information, analysis moved on to a more focused consideration of the relationships between categories. This is referred to by Rennie, Phillips, and Quartaro as the movement toward parsimony. What this involves is the consideration of the hierarchical relations among categories. At this time, categories with few connections to other categories were dropped or collapsed. With the tentative emergence of a theoretic structure to the categories, attention was focused on a consideration of the core categories that were most densely related to other categories. Rennie, Phillips, and Quartaro offer that while this is often an abstract category and frequently emerges late in analysis, it should be clearly defined based on the categories it subsumes. Further, they suggest that where more than one core category exists, attempts should be made to determine whether one of these categories is better subsumed under other extant categories.

Finally, with the assistance of research memos, the grounded theory itself was written. During this procedure, memos were sorted and arranged based on the emerging theory and rearranged as new ideas came to the fore. As a concluding step, the results of the grounded theory analysis were then returned to participants for their
comments and to provide further ideas regarding the theory itself.

Validity

Determining the validity of categories and the themes within them is a particularly sticky matter where non-empirical work is concerned. While it would be easy to discount the importance or even relevance of validity in a post-positivist paradigm, Lather (1991a) for one argues that “lack of concern for data credibility within praxis-oriented research programs will only decrease the legitimacy of the knowledge generated therein” (p.68). In regard to validity, Lather suggests that the best tactic involves rigorous self-reflexivity, but in addition to this, sketches out four ways of conceptualizing and increasing validity particularly for emancipatory research. These involve the process of triangulation as taken from Lincoln and Guba (1985), and attention to construct validity (determining that constructs are actually occurring rather than inventions of the researcher’s perspective), face validity (whether the theory makes sense to participants), and what she refers to as catalytic validity (the extent to which the research process energizes participants toward knowing reality in order to transform it).

Triangulation refers to the inclusion of multiple data sources, methods, and theoretical schemes that consciously seek counter patterns as well as divergence (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Although not all aspects of triangulation are pertinent to more naturalistically grounded inquiry (e.g., the use of multiple, pre-planned methods is not consistent with emergent inquiry), the use of multiple data sources and theoretical schemes are helpful. Multiple data sources can refer to “multiple copies of one type of sources (such as interview respondents)” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p.305) and as such, this study’s use of multiple respondents would seem to satisfy this criterion. As well, the grounding of this paper in a theoretical literature would also seem to speak to the need for reference to multiple theoretical sources. The check for construct, face, and catalytic validity, is intimately linked to the return of the analysis to research participants for comment (and perhaps beyond as with catalytic validity), and was undertaken at that juncture. The issue of validity will be discussed more fully in the Implications and Conclusions section.
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Participants

Open ended interviews were carried out with 16 women in various locations in Southwestern Ontario including Windsor, Guelph, and Toronto. The results of the questionnaire will be presented first, followed by the grounded theory analysis of the interview data.

Demographics

The demographics questionnaire gave participants the option of providing a variety of information pertaining to age, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, education, occupation, class, relationship status, past/current religious affiliation, and political beliefs.

Participants ranged in age from 19 to 39 years, with a mean age of 29. An examination of frequency information reveals a relatively even spread of participants across the 20 year age range. The majority of participants identified as heterosexual (11), while four participants labeled as bisexual, and one refused to label according to sexual orientation. When asked about their race, the preponderance identified as white (14), two as Black, and one as "other", providing the descriptor "Mulatto" to describe her racial background. When asked about their ethnic background, a more complex picture emerged. Many participants claimed mixed heritages, making for a large number of different ethnicities represented overall. Specifically, participants reported ethnic or cultural backgrounds that were Polish (1), Irish (3), Scottish (3), English (4), German (2), French (2), Canadian (1), Mauritian (1), Jamaican (1), Dutch (2), Ethiopian (1), Jewish (1), and White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (1).

In terms of educational background, eleven participants stated that their highest level of educational achievement was university, while four had done post-graduate work, and one had attended college. Notably, all participants had post-secondary school experience. At the time of the interview, eight were enrolled in undergraduate programs, two in graduate programs, and six were not attending any educational
programs. When asked about academic specialization, responses were varied. Participants reported studying Philosophy (2), Women's Studies (2), Sociology (1), Psychology (2), English (1), Health-related disciplines (2), Fine Arts (2), Sexuality (1), and Theatre (1). Two participants claimed no particular area of specialization.

Participants were also asked about their current occupation, and once again, responses were as varied as the participants. Of the eleven participants currently holding full, part-time, or multiple jobs, these individuals worked as bartenders, writers, musicians, labourers, reflexologists, booksellers, program planners, counselors, curators, office administrators, bank employees, customer service representatives, dominatrixes, and registered nurses. Regardless of current occupation, participants described their economic class while growing up, with two claiming working class roots, one a lower-middle class background, the majority (8) a middle class family life, and the remainder (5) an upper-middle class background.

In terms of romantic/sexual connections, participants were also asked to describe their current relationship status. Some problems with the demographics questionnaire were noted by participants and as a result, a number of "other" responses were given. At the time of the interviews, five participants reported being single, one was married, two were separated/divorced, three were living common-law with a partner, while the remainder provided options of their own to describe their relationship status, including "collared" (1), "polyamourous" (1), "dating" (1), and "long-term" (3). By way of explanation of participants' own options, "collared" refers to being collared to a master in a BDSM-based relationship. The elements of the acronym BDSM can variously stand for Bondage, Discipline, Domination, Submission, Sadism, and Masochism. However, a BDSM-based relationship, whether contractual or, in this case, romantic, implies ritualized roles and practices having specific power differentials associated with them. In the case of this participant, she is a slave or sub to her dom or master. Her collaring is a signification of her role within this relationship. To continue with participants own options, "polyamourous" refers to having the freedom to date more than one individual at a time, and "dating" and "long-term" refer in different degrees to relationships that are important but not currently involving marriage or co-habitation.
Finally, participants were also asked about past and current religious affiliation, as well as their involvement with political causes or groups important to their identity. In terms of past religious background, eight reported being Roman Catholic, one Anglican, one Islamic, one Baptist, one United, and one atheist, while three reported no past religious identification. When asked about current religious affiliation, one described herself as Buddhist, three as Pagan, two as Roman Catholic, one as Islamic, two as Non-denominational, one as Atheist, and six claimed no current religious beliefs. Participants were also asked to list any groups to which they belong that they consider important to their identity or politics. Rather than identifying groups, however, most participants provided issues or interests that were important to them. The following list comprises participant responses to this question:

- Human Rights (1)
- Environmental (3)
- Socialism (1)
- Women's Issues (2)
- Politics (1)
- Sex Radicalism (2)
- Secular Humanism (1)
- Reproductive Rights (2)
- Feminism (4)
- AIDS (1)
- Paganism (1)
- Folk Art/Healing (1)
- Anarchism (1)

What is perhaps common across many of these categories is at least some implicit interest in political organizing, many geared toward women's issues.

**Women's Voices**

A grounded theory analysis was conducted in order to identify recurrent themes emerging from participants' accounts. The central thematic areas of women, sex, and power were the focus of interviews and participants considered various combinations of these concepts as applied both to their lives and broader theoretical constructs. Feedback from participants was used to further supplement the analysis done by the researcher. Two main themes emerged from this analysis, that I have called "Power and the Personal" and "Power and the Social". The following sections will consider
participants’ understandings of heterosex and power at the level of the personal and the social. The final section will focus on the tension between the personal and social realms as participants attempt to bridge the gap between the two. Running throughout there will also be a critical consideration of participants' thoughts, with an emphasis on exploring the meanings and implications of their ideas and highlighting contradiction and inconsistency. The following is a table of all the themes and sub-themes that will be considered in the following three sections of this chapter:

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- **Tension - Where Worlds Collide**
- **Change**
  - Sexual Power
  - Sex and Emotion
  - The Impact of Life Experience
- **Dealing with Tension**
  - The Ripple Effect
  - Resistance
    - Opposition/Reversal
    - Playing with Roles
    - Playing with Meaning
- **Changing the Social**
  - Transformation
  - Necessity
  - Systemic Critique
- **Commentary: Tension - Where Worlds Collide**
Power and the Personal

When asked to consider the issue of power in heterosex, one theme that emerged strongly was the notion of power and the personal. From this vantage point, power is largely construed as operating at the level of the individual and expressed in the concepts of control/choice and pleasure/subjectivity. This discourse was situated within participants' immediate experience of their own lives and intimate relationships with individual men. From a theoretical vantage point, this set of themes is consistent with a liberal political stance and view of the self as determined by a kind of psychological essentialism. Furthermore, it also shares Jackson's (1996) focus on heterosex at the level of practice or experience, and Lips' (1990) understanding of power as operating at the level of the individual.

Control/Choice

When asked to define what power meant to them, the most common synonym offered to express the concept of power was control. Althea defined power this way:

Money can empower you or give you power in certain respects, but for me power is really more about control. Power is really about saying I want to do this and I want to be able to do this with focus and energy and direction and then being able to access that source within myself and do it. (Althea)

In a very general sense, participants described the notion of power as control to include the capacity to exert one's own will and influence others. However, implicit in the concept of control, was also the notion of choice, and participants generally felt that if one has control, one also has choice, or the freedom to choose a particular course of action.
**Controlling Sex**

When challenged to provide an explanation for the nature of sexual power, participants indicated that sexual power was expressed through controlling sex. In turn, controlling sex was described both in terms of taking control and making choices.

**Taking Control**

For participants, taking control of sex could happen in many ways. Commonly heard was the idea that control in sex is expressed in the act of initiating sex with a partner. As Foxy related, "I think initiation, that's my first feeling of power in sex relationships, if I know that I want to have sex, me initiating." Others described taking control in terms of having the capacity to control actual sexual activity. Typically, participants located this in terms of deciding the what, when, where, and, most importantly, "if" of sexual matters. Zoe mentioned a specific experience with her partner:

> Throughout that entire experience, I had all the control. I could control when we had penetrative sex, or when we had oral sex, or when we shifted positions. That was my decision. If I was enjoying something we kept doing it, if I wasn't, we'd alter it. (Zoe)

Michelle also spoke of controlling a sexual situation, although for her, a submissive in a BDSM relationship, her description of control is more subtle, or as she refers to it, "manipulative." She related the following:

> You're supposedly in the submissive position, but I know that if I move a little bit more this way or like stick my ass up a little bit more and moan this particular way then you're going to fuck me and that's exactly what I want you to do anyway. Even though you're contemplating it. So, it's kind of manipulating a little bit that way and that's kind a twist of the power thing off the submissive side. (Michelle)
For Jane, control came in the knowledge of having greater sexual experience than her partner:

I was the one who initiated it, and he was just not used to this. He found out that I was more experienced than him and it visibly bothered him. But I felt more in control. I felt really powerful at that point cause I had had more experience and he was male and this was very untypical and it was like a little game. (Jane)

Some participants also identified what has been commonly held to be a more traditional form of sexual power afforded to women, that is the power to withhold sex. However, this can still be understood as an expression of control, in this case, control over sexual access. One participant described her expression of power in sex by withholding:

I had a boss when I worked at a restaurant, I was 21, 20, he was 35, 37, nice looking guy, doing well for himself and he had a reputation of being able to have any woman he wanted. I expressed power over him by not having sex with him and I did want to have sex. (Laurel)

However, to the extent that such a strategy also serves to deny women their own desires, other participants were less sure of its utility. Tara said "I don't think power is cutting someone off, I don't think that's power because first of all, who are you punishing?"

This form of power, power as control is largely synonymous with what has elsewhere been called "power over" (Yoder & Kahn, 1992; or see Griscom (1992) or Lips (1990) for a review). It is a fairly conventional form of power. The operation of this power is unilateral and power itself is treated much like a commodity or resource. That is, for participants, control is something you either have or don't, and in a relational context, if you have control, your partner, by definition, cannot. Although feminists have struggled with the ethic of power over, with the exception of control as withholding sex, there was no consideration by participants as to whether the use of this type of power is questionable in its own right. While Michelle's account of control through "manipulation" could be interpreted as a form of "power from under" (Lips, 1990), what
is notable is that she does not experience it that way. She refers to it as having control, albeit in a circumscribed way, and defends her actions as a form of control over.

What should also be acknowledged is that along with these experiences of control over sex, participants also described situations where they had no control that ranged from extreme (e.g., in rape, sexual abuse, assault), to more commonplace (e.g., falling in love). Rather than emphasizing how such experiences were indicative of a loss of control, however, most participants focused on the ways in which it forced them to gain control of their lives. As Jane stated:

It’s like I finally took control after being, excuse the phrase, someone’s bitch for two years. Then I totally took control of everything and since then I really haven’t looked back. The hell if anybody will ever do that to me again. (Jane)

Making Choices

In addition to the idea of power as control, there was a belief in choice as indicative of sexual power. As Laurel said, “if my idea of power is true and it is for me, it’s that I have choice.” Conversely, for many participants, when one is not able to choose, one’s power is taken away. Althea related:

Do you want to do it? Then it’s good. If you don’t want to then don’t, and that’s the choice, that’s the beautiful choice in the matter. It’s when someone takes that choice away from you that is so horrifying. (Althea)

Consistent with Lips (1990) interpretation, choice was understood by participants in terms of having the freedom to act and to decide how to act.

Although relevant to all sexual experiences, the notion of choice was most strongly elaborated on and, in fact, defended in relation to the choice to be submissive in sex. As such, the remainder of this section on choice will focus specifically on what participants had to say about submission. Participants stated that they chose to be submissive at times because it brought them sexual pleasure and fulfilled some of their desires. Nor did they feel that being submissive was merely falling into a stereotypical
female sex role, citing as proof, the purposiveness of their choice to be submissive and
the enjoyment of submission by men and same-sex couples.

What is interesting is the broad variety of experiences that participants
described as “submission.” Jane described it simply as “when I kind of lose control” or
when she isn’t “in total control of the situation.” Michelle on the other hand described
her submission to her “master” this way:

He knows because of the relationship we have that he can do whatever the hell
he wants to me whatever time he wants cause he has that power all the time...
as soon as he decides o.k., you know what, I want to touch you, he can.
(Michelle)

Laurel’s experience, on the other hand, appears somewhere in the middle:

The most powerful sex I’ve had is with B, and it is with total and complete
surrender. Bondage, for me to even be able to say I’m willing to do it! I got
power from that for me. But then the trust that I extended to a person cause I
am a control freak! He could have done anything, so there was that excitement
and I resisted and resisted and resisted and there literally was a point where I
felt my body just give and it felt, in a strange way, it almost felt like I was
possessed. I don’t mean by the devil, but an energy was flowing, it was so free,
nothing was restricted in any way in my body, I wasn’t holding anything, stuff
was going in and out and in and out and it was just really, really enjoyable. That
made me a sex maniac for two weeks after that! (Laurel)

Also notable is the assertion by participants that despite their choosing at times to be
submissive at times in the bedroom, they would under no circumstances choose to be
submissive outside of this context. Although enjoying relinquishing control in sex, Jane
was adamant in saying “I’m always in control of everything else, I live on my own, I pay
for everything, I’m in control of my life, my schooling.” Michelle also made this clear
when she said, “I like being a slave when it comes to sexual encounters not the slave
when it comes to the rest of the person.”
Despite the variability in the meaning of submission for various participants, what was clearer and more unanimous was how participants understood submission as a powerful stance. Specifically, power was seen to come in the fact that they experience themselves as having actively chosen a submissive posture, arguing that if they have chosen this then they are ultimately in control by virtue of having made the choice. Suzette stated:

There's still power in giving over your power because you're the one choosing to give over your power. So, you're the one that holds the power. (Suzette)

Michelle also explored the way in which she can be powerful by *either* exercising her capacity to control a sexual situation when in a "vanilla" context, or through her own "choice" in a BDSM scenario:

I find that really empowering when I'm doing that with someone I don't know, that I want to pick up or an actual boyfriend and taking control in that way where I decide what starts when and how far to tease that person. Then the other side of power is what I see as just fulfilling what you want, like desire wise. When I think of submission, then in one sense you're saying controlling a person, but that's when I choose to give my power up to someone to control me, but it's still my decision to give up the power. I'm the one that lets it happen, therefore, it is kind of empowering in a different way. (Michelle)

Other participants described a rather different kind of power in the experience of submission. These participants described power for them as coming from submission as a way of allowing them to experience a variety of feelings (e.g., trust, vulnerability) that for them were not possible in a more controlling posture. Laurel stated directly that "a person who is in control and has all the power, that's really, really tiring, and it also doesn't lend itself to moments of vulnerability." She expressed strongly that for her, this was a powerful experience:
I came into what I consider power, my choices and ability to determine what happens in my life and how I interact with people. I understood that I was at the bottom, and never got to experience that. So, in my current relationship I am able to surrender power in bed and let somebody else be more powerful than I am and that's more of a physical aspect of power, but it feels really good. In so doing, I feel more powerful, and it's about my power for me and not over somebody else. (Laurel)

For Laurel especially, although she was not alone, the power in submission came via freedom from a rigid, controlling approach to sex, a choice to allow herself a greater range of sexual experience, and a greater range of emotional experience along with it. She had previously described herself as locked into one way of being where sex was concerned and in many ways felt controlled by her need for control over sex. However, in making a choice to explore being submissive, she experienced power by virtue of being freed from a limiting style.

The idea of power as choice is much more consistent with the notion of "power to"—the power to achieve one's goals (Lips, 1990). It has also been considered synonymous with empowerment (Yoder & Kahn, 1992). Such power has at times been characterized as a "good" power, as it is distinguished from the power to compel and reflects instead a more liberating power to act (Janeway, 1981). However, to the extent that even our own choices have an effect on others, particularly in the context of an intimate relationship, "power to" cannot always be easily disentangled from control, nor can it simplistically be construed as unequivocally "good."

What is perhaps a greater issue however, is the extent to which the power to choose is predicated on the existence of a context or environment in which choices are respected or honoured. More so than the power as control discourse, power as choice brings back an appreciation of the relational nature of power. Thus, in some respects, the pertinent question for participants may not be how they see themselves as expressing power, whether through choice or control, but rather, what circumstances afford them the freedom to express this power. Take, for example, participants' demarcation between submission in the bedroom versus submission elsewhere in their lives. This separation may be reflective of the knowledge that in the bedroom, in their
intimate relationships, such choice is possible through the knowledge that it is respected as a choice and can be altered at will. Outside of this arena, however, participants may be less sure of whether the context is one which respects their freedom to choose, thus, necessitating more "controlling" tactics. Certainly participants did defend their intimate relationships as places where their choices were honoured and respected, this often a prime difference between their relationships with their partners as opposed to other men or men in general. Thus, what appears to be a suspicious split, submission inside but not out, may be more reflective of a difference in contexts where women's choices are respected and not. This context may, in effect make choosing submission at times sexually exciting, emotionally valuable, as in Laurel's case, and ultimately, safe.

What is curious, however, is the strength of the participants' defense of submission and the need to retain a sense of power in this through the vehicle of choice. Commonly understood, submission implies a ceding or giving up of power, but participants do not present it as such. In part, I suspect, this is a function of participants' perception of themselves as being judged for being submissive. At times they locate this judgement with "feminism," a belief that feminist theory that is critical of traditional female sex roles carries a scorn for women choosing to act in accordance with such roles. However, this judgement I would argue, also comes rather problematically from participants themselves. Their desire to be "strong" or powerful women, which for them involves resistance to normative expectations, makes submission as traditionally understood a difficult place to be. Furthermore, their situatedness in a patriarchal culture that celebrates dominance and devalues submission, further complicates this issue for participants. Thus, the defense of submission through the discourse of choice should be viewed in functional terms as a way for participants to retain power, stave off judgement, and ultimately, maintain a picture of themselves as "strong" women.

Finally, all this is undoubtedly complicated by the use of the term submission itself. Participants used the term submission to include a fairly broad range of experience, from sometimes letting their partner take control in sex to be bound and owned by a master in an ongoing sexual arrangement. Obviously, then, what submission means and the practices it reflects vary greatly across participants. One
cannot help but wonder if this is the product of a limited set of sexual scripts, and limited understanding of power within them. Specifically, it suggests a series of binarisms, active/passive, dominant/submissive, male/female and control/lack of control, that each map onto one another in a rigid fashion, leaving no room for states between the two. If one is dominant, one is in control, active, leaving submission to mean lacking in control and passive. However, is what participants describe as submission really about lacking control and passivity? They would say no, that is not their experience. This raises the issue of whether the word submission is even appropriate and if what is needed are broader and more flexible sexual scripts that understand sex and power not merely in terms of these binarisms. Rather, what may be helpful, is a new language of power and desire that better reflects the relational expression of power and the nuances of participants' sexual engagements with power.

**Controlling the Other**

In addition to speaking of power in sex in terms of choice or control of the sexual situation itself, participants also spoke of controlling their partner. In this discourse, power was expressed through the act of giving pleasure to a partner and through the seduction and desire of the other.

**Giving Pleasure**

Many participants described feeling extreme power by virtue of being in control of another's pleasure. Relating a particular sexual episode, Michelle simply said, "I felt really powerful in that moment having that person moan and whimper kind of thing." What seemed an underlying theme in much of this discourse was the notion that bringing their partner to orgasm, regardless of the method/act, was a powerful experience. It is noteworthy, however, that this discourse emerged most strongly as participants talked about oral sex. While aware of the stereotype of performing oral sex on a man as degrading, disempowering, or humiliating, participants instead emphasized their power in this. Alicia related:
It was important to me to please somebody else, to have that complete control over somebody else’s body. So, oral sex was a big thing to me, because without them invading my space, there’s a very great sense of power in being able to bring somebody to orgasm. It’s such an out of control, vulnerable state, and to have complete control over that body is a wonderful thing. If I’m giving a blow job then I feel very powerful because once again I’m in complete control of that body and he’s in a very vulnerable state. (Alicia)

Jane also stated:

I have you in the palm of my hand. I’m sorry, they’re not moving, they’re not going anywhere. We’re keeping them there. We have the control, like you said - teeth! They ain’t going no where. Who has control? What are they going to do? (Jane)

Thus, for both Alicia and Jane, the vulnerability of their partner, both in terms of physical control and risk, and the more general vulnerability associated with bringing them to orgasm was a source of power.

Alternately, the vulnerability of being brought to orgasm was also considered by one participant from the opposite vantage point. Alicia related:

Sometimes I would prevent it if I could. I would prevent him knowing whether or not I had an orgasm. I would like for him to think I haven’t when I have sometimes and that’s completely about power because when that’s something that you really, really want, because it’s a wonderful, it’s a great feeling, and I’m reliant on somebody else to do it, and they can stop at any time, that makes me uncomfortable. (Alicia)

What Alicia appears to be saying is that her own pleasure at the hands of another also implies a control or power over her. In part, Alicia’s perspective may be a function of her experience relative to many others in the study. Alicia and Laurel, both of whom were sexually abused when younger, have a slightly different perspective on sexual
power because of this. Having had their sexual power taken from them at a young age, they were well aware of the extreme importance for them of wresting back that power. Both described themselves as exercising extensive control over sex, which at times included not letting their partners bring them to orgasm, and at the same time making sure they had control over their partner's pleasure. Thus, for these participants, giving pleasure is a form of power over and receiving it, potentially allowing oneself to be controlled. Thus, their logic on the matter of power as giving pleasure is internally consistent.

However, what is perplexing is other participants' claims later on that, rather than losing power through receiving pleasure, they are in fact powerful by virtue of experiencing pleasure. This seems highly contradictory, but it may speak to different meanings associated with giving as opposed to receiving pleasure, particularly for participants without a history of sexual assault or abuse. This will be considered in greater depth in the section on Pleasure/Subjectivity.

Finally, it should also be noted that giving pleasure was not always considered to be an expression of power over one's sexual partner. Rather, in a different context, that of a loving, ongoing relationship, giving pleasure was also understood as an expression of love or caring, experienced by the giver as enjoyable rather than powerful.

**Seduction and Desire**

The vast majority of participants indicated that they felt that there was a great deal of power in seduction and being desired by another, and many women spoke about the act of seduction, or seducing another, as a powerful experience. Michelle said that "knowing that other person is going crazy or out of their mind and just completely so turned on by me gives me a total power rush." In many respects, participants used the language of desire much as Lips (1990) does, attraction as a "power resource," capable of controlling or influencing the attracted other. Commonly heard were stories like Jane's. She related, "I'd been dating one guy for a bit and I could tell that he really liked me and I felt in control in that and I felt really confident over what I could do." When asked to describe what seduction entailed, many
portrayed seduction as the manipulation of another's desires for them. One participant described the power of seduction in the ability to keep the other "off balance":

We were playing pool. I was leaving. He came over to say goodbye and he just stood there for the longest time and I finally said, are you going to kiss me or what, like kiss me or basically fuck off. So, he did and then he came back here and we talked about it and I said, no, I don't want to. Then the next time, he didn't even bother to ask, but because I did want to I instigated that sexual contact. I started to touch his leg, rub up against him, and he was a little confused as to what was going on based on our previous conversations. I took control of the situation and we fooled around and ended up going to bed, but the whole time he wasn't sure what was going to happen. His body wanted to do one thing but his mind was telling him another thing and then what I told him didn't jive with what was going on with what I was doing to his body either. So, I felt very powerful and in control of that whole situation. (Alicia)

In most instances, the power of desire and seduction was predicated on an assumption of unequal power between parties, with the individual being seduced, or experiencing desire for the other as having more interest, attraction, or greater investment than the desiree or seducer. Cecilia said:

I don't think I was really that physically attracted to him and maybe that was the nature of my feeling powerful over him. I felt that he always wanted me more than I really wanted him so I felt like I had an edge. (Cecilia)

Included in a consideration of seduction and desire, is also women's treatment of the body and clothes as instruments of seduction. Respondents explored the ways in which women's clothes and their bodies form a nexus for communication about sexuality and power. At many points, the discourses pertaining to the body and clothes were tightly interwoven. For example, particular kinds of clothing (e.g., a low cut blouse) were described very much in terms of sexual signification which in turn came from their function as revealing and concealing the body. Although certain kinds of
adornment (e.g., stilettos) could be said to have a signification on their own. One participant, who not surprisingly works as a dominatrix, expressed the relationship between clothes and power this way:

Vivian Westwood and all her little hooks and eyes, and frilly tops up to here. That's domination. That's female power. To see a woman in that traditional English garment as a school teacher or a governess, it's very erotic. (Lee)

Foxy stated this relationship more directly in saying that "sexuality to a lot of women is sex and how they wear their clothing." Female bodies were described in a similar way:

The woman does not understand how much power she has. Female sexuality, it's the most powerful force on the planet. I mean millions and billions of dollars are spent every year on promoting the female sexual image. It's powerful, it sells, it sells a lot. Female images sell more than male images, female images on a car, not a male lying on a car. (Lee)

To return to a consideration of seduction and desire, what participants' described was choosing to use their clothes and bodies as a way of seducing or influencing men. Jane described it this way:

My best friend, she's short, she's got the biggest boobs I've ever seen and she plays on it so bad, if we go out, it's low cut...we all play on different things, she's short, she plays on her cleavage, and she'll wear low cut tops and what not and I'm taller and wear skirts, it's weird that way, everybody plays on what they've got. (Jane)

Such strategies were used in a wide variety of contexts with men, whether it involved getting better tips as a waitress, having drinks bought for them at a bar, or getting a man in bed. Not only did participants describe gaining power by achieving a desired outcome, they more often located their power in having actively chosen to use such forms of influence.
To examine this section in greater depth, it would be difficult to deny that desire is a form of power, or a power resource as Lips (1990) describes it. To the extent that participants are desired, they have a form of power. This same power may also work against them, as they can be the “victims” of desire as well, although, as considered later, participants don’t see themselves as victims of sexual desire so much as victims of emotional desire.

