

Intimacy

Personal Relationships in Modern Societies

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CHAPTER 5

Sex and Intimacy

Introduction

In the late twentieth century, seeking sexual pleasure can be celebrated as more than lust or a matter of reproduction but as an expression of love, whether or not marriage is involved. Moreover, moralists fear and radicals hope that the process of 'finding yourself', or 'being yourself', now incites a more varied sexual repertoire than conventional heterosexual sex. This is the shift which Anthony Giddens calls 'plastic sexuality' and associates with the ascendancy of greater equality and 'disclosing intimacy' between sexual partners. Chapter 2 has already sketched stories of the history of sex and social change. This chapter is concerned with comparing late twentieth-century academic and popular stories about sexual behaviour with the much more complex and messy picture which emerges from research on everyday sexual behaviour and sexuality.

Sex, love and intimacy are analytically separate but in social practices they are often linked, as the phrase 'making love' illustrates. If the way in which people learn to feel sexy (when and with whom they want to have sex) is structured by a popular story of 'falling-in-love', then sex is linked to love in the construction of their sexuality. If a person learns to feel sexy only when they feel close to somebody whom they know and love, then, for them, sex is linked to intimacy. The converse is a learned separation between sex and intimacy such that knowing and feeling close to somebody makes them sexually

uninteresting. A question to ask of the research literature, then, is, 'Are there routinely produced linkages and separations between intimacy and sexual relationships or behaviours in people's everyday lives?' This is crucial to deciding whether sex is becoming more or less tied to intimacy, as are questions around gender difference. Are we witnessing the decline of macho-male masculinity with its predatory sexuality which ritually denies intimacy? Is there convergence in men's and women's relationships to sex and intimacy? There are also a number of subsidiary questions; for example, if there is a closer realignment of sex and intimacy, what of the continuance and in some cases increase in forms of sexual behaviour in which sex is totally separated from intimacy (prostitution, cottaging, erotica) or aligned instead with violence and abuse (rape, child-abuse, violent pornography)? And what of the fact that the mass media makes the publication and consumption of sexual stories all-pervasive? Is increased intimacy compatible with the increased exposure of people's sexual lives?

There are no easy answers to such questions. Different theoretical understandings of how and why people behave sexually lead to different views of sex and intimacy. As noted in chapter 1, there can be no one story and no neutral reading. The chapter begins by looking at the dominant themes and images of sex and intimacy in public stories, paying particular attention to popular culture, the official messages of the state, and the vocal lobby of the Moral Right. This part of the chapter ends with the current academic notion that the late twentieth century is qualitatively different. The remainder of the chapter turns from public stories told from 'on high' (that is the stories of moralists, experts and academics) to the research literature, the more grounded stories told by ordinary people to researchers.

Stories of 'Normal Sex' and Intimacy

A common message of experts on medical, mental and sexual health, that 'sex' is good for you, has become a taken for granted fact in much popular culture. This is not an unqualified message – it generally means conventional ways of being sexual with a conventional category of 'suitable' other and the conventions are rather different for men and women. However, celibacy, in the form of chosen sexual abstinence, is not recommended or spoken highly of in popular

culture. The stereotypes of people-who-do-not-have-sex often conjure up people who are social isolates either because of their pre-occupations or their inadequacies. While not always portrayed unsympathetically, the incompleteness of their life is what makes them a topic.¹ Sally Cline has conducted one of the few studies of celibacy and commends women's celibacy as enhancing their autonomy and independence. Referring to the 'sacred cow of sexual consumerism' (1993, p. 1) she notes that 'fifty years ago it took courage for a single woman to admit that she was enjoying an active sexual life. Today it takes courage for her to admit that she is not' (Cline, 1993, p. 3).