To this I must add, however, a personal reaction to participants descriptions of seduction, that is something along the lines of “egads, that sounds so manipulative!” That may reflect a discomfort with women outrightly exercising power, something that at least Lips (1990) suggests is considered “distasteful” given our social understandings of female gender roles as inconsistent with an orientation toward power, and especially sexual agency. However, I suspect my reaction comes more from the feeling that such accounts paint the woman as the stereotypical seductress, manipulating poor hapless men, a process made easy by men’s obviously overwhelming sexual appetites and pitiable inability to resist such temptation. In this way, such accounts would seem to support a problematic constitution of both male and female natures. In fact, a few participants did voice similar concerns. One could argue that such stereotypes function precisely to discredit and make problematic women’s sexual power or agency and as such, buying into them (although in this case I’m uncertain who is doing the “buying”) in effect lessens women’s sexual power. However, participants do not understand it this way. Rather, they see using male desire as a way of hoisting men on their own petard. In other words, if men understand themselves as being led by their sexual desires, then we should take full opportunity to do the leading.

It should also be noted, however, that seduction/desire also has limits in a more general sense as a strategy of power. Lips (1990) suggests that attraction as a resource is limited by one’s ability to attract (often a function of youth or natural endowment within a prevailing cultural aesthetic) which alone makes it risky if it is one’s sole form of power. As discussed in the final section of this chapter, the limits of this strategy are acknowledged by older participants. To this I would add also that some participants acknowledged that the power of attraction or seduction is also shifty as it is predicated on the response of another. If the other does not respond, then as a source of power, it falls flat. This in effect draws attention back to the ways in which power,
although constructed often by participants as a resource, is more properly considered a relation. Thus, while one may choose to use such forms of influence or power, this alone does not determine the efficacy of this strategy.

Challenges to Control/Choice

Alongside descriptions of how they experience themselves as powerful and in control, there was also some mention of how participants have felt powerless. While obvious experiences of abuse and rape were indicative of powerlessness, what came across most strongly in women’s accounts was the ways in which a variety of other factors serve to interfere with this and have challenged their sense of personal control. The discourse on emotions will consider one area where participants were less sure of their personal power. As will be discussed later, this represents a difficult contradiction to the extent that emotions are seen as coming from within the individual yet outside of their personal control. Also considered in this section are participants’ accounts of power within their intimate relationships, a context that often defies the straightforward expression of more traditional forms of power. Finally, the body, more specifically the pre-discursive body, is also treated as a site where power is limited by the very nature of the body itself.

Emotions

For many participants, emotions were characterized as a barrier to control or choice in a sexual situation. In many ways, this discourse appeared as the flip side of the discourse of controlling the other through desire and seduction. In short, if being desired sexually by another was considered by many women to be a form of power and control, having emotional desires, or feelings for someone else, was often experienced as a major source of disempowerment. While participants did not often explicitly distinguish between emotional desire and sexual desire as distinct entities, neither did they outrightly claim sexual desire as a component of the romantic or emotional. Much of the discourse however, did seem to allude to sexual desire and emotions as being somewhat opposed, particularly when considered as gendered concepts. To look at
this another way, many participants seemed to imply that men lose power through their sexual desire for women, while women lose power through their emotional desires. In this way, sexual desire was coded as a more masculine “vice”, while for women, emotional desire or having emotions for another was experienced as problematic.

Some expressed the loss of power through emotion in terms of a scenario where they “thought” they were just dating casually or having sex for mere bodily gratification, but upon “realizing” that they actually had feelings for the individual, began to experience what felt like powerlessness. Jane related:

The guy I’m dating now, it started out as what I thought was casual sex. I thought I can do this, this is just, I don’t know, body gratification, this is nothing, he’s cool, he’s a friend, and I’m in control of this. Then I found out I liked him and you think you have the power and sometimes you realize you don’t a little bit later when you look back. (Jane)

Others spoke of disempowerment stemming from the experience of emotions as making them act in a way that is inconsistent with their experience of themselves outside of the relationship,

I feel like those emotions make me act in a way that I normally wouldn’t behave. I’ve always suspected that I will try and be the person that they want me to be. Or the sense that if I really like somebody I turn into this wilty, soppy person. (Victoria)

or in taking their focus away from their life priorities:

The only time I’d say I feel like I lose power is when all of a sudden I do the, “oh my god, he’s so amazing, I couldn’t get him”, that kind of thing. “Oh I can’t go talk to him, I couldn’t do that” Or when you want that guy to call so bad that it disrupts your working pattern or your lifestyle because that person, that anticipation for that person to call or to see him or whatever disrupts other positive things in your life then everything gets negative. That’s when I feel a
loss of power. (Michelle)

When examined more closely, the lack of power in much of this discourse seemed to come from a place of not knowing whether their partner shared these same desires. Hence, the problem was not one of emotion per se, but rather, a fear of unreciprocated emotion as this quote suggested:

I know that I can be really intense and kind of scary and it's frustrating cause that's only one side of my personality. It's the side that tends to come out when I'm in a relationship that I don't feel is really stable, or in the initial stages of I really, really like this person and I really want us to stay together. So I'm trying to figure out if that's really how I feel or if it's just those initial stages which tend to be the most exciting. It's like I really like this person but I don't know if they like me. (Victoria)

In a slightly different vein, another participant spelled this out more clearly when she stated that emotions were not the problem as they could be a very good part of a relationship, but rather, insecurity was the issue:

It's not emotions, it's insecurity. When your insecurities are involved then I feel powerless. To me that explains it all, key word is insecurity. If I just want that guy to call and I really like him and I'm hoping to god he likes me and I'm insecure because I don't know, I feel powerless. (Michelle)

The discourse pertaining to emotion is a particularly tricky one for participants, and incidentally, for myself as well. What complicates matters is the extent to which emotions are felt to have a physiological base, to be experienced at the level of the body, yet arguably such reactions are elicited within specific context and interpreted within a broader social frame. Within the context of intimate relationships, one script that is particularly relevant is the romantic script. When participants stated that men are motivated by sex and women by emotion, not only do we run headlong into gender socialization, but we are also confronted by a romantic script that specifies the ways in
which intimate sexual relationships are played out. Emotions within the romantic script are understood as "carrying one away," this script normalizes passive yearning particularly, although not exclusively, on the part of women. Segal (1997) targets the cultural image of women in romantic fiction as particularly problematic for women's sense of their own agency and control.

In addition to this, the experience of emotion is also filtered through a social discourse that interprets emotional expression as a loss of control and a cultural value system that privileges rationality above emotionality. In fact, participants are aware of this, as will be seen in the section on Power and the Social. However, what is less appreciated by many participants seems to be the fact that this is doubly pernicious for women who, being socialized toward emotionality, are also told that this very trait is in fact indicative of weakness of powerlessness. Thus, I would suggest that in part it is this particular double bind that contributes to participants' perception of emotion as disempowering.

That said, it is also important to acknowledge that within an intimate context, emotions do often render us vulnerable, whether or not we choose to interpret that as loss of control or power. At the same time, it is often these same emotional connections that can make intimate relationships places of respect, caring, love and even an equal sharing of power, where Lips (1990) locates the potential for a different kind of power relationship between men and women. This is perhaps hinted at when participants suggest that emotion is not a problem, that in the right (i.e., legitimate) context they can be a source of power and enjoyment. Once again, the importance of the context comes through, and as participants consider their own relationships as one specific context for power relations, this is further underscored.

Relationships

While not necessarily a barrier to control/choice, participants' accounts of their own experience in their relationships certainly provided a place where hard and fast rules and relations of power were more difficult to discern. When describing the working of power in their intimate relationships with men, most participants reported a subjective experience of the balance of power being highly fluid and context
dependent. Wendy stated this broadly when she said “Power depends on the people involved, the aims of the people involved and circumstances and every other variable that could come along.” Participants readily acknowledged that particularly with relationships or interpersonal dynamics, power can be quite malleable. Cecilia’s experience was not an uncommon one:

That relationship quickly went through a kind of power flip where I became very enamored of him and as soon as I started getting really into him he started losing interest and the whole thing. Literally within weeks it was totally turned on its head and I just completely lost all power in the relationship. (Cecilia)

Victoria also spoke to the fluid, changing nature of power in relationships:

I think that’s where the issue of power becomes really complex. In personal relationships, in different situations, at different times, different people seem to have more power over the situation. (Victoria)

In exploring the nature of this fluidity, Zoe considered the extent to which power in relationships is not merely the sum total of individual power resources, but part and parcel of the relation itself. She put it this way:

Power comes from another person’s desire to give us that power. The only reason that I have that kind of control in our relationship is because he wants to give it to me and if he didn’t want to give it to me I’d probably turn around and slam the door in his face and tell him where to go. In our relationship he wants to give me that power. He respects me enough to give me that power and the only reason he has any power in our relationship is because I give it to him cause if I didn’t he’d walk away. (Zoe)

On the other hand, some participants chose to bypass the notion of power altogether and instead presented a vision of relationships as founded on “equality” as opposed to power. Lee described her relationship the following way:
I try not to think about power in my personal life. In my personal life I think of equality. I think that one hand shakes the other. If you give to me I'm going to reciprocate. If you treat me well, I'll treat you well. If you hit me, I'll hit you back. (Lee)

What is somewhat curious about these accounts however, is the extent to which power is still implied, despite the use of terms like "equality" or "reciprocity." What is equality if not an equal sharing of power? This was perhaps clearer in Jane's words:

It's really strange, but I like it. It's kind of an equal feeling. I don't feel in control of him. I feel like it's kind of back and forth. It's give and take power, a give and take thing. (Jane)

What is most important to note about this section is that, unlike some other discourses, participants are speaking directly about power in their current intimate relationships. As such, this has a significantly different flavour than when participants speak of "men" as a group, or past relationships, or less emotionally invested ones. What emerges however, is a more complicated picture of power. It is described by participants as highly context dependent, fluid and generally less of an issue. Most participants were in fact hesitant to speak of power as operating within their relationships and we can consider possible reasons for this.

One could interpret this in terms of an unwillingness or inability to consider how power might be operating even in one's intimate relationships. For example, the questionable claim that "equality" somehow removes power from the equation might be taken as a desire to ignore the presence of particular power relations. However, participants were able to enumerate the many different kinds of power possessed by both themselves and their partners. What was unique about their intimate relationships, I would suggest, is the context. Unlike the broader social arena, this context is one in which there is a desire or motivation to share power, respect the choices of the other, make use of one's own power, not in order to better one's own position, but to further the joint goals of the partnership. This was certainly suggested by participants themselves. Although I might be accused of waxing poetic about the
nature of intimate relationships, I must admit to sharing with Lips (1990) the conviction that such a context is one where in fact male domination may be transcended. What happens in such a context is not that power disappears, but that when shared it becomes less of an issue, more invisible and hence, less theorized. What this may point to is a need to direct attention to contexts and ways in which such power sharing can be achieved.

The Pre-Discursive Body

In considering the body, some participants also examined this from a more theoretical perspective, specifically the extent to which potentially pre-discursive realities impact on women's lived experience. As Suzette put it, "Women can't deny their nature I suppose, but it doesn't have to rule us." Although participants were not completely deterministic in this regard, they did struggle with the ways in which certain biological realities may hold a power that is beyond our control. Many women acknowledged that women's bodies, particularly their reproductive capacity made an impact on their sexual lives and their experience of power. Suzette, for example, spoke of her more empowered sexual experience with a man who had had a vasectomy:

I'm going back to my last long term relationship. It was 5 years and he had a vasectomy, which was really good. I always wanted a man with a vasectomy, and I still always do. If I was a man I would be the leader of the male vasectomy movement. That was pretty cool, no worries. It's not like he did it for me but partially he sort of did. It wasn't like I said you get that or I won't have sex, but it was sort of for me too because he did have genuine compassion for the plight of women in terms of birth control. (Suzette)

For many, the potential for pregnancy and avoidance thereof, and the responsibility for birth control, all had a profound impact on their sexual power. In short, pregnancy was a reality for many that they considered a constant presence threatening to challenge their own sense of personal power and control over their own lives. At a more squarely theoretical level, Cecilia put it this way:
This sounds kind of bizarre but sometimes I think wow, isn't it amazing that at the end of the 20th century women are still having periods! It just seems old fashioned. It doesn't fit in with the theory. It just seems strange to me somehow that we have all this theory, that we get a certain way along the line with playing and troubling and all that kind of stuff, and then at the end of the day you're still lying on your back with your feet in stirrups screaming your head off as your parasite [laughter] is being extracted out of you. (Cecilia)

In short, what this participant seems to be saying is that despite our efforts to reconstruct the body through theoretical discourse certain pre-discursive realities continue to exist, at least in the practical experience of many women, realities that challenge women's sense of their own power. While the existence of the pre-discursive body, a body existing prior to and outside of the discourse we use to know it, has been hotly debated, many theorists (e.g., Segal, 1994) continue to warn that forgetting the biological reality of women's bodies may be dangerous. Cecilia, as one who is familiar with this literature, puts it very clearly. While we can interpret, inscribe, or signify the body any way we choose, this does little to change the reality some women's bodies menstruate, ovulate, and gestate. While the meaning of bodily functions is undoubtedly socially derived and obviously pregnancy can be prevented, despite sexual scripts and moral prescriptions that complicate matters, this is not the issue. Rather, what is the issue is whether the biological reality of women's bodies, however interpreted, the biological capacity for pregnancy, for example, places limits or alters women's sense or exercise of their sexual power.

**Pleasure/Subjectivity**

In claiming power in their sexual relationships, participants also relied on notions of pleasure and subjectivity. I would like to begin this section by considering a quote from Jane that encapsulated both ideas. She stated:

I think if this is going to feel good and that's going to pleasure me, I think I have the power. You can't tell me what's going to please me, I know what pleases
me and if I'm going to dominate him and it's not going to do anything for me... What you like is what you like and what you get off on is what you get off on and if you come out of it feeling good, I don't feel there's a lack of control. Nobody can tell you how to feel. (Jane)

What Jane's quote implies is the link between power, pleasure and her own subjective experience, and she is not alone in considering this link an important one.

**Feeling Good**

When asked to comment on whether or not there were specific power differentials associated with various sex acts, the general response was that the precise nature of the sex act was irrelevant. Rather, what was important was the experience of the act. Thus, most expressed scepticism over finding problematic that which is experienced as pleasurable or affirming, some claiming that such experiences of pleasure were indicative of power itself.

In considering a range of intercourse positions from "missionary-" to "doggy-style", as well as the specific experience of sexual submission, most participants described having felt powerful in these positions, but situated this in the experience of the act rather than in the act per se. For example, as Alicia related it, problems occur not with the act itself but with how it makes her feel:

> Being on top is a good position for me. I like being on the bottom as long as there's some attention being paid to the rest of my body, I don't like to be just a vagina lying there. (Alicia)

Jane more explicitly linked power to pleasure in this quote:

> I think if this is going to feel good and that's going to pleasure me, I think I have the power... What you like is what you like and what you get off on is what you get off on and if you come out of it feeling good, I don't feel there's a lack of control. (Jane)
In both quotes, what appears constant is the contention that if a particular act or experience feels alright or feels good, then it is not problematic, and for Jane it is indicative of feeling powerful.

Unlike Jane, however, when remarking on a particular sexual position, Alicia stated that this act had in fact nothing to do with power. Of a particular sexual act she said, “that is my favourite and that is not about power that is about pure satisfaction and that is complete pleasure for me.” What this suggests is that perhaps pleasure is in some measure beyond mere tit for tat understandings of sexual power. Taken as a whole, what is curious about these statements is that they imply either that pleasure is power or that pleasure is beyond power. While this may seem to be a contradiction, it is perhaps sufficient to say that both statements share the functional concern of moving pleasure out of an arena of critique or out of the realm of the problematic.

In considering anal sex, the equation of power and pleasure remained, although from the opposite direction. A number of participants felt that anal sex was unlikely to ever be powerful for women, citing for a reason their suspicion of a next to zero chance of their experiencing pleasure as a result of anal sex. From this vantage point, if one partner only could take pleasure from an act (the man) then it was by definition not empowering or powerful for women. Jane stated:

For once I’m almost embarrassed to say something but I’ll say it. I would definitely see anal sex as really domineering. The guy has power. I don’t believe there’s any way that the girl can have power in that situation, cause I don’t think that would be pleasurable, so it’s one sided completely and I honestly think they know that. There’s no pleasure involved, it’s not a two way thing, it’s a one way thing, cause I don’t how a girl could be happy about that. (Jane)

In reading the results of this research, however, Suzette wished to include a different perspective on anal sex. She said “If it wasn’t for anal sex I might not have found my ‘G spot’...Some of the most intense orgasms have been via anal sex accompanied with vaginal fingering.” While Suzette certainly links anal sex to pleasures, she does not address any particular connection to power.
Many other participants also drew attention to the ways in which they had more generally experienced enjoyment and gratification from a positive focus on their bodies, an enjoyment that felt powerful to many. Of one relationship, a participant said:

One of the things that was good about that relationship was just that out of all the relationships I’ve had it was the relationship where my body felt very central. I’m not a small person and I was even larger then, and I felt that he really kind of, in a quite poetic way, enjoyed my body and it made me feel quite happy with who I was. (Cecilia)

She also related her positive feelings to this experience:

Maybe because for so much of my teenage years I’d never really felt a part of that whole objectification of women thing. I always felt like the person who walked past the building site and didn’t get whistled at [laughter]. So, to be the centre of someone’s visual attention felt extremely lovely. It didn’t feel problematic. (Cecilia)

A related theme was that of being powerful when “feeling better” about their bodies, specifically when their bodies are more like their ideal and hence, more desirable. Tara related:

Power comes in in this one, we’d been married 12 years and been together for 15, but when I lost the weight it was like a total, he couldn’t leave me alone. It’s like, what, because you were a few pounds heavier you were a different person than you are cause you lost the weight? You could look at it that way or you could look at it where I’m happier with myself so I am more confident with myself so I feel better about myself so I’m acting different, but there is that double thing there. (Tara)

Although the experience of power in this instance may be related to the ability to create desire in a partner, Tara, for one, suggests that instead it comes from her own feelings
about herself.

What remained harder to tease apart in these accounts, however, is the precise relationship between pleasure and power. In many respects, there is no "necessary" connection between pleasure and power. Jane links the two through the concept of "getting what you want," the implication being that since pleasure is what is desired, by getting that, one is powerful. Of a particular sexual pleasure she said "come on, that's powerful, you're getting what you want, pleasure is power." Nonetheless, the connection between two remains somewhat fuzzy.

In addition to the questionable logic of pleasure=power, there are other points worthy of critique. In a theoretical light, some feminist theory has called into question the extent to which even pleasure could be socially constructed. In short, feeling pleasure, whether it is pleasure in sex or the appreciation of one's body, is not considered indicative of power. Rather, it is theorized to be reflective of the ways in which dominance and submission have been eroticized. The pleasure experienced in sex, in submission, under the approving eye of the male gaze, speaks instead to an eroticization of powerlessness where women's sexual experience is concerned.

Needless to say, Jane for one would disagree with this interpretation. In part, her disagreement stems from a particular perspective on the source of pleasure that will be considered in the section on Knowing the Self, Knowing Desire.

As previously alluded to, what is also curious is the way in which participants claim that in giving pleasure to their partners they experience power or control over them. Yet, here what also appears to be said is that receiving pleasure, rather than being experienced as power over, is instead a power for the self. How can this be? It is tempting to consider that while pleasing the other is construed in terms of a relation, that the pleasure one receives or experiences is removed from a relational context. It becomes something of the self, for the self, within the self—it cannot lie and it certainly cannot be interpreted otherwise. The very notion of pleasure as problematic or deceptive is difficult to conceive of.

Jeffreys' (1990) contribution may shed some light on this issue. She speaks of there being no language in which to consider sexual pleasure that is not good. More specifically, what Jeffreys suggests is that libertarian theorists have made an unproblematic connection between arousal=pleasure=good/revolutionary. From this
framework, there is no language, for example, to understand arousal experienced during rape as negative or not pleasurable. In short, she calls into question the equation of arousal = pleasure and reminds the reader that “the body is capable of physiological responses quite unconnected with an emotional state of ‘pleasure’ “ (Jeffreys, 1990, p. 305). Thus, at times arousal can be associated with pleasure, but at other times the same bodily arousal can be associated with more negative affect. In turn, Jeffreys’ analysis provides a framework for the “apparent” contradiction of participants’ understanding of being brought to orgasm or a state of arousal by their male partners as both positive/pleasurable and/or negative (e.g., being controlled). Whether Jeffreys would consider participants’ accounts of arousal, experienced as positive, as examples of power I am not sure. However, what this draws attention to is not the need to forego pleasure, so much as it begs us to ask different kinds of questions about pleasure and arousal. For example, we must ask under what circumstances is arousal pleasurable? In what contexts is arousal experienced as positive?

Knowing the Self, Knowing Desire

The previous section is an interesting one, particularly because it is predicated on a number of assumptions regarding knowing the self and knowing desire. These assumptions in turn are undergirded by recourse to the concept of subjectivity. In point of fact, this represents participants’ ontological and epistemological constitution of the self and ways of knowing the self. Although restricted here to the notion of desire, it also broadly applies to the earlier concepts of control, choice, etc., asking as it does, in effect, where the seat of agency rests?

At the beginning of this section, Jane stated unequivocally “nobody can tell you how to feel.” What appears to be behind Jane’s words is an insistence on the primacy of her own experience of herself, her pleasures, and her desires, in short, her own subjectivity, as the ultimate arbiter of truth in her world. It implies that both the self and one’s own desires are known through subjective experience which, and this is most crucial, can be severed from the complicating effects of pressures emanating from outside the self. The self is seen as contained and determined by internal drives and
motives, a perspective I have elsewhere referred to as psychological essentialism. It also implies a naturalized desire. In making this claim, Jane and other participants are in effect shoring up the boundary between the personal and the social, most prominently where pleasure is concerned.

In regard to subjectivity and the self, participants spoke of the importance of knowing one's own desires both erotically and more generally. Knowing desire was expressed in terms of knowing oneself in an entirely non-sexual way, including knowing one's emotions, needs, and goals, particularly outside of the context of a relationship. Closely aligned with this idea was the concept of self-esteem. In a sense, self-esteem was thought to involve not just knowing oneself, but also believing in oneself, one's worth, abilities, and capacities. Many participants stated that as long as women had poor self-esteem, they could not be powerful.

In a more sexual sense, participants' also spoke of coming to know one's own erotic desires, or in effect, coming to know their sexual selves. Again, desire was seen to come from within the self. For example, Lee described sex as an essential part of who we are, a general aspect of human nature:

> There are a lot of people out there that can't get laid, and that plays an important part in their emotional makeup. Whether they're going to be good producers in society, productive. Whether they're going to have a good attitude or they're going to be sex maniacs cause they're so deprived. So, yes, it makes the world go around, it's our living, breathing essence. (Lee)

Such notions more or less adhere to a drive model of sexuality, suggesting that the impulse to be sexual or to engage in sexual activity is a biological imperative. In keeping with a biological basis of sexuality was the not infrequent invocation of hormones as a basis for sexual desire.

In a theoretical vein, one participant lamented the fact that very little literature exists that deals with women's desire, especially where men are concerned:

> I just wanted to make this point, about this study in particular, is it looks at women's desire and power finally. That's always been such a tricky thing for
feminist theory. How do we sexually, how do our desires and connections and relationships with men fit into the whole independent, autonomous, individual thing? Any kind of theory that I've seen doesn't really touch on female desire and our position with our own desires. We read a lot about sexuality and there's a lot of material about being lesbian and the prejudices and things like that but there's nothing that directly deals with our desire as women and how we deal with that. (Alicia)

According to this participant, the bulk of theory has focused on delineating what are not legitimate desires for women, rather than exploring desire in a more positive or affirming fashion.

Almost in answer to this, a number of other participants identified the need for women to understand their desire, what they wanted, what gave them pleasure, and many felt this to be a path to sexual power. Routes for so doing were commonly identified when participants were asked what they would tell other women if given a chance to teach them how to be powerful in their sexual relationships. This was often linked to discourse on masturbation as an important way of coming to know that which is sexually pleasurable for the self. Althea related her experience and her opinion about the matter:

I think you have to know how to give yourself an orgasm in order to understand sexual power, I had to teach my friend how to give herself an orgasm. She had slept with 59 men and never had an orgasm. You know why she was sleeping with 59 men? Because she wanted someone to give her an orgasm...I had my first orgasm very young, I was listening to Doctor Ruth and she was instructing somebody and I figured, I might as well try, and I was like, woah, woo, this is a lot better than Johnny's hand up my top (Althea)

In a similar way, knowing one's own desire through masturbation was seen as highly important to having one's desires met in coupled sex as well. Kimbi stated, "I had had sex before I had masturbated so when the guy couldn't make me cum it was no big surprise cause I hadn't even figured out how to do that myself." Knowing one's desires
was also described in terms of a broader exploration of sensual pleasure, not limited to masturbation or penetrative sex as this participant advocated:

I think self-discovery, that's where it starts, looking at the higher aspects of your existence, it's not necessarily just having the old in and out. It could mean having a friend come over and put you into bondage and blind fold you and maybe just breathe on you. Just to feel something different. (Lee)

Throughout this discourse, it is unclear whether participants make a separation between a sexual drive, the urge to be sexual, and sexual desire, the form or direction sexual drives take. This lack of separation may be at least one reason why participants were less likely, given an essentialist view of drive, to consider how desire itself might be socialized. Nor were most participants given to doubting the veracity of their subjective experience as reflective of a genuine, authentic, and ultimately, agentic self.

Commentary: Power and the Personal

In considering the theme of power and the personal, a number of interesting questions come to light. First and foremost, the notion of personal power begs the question of opposition, or more specifically a consideration of what makes claiming personal power difficult. That certain forces were thought to be at work to stop them from being personally powerful was evident — the very need for personal control itself can be seen as testimony to "something" seeking to challenge that control — and the following discourse of power as the social was set up in opposition to power and the personal. What is striking however, is that even in the face of a large discourse pertaining to social power, the majority of participants were absolutely stalwart in the belief in their capacity to control their own lives. In short, they perceived themselves to have a strong and absolute degree of personal power both in sexual and non-sexual contexts. Through recourse to notions of subjectivity and psychological essentialism, participants understood many facets of their experience (e.g., sexual pleasure) as fundamentally emergent from the self and beyond social influence. Alternatively, few considered whether their power, rather than being internally derived, was perhaps
accorded them by virtue of race, class, education, and the like. What can be made of this?

Traditional psychological literature might interpret this as a function of an internal locus of control (Rotter, 1966) – that these individuals have a belief in their ability to direct their own lives, that their actions are self-determined rather than influenced by external circumstances, and a need to approach their lives in such a manner. Outward personal control, then, becomes an epiphenomenon of a general internal psychological predisposition toward control. However, such purely psychological explanations can be criticized for overlooking the larger social and cultural context within which such "personality styles" emerge.

In looking at the composition of this sample of participants, it is notable that they can be contextualized as predominantly white, heterosexual, educated, and of at least middle class background. What this suggests, perhaps, is that this group’s strong belief in their capacity for self-direction and control may be a function of their membership in groups that are already accorded a fair degree of relative power within this cultural context. Thus, these participants may well be describing a power that they have, albeit based in systemic power differences, rather than mistakenly ascribing power to themselves where none exists. In short, they have the power of privilege. To the extent that this group of women does enjoy certain kinds of privileges that afford them specific controls over their lives, one would do well to ask whether the understanding of power and personal control forwarded by these participants would have meaning for other groups of women with less social privilege? Although broad generalization was not the goal of this research, I would suspect that other groups of women would, in fact, have a different understanding of power. This raises the accompanying issue of generalizeability and the need for a more fully stratified sample that will be discussed in greater depth in the Implications and Conclusions section.

Despite what personal power they may have by virtue of social privilege, however, the flavour of much of the participants’ discourse is of a hard won battle. Many participants described themselves as claiming their personal power against the odds, rather than cresting a wave of privilege and they experienced the process as such. It would be possible to interpret this as a function of a lack of awareness of one’s
own privileged position and the power accorded to it, but I would prefer to bracket this explanation for a moment to consider another alternative.

Another approach to this theme is to examine the extent to which it is consistent with, and situated within a particular cultural and social ethos. Despite the suggestion of a postmodern society, our cultural tide is infused with the tenets of liberalism and individualism and the many derivatives thereof. Liberalism, including liberal feminism, is predicated on the notion of individual choice and power as exerted through that choice. The emphasis is on rights and there is perhaps a tendency to overlook the unevenness of the terrain on which different groups of individuals are forced to make choices. Liberalism is also consistent with an ethic of the individual. Individualism locates agency within the individual, and privileges the individual above the social or communal (Sampson, 1977). Recent social movements predicated on identity politics have, to a certain extent, adopted liberalism and individualism as guiding principles, as has feminist organizing emphasizing women's right to choose as an antidote to overcoming oppression. As well, the rise of a therapeutic culture, including "therapeutic feminism," is consistent with the location of power and change within the individual. All that said, it would appear to be plausible to locate participants' emphasis on power as personal control as a function of their position within their cultural and social context.

Critics of liberal feminism (Kitzinger, 1991) have considered the extent to which such a stance locates the solution to social problems within the individual, and have questioned the extent to which it is based on the assumption of a troublesome person/society dichotomy, one undoubtedly present in my participants' accounts, that presumes an individual capable of agency outside of a larger social system. Such a critique is easily extended to liberalism and individualism more broadly. This is also consistent with a radical feminist critique that questions the extent to which we are able to truly make choices of our own free will within the context of a patriarchally constructed world view, and whether even our very pleasures are in fact of our own design (Dworkin, 1987; Jeffreys, 1990; MacKinnon, 1987).

So what of the women in this study? There is certainly some evidence to suggest that they are perhaps less than ideally aware of the larger forces that may be affecting their choices, although by no means are they unaware of these forces as the subsequent discourse on power and the social will show. Are they unaware of their
own positions of privilege? Perhaps, and this will be considered in detail when examining the notion of sexual identity. Are they products of a culture steeped in liberalism and individualism? Undoubtedly. However, what I will argue in the final segment of this paper is that many of these women, by embracing a notion of power as personal control, have chosen the only position on power available to them that affords them any possibility of power and resistance. If one were to assume that our capacity to choose were wholly bounded by the reality under which our choices are created, for example, a patriarchal reality, what power do we have? For most women, very little, an idea that sounds uncomfortably like behaviourism, and a world view that would be intolerable for many. What I would like to forward then, in part, is the hypothesis that the discourse of power and the personal reflects a positional, functional and strategic understanding of power for these participants that is immediately useful to them. This will be considered in greater depth in the Implications and Conclusions segment of this paper.
Power and the Social

In addition to considering their own personal base of power, participants also spent time examining the ways in which their lives and sexual choices are affected by forces emanating from a social level. Power at this level was seen as beyond individual control, although capable of being resisted at an individual level. This perspective was most commonly seen as participants examined their experience relative to men as a group, or with the larger society as a whole. Many of the notions expressed herein are also more consistent with radical feminist critique of systemic or institutionally based power differences, as well as a constructivist stance that suggests that the self is constituted through engagement at the level of the social. From a theoretical perspective, it also speaks to the need for analysis of heterosex in terms of identity and structure (Jackson, 1996) and power at the level of the institutional and collective (Lips, 1990). In general, participants identified three broad ways in which power was seen to operate at the level of the social, specifically through pressure to conform, social signification and institutional power.

Pressure to Conform

In comparing their lived experience to the expectations placed on them by a larger social system, participants readily identified pressures to conform to a variety of norms relevant to power and sexuality. Especially salient for participants were the themes of Gender Roles, Sexual Scripts, Ideal Bodies, and Feminism, each of which will be highlighted in this section.

Gender Roles

Running through much of this discourse was a recognition of socially dictated roles for women, both in terms of sexual and gendered behaviours. Although participants stated that such roles could be resisted at the level of the individual, most acknowledged the extent to which the pressure to conform to sex congruent roles had been a reality for them, often influencing them in unexpected ways.
Without question, all of the participants in the study were well versed in the gender role expectations of the society in which we live. They described having been socialized into these roles and drew attention in particular to women's socialization into passivity including sexual passivity. Laurel described her experience growing up:

It wasn't just the sexual abuse that formed my sense of power around sex. I grew up in a very traditional household and gender roles were so distinct. My mother was the typical mom who literally wore pearls and skirts to vacuum. My father had an extra-marital affair and my mother fell apart. It was so confusing cause she told me we're nothing without him, I'm nothing without him...I could run faster than any boy on my street, but when I started to notice that the other girls were getting kissed because they got caught I would slow down. I'd kind of dilute myself down, dilute that sense of power down constantly. (Laurel)

Even those participants who were less sure that this socialization into sex congruent gender roles had been successful were nonetheless painfully aware of what was considered "appropriate" behaviour for women from the messages around them. Kimbi described a "message" from her mother:

I'd hear this little voice in my head that said, well, if you give the milk away who needs to buy the cow?, sort of thing. Any good woman wouldn't just give it away all the time. My mother sneaking around in the background about being a little too loose which is why no one will respect you if you're too loose. (Kimbi)

Lee described learning about her role as a woman from her religious upbringing:

Getting back into the power and control thing, the only place that I went wrong was that bloody, fucking religion that said if you act this way you're going to go to hell. You're supposed to listen to your husband and I believed that I was supposed to be submissive. It took me a long time to realize that. It took drugs, alcohol, abuse, not just self-abuse but having other people abuse me before I woke up one morning and said I'm not going to take it any more. This is going
to change and the best way to do that is to take control. (Lee)

Given their knowledge of expected patterns of behaviour for women, participants also saw themselves as struggling to know how to be in relation to such expectations. Laurel spoke earlier of how she would “dilute that sense of power down,” choosing to run slower in order to be kissed by neighbourhood boys. Other participants gave examples of how they “sold out” at times, to reap the benefits associated with gender role congruence. Here is Leslie’s story about that:

I have an example of selling out. I sold out in grade 12. I really liked this guy, D, and I had just won the math award and this guy is two seats up and I really, really liked him, so I turned back and I asked him if he knew how to do question so and so. We ended up going out and to this day it riddles me that I sold out and I knew I sold out. It bothers me to this day, the inauthenticity of it. That was the only time in my life. Even at work, if it gets me in trouble I won’t sell out. I won’t nod and agree to things I don’t agree with. (Leslie)

Many participants also described ways in which their lived experience did not accord with their gender roles. In other words, they knew that they did not always act and/or experience themselves as acting in a typically feminine way. Instead, numerous examples were given of how women experienced themselves as acting in more “typically masculine” ways. Laurel compared herself to her partner and said:

He’s tried to hang pictures and ended up putting five holes in the wall, but I love handy stuff, so that’s my role in our household, anything that needs to be built or fixed or whatever, that’s me. Sometimes, we laugh about it, but sometimes while I’m doing stuff like that I feel really cool, but it’s odd by society’s standards and I am aware of that, and interestingly enough, more around other women than men. (Laurel)

While excelling at stereotypically masculine pursuits was often a source of some pride for many women, like Laurel they also acknowledged some discomfort in this,
particularly when confronted with other women whose behaviour was more sex congruent. Again this speaks to the subtle and not so subtle rewards/punishments for gender congruence and non-congruence.

The one participant of Jamaican descent also explored gender roles through her own racial experience. From her viewpoint, the Black community is different, particularly with regard to gender roles in the home. Specifically, this participant felt that, unlike Whites, women are the backbone of Black families, who, while often staying at home, hold much stronger positions of power within the home. Black women are cast as disciplinarians and as directors of all that goes on in the home. She described being raised in a Black family this way:

Black men are raised by Black women...we know we have to be the backbone, that's just what it comes down to, we have to be there backing up our men and our women and our children. We have to attach to everyone's spine. (Foxy)

In addition to seeing Black women as the "backbone" of the family, Foxy also described how Black women in general have been more active and less traditional than their white counterparts:

We've always been seen as the feisty ones, the ones who are always rolling their neck and snapping their fingers and have nothing good to say. We've always had that kind of boost in energy, you know, don't mess with her. We've always been out there, with the 'fros and big lips and fist. We've been there and everyone has seen us and they know what we're capable of. (Foxy)

Most women were also readily able to provide opinions and examples of men adhering to traditional norms of typically masculine behaviour. Leslie provided one take on men's sexual nature:

They're big seeping hormones. I think men are socialized to be that way and I think there's also a biological difference in terms of drive. I think women's drives look different and probably surface differently than men's drives. I think it's
nature/nurture again around sexual drive, but there's got to be some nature in there around drive. (Leslie)

Sophie also spoke to her perception of men as willing to "sleep with anything" and said, "it took me a decade to realize that most guys will sleep with anything, you know, it's like nobody let me in on this secret." Other participants spoke of men as less emotionally invested in sex as Tara suggested:

Men treat sex differently. They can have sex with a woman and not have any feelings toward that person or hide the feelings or whatever, or act like there's nothing there but we, most of us, I don't think all women, but most of us have to have some kind of emotional thing happening. (Tara)

While considering the image of the "new age guy", who purportedly wants a new kind of woman, Jane also expressed these doubts:

When a man says I want a smart intelligent woman, when they get one, they don't want it. They want someone who will be in awe over every word they say and hang off every thought that they have, not someone to challenge them, who'll say, what are you talking about, no you're wrong. (Jane)

Foxy also lamented what she sees as a tendency for men to be unsupportive of women's concerns at large and the feminist movement in particular:

If you come off like you actually respect yourself, they don't take it as respect cause feminist is still a bad word, still an "f" word. People will shun away from you. You'll be known as the bitch, and it sabotages relationships with men. Men don't realize what we've been through and I think they see our sternness and willingness to respect ourselves as paying back. They don't ever say woman-loving, they say man-hating. (Foxy)

In addition to this, Foxy also expressed concern that many men are, in her words,
"desensitized" to women's lived experience:

I think men are desensitized to what we have to say. They don't really listen to where we're coming from, to where we've been and that's a big problem with relationships. That's why they can hold the power over our heads. They know where to hit. (Foxy)

Perhaps not surprisingly, given some of these women's more positive experiences with men, they expressed a substantial amount of sympathy and pity for men, or at least the way men have been affected by their prescribed gender roles. Alicia stated:

I don't like being presented as a one dimensional woman, because even through all the abuse and violence and everything, when I came out of it, I didn't hate men. I disliked a number of them, but I didn't hate men generally. There are a lot of good men and there are a lot of good qualities in men, and I feel that they are a product of their environment just as I am. Their lives have been socially constructed and it's important that they understand that and do the work and fix it and we should help them. (Alicia)

Alicia's perspective is interesting, particularly given her own difficult history of abuse by a male perpetrator. Another participant took a sympathetic view of men as harmed by the norms against emotional expression for men:

I think women probably have less because in society at large, women have less power so of course they have less power in the house or the bedroom. But whether they're completely powerless, I don't think that's true. I'm just saying relatively, guys probably have more but it's really complicated...I think guys are pretty friggin' powerless too, that's all I'm saying. Just the fact that, and this is horrible generalization about men being not very emotional, hurting and lacking in those kinds of areas. I think that's really where power lies within people and the fact that men are really, really hurting in that area, to me, I see them as
being really powerless. (Suzette)

Again, placing it in a broader context, Cecilia also commented on the extent to which men are victims of social pressure and power systems. In her words, "obviously it's a pretty patriarchal society still but it seems as though men are subjected to a huge amount of pressure with that system, as are women, and find it very problematic and difficult." What seems to be emergent in these accounts is an acknowledgment of male gender roles as problematic aspects of men's lives, with men seen to suffer in part by the imposition of inflexible roles. The common belief that male sex roles are socially constructed and therefore mutable, further underscored the call for sympathy, as did the perspective that men are victims of power systems beyond gender.

What is striking here is the extent to which participants showed a strong knowledge of gender socialization and expectations regarding gender roles. They evidence a great facility with analyzing gender, more so than with other related structures. In many ways, this reflects the ways in which gender is in fact a highly visible organizing principle within North American culture. One need only take a look at many jokes flying around email distribution lists of the "men are like this/women are like that" variety to know that the discourse of gender differences is well entrenched. Hence, familiarity with such stereotypes is far from surprising. Although I was tempted to consider such knowledge important in itself, the readiness of this discourse is also troubling. To the extent that it is over-emphasized, this focus can serve to "naturalize" such divisions, fix them firmly to biological sex, and in some ways, trivialize their significance.

More important than the demonstrated knowledge of expected gender roles, is the interpretation of such roles as troubling or discordant with participants' lived experience. For many, the adoption of expected gender roles was at times not easy or simple. As testimony to this, participants' identified rewards and punishments meted out for gender role congruence/non-congruence. They also experienced themselves as acting in ways inconsistent with their sex and prescribed gender roles. Finally, participants' also considered how rigid expectations for gendered behaviour have been hurtful for themselves and also the men in their lives. To take participants' stories a step further, these experiences serve as testimony to the placement of gender and
gender roles as social constructions aimed at control, rather than as natural occurrences emanating from biological sex. In turn, these experiences also draw attention to the potential for resistance to such social prescriptions and cast useful criticism on these structures. Although these theoretical connections were not always explicitly made by participants, such experiences of tension or discord nonetheless had a profound impact on participants' lives, giving them a basis and motivation for resisting gender prescriptions.

Curiously, however, the relative impact of such structures differ in participants' accounts depending on who is being acted upon. In considering themselves, it is striking the extent to which participants acknowledge the pressure to conform and the possibility of a socially constructed reality yet retain a strong sense of agency and capacity for resistance. For them, the notion of gender roles as socially constructed rather than rooted in biology provides them an avenue for resistance and they claim their capacity to do just that. Although not dealt with in the preceding section, this agency is also extended to specific men in their lives who, while also victims of socialization are seen as having and using the capacity to resist the pressure to conform. A rather different picture emerges however, when participants consider larger groups of “others.” In considering men as a group, participants extended less possibility of resistance and at times fell back on a suspicion that male behaviour is in part natural. Men as “big seeping hormones” who will “sleep with anything” reflects a naturalization rather than a destabilization of gender. Similarly, when participants considered other groups of women, most notably their mothers, there was a far greater tendency to see them as uncritically falling into prescribed gender roles for women with little resistance. While they could not locate this in biology, for that would trap them as well given a shared female sex, they nevertheless understood their mothers as less resistant than themselves. Ironically, fathers were seldom considered in any great depth in this regard.

Finally, it is also important to draw attention to the way in which cultural differences cut across the discourse of gender roles. Foxy, the one participant of Jamaican descent, drew attention to ways in which expected behaviour for men and women in her culture differ from that expected in White culture. Although still involving pressure to conform, for Foxy, prescribed roles for women in her culture were, she felt,
much more conferring of power and agency. Although one could be critical of whether
Black women's greater power in the home might nevertheless reflect the traditional
discipline of "separate spheres" for women's and men's relative influence, this
interpretation would be overly simplistic and perhaps ethnocentric. Rather, I would
draw attention to Foxy's observation of a greater political activity and awareness among
Black women as more normative and perhaps more characteristic as a form of
resistance. For women of colour who have to deal with oppression based on both sex
and race, the need for political resistance is not surprising. By the same token, the
relative privilege afforded to White women by virtue of race may be one reason why
resistance for them is often couched in terms of individual resistance rather than
political action.

**Sexual Scripts**

Participants also acknowledged the presence of social scripts or expectations
regarding women's sexual behaviour. Although closely twined with gender roles, as
evidenced in Kimbi's mother's admonishment that "if you give the milk away who needs
to buy the cow?", participants nevertheless addressed what they considered to be
scripts more about sexual conduct and less about gender roles.

Many participants spoke to the messages they received in their families about
appropriate sexual behaviour, most of which were seen to come from their mothers.
Althea said this about her mother as an influence:

My mother always took my sexual power away. She took away my sexuality
when she blamed me for the abuse. She said, oh you were always so
affectionate and I think that's the most defining moment when my mother took
my sexual power away, cause she made it seem so dirty. (Althea)

Others also described themselves as making a decided effort to not be like their
mothers sexually, seeing them in some cases as models of "frigidity" or sexual
disinterest. Still other participants spoke of models from the popular media as Michelle
related:
I think what started was when I was in high school and I heard from all the
women who weren’t enjoying themselves. Where the guy just kind of did their
thing and they were just kind of, o.k.. Cause I’m thinking of my body and all
these feelings and masturbating and all that stuff and how amazing sex sounds,
you know, just can’t wait right. But to hear that kind of feedback. I was like,
you’ve got to be kidding. I was like, there’s no way, cause when I have these
feelings in my body there’s no way that that’s it. When I see movies like Basic
Instinct, you get these almost really crazy, wild sex girls, they were influencing
me cause I thought, dammit they’re happy right, those kind of stereotypes of
women, all messed up too. But just seeing that, I’m thinking I’m going to be like
them and I’m not going to settle for less here. I just knew that you can get more
than I was hearing about. (Michelle)

The role of religion in informing their views was also acknowledged. Despite spirituality
currently being an important force in her life, Lee described her early lessons from her
strict Baptist upbringing:

If you’re sexual, god is going to come and strike you dead and you’re going to
go to hell, that’s what people have been raised to believe ever since they were
children. When spirituality comes into play, you have to eliminate everything
that you’ve ever been taught about sexuality. (Lee)

However, Lee, Suzette and Althea have also found more sex positive forms of
spirituality in keeping with their current sense of their sexual selves, mainly from
paganism.

Michelle also spoke more directly of sexual scripts as she described taking
control of her sexual life as a result of acknowledging social roles or scripts that
prevented her from fully exploring her desires:

I started to notice that I just held back galore from all those sexual experiences
because it wasn’t the good girl thing to do or he wasn’t “the one”. Then after
realizing how much that was just so destructive I got in a situation where stuff started to happen and I realized how wonderful this was and how I want to be in control of this. I want to be able to do this and feel good and do what I want to do in that direction and all these fantasies that I have. I think sexuality in general is completely overpowering in my life. It isn't just a small aspect for me and I wanted to take charge of that and make it as wonderful and positive and contribute as much to myself cause I can. (Michelle)

The one participant of Jamaican background emphasized the cultural relativity and meaning of sexual acts, specifically oral sex. Within her community, oral sex is highly frowned upon as a “homosexual act”, and women (or men) admitting to engaging in oral sex are quickly shunned. She related her experience of learning about oral sex from male cousins:

They always made it sound so gross. They used to say only sluts do that. They used to tell me about ejaculating on their face and their clothing and in their mouth and making them feel like garbage...I receive, I just don’t give. (Foxy)

Nevertheless, she also described a double standard in this regard:

It’s still the double standard, although it’s not really accepted either way, it’s still more accepted on the male side. When women do it to men it’s more acceptable. Men almost expect women to do it eventually. For some reason, girls always end up doing it, sweet talkers...if you love somebody he will do it for you, but for us, we’re supposed to do it because it makes them feel good. (Foxy)

Thus, a culturally specific sexual script was seen to operate pertaining to oral sex, yet it was also embedded in a larger double standard that normalizes men’s sexual desires and women’s expected submission to male sexual demands.

Participants also identified a social script that defines the sexual only in terms of engagement with another. In short, one participant questioned how to be sexual
without a partner, which included the idea of whether lone masturbation was in fact a sexual act.

I just don't know how to be a sexual person outside of a relationship because to me just being a sexual person outside of a relationship, what does that mean? Does it mean that you sit on bar stools and flash your thigh and chat up drunk men? And masturbating just doesn't have the same level of empowerment for me, somehow masturbating for me doesn't make me feel like a sexual person. (Cecilia)

This was echoed by Foxy when she said, "women don't think that it [masturbation] is important, women don't think it's a part of sexuality, they just do it because they feel they need to, but if they have a man there, they wouldn't bother." If one were to adopt this line of thinking, this would define sexual acts as those that imply a relation. While this is arguable, it begs consideration of how we construct a sexual self in the absence of a partner.

Although the sections on gender roles and sexual scripts have been divided, a quick perusal of the discourse about sexual scripts reveals the extent to which prescriptions regarding sexual behaviour are in fact heavily gendered. While participants were aware of this to a certain extent, this distinction was not always made. In a general sense, participants learned what being a woman meant sexually, and identified many roles, including that of: passive object, ultimately expected to yield to male desire and sexual gate-keeper and object of blame for allowing men's sexual excess. Participants also learned of women's sexuality as characterized by a lesser, in comparison to men, sexual drive. However, other very different messages from media depictions of the "new" sexual woman were also identified.

As participants recounted their sexual stories and made sense of themselves as sexual beings, certain constructions were used to help situate themselves in discourse. Specifically, participants situated themselves relative to existing discourses through comparison with sexual icons representing for them, important aspects of women's sexual experience. Although based on "real" people, these icons are more properly discursive constructions, archetypes, or characters in the sexual drama of participants
lives.

One character that emerged strongly for many was their mother. In keeping with comments made in the earlier section on gender roles, the "mother" personified traditional sex roles and experiences for heterosexual woman. For this character, heterosex was thought to be unpleasant, unchosen, and merely tolerated and her orientation toward sex passive or even hostile. Frequently she was assumed to have no sex drive and was often described as "frigid". All of this was seen as consistent with traditional religious prescriptions for women's sexual behaviour. Ironically, it is not too different either from the stereotypical picture of the "anti-sex feminist." In contrast and counter to this, were the "wild sex girls," as one participant framed it. These were seen to personify the new, powerful heterosexual woman, and for Michelle, the women depicted in certain movies. She is characterized by liking and wanting sex, and actively seeking it out. She is able to divorce sex from emotion in the interest of having sex just for bodily gratification and she is powerful to the extent that she gets what she wants out of sex. "Wild sex girls" are proficient lovers and aware of their status as objects of desire. The parallels with the liberated woman of the sexual revolution is noteworthy.

In comparing different participants, it was much more likely to see younger participants making use of these two constructions. Typically, these participants set up the "mother" as a marker of what is wrong with society, at times even appearing to blame the "mother" for her lack of sex drive. Some described themselves as consciously deciding not to be like their "mother" and wanting the promise of sexual pleasure offered in being one of the "wild sex girls." They did not view the sexual withholding of the "mother" as powerful, as they did for themselves. Rather, it was indicative of her pathological lack of sexual desire and enslavement to traditional gender roles. Older participants however, did not use such structures nearly to the same degree, and the reasons for this will be considered later in the section on Change. Instead, I would like to probe what these discourses mean. Arguably, these are both cultural constructions of women's sexuality, and while participants may find them in some ways reflective of their experience, we must also consider these somewhat more critically.
Much as Simmons (1992) suggests in her treatment of the flapper and the Victorian matriarch, such dichotomies are far from new. The sexually liberated woman and the prude were similar cultural products of the sexual revolution. The Madonna and the whore for that matter! While in part these may reflect a developmental trend, the tendency for older generations to be considered always behind the times, unliberated, "square," they also serve a more general function of fixing women's sexual selves in a rigid and, therefore, problematic frame. By presenting only two options, participants are caught between a rock and a hard place. To be either like the frigid, derided "mother" or to have one's sexuality defined by the more the better! The pitfalls of this latter position have already been considered in reference to women's dissatisfaction with the sexual revolution, and I would hazard a guess that the "wild sex girls" might have the same experience. However, more troublesome in all this is the absence of a model that stands between the two. Where power is not only found in having sex, but also in not. All this is to say that such constructions serve a function that I would suggest is not entirely benevolent, not of their creation, and not designed to be in the best interests of these young women.

To continue, once again cultural differences are brought to the fore by Foxy. Taboos on oral sex (and anal sex as well) were described in terms of a larger cultural taboo against not only homosexuality (judged as taboo for occurring between people of the same sex), but also against homosexual acts (while linked to homosexuality, are judged as wrong regardless of the sex of those involved). Such taboos speak to a larger understanding of sex as ideally serving a procreative function, with acts outside of this considered suspect. It is also about what Foxy calls a rampant homophobia in her culture, extending to "somewhat" sanctioned violence against gays and lesbians.

While it would be easy to claim that the prevailing North American culture is different in this regard, this bears closer examination. Certainly oral sex is not a taboo in the same way, and is not coded as "homosexual." Anal sex however, is a slightly different story. Although participants were critical of anal sex from the vantage point of it not allowing women sexual pleasure, it would be easy to argue that some of this discomfort may also reflect a hidden heteronormativity and a privileging of normative (i.e., vaginal) sex. In commenting on these themes, Suzette had this to say about anal sex:
Of course I was against anal sex earlier in life – for me it was based on homophobia, as well as the assumption it must hurt and was utterly degrading for womyn. Now I quite enjoy it – especially with those smaller-penised men!

Thus, for Suzette at least some of her discomfort with this act she saw as stemming from homophobia. The connections are even clearer in the context of male anal penetration by a female partner. The hesitancy of many straight men to engage in such activity undoubtedly carries with it the fear of homosexual stigma, or perhaps hidden homosexual desire. Yet, this also has to be considered in terms of what this in itself may communicate. Andrea Dworkin (1987) might argue that what is fundamentally at issue here is not a fear of homosexuality per se, but instead a male horror with being “feminized,” with feminization (read as submission) enacted through penetration. Although this is somewhat far afield from participants’ musings, I offer it as a consideration of the ways in which more subtle messages about sexuality and heteronormativity may be operating despite protestations of a self-consciously liberal culture.