On the other hand, 'lovers' are typically portrayed as on a higher plane of happiness than others who do not have the combination of love and sex in one relationship. In popular culture there are many characterizations of lovers as equals focused on 'disclosing intimacy' but there are also many traditional characterizations of heterosexual lovers as masterful men and admiring, grateful, seduced women. Numerous films, novels and plays have portrayed lovers as experiencing an intensity of not just sexual discovery but also of a more general, knowledge-gathering intimacy, such that other relationships seem like shadows in comparison.² In the successful romance of this genre, the couple are typically both sexually passionate and engaged in intense efforts of mutual understanding. However, another characterization of lovers draws on themes much closer to conventional macho masculinity. The man is the hero and the woman is the one whom he has chosen or otherwise happens to have his special protection.³ His heroic deeds of care and protection are shown as winning or sustaining her love. Women's love is then akin to gratitude or admiration rather than constructed through mutual discovery. Both genres frequently present sex between lovers as the ultimate peak of intimacy. In portrayals of the action hero, sex and love are often collapsed into each other as the only episodes of intimacy in contrast to scenes of macho male violence. The lovers-as-equals who are focused on disclosing intimacy are mutually absorbed in a relationship which is more intense than anything else in their lives.

The linking of sex and intimacy in cultural constructions of 'lovers' echoes popular and expert assumptions that couples who are celibate or for whom sex is somehow unsuccessful have a problem which threatens their viability as a couple. In late twentieth-century Euro-North American societies, sexual success is generally defined in terms of mutual orgasm (Clark, 1993). Mutual orgasm as proof of success and intimacy in sexual relationships suggests a common and equal

standard of sexual pleasure for men and women. The dominant popular representations of lovers portray sex as mutually enjoyable. There are two common representations of mutually pleasurable heterosex in popular culture which match the two common types of 'lovers': that of the couple for whom sex is a further heightening of their intense concern with knowing, understanding and pleasing each other, and that of the masterful and lusty protective male hero and his relatively passive, indebted and worshipping woman who gives herself to him sexually and to whom he gives sexual pleasure.

For most of the twentieth century, men have also been portrayed as pursuing and being enhanced by sexual adventures which split sex from love and intimacy, while women are presented as degraded by such exploits. Respectability for women has depended on their sexuality being restricted to relationships in which they lose themselves in love and yet do not make the first sexual moves. But, in the late twentieth century, women taking the initiative in love and sex has become a more common cultural theme. Angela McRobbie (1991, 1994) describes this shift in British magazines for teenage girls.

Most strikingly the girl is no longer the victim of romance. She is no longer a slave to love. She no longer waits miserably outside the cinema knowing that she has been 'stood up'. She no longer distrusts all girls including her best friend because they represent a threat and might steal her 'fella'. She no longer lives in absolute terror of being dumped. She is no longer terrified of being without a 'steady'. . . . There is love and there is sex and there are boys, but the conventionally coded meta-narratives of romance which . . . could only create a neurotically dependent female subject, have gone for good. . . . femininity does indeed emerge as an altogether less rigid category. It is still predicated round the pursuit of identity (in beauty), the achievement of success (through fashion consumption) and search for some form of harmony or stability (through happiness). There is more of the self in this new vocabulary of femininity, much more self-esteem, more autonomy, but still the pressure to adhere to the perfect body image as a prerequisite for the success in love which is equated with happiness. (McRobbie, 1994, 164-5)

The popular culture described by McRobbie links intimacy and sex in love; 'good sex' is the sex of lovers, success in love results in durable, intimate, sexual relationships, and love is conducted in a 'new more equal climate of sexual relations that girls are encouraged to enjoy' (McRobbie, 1994, p. 166).

Themes of greater gender equality in sex, love and intimacy co-exist with strong reassertions of traditional and patriarchal versions of how things are and should be. Wendy Hollway (1984) and Francesca Cancian (1987) have described how stories denying men's need for intimacy and portraying loving intimacy as women's business, construct women as dependent on men. Double standards in sexual conduct continue to divide women into 'the good' (who are not out looking for sex) and 'the bad' (who are asking for it). The 'sex drive' story continues to characterize men as needing sex in a way that women do not, justifying predatory and aggressive male heterosexuality of macho masculinity. Many popular narratives continue to present the approaches of men and women to sex as polarized and crudely stereotyped. In much of Euro-North American popular culture, the most feminine woman exhibits what Robert Connell (1987) has called 'exaggerated femininity'. Sex, for her, occurs in the context of being helplessly in love with (and dependent on) a man. The archetypal masculine man of popular culture exhibits an aggressive heterosexuality as if his sexuality were an aspect of general physical toughness. Sex is part of the hero's command over his action-packed life; the relative weakness of his sexual partner is made clear as the hero rescues or protects her and sex is part of her gratitude. This is the hegemonic masculinity endlessly celebrated in popular culture from John Wayne through Arnold Schwarzenegger and beyond. Norbert Elias's (1978) account of the 'civilising process' indicates that the actual incidence of male violence has waned as the modern state removed the legitimate use of violence from the everyday lives of men. Why then has the popularity of this type of hero persisted? One possible interpretation consistent with Elias's account is that such heroes are cathartic, allowing men to act along with male violence in fantasy, while living a more 'self controlled' life. However, the continued high incidence of domestic violence and rape indicates that many men have retained a sense of their right to enforce their domination of women by the exercise of male violence. Indeed, David Morgan (1990) finds no evidence of a decline in the ideal of a 'real man' who is capable of killing; violence continues to be an aspect of the most celebrated form of masculinity. The similarity in justifications given by perpetrators of sexual and domestic violence indicates the continued viability for unextraordinary men of a misogynist world view in which women are for their use and abuse (Kelly, 1988).

Predatory male sexuality and passive succumbing femininity are

pervasive cultural themes powerfully portrayed not only in popular culture but also in a number of expert domains. The social construction of the 'fact' of men's stronger sex drive has sanctioned views such as, that men naturally do the chasing and that women like to be chased, that men cannot help but sometimes lose control, and that women who 'lead men on' are asking for trouble; views which form part of the mythology of rape (Smart and Smart, 1978) and isolate men's sexuality not only from intimacy but from any form of social context. Laqueur (1990) and others⁴ have documented dominant ideological medical/scientific understandings of sexual arousal and pleasure in men and women, and their counter-currents. Decades after the physiology of women's orgasm had been conclusively documented by Masters and Johnson as resulting from clitoral stimulation (1966), experts continued to define women's sexual arousal as if it could only occur in the context of penetrative heterosexual intercourse, and as if women could only learn to like sex in the context of a relationship with and under the tutelage of a man.

Stories of the sexual prowess of men and seducibility of women are stock stories told by 'experts' in a number of other social contexts. For example, they are routinely drawn on by defence lawyers in rape trials. The standard defence in rape cases is that the woman consented, either by welcoming or giving in to the man's sexual advances.⁵ This means a defence which presents whatever sexual events are acknowledged as taking place as being 'normal sex'. Skilled defence lawyers successfully present sex between casual acquaintances, in uncomfortable surroundings, followed by extreme distress on the part of the woman as normal or the normal gone slightly wrong. In the process a predatory male sexuality and a readily seducible female sexuality are typically presented. Nevertheless, the picture of 'normal sex' which emerges is frequently the grim coercive event diagnosed by feminists of the 1970s (Greer, 1971). Courtroom speeches both draw on and reinforce the more pervasive public stories about gender, sex and intimacy, as courtroom dialogue frequently re-enters the domain of public stories through media coverage.

The various arms of the twentieth-century state are powerful filters, amplifiers, and sometimes producers of public stories about sex, intimacy and gender. However, modern states are complex and state agents – legal, medical, religious, educational, welfare workers – may pursue contradictory, competing and uncoordinated policies. What is not in doubt is that the frequency of state, official and quasi-official pronouncements about personal sexual lives has increased.