What is also notable is the identification of sexual scripts that define sex as by nature a relational act (i.e., involving at least two people). Cecilia asks the question of what it means to be sexual by oneself, suggesting that our scripts do not include a concept of the sexual outside of the relational. Another way to interpret this is to consider our sexual scripts as understanding the erotic as defined by difference, a heterosexualization of desire, with difference signified normatively by the presence of a male and female body. Although theorists have argued how difference is also encoded in same-sexed bodies, largely through the operation of other systems of power difference, charges of the cultural erasure of lesbian sex due the absence of difference as expressed in bodies, has bearing here. One could argue that the reason being sexual by oneself is not seen as sex is precisely because it is also construed as lacking the difference that confers the status of the sexual. Thus, a reconsideration of the meaning of individual sexual expression may be important, particularly for disrupting the connection of sex with difference.
Ideal Bodies

As women in this study spoke of their bodies, a great deal of time was spent describing their knowledge of the ideal body and social expectations for conformity to a particular body type in order to be considered sexually desirable. Every woman was able to enumerate the characteristics of this ideal body; thinness, height, long legs, large breasts, etc.. One participant reflected on this type vis a vis her relationship:

His last girlfriend, I've heard she was extremely beautiful, perfect body, perfect Barbie doll girl, and I'm like you go from that to me? I don't get this. I'm tall, I'm white and that makes a difference to him, I know it does. I'm in school. I'm doing well. His parents approve of me. I can cook. I can do all these things that will be beneficial later on and it seems like I'm being picked for that but too bad I also wasn't a size 2 and six feet tall and blond hair. (Jane)

While participants felt that this ideal was all but unreachable for most women, they were keenly aware that this body was held up as that which is desirable. Many perceived this idea as being foisted on them by external forces, and gave examples of how this has been communicated to them by friends, lovers, family, and the media. Jane related her experience watching a fashion television show with roommates:

One of my roommates is small. She used to be my size, now she's probably 20-30 pounds thinner. She's very, very thin and we were all watching the fashion awards one day. We were all just sitting in the living room and of course her boyfriend really liked that cause he likes girls who are too thin. He says he really likes those girls that everybody else think are sickly. (Jane)

Alicia also addressed these messages in greater depth:

I saw an advertisement. It was a piece done on these dolls that were made, have you seen them, the real live dolls. They're like a super blow-up doll and they're $5000. They said that they constructed them and they made the waist a
little thinner so it’s not a real woman because the torso is too thin. You can specify the breast size that you want. They made the hips to specifications, but it’s not a real woman. They said they took what they perceived to be the perfect woman and then modified her to make this perfect sex toy. So we’re inundated with stuff like that and I don’t think that we as real women can ever, ever measure up. I think that we are done this huge disservice with things like that, it drives me crazy. We’re lining up to get our breasts done, our noses done, multi-billion dollar cosmetic industry, fashion industry, gyms, running, killing ourselves. For what? (Alicia)

The one notable exception to this discourse was that provided by a Jamaican participant who was critical of the White western ideal of female beauty. She described the ideal in her community as being much healthier, with an emphasis on fuller shape:

Body image is another part of power. Black men tend to like larger women. They look for behinds and breasts and when I listen to White men, it’s totally different. I would see a White girl with a large behind and it’s considered more voluptuous than fat, and so partly I’m grateful for that cause of my size. I feel empowered in my community sexually cause I kind of fit a lot of what their ideas are of beautiful women, not that that should be an issue but it is. (Foxy)

Interestingly there was little consideration given to the fact that although the ideal in her community might be “healthier” and perhaps more achievable for more women, it is nonetheless an ideal to be lived up to in order to be desirable, and just as impossible for thin women.

Participants also spoke to the costs associated with the image of the ideal body type. Despite the perception of this ideal as emanating from outside of themselves, many women described internalizing such standards, expressing them in self-criticism and even hatred of their own bodies for not being ideal. Alicia said that “you can’t run away from it cause part of me still sweats when my jeans are too tight and I think, oh my god.” Another participant described her anorexia as an attempt to reach an ideal and become the desired object. Jane stated “I totally thought I gotta get thinner, he
won't cheat on me, he won't hit me, he'll love me, if I could just get thinner." A more specific concern was also one of struggling with valuing the self when value had been couched solely in bodily terms:

Physically I was a very large chested woman and I was really, really skinny, so I was the stereotypical breasts, blond hair. I was the toothpick with two big melons, and I used that for sure. Then when I had surgery and woke up and had two little fried eggs I wrote my friend a letter, drew two little fried eggs, and I said to her, what's to become of me now? (Laurel)

What was also evident however, was the feeling that the valuing of women, by themselves and men, solely on physical attributes was suspicious and spoke to larger social issues. Michelle, who located some of her power in her looks, explored this in relation to the broader picture of women's emancipation. While acknowledging the social power she gained from being young, attractive, and conforming to the ideal, she expressed doubt that this kind of power was helpful to women whose appearance did not come so close to the ideal. Nevertheless, she questioned whether or not she “should” give up this form of power that was available to her.

What I refer to as “the tyranny of the body” was much in evidence in participants' accounts. Unlike other discourses, participants addressed this set of concerns with directness and anger. It was probably the strongest and least contested discourse. Standards for women’s bodies were held up as problematic, pervasive, destructive, and certainly outside of their own creation and control. Although participants tended to focus on the way in which a particular look was considered ideal, in point of fact, one could argue that aesthetic ideals per se are not the problem, rather the problem lies in both the narrowness of the ideal but more precisely in the way in which women are valued only for their bodies. In this way, sexual power is both conferred through the body but at the same time limited by its confinement to that realm.

What is most fascinating here, is the extent to which few participants outrightly acknowledged the possibility that the discourse of seduction-desire, the purposeful use of bodies and clothes, could be construed as supporting the same system which they
find so problematic. To the extent that seduction, as described by participants, reaffirms the value of women based on their bodies this would seem to be the case. Michelle was the only one to consider this directly and her musings may shed light on this oversight. Michelle, who at 21 is young, petite, thin, and attractive, perhaps comes close to approximating the ideal. As such, she acknowledges that she gains power from this but also worries that this helps to support a system that values women based on their looks, and all the more so if they come close to the ideal. Michelle's conundrum is whether she should give up the one power she has when it works for her and when other forms of power may be out of her grasp?

In addition to considering the presence of an ideal to be lived up to, that we can argue is even a cross-cultural reality, some participants considered the form of the ideal as well. Alicia in particular addressed the ways in which the form of the ideal is one that glorifies, idealizes and eroticizes women's weakness and passivity. For example, thinness was considered one particularly salient symbol of literal physical weakness. That the ideal is also a youthful one was identified as problematic as well.

Feminism

Although the following quote is a long one, it is notable for speaking both to a broad range of concerns about feminism, as well as a path common to many research participants:

Well, I always thought of myself as a feminist but I've had a honeymoon with the feminist movement...where we were just talking, talking, talking, talking, all the time. Male bashing, male bashing, male bashing and a couple things happened. First of all I really didn't want to bash men any more, it didn't feel productive, it didn't feel constructive, and also I was getting too cajoled and ridiculed for my choices...My problem with that is I will do whatever I need to feel good in my body and a part of myself and if it doesn't fit, if you're going to analyze it and pathologize it, fine go ahead and do that, I understand all of those things but I'm still living my life day to day and it's worked really well for me so far and I can only speak for myself, but as a feminist I'm fighting for the
right for other people to choose however they want to live and that's probably
my biggest gripe is the groups who try and take that away. There are lots of
women who know full well the restrictions around dressing a certain way, but
you can still make choices and I am still. In terms of my sense of power through
sex and vulnerability, friends of mine, not friends, but people I know who are
little Andrea Dworkins and say sex with men is rape, they will never, we don't
have those discussions any more. (Laurel)

Despite many participants identifying themselves as feminists, the most
common frustration expressed about feminist theory can be captured in the notion of a
gold standard, or as Michelle expressed it, a feminist "pedestal," the perception that in
order to be a "good feminist" there is a standard of behaviour to be lived up to. When
critically evaluating their own behaviour, it was not uncommon to hear participants say
such things as "what kind of a feminist am I" or "this isn’t going to sound very feminist
but...", indicating the perception of evaluation from some mythical feminist tribunal.
Alongside this however, was a discomfort and anger at the implications of such a
standard. From this, comes a perspective on feminism voiced by many participants as
rigid, dictatorial, overly prescriptive, and limiting free choice, or at the very least being
highly critical and/or judgmental of certain kinds of choices. Other participants were
critical of their experience of feminism as engaging in "knee-jerk" condemnation of men
and patriarchy, with little acknowledgment of other systemic inequalities beyond gender
that are just as detrimental to many people’s lives.

In areas relevant to sexuality, some were critical of what they feel is feminism’s
condemnation of their right to choose to dress or adorn themselves in a particular kind
of way. As Laurel stated:

I came through the feminist grist mill and I still want to wear high heels, I still like
to put mascara on, all of that stuff. My problem with that is I will do whatever I
need to feel good in my body and a part of myself and if it doesn’t fit, if you’re
going to analyze it and pathologize it, fine go ahead and do that, I understand
all of those things but I’m still living my life day to day and it's worked really well
for me so far. (Laurel)
Similarly, others spoke of their right to act in ways considered taboo by feminists, including the right to wear certain clothes, but also the right to explore specific sexual ways of being:

But then it comes down to someone saying don't wear tight clothes, all that stuff, what I really think is how can I be a strong, proper feminist if I want to be submissive. If I like when guys look at me, if I like sexual comments being made to me and trying to juggle all these things at once and be this incredibly amazing person. It just doesn't fit. Point is you're human. (Michelle)

Or as Alicia stated, "we do have desires, I like pornography, I like sex, I like all of that and I should be allowed to like all of that and it should be written down somewhere Julie!" Many also directly expressed concern that, viewed from the vantage point of feminism, or at least their perceptions of feminist theory, some of their desires would be considered highly suspect, in part because they appear to conform to stereotypical female sex roles. Suzette pondered this:

Because I'm a feminist and I'm this strong woman but I'm with this man currently who I would be his sex slave—it's all kinky. Sometimes I wonder what am I doing baking bread and "doing it doggie-style"—can I be a true feminist?! But you know in actuality feminism has opened up a lot of options for great heterosexual sex. I can be a dominatrix or sex slave and anything in between. There is a sense of personal power when subverting conventional roles and when enacting the strong woman/sex slave contradiction.

Jane, who was also aware of how she felt some "feminists" might perceive her desire for submission, had this to say:

There's power in pleasure and it doesn't matter if you're submissive or dominant. Essentially, if you're getting what you want I don't see how it's giving in. I can't see any feminists putting me down on that, if so it's like, why are you putting me down for that? I have a problem when I talk to feminists, like
extreme feminists, how can that be good, you being ruled, and I'm like, I like it, leave me alone. (Jane)

What comes across in these women's accounts is a belief that the choice or right to claim one's own desires, even those not in accordance with at least some feminist schools, without the problematic charge of false consciousness is highly important. Implied in this as well is a belief that feminism stands against such choices.

Although expressed in different ways, perhaps the most salient of all was the right to claim their heterosexuality, and sex with men. This was acknowledged in the following quote by Suzette, although she also cedes that this viewpoint is perhaps more a minority one:

There would be feminists against it too. Ones who are rigid, they're going against everything that they're espousing. There are some that are quite rigid or militant, I used to be one of them. I was pretty damn militant and I've come across some bad attitudes, especially with lesbian feminists. Some of my lesbian feminist friends or ex-friends, who are like how can you even be with guys? If you are a feminist you cannot be with guys. I think wanting to put men on an island is a little fascist and that we can only be with women is just a little fascist, but I think that's pretty rare. (Suzette)

Many felt that feminist theory disregards the experience of heterosexual feminists, some describing the suspicion that lesbian feminists feel they have a "leg up" on them for not sleeping with men:

A lot of the feminist thinkers that I have come in contact with, a lot of lesbian feminist thinkers feel empowered by their sexuality because men have been completely removed from the equation, in a sense. It's been my experience that they feel that they have somewhat of a leg up on "us". I shouldn't say us, but myself, a heterosexual female who has to interact at some point with men on an intimate level. (Alicia)
Others described feeling that feminism alienates the sexes,

That feminist branch, everybody can say what they want, and I know they believe it just as much as I believe what I believe in, but in the end it just alienates the sexes more, makes sex even more difficult to discuss, more difficult to accept as a part, an aspect of our human nature. (Althea)

and places undue emphasis on negative aspects of sex with men without giving credence to sex with men as an important and empowering part of some women's lives:

A big part of feminism today causes alienation between the sexes and make it much harder for them to understand and relate to each other and what happens is there's a generation of men that are backlashing...and it makes me so mad that people insist on saying that you can't have emotional awareness through sexuality with a man because it's a man. My sexuality made me who I am and the majority of my sexual experiences have been wonderful, self-evolving and have made me aware of who I am and that's my experience, and that's my right to experience it that way, and you don't have the right to tell me that my experience with C is not as valued because it was with a man. (Althea)

This has strong resonances with another participant's wish that, while acknowledging that some men are problematic, that feminism also needs to accede that there are "good men" out there as well.

My participants seemed to have an odd relationship to feminism, although in many respects, no odder than my own! While many of them claimed a feminist identity and saw a feminist awareness as highly important, their dissatisfaction with feminism, broadly termed, was obvious. They felt that feminism set up an ideal to be lived up to in order to be considered "strong" and even "feminist." Further, they felt that living up to this standard involved curtailing certain forms of dress, sexual desires, and perhaps, heterosex itself. That said, there is an assumption that what is being dealt with is women's "perceptions" of feminist theory. This does not entail a belief that what is said by participants is the "truth" of feminist theory and strategizing, but it does acknowledge
the validity of participants' "experience" of feminism. In other words, it is important to remember that it is their lived experience of feminism that grounds participants' perceptions of it, and as such, is richly deserving of attention. At the same time, such perceptions must also be viewed within the broader context of feminist theory and cultural projections of feminism.

I would first like to examine a distinction between "feminism" and "feminists." In reading this material, a colleague of mine commented that "I often think this person has one totally obnoxious friend" (C. Senn, personal communication, December 15, 1999). Frankly, so do I. In many respects I began in a place much like my participants, angry at feminism (although still identifying as feminist) for telling me my desires were suspect, accusing me of false consciousness. However, after reading many of the authors commonly villainized, I came to have a slightly different perspective. The theoretical basis for radical feminist critique is sound, highly sound. What I have found more problematic however, is the way in which some writers have gone about presenting this theory (see previous comment re: Jeffreys, 1990). As indicated in the introduction to this paper, in a similar way I have also been angered and at times hurt by the casual dismissal of my experience, my identity for that matter, in the interests of focusing on larger structural critique. Whether one obnoxious friend or one obnoxious author, I think a crucial distinction must be made between feminist theory and the presentation of such. This is not to downplay participants' experiences, merely to change the target somewhat.

However, I would be equally remiss to leave this state of affairs here. What must also be considered is where and what participants are learning about feminism and feminist theory. Although many participants were involved in women's studies, at least one reader of this document voiced concern that such courses do not currently provide a strong grounding in radical feminist theory, often relying instead on secondary sources. Further, to the extent that these individuals have relied in their reading on reductionistic accounts of feminist theorizing pertaining to sex, it is questionable whether they have in fact a full picture. Probably the largest culprit I would argue, however, is still the popular presentation of feminism by an unsophisticated and potentially biased media. Susan Faludi in *Backlash* (1991) examines the ways in which feminism has been actively discredited in a highly
successful way. One could almost consider it a how-to manual for a smear campaign against feminism – convince the public that patriarchy hasn't caused the problems between the sexes that feminism has, tell women that feminism takes away all notion of freedom of choice, tell the world that feminism is anti-sex, anti-male, and anti-everything that seems the least bit fun and pleasurable. If, in fact, this is where participants have learned about feminism, it is little wonder it appears so problematic.

Now, the question becomes what is to be done? At the end of it all, what these may prove to be are issues pertaining to the goals of feminist theorizing about heterosexuality and just as importantly, issues of pedagogy. This will be return to and considered in depth in the Implications and Conclusions section of this paper.

Social Signification

Participants also acknowledged forces beyond their immediate control as they struggled over the tension between their own personal forms of power as defined by them and the larger signification or meaning of such ideas or acts within a broader social context. In particular, I will consider what participants had to say about The Body/Clothes, Withholding, Seduction and Submission, Emotion, and Institutional Power.

The Body/Clothes

While the section on Power and the Personal indicated that many participants felt powerful when using their bodies and clothes to seduce or engender desire in men, they also expressed discomfort with such strategies of power. The discomfort largely seemed to stem from the meaning of such acts in a social context. Laurel acknowledged the “double edge” of such strategies:

I realized the power that breasts can have and while I would use them there was a certain amount of discomfort. Like, here they are, and I can use these but they're a double edged sword. They made me vulnerable because you can't get away from them, you can't leave them at home. (Laurel)
Still another considered the extent to which such a strategy was part and parcel of women defining themselves and their power by their “orifices”:

I’ve heard what “real women” say that you need to learn to manipulate, you have power, use it, manipulate, use your beauty, use your sexuality to get what you want. You know how damaging that is? It’s like defining yourself based on your orifice and the value of your orifice to some man. I think that’s fucking nuts. (Leslie)

Similarly, although the right to wear certain kinds of clothes was strongly defended by participants, many were also able to identify problems with certain kinds of dress, or at least the reactions of others to it. Laurel related that “to dress a certain way to get attention when I wanted it also meant that I got it when I didn’t want it, and at those times I didn’t feel powerful, I felt like a victim.” What these quotes speak to is the tension inherent in many women’s accounts between the desire for choice, personal control, self-expression and a broader social acceptance perhaps, and a niggling suspicion that on some level there may be problems with what is being expressed by women through their clothes or even more fundamentally, through the social meanings associated with women’s dress and women’s bodies. In a context in which women’s bodies are often understood as commodities to be objectified and possessed, it is little wonder that at times the display of the body and related signifiers may feel more vulnerable than empowering.

Withholding, Seduction and Submission

Similarly, while participants identified power in the acts of withholding, seduction and willingly chosen submission, such acts are also not always interpreted as powerful beyond participants’ conceptions of what they mean on a personal level. For example, one participant examined the meaning of withholding as dangerous for its potential to be read in accordance with less flattering stereotypes about women:
He's pussy whipped, or has to be home at a certain time. It's this weird control that men ascribe to women and it's sort of based on, well then you're going to be denied sex. Sex as a control or a controlling factor in a relationship, that to me is not a really healthy form of power. (Suzette)

Although not stated by participants, the strategy of withholding is also problematic to the extent that it is predicated on, and thus supports, a notion of an insatiable and naturalized male sex drive, and a concomitantly lacking female one (Lips, 1990).

In a related vein, another participant voiced concern that the image of woman as seductress was much too fraught with traditional female stereotypes to be easily reclaimed as a form of power:

I can see the idea of power of seduction and I can see how that can be liberating for some people, but I think it's very easy to fall back into a traditional stereotype as soon as you get back into the role of seductress and that's just seen as too negative for me. I can see power in it, but it's not a positive type of power. (Wendy)

Finally, a few participants also considered their perspective on the power of submission and acknowledged that it was not always interpreted as powerful by others. Michelle related her experience of describing submission to her male friends:

There's a lot of men who don't understand it either. I'm thinking about the submissive thing. They just totally don't see it as empowering. They go, submissive, passive, that's not power. Even if I explain it the other way and say, no, no this is what I want they say why would you want that? They kind of look at you like messed-up, messed-up. (Michelle)

While Michelle's account of her male friends' reaction to her submission may be complicated by it's situation within a specifically BDSM relationship, it nevertheless addresses the value and meaning of submission within a larger sphere where dominance alone is respected.
In addition to looking at emotion on a personal level, participants also examined the social meaning and value of emotion. Many were very clear in stating that emotionality was perceived to be undesirable on a social level. In fact, what was striking was the extent to which emotionality was treated highly critically by many participants. For some, emotionality was akin to powerlessness more generally. Cecilia said, "it feels difficult for me to somehow not equate powerlessness with showing the reality of how you feel about things." Furthermore, this same participant was able to identify messages that she had received about the importance of controlling emotions and social sanctions for not doing so:

Sometimes I want to behave in an extremely emotional way and I feel like I’ve put so much effort into not allowing myself to do that. I can’t bear the fact that other people give themselves permission to do it in a public way. And don’t they realize that people won’t like you if you behave like that? (Cecilia)

Another participant also spoke to the way in which she felt men made use of social norms pertaining to emotionality/irrationality as a way of gaining or maintaining control over women:

They abuse women in that way. They can say look at you, you’re irrational. They love to say that. That’s their favourite word. You’re irrational, you’re yelling and screaming. I don’t understand what your problem is. They have a way of holding it over our heads and making us feel powerless and at the same time gaining our power. (Foxy)

Because of these beliefs about emotion, it is perhaps not surprising that many women felt that in a social context controlling one’s emotions was a necessary step to being powerful.
I try to give other women counsel I can’t do it until they take control over their lives, over their emotions. When you get control and power over your emotions you can conquer the world, but until you do that, you’re going to feel less of a person. When I say get power and control over your emotions? Is that unemotional? No I think it means utilizing that space between action and reaction. (Lee)

While in this participant’s account it was clear that controlling one’s emotions did not necessitate being unemotional, this was not the case for other participants. Rather, what was evident was the strongly felt need to not let others “see” your emotions as a route to maintaining personal power. This participant suggested only half humourously,

I feel like sometimes I almost keep a little notebook where you’re talking to somebody and you’re trying to keep track in your head of how many times you’ve mentioned you’re depressed cause you can’t overstate it. If you haven’t talked about it with that person for a while it’s o.k. to slip it in and maybe I’ll allow myself 30 seconds of talking about it, but then I’ll have to laugh, like crazed laughter to show that you’re still kind of together and haven’t lost your sense of humour and balance. (Cecilia)

or as this respondent elaborated in a more serious fashion:

I just wouldn’t tell anyone cause I didn’t want to feel weak. Cause I’ve gotten to that point where I don’t ever want to feel weak any more. I don’t want to give anybody that. I want to be in control of it all, and sometimes you just can’t be. You can’t be in control of other people. You can’t be in control if they think something negative about you. That affects me so bad but I won’t show it.

(Jane)

Not surprisingly, gender and gender roles seem to run throughout this discourse. Not only did many participants consider emotionality to be a greater part of women’s lived experience in a general sense, but the connection between sex and
emotion was also quite salient for many of these women. Conversely, men were often viewed as placing less emphasis on emotion both in and out of a sexual context. The gendering of emotion has already been considered, as has the way in which this gendering along with the social interpretation of emotion often works to double bind women. What is more disturbing, however, is the extent to which many participants were complicit with the view of emotionality as a highly negative trait, a viewpoint supported by larger social injunctions against emotionality. What this speaks to is the difficulty, at least where emotion is concerned, of stepping away from the level of the social and its influence.

Taken together, the preceding sections address the ways in which the meaning or signification given to certain acts or objects on an individual or personal level are not always shared in a broader arena. What is at issue is the way in which these acts are interpreted or "read." For example, while a woman may choose to draw attention to her breasts, seeing them as symbols of desire, and her actions as indicative of agency and power over a particular man, this is just as likely to be seen within a social context as an invitation to the male gaze, an affirmation of men’s right to look, to objectify, to possess women’s bodies, and as an offering of the body for male consumption. Thus, in the two realms the meaning is quite different, as are the consequences. While participants claimed the right to ignore such broader interpretations, resist its imposition in the form of resisting individual men, their unease came in having no clear way to effect change at the level of social signification. While resignification has been held out by some theorists (e.g., Segal, 1994) as a way of recuperating troublesome aspects of heterosexuality for women, the limits of this are also implied here.

Institutional Power

Still other participants considered forms of power that were seen to operate on an institutional level. Wendy drew a dividing line between institutional and individual kinds of power:

Power could operate on an obvious level. Institutions and things having control over something, whether it’s hospitals or whatever. Obviously it also happens
on an individual level...power can be anything from overt influence, or overt control to more subtle influence, so the degree varies. (Wendy)

To give a personal example, the following quote spoke strongly to certain kinds of power that operated in a unilateral and damaging way emanating from an institutional base. Of a professor at a university, this participant related:

He would make comments about how my breasts or my t-shirt looked that day and I was stunned and I just shriveled. He was one of the main players in how academia really fucked me around cause I wanted to exist from the neck up. I was 17, 18, 19 and I wasn’t interested in getting laid at that point, it was all Hegel and Kant and Descartes and it was all very enthralling. So, people like him, like some guy on the subway grabbing your ass, that’s basically what he was only in an academic environment. Here’s your reminder of how I see you and to him it was just harmless teasing, but to me it was like daggers and he’s never been able to understand that. (Sophie)

As a general theme, participants viewed institutionally- or systemically-based power, that which is geared toward social control, as difficult to fight against.

Only one participant, Leslie, described heterosexuality as a form of institutionalized power that she argued, left women with little free choice and perhaps only the illusion of free choice. Other participants, however, drew attention to the practice of classification according to sexual identity as problematic, although such concerns were mainly considered in terms of “other” sexual identities. For example, Lee spoke in general terms when she criticized the tendency to try and codify people as a type according to their sexual practices:

When we consider their sexual power, we don’t give them any because they’re different. We try to take their powers away. We try to sit them down and dissect them and analyze them and say, well you can’t do that, it’s wrong, we’re going to take your power away from you, you can’t show any sexuality. (Lee)
Similarly, Althea expressed disdain for the use of categories as a way of fostering a lack of acceptance for a variety of sexual experiences and identities:

Just because you have what some might refer to as a crazy sex life, whether it’s B/D or S/M, if you’re a dominatrix and your partner’s your slave and licks your toes for breakfast, that’s your business. It has nothing to do with me. So, I think categories are for people who can’t understand, who can’t accept anything beyond the realm of their experience. It’s easier to categorize things and then you don’t have to understand them. I think there are just people who crave things that are different. (Althea)

In a more personal way, Leslie was also highly critical of the pressure to identify herself in terms of sexual orientation according to externally imposed categories of identity. She related:

I’m not into the masculine/feminine categorizations or the gay/straight categorizations. I think they’re all false polarities based on prejudice and myth and I don’t define myself based on the gender of my partner. I like to live that contradiction. It’s the ultimate political resistance because it’s refusing to be externally defined. That is, if you’re my partner then I’m lesbian and if L is my partner then I’m heterosexual. That means that I’m the variable and you guys are the constant. If you’re constantly there than I’m lesbian and that’s externally defined and I won’t allow anyone to do that. I went through all that stuff, all those identities and realized that none of those are a fit. (Leslie)

This section remains somewhat brief, in part due to lack of attention to this level of analysis by participants. Generally, participants could see power as operating in institutions (situated in religion, schools, etc.), but few seemed to grasp the concept of institutionalization of power more broadly. One notable exception was Leslie’s critique of heterosexuality as an institution. Her understanding of this is likely in part a function of her post-graduate work in women’s studies, but it is also likely due to her own personal struggles with sexual identity. While labeling herself as “married with affinities
for women," she has actively examined the ways in which her heterosexuality had been previously unconsidered, unquestioned, and "normal," couched as it is in the surrounding system that supports it. Not surprisingly, other participants who identify as heterosexual did not question the institutionalization of heterosexuality, targeting instead the somewhat tangential, albeit important issue of sexual labeling. What this says about the need for a concrete examination of heterosexuality as an institution and foundational category will be considered in the Implications and Conclusion section.