The points of contact between the state and personal life have multiplied since the previous century. For example, medical intervention to facilitate or prevent sexual reproduction, interventions regarding sexually transmitted diseases, and psychosexual counselling are services which create new points of contact between experts and their clients, allowing the exercise of subtle controls. The HIV/AIDS crisis provoked many governments to invest money in preventative campaigns, and the content of these official messages is a measure of the balance of power between conservative and radical voices shaping public stories. Initially AIDS was used by moral entrepreneurs as an opportunity to denounce sexual freedom generally and/or homosexuality in particular (Altman, 1986; Patton, 1985; Watney, 1987). However, the preventative campaigns have not declared sexual abstinence or monogamous marriage as the sole solutions, although both abstinence and monogamy have been recommended. Nor, however, have they rigorously promoted safe sexual practices which are an alternative to penetrative intercourse (such as mutual masturbation). Above all, preventative programmes have advocated condom use. Commenting on British 'safe sex' campaigns, Janet Holland and her colleagues note continued reluctance to give official sanction to any form of sexual behaviour which is divorced from reproduction (1991, p. 4) or challenges a conventional male view of sex as beginning with penetration and ending in ejaculation.

Many sectors of society attempt to influence the content of state-endorsed messages. The USA in particular has a very vocal right-wing moral lobby which presents problems of social order (crime, riots, truancy) as the consequence of the twin evils of sexual permissiveness and the breakdown of the family (for them, exemplified by divorce, illegitimacy, and single parents). For more conservative religious groups 'sex before marriage' remains a key indicator of moral decay, despite the fact that it is experienced by the majority of young people, most of whom no longer consider it to be morally wrong. Experts and state policy which emphasize 'relationships' rather than 'marriages' are condemned by the Moral Right. For example, the extension of the legal rights of married couples to heterosexual or same-sex couples forming a domestic unit (a practice now widespread with reference to heterosexual cohabiting couples but rare and legislated against in the USA, through the *Defence of Marriage Act, 1996*, with respect to same-sex couples), and the lowering of the legal barriers to obtaining a divorce are regarded as policies which undermine marriage. The concern of the Moral Right extends to the

decriminalization of homosexuality, availability of abortion, contraception for young unmarried people, sex education in schools, the relaxation of censorship and the growth of hard and soft pornography. All of these are seen as sexual freedoms inciting men and women to moral degeneracy.

While many of the themes of the Moral Right do not have popular support, some are simply a more exaggerated form of themes well represented in popular culture, such as the double standard in sexual conduct and the stigmatization of homosexuality. However, political analysts note that the successes of these right-wing moral movements are limited (Durham, 1991; Milligan, 1993; Somerville, 1992). In both Britain and the USA, legislation has not been passed clamping down on access to contraception or abortion, for example, although there have been some increases in censorship and moves against homosexual rights. For Britain, Martin Durham (1991) traced the disenchantment of the Moral Right with Mrs Thatcher's government, despite its stand against liberal sex education and the introduction of legislation making it an offence for a local authority 'to promote homosexuality or publish material for the promotion of homosexuality . . . promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship by the publication of such material or otherwise' (Clause 28 of the Local Government Bill, which became the law of Britain with only minor amendment in May 1988 (Jeffery-Poulter, 1991)). While for homosexual rights campaigners, it was frightening evidence of homophobia, for the Moral Right this was seen as a minor success amongst a general failure to turn back the tide. (Durham, 1991).

The Moral Right and some more radical organizations have been united in campaigns against pornography although for very different reasons. For the Moral Right, pornography can incite depraved sexualities, simultaneously undermining conventional sex within monogamous marriage. Feminists are concerned with the significance and consequences for women of representations of women as objects for men's use and abuse (Coward, 1982; Kappeler, 1986). Pornography is not the only source or main source of such representations of women. Images which sexualize people, predominantly women, as if they were consumable bodies or bits of bodies are widespread in advertising and popular culture as well as being the dominant theme of pornography. Cultural and structural layers of assumed and real power differences between men and women mean that men represented as objects cannot convey a notion that men are for