Commentary: Power and the Social

What is particularly notable about this discourse is the extent to which there is a lack of specificity around the precise nature of the mechanisms of power as social control. In fact, when asked to speak in general terms, the discussion of many participants focused around conformity and resistance to conformity without often mentioning just what or who was being resisted, or how the pressure to conform actually worked. Similarly, the mechanisms by which resistance to conformity on an individual level were thought to destabilize the existing social order and confer power on the nonconforming individual also remained ill defined. To consider this another way, what appeared to be lacking for many participants was a precise theory or understanding of the particular relationship between the social and the personal. Participants experienced themselves as situated in both personal and social webs of power relations. Their struggle with how to resolve different, often contradictory experiences of power and sexuality in these two spheres is the focus of the final section of this chapter.

Furthermore, the notion of conformity also differed for participants depending upon their own identity status or context. Because the majority of participants claimed a non-marginalized identity, with the exception of their identity as women, the discourse pertaining to conformity was mainly confined to conformity to expectations for gendered behaviour, with sexual behaviour as one aspect of this. The vast majority of participants did not see heterosexuality, for example, as implicated in systems of conformity, nor did they question the origins of their own heterosexual identities. However, for those participants with more marginalized identities, pressures to conform
were expanded to include not only conformity to expectations for gendered behaviour, but also expectations for sexual identity, particularly the pressure to conform to a heterosexual imperative.
Tension - Where Worlds Collide

The final section of this chapter takes as its focus the points of intersection or tension between accounts of sexual power at the level of the personal versus the social. Consideration is given to participants' efforts to make sense of that tension and navigate the conflict arising from the personal/social juxtaposition. This will be undertaken by looking at participants' stories of changes in their conception of sexual power with age and experience, the personal theories or strategies that emerge as participants actively engage the personal/social tension in their own lives, and finally, participants' understanding of change at a social level. These will be considered under the headings Change, Dealing with Tension, and Changing the Social.

Change

One of the stronger themes that emerged during interviews was the notion of change over time. Many participants identified ways in which their lives were different now than at an earlier juncture, and in so doing, were able to analyze both where they were, and where they are in coming to terms with sexuality and power in their lives. Alicia spoke of her active involvement in this process:

I've progressed through my sexuality and as I've gotten older I've been able to track where I think power comes from for myself. I think I'm pretty self-aware and pretty reflexive and trying to understand the episodes in my life that contribute to where I am sexually right now. (Alicia)

The theme of change is particularly pertinent to the idea of personal/social tension as oftentimes the changes in participants' lives were the product of an engagement with this tension. The common pattern seemed to be one in which participants' sense of personal power was challenged by forces outside of their control, forcing a readjustment or change to their conceptualization of personal power. Participants examined change along various dimensions, focusing mainly on how their sense of sexual power has changed, how the relationship between sex and emotion has shifted
for them, and how life experience in general has altered their understanding of sex and power.

**Sexual Power**

An overarching concept arrived at by many women was the idea that there exist many kinds of power and that this power changes with both age and experience. In Jane's words, "It just changes as you age, you get different forms of power, every new experience brings you a different kind." As has been described already, participants located sexual power in such varied things as being desired, seduction, choice or personal control. A closer examination of these themes within the context of participant's lives over the longer term, however, revealed a pattern. Perhaps better conceptualized as a trajectory, many participants described moving over time from a focus on power as desire or seduction to an increasing reliance on the notion of power as choice or control. This change in their understanding of the nature of personal power resonates with similar themes from other sections of this text, including a movement from an emphasis on being desired to having one's own desires fulfilled (although this might include pleasuring another) and the change in emphasis from an outward appreciation of one's body to a more inward focused reclamation of the body. In much more general terms, this discourse speaks to a movement or change in focus from external to internal, outside to inside. This participant described this movement and reflected on power:

> When the focus came off of only getting my power from the way I looked or the way I dressed or the number and type of men I could have, it came down to a sense of knowing myself. Do I see that as power? It was powerful in a certain context, but it would not work for me now, absolutely not. At this point there's nothing a man can do or say, at this point in my life that will take the power that I have, and this is different than when I was younger. I don't rely on them for it, so you can do or say whatever you want and it just doesn't matter. Whatever you do, it has nothing to do with me, I know that it doesn't. (Laurel)
In examining these themes more specifically, it appears that a number of participants identified "being desired" as a power associated more so with being younger. This is not surprising since, as Lips (1990) points out, "women's sexuality-based power fades somewhat as a woman ages and falls victim to the societal insistence that beautiful means young" (p.121). However, I do not believe this to be the only factor. In looking back many questioned whether such behaviour was in fact empowering. While not judging her behaviour at an earlier stage in her life, this participant described her current choices in terms of being a "better place" for her:

I would go out and I would be circulating and trying to have sex and that's just not the option that I would choose now because it doesn't allow me to express myself, it's not set up for me. I don't think I could be that woman any more. When I look back at the time, I did feel extremely powerful, but it was at the expense of all kinds of other feelings which I couldn't allow myself to feel or it would detract from that sense of direct power over the other person. Thank god I don't have to compartmentalize them that way now. (Laurel)

From her current vantage point, Sophie also explored with a critical eye her own past conceptualization of power as seduction and desire and considered the detrimental costs for herself and others and the implicitly masculine sexual norm:

That putting on a male version of sexual power is so misleading. A lot of younger women have the tendency to mistake licentious behaviour for power. I started realizing that after hurting a couple really, really good guys. Months and years later saying how come he won't talk to me anymore, why doesn't he want to be my friend, and it's cause I treated him like a bag of shit, cause I dated him for 3 months, and told him I loved him and then for no reason just left him in the middle of the night and then two days later was dating his friend. Of course he's going to be hurt! He thinks I'm crazy! There's something wrong with this picture, with this definition of power, this definition of sexual power. The wrong people were getting hurt, including myself. (Sophie)
Although Sophie is critical of her reliance on the power of seduction and desire at an earlier point in her life, a number of participants struggled with whether or not to consider this movement from desire to choice in progressive or linear terms, with the latter being a more mature or less naive notion of power as this respondent suggested:

We were just going down, fucking these guys and isn't this grand and what was interesting was, I don't remember the word you used before, something about false consciousness, perfect example. We all were daydreaming that we were in control here and we absolutely weren't. We were going down and being picked up at the bar and we just weren't being paid, we were just cheap hookers. In most cases there was no gratification, and we thought if we sleep with him then we'll be able to have boyfriends. That was maybe where the control sat, but it never worked out cause at 7 in the morning they were out and gone long before there was any talk, so I can say that through that whole period I was totally not sexually in control. (Kimb)

Despite the debate however, for the most part the general consensus was that perhaps we have different kinds of power that necessarily operate at different times in our lives, with none being relatively better or worse. That said, participants were obviously aware of the costs of exercising that form of power, but were not interested in passing judgement, particularly when there was an awareness of having benefitted from this kind of power. It could be questioned however whether having "benefitted" from the exercise of a particular kind of power should be the sole criterion for evaluating its "goodness."

A final aspect of the theme of change and power involved a movement toward power as play or fluidity. The common trajectory described by this smaller group of participants was a somewhat linear movement from power as being desired, to power as choice, to finally, power as play. Unlike the discourse of power as seduction/desire, where the role was often seductress or object of desire, and the discourse of power as choice, where the role was that of autonomous, self-directed individual, the power as play discourse instead was marked by a conscious decision to play with many roles. Suzette talked of play saying "it's about crumbling away that rigidity, those walls, those
rules, those hard things, that's where the word play comes in." Speaking of any earlier time in her life, Cecilia also captured the notion of play well describing that "being a sexual person was something that could be played out and it was so much about playing, about playing with that identity and learning about that identity."

While it is tempting to describe participants' changes in their understanding of sexual power in terms of "stages" of development, this will be avoided as the stringent imposition of linearity or fixedness would seem to create differences that are perhaps more constructed than "real." However, these differing characterizations of sexual power did mark distinct contrasts in the shadings of how many participants' sense of sexual power changed over time. While age may definitely play a part in the shift from power as seduction to power as control, I would argue that this is also due to experience. Specifically, as participants confronted the limits of the power as seduction strategy, in part through an awakening to the larger social signification of seduction and their frustration with unintended consequences, the strategy of control or choice seemed to be a less problematic and more beneficial one.

**Sex and Emotion**

Another common change across some participants' lives involved the relationship between sex and emotion. While all participants acknowledged some linkage between sex and emotion for women at personal and social levels, two different sets of narratives emerged as participants dealt with how the relationship between sex and emotion has changed for them given their unique experience. The first and most predominant set of narratives were offered by women with relatively unexceptional sexual histories. These women spoke of struggling with the connection between sex and emotion, feeling disempowered by the emotional aspect of sex. In struggling to gain a sense of power, many sought to disconnect the two in the interests of having sex without emotional involvement. However, this state was often not entirely satisfactory, and instead, many strove to find a "middle" place where sex could be detached from emotion in service of bodily gratification, but where the two could also be connected when desired.
The second narrative was offered by participants with a history of sexual assault/abuse. Due to their early experiences of abuse or assault, the relationship between sex and emotion was very different. Rather than feeling controlled through the pairing of sex and emotion, these participants described sex as something over which they exerted a phenomenal degree of control in their early lives, and as something that was of necessity divorced from emotion. The need to take such a stance was well spelled out:

For a long time sex didn't mean anything to me, cause in my mind, if it meant something then it would blow my whole world apart. It would mean that what happened to me meant something, and because it was sex, that would mean sex was important...In order for me to survive through it [sexual abuse], I had to believe that the sexual act itself just didn't mean anything. It was kind of like blowing my nose. (Alicia)

Earlier Alicia also related wishing she could fake not having an orgasm with her male partner. For her, this was also an expression of the need to have ultimate control over sex. What is interesting, is that for these women, the process of growing in sexual power, unlike many other participants, was one of moving toward a relaxing of control in sex, as well as a reintegration of emotion into the sexual aspects of their lives:

I was sexually abused and raped when I was quite young, so for me sex was power. It was important to me to be the dominant then and claim it for myself which is what I've been for the last how many years I've been having sex. Now I'm at a place in myself where I would like for the emotions to be a substantial component of that...now I'm in a place where I want them to factor into it more than it has in the past. (Alicia)

The integration of emotion into sex for these women was expressed in terms of a desire to experience vulnerability or trust in sex, to have emotions in a sexual relationship, to give up control in sex, or even to experience "submission." As Laurel related, "when I'm in my vulnerability and I'm feeling so good and I'm able to share it
with somebody, the strength I get from that!” Ironically, these women almost seem to be describing a giving up of control in order to gain more control of their sexual lives or at least their own personal demons. What this perhaps points to on a larger scale, however, is the notion that what constitutes power is a highly individual concept, grounded most in the context of the individual. In short, what coming into power “looks like” or the ways of getting there differ from individual to individual, based on their own experience. Ultimately, however, the end result of her engagement with power and emotion, for Laurel at least, was one of empowerment and sexual awakening:

In combination with the therapy and being able to be vulnerable for somebody, the sense of power that I get from sex, to express myself, to have choices, to know that whatever I want or say can happen, it’s great. If you had asked me ten years ago, if you had described that scenario and asked do you think this is possible for you I would have said absolutely not. I wouldn’t have been able to envision it or imagine it or I wouldn’t have been able to think how that would work for me. So now I’m like a kid and that’s a powerful feeling both sexually and in the rest of my life. (Laurel)

Notably, all participants, regardless of differences in the paths they took, seem to be in a similar place, one of trying to integrate emotion into sex in a flexible and self-directed fashion.

The Impact of Life Experience

A final sub-theme under the heading of Change involved participants’ consideration of how their understanding of sexuality and power has changed with specific life experiences. Participants probed how engagement with feminist theory, increased closeness with other women, the appreciation of their own bodies, "pivotal" relationships, and developmental milestones have all had their effects.

For some, the introduction of feminist theory and thought marked a strong turning point:
As I've gotten older, I've changed my perspective, looked at my socialization and questioned, or started questioning it, deprogramming myself. It's really kind of snowballed since I discovered feminism. So for me there's a link for sure. And when I discovered feminism in my mid-twenties, it was just kind of by chance. I ran into some other women. Cause it's certainly not taught in school, that's where the whole socialization thing comes in. (Suzette)

As touched on later, for those participants most clearly invested in either notions of choice or play, the knowledge of existing roles and patriarchal structures seemed a vital precursor to adopting such a stance. In other words, in order to play with roles, or to make reflexive choices about how to live one's life, a familiarity with those roles and their arbitrary nature, in short a basis on which to critique them, seemed important. For many, this basis came directly from feminist theory. Here was how one participant related her experience:

I was probably the women's studies prof's worse nightmare. The first class I took I sat there and I said this isn't an issue for me. Men have no control over me. I don't understand why you're bashing men all over the place? There's no glass ceilings for me, there's nothing, I have equality in everything I do. And so after that notion was shattered and I went, oh wow, yeah, o.k., date rape is real and this is how it happens and these are the situations where women have no power. It became much more real to me, the difference between power as a facade and power as real. (Kimbi)

Some women talked about the familiar alienation from other women that seemed to be a large part of their early lives, particularly when their understanding of power was based on seduction. Many described how women had gone from being "the enemy" in their lives to being valued friends and confidantes. Sophie spoke of her movement in this regard:

I didn't share a lot of those kinds of feelings with other girlfriends because I was always very bound up with that it was competitive and now that I think back on
what a little bitch I was, god, jeeze. It was stupid, wanting to think in terms of
I'm sexier than her, I'm better looking than her, and guys like me better and this
kind of bullshit. It's just so nice to have maybe grown beyond that stage.
(Sophie)

This participant related her experience at a gathering of women that for her spoke to
the new role of women in her life and a greater comfort with other women:

I went to an all girls school for a year and I don't even recall what that felt like. I
had the occasion to undress in front of women and so it was bizarre and in a
way it was again giving up power, but I realized in a positive healthy way, these
aren't the enemy. Look at all of our different bodies! My friend has the tiniest
little breasts and she kept going around saying you can touch them if you want,
so everybody did. Then she walked over to me and said, you've got big ones
and just laid her hand on them, and it was sexual in a way and yet not, it was
just like play, and we all talked about it later and we all left feeling really, really
powerful. (Laurel)

Participants also described a growth in comfort with their own bodies with age, and a
more recent capacity to love their own bodies as compared with their younger years, as
is evident in Laurel's quote above.

Other common experiences included a change with age from being inhibited by
inexperience and unable to talk about or negotiate sex to a greater freedom and
confidence with sex and ability to make one's needs known. Laurel spoke to this:

When we started dating that was when we negotiated here's what I'm working
toward and B brought sensitivity to that and I had the best sex I'd ever had in my
life. I was actually able to talk during sex. Before I was never even able to say
"oh that feels good." Better if you get the guy to say all that stuff, like give it up,
give it up, tell me how great I am and how you're going to lose your mind.
(Laurel)
Michelle also spoke of growing in comfort with sex:

What kept me inhibited at the beginning was inexperience and thinking I don’t really know what I’m doing and being shy to say I don’t know what I’m doing. But then I kind of came out and said well, I don’t know what I’m doing and I really actually want to learn so screw that. (Michelle)

The advent of a pivotal sexual experience was also a common theme and often mentioned in terms of a growth in sexual comfort. Tara related:

He taught me well let’s put it that way. I’d say things that I would never have said before that and I wouldn’t say them to my ex-husband. As far as having a vibrator, he’s like get a vibrator, we should try this and we should try that and pornography and all of these things, bringing everything into it. And it’s like, o.k., sex doesn’t have to be boring, you don’t just jump on jump off and that’s it you’re done. (Tara)

Lastly, other participants described other more clearly developmental stages as having an impact on at least their conception of relationships. Specifically, with age, many women saw the nature of their relationships changing, desiring more and more a committed kind of relationship. Other women considering having children in earnest also speculated on how the potential for child bearing added to the mix. For one participant, having children was seen as a much more salient indication of supporting patriarchal institutions than merely sleeping with men and for her, posed much more of a dilemma.

Finally, a related idea taken on by some participants was the concept of false consciousness. Specifically, many participants were critical of the notion of false consciousness, having come to a place of actively questioning on what basis others, including other feminists, could make judgements as to the validity of their experience. Not all participants came to this questioning from the same place, however. Some younger participants resisted what they perceived to be judgements about the validity of their own experience, but such accounts had the flavour of “you can’t tell me what to
do." In comparison, older participants with greater life experience, while coming to a similar place described having gotten there through a period of critical reflection and thought about their own lives. For example, this participant, while acknowledging the possibility of false consciousness, still held to the priority of her own work, reflexivity and experience:

I might to a certain extent have my sexuality constructed for me and maybe a false sense of power, but for myself, the position that I'm in now, I personally don't feel that way, that I have a sense of false consciousness, that I'm not as empowered as I think I am. Cause I've done the hard work and I've done the reflexive thinking and I've tried to position myself. (Alicia)

Even as a strong feminist, Leslie reflected on her own research and lessons learned about judging someone else's experience, the potential to be what she called a "feminist bigot":

I think that's arrogant and I think that was the early days. It's like White women say to women of colour, you know, well she just doesn't know any better, now that she's here she's going to have an enlightenment. That's our lens being placed on somebody else and I think feminists have done the same thing, and I'm an extreme feminist, but my feminism is about anti-oppression for all while celebrating women and celebrating the fact that I am a woman. I think I learned a lot by this study around how much my lens was a bigot. I was a feminist bigot. (Leslie)

Both Alicia and Leslie position themselves as having come to a point at which they are uncomfortable with the judging of another's reality or experience. In neither case do they discard the need for critical reflection, but both seem to espouse a belief in women's capacity for self-determination and self-reflexive thought. This includes respecting another's right to choose.

Throughout these accounts of change, there emerged in many ways a third position that can be set up against the previously mentioned dichotomy of "mothers"
and "wild sex girls." This position I have referred to as "the moderates." This was more likely found among older participants who were less likely to accept that aforementioned dichotomy. Not only were they more sympathetic to the "mother," at the very least understanding her as a product of a particular socio-historical reality, they were also more likely to be somewhat skeptical of the promise of the "wild sex girls." Their position comes from greater lived experience and a different vantage point from which to view the world. Some of these individuals were mothers themselves and many of them had been married. While I might be accused of reverse ageism, discounting the experiences of younger participants for their lack of "real world experience," I also think it important to acknowledge that such experience does serve to change one's perception of the world and while this does not mean that one has to deem one perspective "better" than another, I would be less than self-reflexive if I didn't at least acknowledge some personal bias in this direction.

By way of example, I received a recent email from Zoe that perhaps points up the importance of experience. One of the younger participants, Zoe spoke during our interview in very positive terms of her then current relationship with her first serious boyfriend. In the more recent communication, however, she described the dissolution of that relationship after having been repeatedly date raped. I can't help but wonder how such an experience might have served to change Zoe's understanding of sexual power. I am also reminded of previous research I carried out dealing with adolescents' perceptions of safer sex (Fraser, 1994). When asked why they had unprotected sex, some women invoked the idea of "trust" as a reason for doing so. When asked on what basis they came to trust their partner, at least one teen said that, after all, they'd been dating "for almost two weeks!" Once again, we see the role that experience and context, in part a function of age, may have in influencing our perspectives on sex and power.

Dealing with Tension

The following quotes are useful because they address two very different ways of thinking about the personal/social tension experienced by participants. In dealing with these Zoe had this to say:
I'm comfortable in saying that in a sense yes I do have power and in another sense I don't, and in a sense I probably never will. In a sense I do have some power in my relationship but in a sense I don't because if he wasn't willing to give me that power I wouldn't have it. In a sense I will never experience that kind of power or that kind of equality with a man outside of my relationship, at least not to this extent because of mainstream society and what their popularly accepted normal views are. (Zoe)

Thus, for Zoe, her own personal power is in a state of question, delimited by both the nature of her relationship with her partner and by "mainstream society." Victoria is more optimistic than Zoe, although perhaps less sure about the basis for her optimism. She stated:

That very rigid idea of like, this is the social power dynamic and you can't transcend that as an individual. There's no way to get around that. It's not something that I would agree with but I always feel like I don't have enough arguments to come up with why I don't agree with that. It's like, well, it's not my experience except for well, maybe, sometimes, but maybe I just don't realize what's going on? (Victoria)

Victoria feels that based on her experience there is something inconsistent with the idea that broader power dynamics cannot be transcended. Where she expresses some concern however, is in the fact that she cannot readily argue these points, based as they are in her lived experience. However, Victoria is not alone in considering her lived experience as an important base for reconsidering the issues. What differs for participants is precisely how they understand their personal experience to have a broader impact. The following sections are divided into the Ripple Effect, a consideration of how individual experience has had positive but limited effects in participants' own lives, and the section on Resistance, that considers participants attempts to actively engage the social from a personal base.
The Ripple Effect

Beginning with their experience, some participants described how they felt the expression of their personal sexual power served to have a broader "ripple" effect in their lives. Kimbi described the following:

It’s all one and the same. If you’re assertive in your sexual life and that can be assertively giving over control, that has to filter into your everyday world. If you can negotiate sex, which is probably one of the hardest things to talk about, there’s no reason why you can’t negotiate anything in your place, your school, when you’re hanging out on the streets. So there’s an absolute connection between those two things for me. (Kimbi)

Similarly, Laurel also spelled out this relation for herself:

That’s my most vulnerable area is sexually. To me that’s the area that was the most protected for me psychologically, and the most at risk at any given time, so to acquire power there, if I could have my voice in that really vulnerable place, then when it comes to my grilled cheese sandwich not being the way I want it, that’s nothing. (Laurel)

What both these participants seem to be saying is that exerting sexual power through the choices they make and the way they conduct themselves in a sexual arena has had positive effects, namely allowing them to be more assertive and powerful in non-sexual aspects of their lives. Foxy couched these same ideas in terms of "self-esteem," or the way in which her individual assertiveness, a function of self-esteem, has enabled her to be powerful beyond the sexual realm. However, the notion of self-esteem was also treated with some circumspection. While participants felt it was highly important as a base for agency, they were aware that "getting self-esteem" is often easier said than done.

Two things in particular are notable about the preceding discourse. There is somewhat of a curious contradiction where participants describe the ramifications of
their choices in the bedroom. While here participants appear to be saying that exerting choice in a sexual context allows them to be assertive outside that context, a very different relationship was noted as participants spoke of submission. Instead, most participants were strong in saying that choosing to be submissive in the bedroom in no way means a choice to be submissive in a non-sexual context. To put this in more straightforward terms, being assertive causes a ripple effect but being submissive certainly doesn’t. I suspect one way that participants might counter such a charge would be in saying that if they are assertive in their choices in the bedroom, whether that be choosing dominance, submission, or anything else, they are also able to be assertive with their choices outside of the bedroom. In turn, the tendency not to choose submission outside of the bedroom may merely reflect a social context in which such choices are less likely to be valued or respected. Another way to consider this, however, is in terms of a hesitancy to turn a critical light onto specific aspects of women’s sexual experience (i.e., submission).

Another point worthy of note is the extent to which power in this context remains at the level of the individual. Participants spoke here mainly of the way in which being assertive sexually led to being assertive outside of a sexual context, but still within the confines of their own individual lives. While being assertive in either context may not be conventional for women, given traditional gender role expectations, it is not clear from these participants’ accounts how this actively poses a challenge at the level of the social. Rather, the ripple effect of wielding personal sexual power is presented mainly in terms of a strengthening of individual agency. Where the connection between the personal and the social was more visible, however, was in the discourse of resistance.

**Resistance**

When challenged about the impact of the social on their personal lives, most participants held to a notion of individual resistance to social pressures as a viable way of responding to that tension. In short, individual resistance to social pressures to conform was seen as a way of being personally powerful and challenging or destabilizing social norms for sexual and gendered behaviour. Although the vast majority of this discourse will focus on how participants gain personal power and seek
to alter social power arrangements through resistance, at least Leslie spoke to the ways in which conformity could also confer certain kinds of power. She stated:

I think that there's two sets of ways you can get power based on those dualisms. One, you can conform, and a lot of women have gotten a lot of power that way, but it's ascribed power. It's based on their affiliation. If they ascribe to heterosexuality, thinness, not being too smart, being a nurturer for the whole family kind of thing, then she's often with a man of means, with money and so she gets power that way. Then there's other women who have said forget it, and that doesn't mean that they're not married or not in a male partnership but they've gotten their power through questioning all of that and re-defining things. So, I don't think it's one or the other, I think you can get power both ways.

(Leslie)

Laurel explicitly gave voice to her own struggle with the power available when conforming to social expectations:

Other times I feel that I want the doors held open for me, I want my coat taken, I want all of those really traditional things to happen and he, true to form, doesn't even think of it, and I become my mother. It's like, who raised him, wolves? And I write about it in my diary and it's like, whoa, this is not o.k., but what I notice is that when he didn't do those things I felt powerless. (Laurel)

I draw attention to what Leslie and Laurel had to say in part because it was often easy for participants in speaking of resistance, to simplistically treat conformity as a loss of power and as such, overlook the privileges and powers available to them by virtue of conforming. In turn, this oversimplification often impedes a thorough consideration of the entrenched and systemic base of much social power.

To return to participants' discourse of power through resistance, one key component of resistance seemed to be self-reflexivity. Alicia described in a general way what reflexivity means for her regarding choices about dress:
Whenever I do want to look good I do put makeup on and I pay attention to my hair and do all those typically feminine things, but I don't do it all the time, and I'm aware that I'm doing it when I'm doing it. It's not just absorbed into my lifestyle and never looked at. (Alicia)

For most participants, reflexivity involves being aware of, and grounded in the pressures exerted at a social level, and power is retained through resistance, or the capacity to make their own choices based on that knowledge. However, the precise nature of resistance was also variable. For some, resistance involved a straightforward opposition to, or reversal of accepted roles or standards of behaviour, a celebration of opposites. For others, it was described much more in terms of a destabilization of fixed structures, a "playing" with roles, adopting them in a transitory and provisional manner, or a reworking of meaning or signification. These will be considered under the headings of Opposition/Reversal, Playing with Roles, and Playing with Meaning.

**Opposition/Reversal**

One participant felt the idea of simply glorifying body types not commonly associated with the western ideal (e.g., strong women's bodies) is in itself a subversive form of resistance. In describing how she felt in a relationship that did this, Cecilia said:

It felt like a transgression because I felt that in that relationship I was made to feel as though I could find a place in a much larger idea of beauty than in the rather limited late 20th century view of beauty. Something did feel kind of transgressive about him reveling in that and being into the idea of strength and power in my body, rather than being flimsy. He wasn't attracted to flimsiness or to the idea of protecting the delicate woman. (Cecilia)

Outside of a relationship context, other participants described resistance through a positive treatment of the body. Given the negative focus on women's bodies for many, fostering a more positive relationship with their own bodies, a reclamation of the body, has been especially beneficial. Such reclamation is described in terms of a movement
from an outer focus to an inner focus. While the body is still an object of desire and a vector of pleasure, the focus in these women's lives has moved from the body as desirable and a pleasure to others, to the body as a source of pleasure to one's self—an inward valuing of one's own body. From this vantage point, many stated that if others choose to value or devalue their bodies, this has become somewhat unimportant as the source of joy associated with their own bodies is primarily from their own experience of their bodies. One participant specifically described that her current sense of power and empowerment was directly associated with doing things that were good for her body. Suzette related:

I've found for me that things that enhance my body image are big. Things like taking yoga and really feeling results, feeling different about my body. I'm starting belly dancing on Thursday! But just things that help you to be in your body and just feel good about yourself, it could be anything, it could be any individual, but I guess I'm seeking that and realizing how important it is for all individuals, males and females. (Suzette)

In a different vein, Foxy also spoke of her conscious choice to resist expectations of female passivity in the face of pressure from her own community, choosing to be sexually agentic instead:

I think it really scares people to think that we've totally switched the role. We Black women have been conditioned to feel that we have to be the passive one and I wasn't waiting, so I got flack from people who were more traditional. They thought I was a tramp, trying to get attention. Lots of times they just asked me why him or why in that way, why don't you just try, why don't you wait. They try and analyze me and think why is she doing that. I just don't understand why she would ever want to actually have sex when she feels like it, why doesn't she wait for her boyfriend type thing. I just rebelled against that anyway. (Foxy)

Finally, Michelle, who coined the term "self-objectification" also spoke at length about the extent to which she felt subversion to be possible through a focus on reversing the
rules and roles associated with objectification and the male gaze. In describing one of her own creative works, she explained:

I'm totally objectifying my body in that video and a lot of women would say, what are you doing, stop doing this. But in doing that with my eyes focusing on the other person it shows them that I'm watching them look at me and it takes away their power, the voyeuristic power that they would have because I'm watching them back. (Michelle)

Playing with Roles

Other participants described resistance through a strategy of actively "playing" with a variety of roles, rather than merely reversing an accepted standard. Wendy described this idea:

But it is fluid, when you're playing with roles. The whole idea of playing with roles is play, you know, that you're trying something on. It's not a commitment forever that you're always going to be one way but the idea of play is trying out something new and trying on new variants of something. (Wendy)

Suzette also described what this meant to her:

I'm more fluid now because I don't have "a" role. I can move through all kinds of different roles, and that's the whole joy, is the freedom, or just loving yourself or being powerful within yourself. Having that freedom to explore all different roles, there's so many more to do, but I'm just so amazed at how much fun I'm having. (Suzette)

Although such ideas are tied up in the notion of individual choice and control, underlying this also seems to be the assumption that playing with roles is a way of destabilizing them, removing them from the realm of compulsion and adopting them in a transitory and intentional fashion. In many regards, roles themselves were not
viewed as problematic, rather what was considered problematic was rigidity and inflexibility, which served to give roles the power of appearing "naturalized."

Participants described such destabilization or play in regard to many aspects of their lives.

Suzette and others took on the notion of submission in terms of consciously adopting one of many available roles. She described her experience of playing with submission this way:

How do I find being submissive and all, how do I see that as subversive? That I see more in the socio-political context of feminism. If I wasn’t a feminist I’d be like a typical housewife of the 50’s which would be like yeah, I’ll get down on my knees anytime you want because you own me, because that’s what the woman’s role is. You are the property of this man and you take his last name, that’s just the traditional way but because I’m not like a fluffy house wife and I guess that’s evil to say, but because I’m not accepting that role that society puts on me, it’s subversive because in reality it’s counter-revolutionary. (Suzette)

In getting clarification from Suzette, what she was trying to say is that because of her grounding in feminism, including her knowledge of a particular role (in this case a submissive role) as just that, a role, she is able to play with it. Thus, in her view, adopting the role with the knowledge that it is a role, rather than a necessary way of being, constitutes subversion. Similarly, Cecilia described how the exploration of submission as a different sexual role is not problematic given a strong foregrounding that what is being explored is indeed a role and not an unavoidable way of being:

It’s very submissive, and sometimes there can be an enjoyment in taking a submissive role because you feel like you can just daily with the idea of a sort of submissive female role and it can be quite sexy to feel that way. (Cecilia)

Some participants also voiced the belief that playing with gender roles could be a potentially transgressive act. Many were critical of notions of gender as a "box" into which one is supposed to fit in an either/or manner, doubting the validity of this
understanding of gender based on their own experience of themselves and others. Jane said “I never thought I had to be one or the other. I always thought you could pick what you wanted.” She was critical of what she called gender “rules” and spoke of the need to break the rules:

I can go in and transgress those gender lines. We’re breaking out of what we’re supposed to be and it’s kind of like, we’ve had enough, this is your game, now this is my time. This is how I’m going to play now, it’s not going to be by your rules, it’s going to be mine and I don’t think I have to follow this set of rules which are female and this of rules which are male. I don’t know why I can’t mix those. I never really saw myself as being a girl or a boy, it was just like I’m a kid, I’m having fun. (Jane)

What participants appear to be saying is that the knowledge that there is no necessary connection between sex and gender, that one’s sex does not dictate the roles that one can don as they go through life, that we are instead “complexly gendered” and not always in ways that are concordant with our biological sex, can lend itself to subversive ends. However this strategy could be considered somewhat suspect to the extent that what is advocated is the uncritical acceptance of masculine roles. For example, it would be possible to claim that women can be as powerful as men merely by enacting masculine types of behaviours. What must be considered however, is the privileging of stereotypically male characteristics or traits over female, the assumptions that what is typically masculine is powerful. Victoria pondered this stating “what women do is that overvaluing of what are typically considered masculine expressions.” This leaves open the question of whether there are roles typically associated with femininity that can be considered powerful or valuable in their own right.

**Playing with Meaning**

Other participants described resistance at the level of meaning, seeking to redefine sex, emphasizing the numerous and varied roles or meanings sex could have, including an association with pleasure, procreation, and healing.
Sex is definitely not just for procreation or any other reason than fun or even health in some cases. If you're really feeling sick sex can be really healing. You didn't even ask me about what does sex mean, but it has a lot of functions, it has a lot of roles and it's not just one, which say an evil Christian would want, which is for procreation only, so that kind of busts up the rigidity around the notions of what sex is for! (Suzette)

This is also similar to participants' attempts to redefine oral sex in terms of power rather than degradation.

Laurel also spoke in great detail of the ways in which she has sought to play with dress and the meanings accorded to particular kinds of dress. For her, clothes are used to communicate various identities, multiple ways of being, particular characteristics, or aspects of the self. Nor was this process a rigid or static one as her quote suggests:

I dressed like every guy's wet dream. Then I went through a stage, and this was before certain modes of dressing were a gay uniform. I was wearing docs, I had dyke hair even before dykes were wearing dyke hair, and I had that wardrobe and that was around my feeling powerful, cause I could kick someone's ass if I had my doc martens on. And then now, sometimes I like to wear a dress, sometimes I wear a hockey jersey, so as I have been able to access a different kind of power for myself, cause it is for myself. I find I'm actually playing with my femininity more and I don't feel sorry for it. (Laurel)

For Laurel, her clothes at various points in her life communicated sexual desirability and power in multiple and not necessarily conventional ways. More recently, this play has included an exploration of clothes associated with a particular view of femininity. Of the resurgence of 1950's fashion trends, Laurel said:

I love these fashions, and I'm actually playing with the idea that I feel sexy in them. I feel good in them. They're kind of sweet to me and I've never been thought of as a sweet woman, I never thought of myself as a "lovely woman". I
always wondered what it would be like to be a "lovely woman" with a little hand bag. (Laurel)

Thus, clothes represent the exploration of identity and the "trying on" of this style of clothes an experience of self as a "particular" sexual/sexy woman. While it might be tempting to interpret playing with clothes as somewhat trivial, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that because femininity and women's sexuality are expressed and encoded in women's clothes, such an act may represent an important process of examining the social constructions of femininity for some women.

In the previous section participants described how their own lives are made stronger or more powerful by struggling with the tension between their personal experience and larger social expectations, and in resisting larger social prescriptions for sexual or gendered behaviour. However, what remains fuzzy is whether the end product of this struggle, typically more empowered lives for participants, necessarily implies any social change beyond the individual. While participants felt there was a connection between personal resistance and social change, the precise mechanisms for such change were not well spelled out. However, participants do consider this somewhat more directly in the following section.

Changing the Social

Participants examined the ways in which their actions might be understood as having broader social impacts. Some held out the possibility that their personal actions might have transformative consequences in the social realm. Others raised questions about whether or not social change was already occurring. Still others were more doubtful about the possibility of changing the social from the level of the personal, and called attention to the need for action directed at the social realm. These themes will be considered under the headings of Transformation, Necessity, and Systemic Critique.

Transformation

It was interesting the extent to which few participants really were able to take on
the question of how to promote social change, specifically, how changes at the level of the individual could be conceived of as making changes at the level of the social. However, some participants did make an attempt to draw connections. In general, participants’ comments implied some form of transformation, that the social realm would somehow change or be transformed through the cumulative effects of individual acts. In a somewhat spiritual way, Suzette stated:

Anything that’s going on is all about people transforming themselves and if you’re transforming yourself then everything else is being transformed too. It does have a ripple effect. If you believe in energy and everything being connected then surely. (Suzette)

Although somewhat less certain than Suzette, Zoe also spoke to a connection between personal and social change:

I don’t think right now at the present it will have a really big impact but I think if there is a large enough proportion of women today having, experiencing maybe a power or at least an equalness with their male partners, I think in the future that could be transferred to the more public sphere. I guess it’s kind of a process, one leads to another and this power that women are experiencing in the bedroom, if men see it too, if men are appreciating that they’re giving women that kind of power and that they can give women that kind of power, then maybe in the future that will translate to social things. (Zoe)

Rather than providing answers about the relationship between individual change and social change, participants were more likely to consider the ways in which change has perhaps already become a reality.

**Necessity**

A limited number of participants also questioned the necessity of social change. These individuals wondered to what extent it was still necessary to work toward broader
social changes, instead drawing attention to the ways in which they felt that important changes had already happened at a social level. Zoe, for instance was quite convinced that in general our society is less strongly divided along gender lines:

There are people that are very female and there are people that I know that are very much male as far as generally acceptable gender types go but I'm finding that women are becoming more, they're taking on more male gender types and men are beginning to take on more female gender types. I'm finding that personality is becoming more consistent across gender, there's less of a discrepancy between what it is to be male and what it is to be female, does that make any sense? It used to be that men were aggressive and powerful and they fit into this little box and women were passive and submissive and they didn't have any power and they fit into that little box and there wasn't really anything that coincided between the two. I'm finding that more and more men and women can be tossed into the same box, being powerful and yet having that submissive quality. (Zoe)

Others also considered ways in which masculinity is currently being challenged on a social and personal level. Addressing the issue from a broader base, Cecilia had this to say:

I think everybody is confused about their gender roles these days. I don't think it's just women, and it seems to be all the young men who are all fuck ups and don't know how to handle being young and male at this point in history and what their role is and what they're supposed to do. They're not supposed to go out and fight wars and look after the woman folk and stuff. (Cecilia)

Reflecting on her partner and male friends Laurel also commented:

Men are also admitting their vulnerability and the fact that they sometimes don't feel that they have power. Power does very easily switch and it has nothing to do with gender. Sometimes you can just hit society's walls. (Laurel)
Even in terms of their experience of male sexuality, some women described discovering things about male sexuality hardly in keeping with its mythic representations. Cecilia's story was particularly charming:

Like playing "Nervous?". The idea was that they'd either end up with their hands down your knickers or a hand on your breast or something and all these people sat around watching. And I felt quite bold at that age and it didn't take long to realize that it was very easy to unsettle the boy's power, that they felt powerful because they thought the girls were going to be nervous and wibbly and as soon as you said, no I'm not nervous and they could keep going, it didn't take long to realize they got a lot more nervous than you did. One boy passed out on me when I played it with him! (Cecilia)

Foxy also commented on male sex roles:

They're happy to be on the bottom. They wouldn't mind not having to do much. They don't want to be meowing at the end. I don't think they want you to hold their legs up and wrap them around the bed head and stuff, but I think that they'd like to feel you're in control sometimes and that is part of their sexuality as well. (Foxy)

While it is important to take note of how things in society may in fact be changing, and in so doing respect the lived experiences of participants, such a stance may be dangerous to the extent that it detracts from a consideration of ongoing systemic problems, the focus of the remaining section.

Systemic Critique

Some participants expressed concern that leaving the hope for change at the doorstep of the individual is unlikely to result in larger changes to the way in which sexuality, gender and power are constituted on a social or institutional level. While not denying some social change, these individuals generally felt that further change at a
more systemic level was also necessary.

To begin with a personal struggle, as previously described, Michelle worried that the way in which she uses her body and looks as a source of personal power, rather than challenging social norms about women’s power, instead works to support a system that is oppressive to many. About using her body, Michelle stated “I don’t know, like I said, I think that whole thing really does need to be changed but at the same time I am somewhat helping it work, I don’t know where to go with that but I see it.” Were Leslie to respond to Michelle, she would undoubtedly consider Michelle’s place problematic. Of a story of one woman using her body and attractiveness for personal gain, Leslie stated:

The ultimate resistance is to not use it. I just think that’s a sell out. That’s an example of her selling out and I don’t blame her because the culture breeds that. I don’t blame her individually but I think that’s a sell out. (Leslie)

In part, Leslie’s concern over such strategies, and Michelle’s as well, is the extent to which they leave untouched or unchallenged larger systemic issues. The need for systemic critique is stated directly by Wendy:

We do have to work on individual levels to make things better, but, there’s always a but with me, but it’s definitely not enough. I don’t know, it’s known as systemic critique and if you’re dealing with systems and how they effect individuals you have to have more than just an individualist level. It has to be a systemic critique, cause there are problems with the system operating. You can’t change it one by one. (Wendy)

While applauding the effort of individual change, Wendy seems to feel that it is insufficient on it’s own to make a larger impact. Leslie, who is less sure about even the possibility of individual choice, likewise directs her criticism at the more systemic level. She stated:

I think individual choice and individual power is a myth. When I think about
getting married, having sexual intercourse and that as a choice, you have a
choice to get married, you have a choice to have intercourse. I don't think it's a
choice. I think it's prescribed. I think our whole structure is built all around that
notion of how to have sex, who to have sex with, and under what
circumstances. So, nope, I say we have some individual control and power but I
really do see a ubiquitous blanket of oppression over top of us. (Leslie)

In a similar vein, Leslie targets the notion of self-esteem as a particularly pernicious, in
her view, individualistic a panacea for unacceptable social conditions. She is highly
critical of the psychological construction of self-esteem for its oversimplification of
oppression and victim blaming implications. She stated:

Self-esteem is being blamed for everything and I see self-esteem erosion as an
outcome of oppression. The women who are defined as having low self-esteem
in some way in their lives have had their spirit squished or oppressed. And
nursing's take on self-esteem is that we'll just teach them how to have high self-
esteem and then they'll have a happier life. This simplistic notion of individual
transformation will fix the fact that you're a woman or fix the fact that that
woman's fat or fix the fact that she's gay or fix the fact that she's Black and
that's bullshit. What I learned was that women grow in connection versus any
kind of educational self-esteem class. With that they didn't grow and they felt
self-blamed. (Leslie)

Thus, both Leslie and Wendy serve to direct attention to the need for systemic critique
in order to engage in social change.

Although slightly different in emphasis, Wendy also considers in a more
theoretical vein the utility of strategies aimed at resignifying the meaning of specific
gendered and sexualized acts. She is suspicious of the belief that the mere
manipulation of the meaning of such acts has transgressive potential predominantly
because such acts are still interpreted within a systemic frame that understands them
otherwise. Specifically she questions whether a radical message, if not received as
such, could in fact hope to do much more than support an existing status quo:
I guess you could get into semiotics, sign, signifier. I mean, yeah, I guess the idea, not to pick on seduction but, the idea is that sometimes, what's the effectiveness of the message if the receiver isn't receiving it? I mean that's part of the problem. Let alone misinterpretation of the message is a problem obviously as well, I think for some people, for some women in sexual relationships, it is just the act of going through a seductive thing...if that makes them feel like they're getting empowered fine. I think other people would point out that you might just be playing the script that's dealt to you. (Wendy)

Specifically, this participant probed the line between “playing” with traditional roles and slipping back into them. Her criticism is also consistent with existing critiques of “performativity” and resignification.

Finally, on a systemic level, some participants reiterated the need for men to be actively involved in such struggle, fearing that without men’s involvement in stopping inequity, little concrete change would occur. Alicia stated strongly that a focus on men and masculinity was now needed in order to promote the next wave of social change. For her, such a shift represents a move to considering precisely where the problems are, with men's behaviour and experience. She said:

The problem isn't with us. There's been such a focus on women, which granted is great, but the focus has to shift. It has to shift because things really aren't changing, they're getting worse and I think that that's definitely a reason why.

(Alicia)

**Commentary: Tension - Where Worlds Collide**

In looking over this section a few comments must be made. It is important to note that participants did struggle with both the social and personal expressions of power they encountered. While context and experience positioned participants differently in relation to that struggle, they were for the most part critically engaged. The main strategy offered by participants for when worlds collide was resistance, although some other options were considered. What becomes pertinent at this point is
the question of whether we can consider resistance "subversive?" Resistance implies a striving against the system, acting counter to for the purpose of stopping, preventing or defeating. To subvert, on the other hand, means to overthrow a system from the very foundations. If the system that we speak of is the system that supports specific social power relations between men and women, and a particular constitution of women and heterosex, can resistance at the level of the individual subvert that system? Wendy and Leslie might doubt this, indicating as they do that efforts need to be directed at the level of the systemic in order to effect social change. However, is this resistance unimportant? Should it not be celebrated? I would say in fact that it must be celebrated, and that is in part the focus of the final chapter of this paper.
IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

At this juncture, it becomes important to revisit the goals of this project. While the first goal of providing a qualitative approach to the study of heterosexual sex was the focus of the previous section, the remaining goals, as outlined below, will be addressed in what follows. As stated earlier, the relevant goals were:

• To encourage a theory of power for women, with an emphasis on the way these women understand power and its workings in the context of their own lives and in particular, in their sexual experiences with men;
• To examine the relationship between participants’ experiences and existing discourses around heterosexual sex, including a consideration of the potential for subversion or transgression of heterosexual sex, and the relevance of radical and queer understandings of power, gender and sexuality to such an enterprise, and;
• To begin a critique of heterosexuality as an essential category through an examination of participant’s sexual experiences, desires, and identities.

Thematic information and critique from the previous chapter will be brought to bear on the above goals with the intent of imposing some order on the many themes identified by participants and linking those themes back to the literature reviewed in the Introduction. In closing, critical consideration will also be given to the project itself, in order to identify both weaknesses and ways in which this project has provided unique or valuable insights.

A Theory of Power For Women

In beginning this project, I made an assumption that some women who have sex with men feel powerful in doing so. On the heels of this assumption, was the hope that in expanding upon women’s ways of feeling powerful in sex with men, that theories or models of power for heterosexual women would be the result. I assumed that such theory must begin with the lived experience of women having sex with men, not
presuming to know the nature or form or boundaries of women's sex with men. Thus, this section is not about women and power. Rather, I attempt to do what Nancy Hartsock (1990) suggests, which is generate a theory of power for women; a theory of how women having sex with men understand power and see it working for them. At the same time, a critical evaluation of women's understandings of power will also be offered.

Participants identified a number of different forms of power that had both positive and negative impacts upon their sexual lives with men. In considering these themes as a whole, one central organizing principle seemed to permeate much of the discourse, that is the tension between the personal and the social. Kitzinger (1991), in her analysis of power in psychological theory advocates a focus not on the “correct” or “objective” understanding of power, but rather a foregrounding of the “rhetorical functions of different conceptualizations of power, and their sociopolitical implications and effects...to construct our own theories of power and powerlessness in terms which are useful to feminists” (p.427). What has emerged from this study and will be presented herein is a theory of power that considers the rhetorical function of participants' discourse of heterosex and power and also it's utility for the women in this study.

Underlying much of the discourse offered by participants were multiple ways of coming to know or constitute the self, as an individual and as a sexualized and gendered being. The nature of the self espoused by participants was variable, at times appearing more constructivist in nature and at other times more essentialist. These positions were also linked to specific conceptualizations of power and its operation. These in turn, were influenced by the specific context of participants' lived experience and whether participants were describing their experience of themselves or specific men in their lives, or their more general experience with men as a group, or in relation to other groups of women.

The discourse of power and the personal located power in control, choice, seduction, desire and pleasure, although the use of different kinds of power was in part determined by the context of individual participants. This discourse is predicated on the assumption of an essential or core self that is “real” and autonomous, a self that can be discovered or known through individual subjectivity, and that exists prior to, or outside
of the social. Participants came to this perspective when considering their own experience of themselves and their experience of individual men in their lives. To look more closely at this discourse, one sees embedded within it a particular form of essentialism. This essentialism is not rooted in biology or hormones, however, it is grounded in a sense of a “real” or “true” or “authentic” self. This can be considered a form of psychological essentialism. Furthermore, this self was often seen to exist outside of, and often in contradiction to social expectations for gendered and sexual behaviour. Participants held firmly to the conviction that through individual effort, this essential self could be accessed and realized within the context of one’s day to day life.

One can then ask, what is the function of this discourse. On a simple level, this discourse in part functions to explain women’s experience of themselves or who they are as inconsistent with expected social roles for heterosexual women’s sexual and gendered behaviour. It also functions to explain the ways in which men in their lives are experienced as different from patriarchal norms and redeems their intimate relationships with men. On a more strategic level, however, this discourse also allows a place for individual agency, power and control. It is a space for resistance for both themselves and their male partners.

To step back from this perspective, a number of criticisms can be voiced. First and foremost, this viewpoint rests on the assumption of a split between the personal and social worlds, a split that has been criticized by many theorists (e.g., Dworkin, 1987; Jeffreys, 1990; Kitzinger, 1991; MacKinnon, 1987). In fact, it is functional only to the extent that the two are divisible. While this perspective may fit well with a notion of personal power, it does so only to the extent that personal power, or the individual, is separable from larger social influences. Given that the goal of this study is also a consideration of the possibility of the subversion of heterosex, to the extent that such a split is absolute, it raises questions about how the operation of personal power could lead to subversion at the level of the social.

A slightly different perspective on the self was seen as participants considered men as a group. In speaking of men generally, participants readily elaborated on the characteristics of men in a fairly traditional manner, stating that men are “walking hormones”, will "sleep with anything", are less emotional than women, etc., citing numerous personal examples as proof. Within this discourse men, unlike women, were
viewed more as a product of biological essentialism. As such, men’s behaviour was viewed as consistent with masculine social roles pertaining to gender and sexuality. Furthermore, men’s behaviour was more frequently seen as beyond their control (e.g., “men are just like that”). Functionally, for many participants, this discourse often served the purpose of explaining the consistency of men’s “bad” behaviour and women’s experience of men as a whole. However, for many participants this essentialist view of men was also problematic for a number of reasons. If male behaviour is viewed as a product of innate predisposition, then little change in social power arrangements between men and women can be hoped for. More profoundly, however, for many women this perspective was problematic precisely because it doesn’t account for their own experience of men in their lives who don’t fit within socially prescribed roles for sex and gender. Given the intolerability of this position and its logical incongruence with their lived experience, participants were also given to forwarding another explanation for the constitution of the self.

Participants spoke of the self as being “constructed” or as a product of “socialization,” often using these ideas relatively interchangeably. While theoretically this is a problem, in the common usage of participants, these terms were seen to refer to a process whereby the self is constituted through engagement at the level of the social and power is seen to operate in social mechanisms of control. Participants enumerated many ways in which they were affected by social influence, citing most frequently the pressure to conform to standards for sexual and gendered conduct. Many participants were able to identify social rewards for gender congruent behaviour and in fact, suggested that sexual desirability for women was in large part defined by acting in accordance with social expectations. While many also described ways of resisting such indoctrination as they became more self-aware, such pressures continued to exert an influence.

Again, the function of this discourse is instructive. At its broadest level, it allows for a discursive space that makes for the possibility of social change. As previously mentioned, women’s more essentialist constructions of self, while allowing for the possibility of individual change through resistance, did little to challenge the social realm. However, if we are not products of essentialism, rather, we are products of a particular process of socialization, then social change becomes possible to the extent
that we are able to change that process and recreate ourselves in new ways. Participants made use of this discursive structure to explain the consistency of women's experience, the ready supply of common reactions, stories, and the like, that one would expect to the extent that women are socialized within a shared social reality.

Although the preceding position on the constitution of the self functioned to allow for the possibility of broader social change, participants were not all at ease with this stance. Many voiced scepticism or doubt over the possibility of effecting change on that level. Moreover, the precise mechanisms by which such changes could be made were not obvious to most. In response to this doubt, many participants tended to gravitate back to notions of change on an individual level. Whether through discovering their "true" self or resisting conformity on an individual, day to day basis, the only practical strategy for many participants appeared to be one involving a notion of individual control or personal power.

In considering the sum of these ideas, what becomes apparent is that the women in this study had a variety of explanatory positions regarding the nature and operation of power in heterosex, much of which hinged on particular notions regarding the constitution of the self. What is also intriguing is that these positions tended to co-exist within participants' accounts. What do we make of the presence of multiple positions? As suggested earlier, I would forward that these positions be viewed in terms of their functional or tactical significance. At the level of the personal, participants argued to maintain the integrity of their belief in personal power, they created a space for resistance, for reclaiming and justifying their intimate relationships with men. More than this, I would argue that such discourse is the only one available to participants that in fact affords them any sense of power whatsoever. At the level of the social, participants also argued to maintain a space for social change, to explain the commonality of their experience of men and with other women. While not able to envision social change through the operation of personal power, participants nonetheless acknowledged the importance of a discursive space where such change is in fact possible. Far from discounting the need for social change, participants actively created, despite a plethora of internal contradiction, a space where social change could happen.

While postmodernist writings like that of Foucault's have leveled criticism at the
liberal discursive construction of an agentic subject, feminists have argued strongly that it is imperative to retain a notion of a subject capable of resistance (Haber, 1996) and a world where larger social change can be envisioned (Deveaux, 1996). I too argue here for the retention of a resisting subject. However, I would like to suggest that the notion of subject be treated provisionally. Weeks (1993), in addressing the paradoxical nature of gay identity draws attention to the function of such identities as "necessary fictions" (Lather, 1991a also addresses this concept). I believe this idea to have great relevance. Like Weeks, I would argue that many of my participants could also be understood as making sense of their own identities as heterosexual feminists. They are struggling with what it means to be both heterosexual and feminist in a larger climate they perceive as disapproving of that identity. While what holds these women together under such labels as "heterosexual" and "feminist" is far from unitary, these labels, nevertheless, provide a sense of cohesion against what has been experienced by some as a hostile opposition. Furthermore, this identity is characterized in terms of an agentic, self-directed, resisting subject.