women's use and abuse equivalent to the message conveyed by images objectifying women. Susanne Kappeler (1986) begins her discussion of pornography by referring to a photograph of a black man taken in Namibia in 1983 by racist white men who murdered him. He is photographed as if he were a trophy, an animal captured by game hunters. While this man was not portrayed in a sexualized way, the picture conveyed the white racists' sense of ownership, of rights to use and abuse, and their objectification of the person in the picture. Men, then, can be portrayed in ways which suggest they are disposable objects but only with reference to racism, classism or some other system which incites seeing men as representatives of a subordinate category. Pornographic pictures of women often exemplify a taken for granted male supremacy just as this picture exemplified the racist mentality of these whites. The persistence of a pervasive sexism means no additional category is required to present women as subordinated objects. A particularly contested issue is the relationship between pornography and male violence towards women. While feminists are absolutely united in their will to combat rapes and sexual assaults by men on women, not all agree that censoring pornography will mitigate the problem.⁶ The view that pornography was the theory and rape was the practice led the North American feminists Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon to draft legislation against pornography, an example followed by some feminists in Britain (Assiter and Avedon, 1993). Anti-censorship feminists generally argue that the problems of sexual violence need far more radical attention than censorship and, moreover, that censorship may be used for odious political reasons leading to unwelcome restrictions on personal freedom.

It has been suggested that new story tellers and new stories have emerged at the century's end, extending the repertoire beyond popular portrayals of the ultimate intimacy of sex between lovers, the older stories of sexually needy men and seducible women, and the various messages promoted by state-sanctioned experts and vocal moralists.

Whatever changes occurred in the nineteenth century to establish preconditions of sexual story telling, a qualitative shift occurs in the mid-twentieth. Most analysts of sexuality agree that something dramatic happened to sexuality during the 1960s and 1970s. . . . More specifically, shifts have been detected in the swings towards a libertarianism where sex is 'viewed as a positive, beneficial, joy-

ous phenomenon' (Seidman, 1992, p. 5), towards a feminisation of sex (Ehrenreich, Hess and Jacobs, 1987); towards a recreational sex (D'Emillio and Freedman, 1988) and ultimately towards a democratisation of intimacy (Giddens, 1992). There is no one reason for these changes. One factor is surely the growth and proliferation of communications. Not only have the major means of mass communication been put into place so to be widely available to most (from mass paperbacking to records, TV, telephones, videos, etc.) but enough stories have been told publicly and circulated freely to reach a critical take-off point. (Plummer, 1995, p. 123)

Kenneth Plummer identifies three new sexual stories as having reached a 'critical take-off point'. They are the 'breaking the silence' stories of female survivors of rape and sexual abuse, the 'coming-out stories' of gay men and lesbians, and the recovery stories of people who present themselves as previously addicted to a pattern of relationship which was doing them harm. What these stories have in common is that they are told in the context of imagining others who share a similar experience and hence drawing on an imagined community of support. The stories have a conventional narrative structure in which suffering is overcome and a new sense of self and community found, but at the same time the stories can be seen as part of the process of creating community and making it possible for stories like theirs to be heard.

Stories need communities to be heard, but communities themselves are also built through story telling. Stories gather people around them: they have to attract audiences, and these audiences may then start to build a common perception, a common language, a commonality. Typically, stories that are not involved in community-building do not become strong stories. (Plummer, 1995, p. 174).

Reaching the critical take-off point in the case of 'breaking the silence' and 'coming-out stories' has followed sustained and persistent effort by the women's movement and the gay liberation movements to make personal stories political. The recovery stories, on the other hand, emerge from a therapeutic self-help culture which individualizes rather than overtly politicizes problems but, nevertheless, private pains are transformed into public ones shared with an imagined community.