The term "fiction" is not taken to imply a falsehood. In other words, I in no way mean to infer that the perspective offered by these participants is untrue or misguided. Rather, it is fictional in the sense that it rests on a construction of a particular identity, selfhood and agency that is in itself a discursive production. While open for criticism, it is also recuperated through its functional necessity for participants. The understanding of this as a necessary fiction is useful because it foregrounds the problems associated with particular discursive constructions, but at the same time acknowledges the utility or functionality of this construct in participants' lives. It also leaves a place for a critical consideration of "heterosexuality" as an oppressive structure but also one with functional importance for participants. In summary, the theory of power for women that emerges in this study is one that is grounded in functionality and in lived experience, that while perhaps a "necessary fiction," also attempts to make sense of a larger social reality and the contradiction of the different vantage points in these women's lives.

Can we then leave this theory as it stands? Certainly it is contradictory, in some measure quite problematic – the discourses provided on pleasure, submission, and emotion standing out notably – and many would criticize it. However, it also needs to be viewed in the context of existing discourse and theory pertaining to heterosexual
sex. A number of relevant works were considered in the introduction, including those coming from sexological, feminist, and queer frames. Each of these will be reviewed in light of the results of this study, and final consideration will be given to the potential for subversion of heterosex.

Theory Revisited

Sexology

As previously stated, Parker and Gagnon (1995) outline a number of different assumptions that are characteristic of modernist conceptions of sexuality, including the notion of sexuality as a natural force in opposition to society or civilization, a drive or instinct that exists within the individual prior to social ordering, and as fundamentally different in men and women. Constructionism challenged the essentialism of modernist sexology by questioning the relationship between identity, desire and behaviour and the assumption of heterosexuality as a natural category, and sought to emphasize the construction of sexuality as the individual intersects with social, historical and cultural factors. Both modernist and constructionist perspectives can be seen in participants' accounts. In describing where they saw the sexual instinct as coming from, in their defense of sexual pleasure, and in their depiction of men as "big seeping hormones" participants were seen to hold fairly traditional assumptions about sexual drives or instincts existing outside of a larger social ordering. Furthermore, particularly in the discourse of emotion, wherein participants saw men as being more motivated by sex and women by emotion, differences in male and female natures were at times located in essential differences. Yet, at the same time, participants also provided plentiful examples of how social reality is constructed on social and cultural, if not, historical levels. Discourse pertaining to the cultural differences in the meaning of various sexual acts and the imposition of gender role expectations and specific sexual scripts all suggested that participants were aware of the ways in which sexuality and gender are constituted at a level beyond the individual. Seldom problematized however, except by participants with non-heterosexual identities, was the notion of institutionalized heterosexuality and its foundational and constructed base.
Feminist Theory

Probably the more interesting questions come in considering participants' stories and the emergent themes in light of feminist theorizing pertaining to sexuality and power. Remembering the quotes of Maya Gallus, Judy Rebick, Assiter & Carol, and the many heterosexual feminists who expressed their opinions in Wilkinson and Kitzinger's (1993) collection, there is a striking similarity in the concerns voiced about feminist theories of heterosexuality. To make a broad sweep, many have difficulty reconciling their own intimate experience with that reflected in feminist theory. Is feminism, as Segal (1997) suggests, "No longer ahead, but out of step with many women's dreams and desires" (p.80), or is there something else going on?

One way to approach this question is to consider whether or not these concerns are the product of biased portrayals of feminist theory and a specific (and perhaps calculated) cultural construction of feminism. Certainly some writers have targeted the ways in which feminism is not currently well represented in the public sphere. Maglin and Perry's (1996) treatment of the tendency for popular accounts of feminism to create false dichotomies like pro-sex/anti-sex is particularly relevant. Also relevant is the charge of a popular discounting of a large body of feminist writing in order to insert a supposedly "new" counter feminism, variously dubbed "do-me" feminism (Quindlen, 1996) and "valkyrie" feminism (Pollitt, 1996). While Willis (1996) doubts that this is new, what is also more problematic is the extent to which it rests on the false assumption of an absolute pro-sex/anti-sex split that is more constructed than real where actual feminist theory is concerned. In examining the themes emergent in this study, one can see a similar split when considering the discourse of the "wild sex girls" versus the "mothers." The fact that the "wild sex girls" discourse maps on so perfectly onto that of the "do-me" feminists is telling. More so, perhaps, is the fact that the "mothers" in some participants' accounts look suspiciously like the nasty old anti-sex "feminists!" There is little reason to doubt that these participants are not affected by such portrayals of feminism, and while not calling themselves "do-me" feminists or even "feminists," their eagerness to dissociate themselves from their frigid "mothers" or the "anti-sex" feminists is evident. It is tempting to consider that what may be behind this is actually a new, more sexually liberated woman. However, to the extent that the
"previous" sexual revolution offered much to women and delivered much less (Jeffreys, 1990; Tiefer, 1988), I would be hesitant to put all my eggs in that basket!

I have elsewhere considered whether participants' discouragement with feminism is a problem of experiences with individual "feminists" or specific presentations of feminist theory. While this explanation has some merit, as does criticism of the popular media, I believe it is only part of the answer. For example, consider the respondents in Wilkinson and Kitzinger's (1993) book. One might expect that such writers are well versed in feminist theory. Are they likely to be merely dupes of this cultural construction? I suspect not, or at least hope not. Rather, I would argue that such tensions are also the product of a genuine need to reconsider existing theories of heterosex and heterosexuality. That in some important ways, feminist theory needs to be changed or challenged in this regard. In the following sections I will use my participants' concerns in conjunction with existing feminist writing to attempt to give voice to the direction I think such challenges need to take.

It is the underlying theme in this study, the split between the personal and the social, or what I will refer to as the personal/social split, and the navigation of this split that must become the focus of our efforts. A wide variety of theorists critiquing both heterosex and power have drawn attention to this split (Griscom, 1992; Kitzinger, 1991). However, the precise way of conceptualizing it remains a concern. While many have called for the need to attend to both personal and social levels in constructing an adequate theory of heterosex and power (Jackson, 1996; Lips, 1990), what remains at issue is how we understand the relationship between the two.

Radical feminist theories have emphasized in large part the overarching presence of the social as dictating the personal. In her critique of liberalism, Kitzinger (1991) expresses concern for theory, like that generated in this study, that assumes that there are choices that are not constructed under male supremacy and for assuming that "there is a concept of a true authentic inner self, which can spontaneously generate its own actions and free choices, a self that could be free of external influences" (p.432). Similarly MacKinnon's (1987) belief that female power is a contradiction in terms and her challenge for heterosexuals to prove that they do have a choice also underscores the social as determinant of the personal. Dworkin's (1987) comment that, despite a belief that heterosex can be saved, such hopes "do not
amount to much in real life with real men” (p.129), also belies a scepticism that places the social over and above the personal in determining the reality of power in our sexual lives. Within this framework, many of the ideas voiced by the participants in this study, about choice, pleasure, and heterosex, are all problematic. Nor would I presume the notion of “necessary fictions” to assuage these writers’ concerns.

As previously stated, what is at issue is how we interpret or what we do with the “I” in the personal/social, and there are a number of options. For a moment, let us consider removing the “I” and envision the merging of the two in some fashion. What would that look like? One way to do this would be to consider the ways in which the social is in fact ever-present in the personal, or more precisely how the social in fact constitutes the personal. Feminist theory such as that indicated above could be interpreted as doing just that, in effect erasing the personal and seeing us constituted through and through by the social. While such a focus has the important effect of drawing attention to the way in which even such taken for granted experiences as pleasure may have in fact a social base, there are also costs to this approach. Probably the most notable cost, one identified by participants, is that in removing the focus on positive, individual constructions of sexuality, we also lose the possibility of resistance. Jackson (1996) for one cautions against assuming experience is determined directly by structure as this “leaves no space for the contestation of patriarchal power within heterosexual relations” (p.30).

What is also problematic, and I would argue frustrating, about this is that it seems to leave no room for falsifiability. If, as such a stance implies, our very ways of thinking, our experience, and our pleasures, are all created under heteropatriarchy, that we are socially determined through and through, then on what basis could we offer evidence to the contrary? In effect, what may be frustrating for many heterosexual feminists, for example Victoria who seeks to argue with such a position armed “only” with her experience, is that there is no room for argument. Kitzinger and Wilkinson (1994) write of “purportedly noncompulsory and nonabusive heterosexuality” (p.59) as still a problem for feminist theory. If this is the case, that even “noncompulsory and nonabusive” heterosexual experience says nothing, then what would? Their use of the term “purportedly” is also irksome for its denigrating connotations. While I do not wish to imply that radical feminist theorists have erased the personal in totality, I would
suggest, as have others, that the absence of the personal represents a problem. While this argument may be faulted for conflating a critique of heterosexuality with one of heterosex, in many ways I think the point still stands.

However, to return to envisioning an amalgamation of the personal/social, there are also problems if we conceive of the social as dissolving into the personal. The call for a perspective on pleasure as well as danger that went out at the Barnard conference (Hollibaugh, 1984; Vance 1984b) in many ways was a call for an exploration of positive, personal experiences of sex, including heterosex. Yet, to privilege the personal above the social could conceivably end in a rather unhealthy and problematic relativism. An emphasis on the personal at the expense of the social constitutes a refusal to consider social inequities and systemic power differences. Those with the power to operate successfully at the level of the personal, whether by power of race, or position, or identity, would not be the ones to suffer if the personal is considered to be the sole measure of reality. I questioned earlier whether participants' reliance on the power of choice and control was in part a function of their privileged position. If we assume this is the case, and also assume that such privilege gives them a greater likelihood of making their realities known as opposed to others without such privilege, we are left with a theory of power and heterosex that reflects only the perspective of the privileged few, leaving the oppressed without a voice. However, in defense of the theory offered here, participants were not ignorant of the operation of power at the level of the social. Nonetheless, the personal is highly important, not only for the individual, but as Lips (1990) suggests, intimate sexual/romantic relationships "may be the one realm where a man and woman find the personal motivation to transcend the cultural messages about male dominance" (p.115). In fact, as participants considered their own relationships they drew attention to the ways in which there were places to challenge social power and a number expressed thanks at having the opportunity to see how other women's experiences were not that different from their own.

To return to the relationship between the personal and the social, is there another way that we can conceive of this? Ostensibly we could take the "P" to mean a disjunction or discontinuity, wherein the two are thought to operate in an unrelated fashion. Certainly participants' discourse pertaining to pleasure in many ways
attempted to do this. Pleasure was shielded off from the social, despite the acknowledgment that the social in almost every other way had an impact on their lived experience. However, the problems with a complete disjunction have been well treated in the radical feminist theory already considered, and to the extent that disjunction does not reflect what participants had to say in the majority, this will not be pursued.

What is left is to consider instead the precise nature of the conjunction of the personal and the social. To keep the two in check is not an easy task, but many believe that this is crucial for a useful theory of heterosex. For example, Hartsock (1990) suggests that theories of power for women, begin with their experience and look not only at domination but also at the capacity for transformation of power relationships. Jackson (1996) also draws attention to the need to look at the link between individual and structural power as it is both exercised and resisted at an individual level. Lips (1990), while acknowledging that power at the level of the institutional is difficult to challenge, retains the idea that change in one area can set off change in the other. Despite these hopeful words, this conjunction remains a source of tension.

In part, this tension comes from the difficulty of dealing with contradiction. What is perhaps one of the most salient organizing principles in this entire set of themes is that of contradiction. Participants’ accounts are rife with contradiction and that contradiction occurs precisely at the point where the social intersects with the personal. If we weigh claims of control and choice against the myriad examples of how social power permeates their lives, what appears to be the result is contradiction, but what we do with this, I feel, is the key. What has happened previously has been a problematization of contradiction, a desire to eradicate it, smooth it away. In considering the amalgamation of the social and personal, an over-reliance on either one is an attempt to explain away the contradiction. If all is social, then the contradiction in participants’ lives is merely a function of false consciousness. If all is personal, then the challenges posed by radical feminist theory are likewise erased and become the ravings of “anti-sex” feminists. Neither of these seems to be an optimal solution.

What may be somewhat helpful here is a consideration of Singer’s (1993) treatment of the conjunction between feminism and postmodernism. Singer situates her inquiry in an interrogation of the “desire” underlying various formulations of this
conjunction. In the end, she states that it is the quelling of difference that is most problematic. As such, the conjunction must be understood as a space and not a specifiable set of relations. It is the space that allows for a site of “strategic engagement” with revolutionary potential. What I would suggest, in regard to this project and the broader theorizing of heterosexuality within a feminist frame, is that the conjunction of the personal and the social be treated in much the same way. That the difference or contradiction be embraced, the space between the personal and the social left free as a cite of engagement, rather than the ground for a specific, inflexible set of relations.

So, what if we accept that contradiction? If we refuse to problematize it, where does that leave us? In part where it leaves us is with the lived experience of participants. Their world is contradictory. They live in particular contexts in both personal and social spheres wherein different kinds of power operate. More importantly, it is at these points of contradiction that many of the important changes in their lives and their consciousness about power and heterosex occur. As indicated in the discourse on change, it is the intersection of these two that have made for reflexivity, thought and ultimately change in their own personal ideology. I would offer that what has partially happened in the discourse surrounding feminist theory is that a focus on contradiction and the “problem” of the split, has overshadowed the more important concern of the “function” of the split, particularly in the lives of heterosexual women. This has also impeded the acceptance of this as a site for “strategic engagement” and a growth of reflexivity.

What this ultimately points to are also issues related to the goals of research and pedagogy for feminist theorizing of heterosex. I would like to consider the issue of research and pedagogy for a moment in a more practical sense and ponder the question of how research and pedagogy should or could be different? In many respects feminist theory, more than any other realm, has produced a consistently high quality of discourse pertaining to both emancipatory research and pedagogy. The approach used here by Lather (1991a) is but one example. Much of this work shares in common the goal of empowering those involved to speak their own “world,” whether as research participants or “students.” It also shares an approach that achieves such goals by breaking down traditional binaries between researcher and researched,
teacher and student, creating an active, emergent, and dialogic approach to the
generation of knowledge. Furthermore, for Lather (1991b), the emphasis in such work
is on challenging various “authorities,” examining blind spots, and disrupting received
definitions and forms. In summing up her work as both researcher and pedagogue,
Lather states:

What is sought is a reflexive process that focuses on our too easy use of
taken-for-granted forms and that might lead us towards a science capable of
continually demystifying the realities it serves to create. [I envisage] an
altogether different approach to doing empirical inquiry which advocates the
creation of a more hesitant and partial scholarship capable of helping us to tell a
better story in a world marked by the elusiveness with which it greets our efforts
to know it. (Lather 1991c, p.15)

Feminist emancipatory praxis advocates a focus on contradiction, including that which
exists at the juncture between the personal and social, and a joining with participants or
students in examining that contradiction rather than seeking to explain it away. That
said, I would argue that many of the tools for a research and pedagogy that accepts
and explores contradiction are already well in place. What then is missing?

What I would like to suggest, which is perhaps in part alluded to by Lather as
she talks of a “reflexive process” and “hesitant and partial scholarship,” concerns itself
not so much with a technique of doing research or teaching, but rather with an attitude
toward it. I recognize the elusiveness of such a concept, but feel it is important to
attempt to give voice to this idea. In conducting research of this type, more than merely
having a technique that accepts contradiction, probes discontinuity, questions the
taken-for-granted, such work also requires an attitude toward the doing of these things.
One might call such an attitude “humility,” as I am tempted to do, but it could just as
easily be considered an attitude of radical reflexivity, doubt, or open-mindedness. It
involves a questioning of “desire,” not only that of the participants or students, but that
of the researcher or teacher. It involves a willingness and ability to bracket such
desires (e.g., the desire to dissolve contradiction) in the interests of emancipation and
strategic engagement. This is not to be gained through technique, although the two
would seem to go together. Rather, it comes through personal effort and a
reconsideration of the desires or goals of research and pedagogy. I would argue that it
is attitude, perhaps more than technique, that creates the necessary conditions for truly emancipatory research or pedagogy. While I do not claim for a moment to have achieved this particular "state of grace," what this project has shown me on multiple fronts is the importance of reserving or holding in check preconceptions of all kinds. It has also shown me where I have failed at doing so. It has shown me where my own desires and my own investment as the knowledgeable researcher have at times threatened to engulf my participants whole.

In summary, to return to the goals of this project, if we embrace and accept the genuine contradiction of participants' lived experience, the goal becomes not one of trying to solve such contradictions, of "proving" that heterosex is hopeless, that heterosexual women who claim to have power are misguided, or that feminists are all "anti-sex." Rather, the focus becomes the contradiction, the space between the two, the point of intersection of the personal and the social. It becomes a determination to foreground the questions that occur at the intersection of sets of "truths." Lather (1991a) writes that "To avoid the 'master's position' of formulating a totalizing discourse requires more self-consciousness about the particularity and provisionality of our sense-making efforts, more awareness of the multiplicity and fluidity of the objects of our knowing. (p.142)" In practical terms, what this means is that the focus of research and pedagogy asks not about the veracity of participants' claims. Rather, the focus becomes just what allows women in heterosex to have the power they do have? What contexts or experiences allow or disallow the use of certain kinds of power? In what way has resistance been possible and what has made it difficult? In many respects, the "moderates" in this group are already engaged in answering such questions. Such work must also seek to examine with participants the structures underlying multiple ways of "making sense" of contradiction, the ontological and epistemological framework which undergirds various productions of knowledge. It is in giving up the "problem" of contradiction and the "master's position," and in adopting an attitude of humility toward research, pedagogy, and the objects of both, that may provide a more accepting space for heterosexual women to begin the much needed task of answering these questions. In so doing, this may also go far in giving some women a reason to re-embrace feminism.

Some might voice concern that such a tactic panders to heterosexual feminists
to too great a degree. In considering how to teach men about feminism in university classes, I have personally struggled with whether or not my energies should go toward making men comfortable as a way of trying to involve them in a consideration of feminism. However, I do not see this as providing a space in which to make heterosexual feminists comfortable as critique is not always comfortable. Rather, I see this as a space where their experience, their theory of power, is respected. This is also a space that accepts that heterosexual feminists or women who claim power in their sexual relationships with men have perhaps a particular "situated knowledge" (Harraway, 1991), also worthy of acceptance and consideration. This is a place where it is possible to "speak our anger without it being taken as an attack on our sisters" (Gill and Walker, 1993, p.71). There may be some concern that this will still require heterosexual feminists to get involved, an involvement that some have expressed frustration at not seeing (Kitzinger, Wilkinson, & Perkins, 1992; Segal, 1994). However, I would suggest that attention to the issues addressed herein is an important first step. If these women are important, if what they have to say is indeed valuable and necessary, if their presence in the feminist movement is important, then I think such an approach is vital.

**Queer Theory**

I also considered the possible contributions of queer theory as a way of recuperating or reconsidering heterosexuality. However, I must say that based on the themes that emerged, such a focus was not immediately useful. With the exception of one participant, Kimbi, the "queer heterosexual" was nowhere to be found, and even Kimbi doubted that the concept was especially meaningful. The model of queer as a community tolerant of contradiction with common, if temporary, goals may be important. Again, in reference to feminism and postmodernism, Singer (1993) suggests that "Feminist and postmodern theory...are conjoined, perhaps beyond any elective enterprise of intention or desire, by the enemies they make, and the forms of challenge and resistance they provoke" (p.196). This may also be helpful. A reconsideration of the common enemies faced by feminists theorists and the women in this study, although each may use different strategies of attack, may be a place to consider a new
way of coalition building. Where queer theory does hold promise is in the critique of "heterosexuality" as an identity and as a way of questioning binary divides. However, this will be considered in the next section on subversion and in the later critique of heterosexuality. However, queer theory should also be kept in check for potentially supporting a view of feminism that I feel is problematic. The emergence of Walter's (1994) "‘bad girl’ (dildo in tow)" is much like the "wild sex girls," a problematic construction that bifurcates rather than looks at that which lies in the middle.

**Heterosex and Subversion**

Finally, this project has also sought to consider the ways in which heterosex could potentially be subverted. However, before considering participants' offerings in this regard, the writing of this work has highlighted for me a need to ponder and hopefully clarify some terminology. To subvert means to overthrow a system from the very foundations. To resist, on the other hand, means to strive against, act counter to for the purpose of stopping, preventing, or defeating. While participants spoke in many ways of resistance at the level of the individual – resisting gender roles, specific sexual scripts – what is less clear is the connection made between subversion and resistance. Resistance stands against the system. Subversion, on the other hand, seeks to destabilize the system. If we assume that the system of which we speak is one that is reflected in our social constitution of gender and sexuality, in the scripts for sexual relations between men and women, and the power differentials therein, subversion would be a tall order indeed. Whether or not individual resistance can be in fact subversive remains to be seen, and depends once again on how you understand the relationship between the personal and the social.

Although labeling their actions subversive, participants were generally unable to offer convincing or well thought out explanations as to why individual resistance could be subversive of the larger social order and in fact, some were outrightly doubtful that work at the level of the individual could ever change the social order. Chapkis (1997), in outlining a socialist feminist vision for sexual subversion addresses the importance of context above and beyond choice, and ultimately champions the possibility of subversion from within, where "acts of apparent complicity may also be acts of
subversive resistance" (p.26). Chapkis adds another interesting concept into the mix, that of "subversive resistance," although just what this looks like is still up for grabs, much like performativity (Butler, 1990), queer heterosexuality (Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1994), or "gender-fuck." Like Chapkis, participants in this study did emphasize the importance of context to their concept of subversion or resistance. Perhaps we can consider what participants offer in the way of resistance to be subversion from within. Because of their awareness of the larger proscriptions regarding women's sexuality and gender roles, they are also highly aware of how their own relationships, the context from which they began to consider the issues, differs from that which is around them. For many participants, this is a context that affords them the right to claim their own pleasure, to have choice in sexual matters, to be who they are, regardless of social expectations. Thus, the context and experience of these participants' heterosexual relationships is one of resistance to the larger social order, if not subversion. While one can criticize the extent to which participants' resistance might be aided and abetted by binaristic constructions of women's sexuality (i.e., it wouldn't take much to look resistive if what you're comparing yourself to is the frigid "mother"), I believe it important to acknowledge the importance of this resistance, even as we challenge it and struggle to understand it in relation to the larger social ordering of power. While it might be short-sighted to leave subversion at the level of individual resistance, I also believe it would be equally short-sighted to dismiss it out of hand.

In addition to participants' offerings pertaining to subversion and resistance, a number of specific ideas were forwarded earlier; that is, resignification, queering, proliferation, and embodiment. While there are some examples from participants' accounts that could be brought to bear on these ideas, by and large, participants did not deal directly with these concepts. In part, this may be a function of a difference of agenda vis a vis the researcher and participants. While I suspect this is partially the case, I also suspect that this represents the relative newness of a focus on heterosex as in need of subversion. It may also be exacerbated by the tendency for subversion to be located in concepts that lack an accessible language (e.g., performativity). Perhaps with a more approachable language, such concepts could be better applied an analyzed by participants.

In terms of resignification, what this researcher was looking for were ways in
which participants' discourse about heterosex worked to deconstruct fixed binaries (Segal, 1994) and reconstruct heterosex in a new frame. Take for example the discourse around oral sex. Many participants knew one common discourse around the meaning of women performing oral sex, that of degradation, but they refused this interpretation. Many instead spoke of performing oral sex as being powerful, as having control over their partner's pleasure, of having their partner in an exceptionally vulnerable position. Similarly, participants' consideration of the ways in which men's sexuality is far from mythical, including an enjoyment of passivity, and this may also amount to a reinterpretation of common discourses of male sexuality and the flux of power in heterosex. In another way, it may be possible to interpret the discourse of the "wild sex girls" or participants' claiming heterosexual sex in general as chosen, pleasurable, and powerful, as a way of resignifying traditional interpretations of heterosexuality for women. While some theorists are critical that such strategies are mere "linguistic sleights" (Kitzinger, Wilkinson, & Perkins, 1992) that "overestimate the power of the individual" (Valverde, 1985), it is also more properly about a choice over representation or as Plummer (1995) calls it, "intimate citizenship." While participants' treatment of resignification may be somewhat limited, their experience in fact draws attention to the need to do this. As previously stated, the lack of sexual scripts reflecting the fluid and destabilized reality of many participants' sexual experiences reflect this need. Such scripts would represent an important resignification of heterosex that may do much toward subversion of the sexual order, a way to "speak new worlds" (Haber, 1996, p.153).

Under the larger heading of queering I also considered ways in which heterosex may be destabilized by recourse to notions of performing heterosex (Pendleton, 1997) or through a rethinking of female heterosexuality along the lines of Frye's "virgin heterosexuals" (Frye, 1992 as cited in Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1994). As indicated earlier however, participants did not explicitly make mention of "performing" anything, although some participants' insistence on "play" as subversive may be somewhat relevant here. However, despite their use of the word "play," I would caution that just what this means to participants is still not well understood, and it may be erroneous to use it as completely synonymous with "play" as offered in postmodern theory more broadly. What may be called for is a closer consideration of what this concept means
to participants and how it is considered subversive. As for the virgin heterosexuals, one might consider the participants claiming "wild sex girls" status to be just that, although as previously suggested to the extent that this reflects a questionable cultural construction, this concept remains troublesome.

If we consider the notion of proliferation, it is difficult to see how this sample of participants, the majority of whom identified as heterosexual, could bear testimony to an influx of new, subversive sexual identities. By purposely not asking for specifically "heterosexual" participants I had hoped to have a wider variety of identity positions from which to consider heterosex and power. While certain less normative identifiers were offered (e.g., polyamourous, bisexual, married with affinities for women), these involved a minority of respondents. Although these individuals provided a different vantage point at important times (e.g., in the critique of heterosexuality as an institution), there was little indication that their identities were subversive of heterosex in general. Similarly, there were very few radical sexual practices reported by participants either. The one participant who had the most "radical" sexual arrangement (slave in a BDSM relationship) did not construe the particulars of her relationship as subversive per se. The notion of queering was only brought up by the one participant who identified as bisexual, but she doubted the extent to which heterosexuality could be queered. She said:

I'm trying to figure out how a straight relationship ends up being queer. It's difficult. In the context of S&M there's a cross over to the radical sex community and I think there's room there to make relationships different. Maybe polyamourous relationships, it depends how they are negotiated and worked though, but I'm not convinced that that's a gay thing though. (Kimbi)

While she did wonder if heterosex could be subverted through more radical sexual practices (e.g., BDSM), if this sample is any indication, one wonders to what extent this is actually going on.

Finally, in considering embodiment, it is somewhat unclear whether participants engaged on this level. Certainly a number of participants spoke to ways in which they had begun to consider their own bodies and their relationship to it in a different light,
focusing on the body as a source of pleasure for themselves. In doing this and taking the emphasis off the body as a pleasure for the male gaze, participants may begin to "retrain" the body in important ways, challenging the embodiment of the socio-sexual roles they resist. However, an examination of this idea in any depth would almost certainly require additional future research.

In conclusion, can we take from this research that heterosex is being subverted? In many ways there is little in what participants had to say about their sexual practices that would lead to any striking revisions of the sexual code. In asking what makes heterosexuality queer, Kitzinger and Wilkinson (1994) wonder, tongue in cheek, if it has to be "queer-approved" based on whether "it violates some other purported taboos — if it's sadomasochistic or fetishistic, perhaps" (p.455)? If what constitutes a challenge to heterosex involves the accoutrements of radical sex — strap-ons, whips, hand cuffs and the like — then we see very little of that with this sample. While radical sex may have a subversive potential, there are reasons why I consider its absence less troubling. First, while initial versions of this project had centred on women with radical sexual lives, further reconsideration left me with the conviction that this was not where the focus was needed. Arguably, more work has gone into considering the subversive potential of women's lives that are less "normative." Works about a variety of different kinds of sex workers from strippers to pro-Doms (Chapkis, 1997; Nagle, 1997), for example has represented one consideration of how heterosex can be subverted. Yet, I was concerned that such works say little to women whose lives and identities are not so obviously transgressive in and of themselves. However, given the sampling techniques used and assuming these participants are likely to be more "on the edge" than your average sample of women, then where are we left?

While I might not be able to make strong claims about the subversion of heterosex, I do feel able to claim that what these participants are is critically involved and engaged in thinking about heterosex as it plays out in their lives. The stance some of them have taken is one that I would suggest implies a readiness to consider the potential for subversion in future, if not current, heterosex. I would also argue that what they lack is more the raw materials of how to conceive of ways in which their sexual practices could be subverted, a language, a framework as it were. This does not mean that all would take this challenge, or that even those who would, would do so on an
ongoing basis, however, the desire to consider and be critical is there.

Heterosexuality and Heterosex

A third goal of this project was to begin a preliminary examination of heterosexuality as a foundational category versus heterosexual sex as a particular behaviour. Much of the criticism of women having sex with men has rested on its support of heterosexuality as a hegemonic institution that is prescriptive and oppressive to those whose lives do not fall within its bounds (Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1993; Rich, 1983; Richardson, 1996). Some scholars and academics have tried to rescue their intimate lives with men by claiming their relationships and sexual activities with men, yet at the same time acknowledging the larger critique of heterosexuality through a refusal to label themselves as heterosexual. Some participants were also wary of such labels for not capturing the entirety of their experience or desire. However, Kitzinger and Wilkinson (1993) are critical of the extent to which the lack of a label allows heterosexual women to forgo considering the privileges associated with that label. What can we make of this in terms of the participants in this study?

In general, participants focused discussion around having sex with men, rather than being heterosexual. What was also fairly obvious was that the bulk of participants claiming a heterosexual label remained unaware of how their identity as heterosexuals gives them power. Only participants claiming a “non-normative” sexual history or experience voiced concern over problems of sexual labels and the standards of normalcy and deviance that they imply. Thus, where categorical identities are concerned, critique was largely reserved for “other” sexual identities with heterosexuality as an identity position still obscured. In point of fact, participants were much more likely to problematize gender alone, not linking it explicitly to heterosexuality. For instance, participants were critical of the extent to which they were under pressure to behave sexually or socially as a woman. However, not one (heterosexual) participant expressed concern that she was under pressure to behave sexually or socially as a heterosexual. While this may suggest that gender is a more salient organizing principle for most women, it also speaks to the lack of awareness of heterosexuality as proscribed and entrenched within a particular web of social power
arrangements. This is not entirely surprising. Many of the women in this study experienced ways in which their lives were limited to the extent that they conformed to the dictates of socially proscribed gender roles. However, few limitations were noted, if any, to living in accordance with proscribed standards for heterosexuality and arguably there are in fact benefits to be enjoyed. In short, if it is the experience of oppression that makes for salience, then the lack of oppression for heterosexual participants worked to render heterosexuality and its accompanying privileges invisible to them. In fact, this state of affairs can be seen much beyond the discourse of heterosexuality. For example, men's experience of power through the gender system has often made gender inequities all but invisible to them. Foxy was one participant who noted men's "blindness" in this regard.

On a slightly different note, despite the similarity of many participant's accounts, one hardly sees a monolithic representation of heterosexual experience from this sample. Segal (1994) for one has called attention to the extent to which one could rightly consider the existence of "heterosexualities" rather than a singular heterosexuality as a way of destabilizing heterosexuality as a problematic construct. However, I remain somewhat unconvinced that what has been offered by participants is truly challenging in this regard. Thus, while heterosex and power may appear less problematic at the level of experience and practice, heterosexuality at the level of the institutional and as a foundational category remains troublesome and unconsidered by most participants.

The Good with the Bad: Some Critical Considerations

A number of issues must be addressed in order to critically evaluate this study. This will include a consideration of the limits of the methodology and the participant sample, as well as more positive reflections on the important contributions of the research as a whole.
Methodology

As laid out in the Methodology section of this paper, this research took as its base a feminist emancipatory praxis (Lather, 1991a). To be considered successful in this regard, Lather suggests that such work must provide a climate of maximal reciprocity as regards the relationship between the researcher and the researched. Similarly, Lather also outlines a particular relationship between data and theory characteristic of feminist emancipatory praxis in which both data and theory emerge in interaction rather than through the imposition of theory onto data. A consideration of the various ways of creating maximal reciprocity and interactive, emergent theory as spelled out by Lather reveals some short falls of this study. Most notably, one could question the extent to which participants were in fact engaged in an ongoing process of collaboration throughout the entirety of the research project. Due to practical limitations it was not possible to conduct multiple interviews with single research participants or groups. Furthermore, although thematic analysis was returned to participants for further comment and critique, the results of this were less than hoped for. Of sixteen participants, responses were received from five only. Of those five responses, the majority were rather general comments which although quite positive were not challenging or particularly critical. While I hope in part this reflects a job well done in terms of representing participants' experiences in an authentic manner, I also suspect it is indicative of a lack of engagement in the theory generation process. This in part calls into question the success of this study in terms of meeting all the criteria of feminist emancipatory praxis.

An alternative way to critique the methodological success of this work involves considering the issue of validity. Lather (1991a) outlines three kinds of validity that need to be met in order to ensure rigorous work. Specifically, Lather identifies construct validity (whether constructs actually occur or are inventions of the researcher), face validity (whether theory makes sense to participants), and catalytic validity (whether participants are energized toward changing reality). In the Methodology section I suggested that such validity is best judged by participants themselves, and so I offer for consideration some of the feedback received from participants in this regard.
In terms of construct validity, there was no indication from participants that the themes that emerged from the interviews were other than what had been provided by them. Foxy’s statement about this was fairly representative. She said, “You did represent my ideas accurately, I was quite impressed with the way you integrated our thoughts so comprehensively, our experiences were well spoken and put together.” It was less clear however, whether the study was entirely successful in achieving face validity. While Suzette said “I think you did a great job of organizing it all – the themes you have chosen make sense and are well-connected”, Lee had more critical comments. Lee, who describes herself as not having “a university education” goes on to say:

In my opinion, the purpose of the document is for the education of the author. The only people who would gain anything by reading it would be highly educated people. The knowledge would not go far in a women’s shelter or in a high school. I think that if you convey your findings through symposiums, etc., readers might find it more relevant. I think others would see it as an informative document for intellectuals.

What Lee’s comment suggests is that the “academese” of the results may render it somewhat difficult to understand and perhaps less than useful in other than an academic setting. What this suggests to me is a challenge to continue to work with the information provided by participants in order to make it more accessible and relevant to a broader group of women, a challenge that I have already confronted in trying to convey my work to undergraduate university classes! In many ways this also draws attention back to the need to reconceptualize research and pedagogy. In short, it begs the question of just who research products or processes are for? If, as Lee suggests, the process and products of research seem to be geared toward those in the academy alone, we should question the extent to which our work could ever be truly emancipatory. It is quite likely that we need to continue to question our own positions as researchers, our own desires, even our own egos, and challenge the blinders that we wear while doing such work.
Finally, in terms of catalytic validity, this is somewhat more difficult to determine. Victoria addressed this somewhat in her feedback. She stated:

More than any concrete, final truth you seem to have uncovered more of an ongoing process that is taking place whereby women struggle to figure out how to negotiate power and status within their sexual relationships...Being part of your research made me put some of my thoughts and feelings into a more objective context and reading your work as a whole has made me realize how widespread my own experiences are. I guess that's just to say that the experience has helped me chart out a little more territory of my own existence.

Whether Victoria's comments suggest that she feels energized toward changing her reality remains to be seen. I think what can be said, however, is that at the very least, many participants felt encouraged and listened to through the process of engaging in dialogue during the interviews themselves. As Suzette put it "I think it's important for women to see their experiences validated in others and reflected back so positively, thanks for the opportunity to participate."

As for future research, I am very convinced of the need, as Lather suggests, to use a methodology that moves beyond the single interview/feedback format that was used here. Although practical reasons made such a method impossible, I often think of the work done by Frigga Haug (1987), that involved researcher and participants in ongoing meetings and a collaborative writing process, as the ultimate in a feminist emancipatory praxis. As such, I would suggest that this work would have been improved by an alternative method that better encouraged participant involved and investment. However, the issue remains of what to do when participants choose not to be involved even in the limited way offered in this study? Short of changing methodology, how do we understand participants' non-involvement?

One could consider whether there are ways of increasing the likelihood of participant involvement through the provision of incentives or even more frequent reminders. Although incentives were not provided, regular contact was kept with participants by phone or email as a way of encouraging their feedback. Obviously this was not entirely successful. My impression based on emails from participants is that
many were interested in responding but got bogged down in life itself and hence, providing me with feedback was not a priority. However, one could genuinely ask, whose priority is at issue here! The fact that participants referred to it as “my” research as opposed to perhaps “our” research may suggest that they felt little ownership of the project itself. Thus, conveying a sense of ownership to participants may also be important. Ultimately, if all these are tried and participants still do not wish to become further involved in the research process, I suspect we have to respect their own agency and capacity to make their own choices.

Nevertheless, the question can still be raised, why isn’t this an issue for participants? That is, why are they not motivated from their own perspectives to involve themselves more fully in a consideration or critique of heterosex? While the preceding section on the goals of research and pedagogy may have some relevance, there other explanations that should be forwarded. Let us assume for a moment that participants would be motivated toward engagement if they felt that the issues raised in these interviews were experienced as a problematic source of tension. Arguably, as self-selected sexually powerful women, it may be that a critique of heterosex has little relevance for them. They may have found ways of being powerful, or exist in privileged social spaces that eradicate the need for critique. Thus, heterosex may be less problematic in their day to day experience. I could then ask whether the “need” to see participants as motivated toward critique is, in fact, my own need, and I would be less than honest if I did not acknowledge a desire for participants to see the necessity for critical engagement as I do. In this way, participants lack of involvement becomes a consideration of my own role as researcher and the agenda that I bring to the process. Alternately, this may also be a function of sampling as considered in what follows.

**Sampling**

One other obvious downfall of the present study is the lack of variability in the sample. Given that the purpose of this work was theory generation, the need for a knowledgeable group of participants remained a greater concern in many ways than having a varied sample. However, even with the need for a knowledgeable group one could easily criticize this study for being highly limited. The vast majority of participants
were white, educated, of relatively high economic status, and uncritically heterosexual. Given this state of affairs, it is important to consider, as I have done elsewhere, to what extent these women claim power precisely because of belonging to relatively empowered groups? If this is the case, this study might be accused of speaking to the reality of only a very limited group of women. Although those individuals who were less like the majority, either by race or educational background, gave responses similar to that of the majority, with such a limited sample, it is impossible to know whether those individuals are in fact in any way representative of a broader sub-sample.

That said, conscientious and repeated attempts were made to encourage greater diversity within the sample of participants although with limited success. Specifically, I tried to expand the racial diversity by seeking contacts from Foxy who is well connected to a large group of women of colour. However, despite her best efforts and mine no women volunteered to take part. In conversation with Foxy, I asked her why this might be the case. She suggested that cultural differences were likely one concern. As she put it, talking to their friends about sex was one thing but talking to a stranger was just not comfortable for many of these women. When asked if my being White could be a barrier for some participants, Foxy didn’t feel this was a concern. What this suggests however, is that alternative recruiting strategies may have been useful. For example, making myself available on an ongoing basis and becoming more familiar to participants may have made their cooperation more likely.

**Important Contributions**

This study makes a number of important contributions to the study of heterosex and a theory of heterosexuality more broadly. First, as indicated by many of my participants, this study is important sheerly for giving voice to the lived experience of women where power and heterosexuality are concerned. By providing an exploration of women’s power, including strategies of resistance, and situating it in their lived experience, by not presuming to know the nature of women’s power in heterosex, this work seeks to convey a respect for these and other women’s experiences. The voices of women who feel that existing work pertaining to heterosex says little to their reality, may in some measure feel vindicated or comforted by work that seeks to represent that
reality, including positive experiences of heterosex. In more general terms, given the theoretical vacuum where theories of heterosexuality are concerned and the need for such theory (Hollway, 1993; Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1994; Richardson, 1996; Segal, 1994), works such as this one begin to address this in a concrete way.

While individual resistance may or may not change the larger social picture, this work also seeks to celebrate the way in which these women’s lives have become more empowered through a strategy of resistance, thus, it provides a useful tool for learning based on their efforts. If in part, the issue for some women is envisioning what a powerful heterosexual woman “looks like,” this work has sought to do just that. In learning of some women’s strategies of resistance, this may provide a useful springboard for other women to consider how they might also incorporate a politic of resistance into their day to day lives. The focus on both the positive experience of heterosex, as well as the politic of resistance also paints a more balanced picture of the lived experience of heterosex for some women. In doing so it has also drawn attention to the need for new sexual scripts and ways of expressing women’s experience of power in heterosex with men in ways that are more congruent with their lived experience.

Furthermore, by exploring in greater depth women’s experience of heterosex, this work also draws much needed attention to various aspects of women’s sexual experience with men that have been considered from a limited vantage point. The exploration of women’s desire where men are concerned, as indicated by one participant, has been lacking in the theoretical literature, as has a positive consideration of specific aspects of women’s desires (e.g., desire for submission). However, it also identifies particularly salient conundrums for women around such things as pleasure and emotion that point the way to further research.

In a related vein, this work also considers how strategies of sexual power in heterosex change with age, experience, and context. Little emphasis has previously gone into understanding the ways in which different forms of power are available to women at different points in their lives. Emphasizing the extent to which such strategies are context dependent rather than absolute has important ramifications. This allows for a broader consideration of the developmental context in which power operates and allows a more nuanced treatment and questioning of subversion or
resistance from those bases. It also underscores the need to contextualize feminist activism and consciousness raising in experientially relevant ways.

By looking to the functional basis of women's perspectives on power (i.e., what functions their understandings of power serve in their lives) this work also seeks to provide a way around problematic tensions that exist where theories of heterosex are concerned. As mentioned, the previous critique of the person/society split may be questioned for the extent to which a focus on the "problem" of the split has perhaps impeded a consideration of the "function" of the split in women's lives. Foregrounding the functionality of the split may create a much needed space for heterosexual feminists. To the extent that this work provides theory that fits better with their reality it may, at the same time, also provide challenges that are couched in their experience and so are more meaningful and perhaps more easily "heard." Furthermore, the emphasis on a reconsideration of the personal/social conjunction and a resistance to theoretical hegemony also provides a way to approach heterosex both in terms of research and pedagogy. In advocating an acceptance of contradiction and a focus on the space between the social and the personal it seeks to leave room for a renewed engagement of heterosex that allows for analysis at multiple levels without discounting the importance of any particular vantage point. In summary, it takes up the challenge offered by Jackson (1996) and Lips (1990) to provide a theory of heterosex and power that is both inclusive and thorough, multiply determined and relational.

Future Directions

As with most research projects, this study in many ways opens more doors than it closes. A variety of future directions can be considered based on the findings of this research, each of which would serve to carve out a better understanding of women's experience of heterosex and add to the body of literature theorizing heterosex. These will be considered in brief.

Future consideration should be given to women's desires in heterosex. While participants identified pleasure and submission as important aspects of desire, these constructs need to be explored in greater depth. Underlying this is the need for a more specific inquiry into the source of desire. Participants were not challenged to consider
the source of their desires, to interrogate the ways in which they have become
socialized into particular forms of desiring. Instead, they begin with what their desires
are rather than where their desires come from. Thus, an engagement with the latter
would seem timely.

Continued attention should also be given to probing the space between the
personal and the social. If we can take as a starting point participants' knowledge of
both the personal and social worlds of power and heterosex, additional research should
focus on the points of intersection and contradiction. Engagement at this level, without
an agenda of solving or explaining away contradiction would seem to be especially
crucial. This may involve addressing some of the questions that I identified earlier
pertaining to the different contexts in which power is seen to operate. However, it also
will involve a consideration of a pedagogical approach that allows such questioning to
be done in an open and accepting fashion. What may also be important is to consider
whether or not the emergence of particular strategies are conscious or purposive.
While I have suggested that the theory of power offered by participants is functional, it
is a different issue to ask whether it is purposively or intentionally functional.

Additional work should also seek to address the limits of sampling identified in
this research. It is important to consider whether the theory of power for women
identified here is more broadly applicable to a greater variety of women. In doing so,
however, the intent is not to discredit what is offered by these participants so much as it
is to further explore the contextual factors that impact on women's power in heterosex.

Research that considers the need for new sexual scripts regarding heterosex
should also be attempted. The need for new scripts (e.g., limits of the term submission)
has been repeatedly emphasized throughout this paper. In developing such scripts, we
not only seek to better represent women's experience of heterosex, but also to provide
a space for resignification and the potential subversion of heterosex through a
destabilizing of traditional narratives of heterosex.

This work also draws attention to the need to address the invisibility of
"heterosexuality." While a focus on heterosex as practice or experience is important,
the critique of heterosexuality cannot be lost within that. The experience of participants
in this study indicates that heterosexuality is still not subject to critique for most. In part,
this may reflect a lack of splitting of heterosexuality as identity from heterosex as a
behaviour. Thus, research which seeks to make that split apparent and challenges participants to consider this split explicitly is definitely warranted. Alternately, future research should also make a more concerted effort to consider these issues from the vantage point of identity positions (e.g., bisexual) that do not fall into traditional binaristic identity categories. While a limited variety of identity positions were seen in this research, this represented a minority of respondents. The offerings of these minority participants, however, suggested a greater awareness of heterosexuality as identity and institution. Thus, subsequent work focusing on individuals claiming such identities may shed a new light the topic of power and heterosex.

Finally, although identified by one participant, future work should also be done that shifts the focus away from women and begins in earnest a reconsideration of heterosex and heterosexuality for men. To consider the meaning of heterosex and to open space for resistance and subversion would seem to be limited to the extent that men are not engaged in this process. As Alicia put it, the problem is not with women. To engage heterosexual men in a thoughtful consideration of power in heterosex may provide the biggest challenge yet, but one that may have in some respects a highly important pay-off.
REFERENCES


Walters, S.D. (1996). From here to queer: Radical feminism, postmodernism, and the lesbian menace (or, why can't a woman be more like a fag?). Signs, 21, 830-869.


Appendix A: Recruitment Advertisement
My name is Julie Fraser and I am currently working on my doctoral dissertation in Applied Social Psychology at the University of Windsor. I am looking for women, 18 years and older who are interested in talking to me about their experiences of power in their sexual relationships with men and helping me in generating theory pertaining to women, sex, and power.

If you have had the experience of feeling powerful in a sexual relationship or context with a man, you’re someone that I would like to talk to. You do NOT have to identify as heterosexual to be involved in this study but you do have to have had a sexual relationship with a man. This project would probably be of greater interest to someone who’s had the opportunity to study or think about these issues before - for example, in taking a course or being in a discussion group. However, anyone who is interested is welcome to participate!

The study itself will involve a one-on-one interview with me at a safe, agreed upon spot in your geographical location. The interview will give us an opportunity to talk about your sexual relations with men and your experiences of power in those relationships. You will also be asked to fill out a short demographics questionnaire. Later, you will receive a copy of a preliminary analysis of the interview data for your comments and criticisms. In that way, you will also be involved in the research analysis as well. All information is completely confidential and you can withdraw from the study at any time.

If you are interested, or if you want more information, please e-mail me at fraser1@uwindsor.ca. If you wish to talk in greater depth, let me know how I can reach you by phone and I will be glad to call. If you know of anyone else who might be interested in this study, please pass this on to them.

If you are concerned about contacting and potentially meeting with a stranger and would prefer some verification about who I am, please feel free to call or visit the Department of Psychology at the University of Windsor (519-253-4232 ext. 2215) and they’ll be glad to speak with you.

Thanks for taking the time to consider this study!
Appendix B: Interview Protocol
Interview Protocol

Introduction:

"If you remember back to when you first heard about this study, what we're here to talk about is your experiences of power in your sexual relations with men. Because this study deals with women having sex with men, what I want you to think about is a time when you've felt powerful in a sexual experience with a man. If anything upsets you at any time, please let me know and we can talk about it. You can also choose not to answer any question that you might feel uncomfortable about."

Getting started:

1. What does power mean to you? In the context of sexual relationships?
2. In what point in your sexual history did you begin to think about power in your relations with men?

Questions to encourage stories:

1. I'd like you to think back to a sexual encounter with a man where you felt very powerful. Take a moment to think about it, to put yourself back in that situation in your mind. Let me know when you've had a chance to do that...

   Can you describe that encounter? What was going on? What was it like? How did you feel about it? Did it make you feel comfortable/uncomfortable? Was that typical or was it unique? Is that how it usually goes? What made you feel powerful? What was it about what was happening that made you feel powerful?

2. Now, I want you to think back again. This time I want you to think about whether there was another time when you also felt powerful but that was very different from the experience you just described to me...

   Can you describe that situation to me? What was happening? How was it different from the first experience you described? How did you feel powerful in a different way in this situation?

3. I'm going to change directions here a little bit. Again, I want you to think of an experience you had, but this time, see if you can think of an experience that was completely opposite to the previous ones, perhaps where you felt powerless...

   What was going? How did you feel? How was this different from the situations where you felt powerful?
4. Lastly, I also want you to think about whether there have been situations where you've felt both powerful and not powerful with the same person or at the same time...

What was that like? How did you experience that?

More specific probes:

1. Some people think that men have all the power in sex with women. What do you think about that? Why do you think people say that? Does your being a woman have an effect on your experience? If so, how? What kind of a woman are you?

2. Some theorists believe that understanding things like sex, power, gender, and sexual identity, in terms of rigid either/or categories doesn't work to explain many people's experiences. What do you think? How do you see those things? How do they relate to your experience?

3. We often tend to think of power in terms of control or dominance, or in terms of one person having power over someone else who lacks power. What do you think about that? How does that fit with your sexual experiences with men?

4. Imagine a situation where you are given the opportunity to teach other women about experiencing sexual power in their relations with men. What would you tell them? Could they change their experience? What might help/hinder them?

5. Are there any people who might be critical of your understanding of your sexual experiences with men? If they were here, what would they say?

6. How does the power that you experience in a sexual situation with a man relate to the nature or quality of your relationships with men outside of sex?

Closing Questions:

1. What expectations do you have for your future sexual relations with men?

2. Are there any important questions that you think I didn't ask?

3. If you were doing this research what might you have done differently?

4. Do you know of anyone who might be willing to talk to me whose experience might be different from yours?
Appendix C: Demographics Questionnaire
Confidential

What follows on the next two pages is a background questionnaire. Please fill out the questions on the following pages as best as you are able. Do not write your name on these sheets.

Not all people are comfortable with filling out these types of questionnaires. It is often difficult to label oneself according to pre-set categories, particularly when these categories don't always fit who we are or our experiences. The information on this sheet will only be used to give me general ideas about who my participants are. It will not be used to make predictions about particular groups of people. If you find questions that are difficult to answer, ask me if you are unsure. If the options provided do not reflect your experience, please feel free to create your own options!
Demographics Questionnaire

H. What is your age? _____ (years), sex? _____ (male/female)

I. At present, what best represents your sexual orientation?
   1). Heterosexual
   2). Gay
   3). Lesbian
   4). Bisexual
   5). Not sure
   6). Other, please describe ______________________________________

J. What best describes your racial background?
   1). White
   2). Black
   3). Hispanic
   4). Asian
   5). Arabic
   6). Aboriginal
   7). Other, please describe ______________________________________

Please describe your ethnic or cultural background (e.g., Irish, Lebanese, etc.)

______________________________________________________________

K. Which of the following best describes your educational attainment level to date?
   1). High School
   2). College
   3). University
   4). Post-Graduate
   5). Other, please describe ______________________________________

If you specialized in a particular area of study (e.g., psychology, women's studies), please describe the nature of your studies in the space provided below:

______________________________________________________________

L. What, if any, is your current occupation? Please describe.

______________________________________________________________

M. What best describes your socio-economic background?
   1). Working class
   2). Lower-Middle class
   3). Middle class
   4). Upper-Middle class
   5). Upper class
   6). Other, please describe ______________________________________
N. What is your current relationship status?
   1). Single
   2). Married
   3). Separated/Divorced
   4). Widowed
   5). Common-law
   6). Other, please describe ____________________________

O. Please list any groups to which you belong that you consider important to your identity or your politics.
   __________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________

I. If applicable or important, how would you describe your current and/or past religious background?

   Current: ____________________________________________
   Past: ____________________________________________
Appendix D: Consent Form
Consent Form

Research Title: WOMEN'S STORIES OF POWER: EXPLORING RECLAMATION AND SUBVERSION OF HETEROSEXUAL SEX

Investigator: Julie Fraser, M.A., Psychology, University of Windsor

The purpose of this document is to inform you of the existence of the University of Windsor Psychology Department Ethics Committee whose purpose it is to protect your rights and welfare. Any concerns about this study should be addressed to Dr. Sylvia Voelker, Department of Psychology Ethics Committee, University of Windsor, Windsor, Ontario, N9B 3P4, (519) 253-4232 ext. 2249. For more general questions or information about the study, you may also contact Julie Fraser at (519)-256-0014.

The purpose of this study is to gather women's stories of their experiences of power or control in their sexual experiences with men. This project is also being undertaken as part of a doctoral dissertation in Applied Social Psychology.

I understand that I will be asked about my sexual experiences and my understandings of power in sexual relationships. Individual interviews will be audio-taped for transcription purposes and subsequently erased. It is the responsibility of the researcher to keep the identity and opinions of all participants strictly confidential. In the event that direct quotes from interviews may be used, all identifying information will be removed and those individuals responsible for providing these quotes will be approached directly and asked for permission to use quotes as indicated. Quotes may be used in the writing of the final research document or for the purposes of research publications and/or for teaching purposes.

I willingly consent to participate in this study and realize that I can withdraw from the study without penalty at any time for any reason, and that I may decline to answer any question.

Date: __________________________________________
Name: __________________________________________
Signature: _______________________________________

Address where you can be reached:
VITA AUCTORIS

Julie Marie Fraser was born to Yvonne and Cameron Fraser on January 3rd, 1966. She spent her first years in Stratford, Ontario, and graduated from Northwestern Secondary School, Stratford, in 1985. She received a Joint Honours B.A. in Psychology and Music from the University of Waterloo in 1990. In 1994, she received a Master’s of Arts Degree from the University of Windsor, with a specialization in Adult Clinical Psychology. Finally, in 2000, she obtained her Doctorate in Philosophy from the University of Windsor, with a focus in Applied Social Psychology.