Each of the sexual stories which Plummer identifies as unique to the late twentieth century repudiates a scenario which involves the

separation of sex and intimacy and implicitly lends support to 'disclosing intimacy' as the ideal. The stories of recovery from sexual/relationship addiction are a story of dawning self-knowledge and the replacement of self-loathing with self-love. Anthony Giddens argues that an increase in addiction to sex and damaging relationships is characteristic of the late twentieth century and stems from the same cause as the search for mutual relationships of disclosing intimacy: tradition has been more thoroughly swept away leaving people vulnerable to being overwhelmed by choice and having to work at sustaining a sense of a stable self. An addiction is a compulsive behaviour which has dispensed with choice. 'The idea of an addiction makes little sense in a traditional culture, where it is normal to do today what one did yesterday' (Giddens, 1992, p. 75). The general message of the addiction recovery story is that good sex and good relationships are only possible when you know and accept yourself; you must seek intimacy with yourself before seeking it elsewhere. Survivors who speak out about rape and abuse are adding voice not only to a general feminist attack on male violence but also to a denouncement of the predatory sexuality of macho male masculinity. What happened was violent, abusive and deeply harmful and a pole apart from the narrator's ideal/normal sexual relationship. In this sense the account by a survivor told on her own terms contrasts sharply with that of the stories of rape which are often constructed in courtrooms by way of defence. The coming-out story is about escaping the impasse of the impossibility of intimacy. It is a story of leaving behind the self-censorship, doubt and isolation of feeling gay but not telling the people that you love. It is as if a secret sexuality damaged the basis of intimacy with family and friends. While 'coming-out' often results in the further loss of family and friends it also represents a new beginning with the implied possibility of real intimacy.

However, the increase in radical stories from people shaping and reclaiming their own sexuality coincides with the persistence of consequential antidotes to their accounts. As rape victims speak out about the terrible harms they have survived, rape trials reproduce a masculinist view of pressured yet apparently consensual sex as a defence. As films like *Philadelphia* (USA, 1993) contribute to the normality of being gay, other arguments convince both the US and the British governments that the armed forces should retain the right to discriminate against homosexuals and the US passes the *Defence of Marriage Act* into federal law. Recovery stories about knowing and loving your-

self blend with the barrage of stories about who and how you might and should be as a 'healthy', 'real' or 'normal' man or woman.

The Realities of Sexual Lives

Some aspects of sexuality and sexual behaviour have been more researched than others. In general, areas which have been defined as relevant to social problems such as teenage pregnancy have been subjected to the most scrutiny. In 1994 large-scale surveys of sexual behaviour were published in Britain (of about 18,900 adults aged 16-59; Wellings et al.), and the USA (of about 3,500 adults aged 18-59; Laumann et al.). Surveys are more suited to exploring what people do than why they do it or what their behaviour means to them, although it is also possible to explore attitudes through surveys. In-depth interview studies are more suited to exploring the relationship between sex and intimacy. Young people have been the subject of such studies to a greater extent than other sub-groups of the population.

Sex surveys

The findings of both the US and British surveys of sexual life were greeted as remarkable only in the extent of conventionality found. One of the more highly publicized findings was how small the minority reporting homosexuality was, somewhat below the 10% found earlier this century by Alfred Kinsey (1948, 1953) for men and below 5% for women. The high rates of monogamy and modest number of sexual partners over a lifetime for the majority were also highly publicized as evidence of continued convention. In the US 75% of married men and 85% of married women say they have never had sex with anyone other than their partner since marriage. In Britain only 4-5% of married men and 2% of married women reported two or more sexual partners in the previous year. However cohabiting men and women reported a higher incidence of more than one partner in the previous year (15% and 8% compared with 28% and 18% for single men and women). In the USA, the average (median) number of partners over a lifetime was two for women and six for men (although the number of partners was higher for those who were teenagers in the late 1960s and early 1970s). Figures for Britain were similar.

The surveys provided some evidence with which to assess claims such as that of convergence between men and women's sexuality, the blossoming of personalized and varied repertoires of sexual behaviour and the closer fusion of sex and intimacy. Both surveys confirmed a continued gap in sexual behaviour between men and women, with men reporting higher rates for all forms of sexual activity, (on average, more partners, more orgasms, more masturbation and thinking about sex (asked only in the USA), more homosexuality and more adultery and higher rates of sexual pleasure. The overwhelming majority of US men said they routinely experienced orgasms when having 'sex' but only 29% of women (asked only in the USA). The British survey asked respondents to agree or disagree with the statements 'Sex without orgasm, or climax, cannot be really satisfying for a man', 'Sex without orgasm, or climax, cannot be really satisfying for a woman'. Men were more likely to see an orgasm as essential to either gender's sexual satisfaction and women were more likely to see an orgasm as essential to men than to women. Both surveys investigated a long list of possible types of sexual behaviour. The British survey reported: 'After vaginal intercourse, non-penetrative sex was the most frequently reported activity. 75% of women and 82% of men had experience of genital stimulation which did not result in intercourse (non-penetrative sex) at some time, and one in four had experienced this in the last 7 days' (Wellings et al., 1994, p. 149). *Time* magazine made much of the popularity of oral sex revealed by the US survey. A minority of heterosexuals had also practised anal sex. Both surveys also asked one or more questions about sexual practices which clearly separate sex and intimacy. Paying for sex was found to be very much a minority phenomenon. In Britain about 7% of men said they had paid for sex with a woman at some time and the pattern across ages suggested a decline in men's use of prostitution. Coercive sex was investigated in the US survey; 22% of women reported having been forced to do sexual things they did not want to do by somebody they love, and 3% of US men admitted forcing themselves on women. The British survey asked whether people agreed or disagreed with the statements 'Companionship and affection are more important than sex in a marriage or relationship' and 'Sex is the most important part of any marriage relationship.' The pattern of answers for men and women was very similar with 67-8% agreeing with the former and 16-17% agreeing with the latter.

Clearly the relevant evidence is mixed. Nearly 70% of men and women state that they value aspects of intimacy in a relationship

more than sex. However, there are clear warnings against assuming convergence between men and women concerning how sex should be conducted and what is valued in a sexual relationship. There are persistent behavioural differences and different expectations about sexual satisfaction. The most disturbing evidence suggesting the continuance of a predatory male sexuality is the significant minorities of women in the US who report being forced to do sexual things. There is little evidence about behaviour in either survey to suggest a quiet sexual revolution except perhaps a diversification in many people's sexual repertoire beyond genital penetrative sex. The surveys throw little light on the meaning of acts such as non-penetrative sex, oral and anal intercourse. The same acts can vary enormously in meaning to the participants. For example, Jacqui Halson's (1991) study of British schoolgirls suggests that girls give in to pressure to 'suck off' their boyfriends because they are unwilling to have conventional sexual intercourse. It is a strategy of damage limitation. Lillian Rubin (1990) found that in her US adult population both men and women viewed oral sex much more positively. There is, as yet, insufficient evidence to conclude the beginning of the end of the dominance of conventional genital sex as 'real sex' and the flowering of a more 'plastic sexuality'.

Learning about sex and intimacy

Childhood and youth are particularly studied because they are seen as key formative periods in determining adult patterns of behaviour through the formation of emotional and sexual identities. Influences in childhood are seen as more potent than influences in adulthood. It is the relative powerlessness of children and young people, which makes them necessarily susceptible to the moulding of cultural prompting and external constraints. Moreover paths taken in youth often close off other options in adulthood. However, it remains a debated issue whether everything learned in childhood can be re-learned in adulthood. Emotional responses such as feelings of guilt and shame about sex or the body or longing for particular types of relationship may be difficult to realign once established (Connell, 1987; Poster, 1978; Scheff, 1990).

Writing in the tradition of symbolic interactionism, John Gagnon and William Simon basically laid aside notions of deep-seated psychological predispositions and focused on the social process of learning about sex and constructing a sexual identity. They provided an

early detailed account (1973) of how male and female children and adolescents learn a different relationship to sex and emotion. Their account was subsequently elaborated by the British feminist author Stevi Jackson (1982). This work suggests that sexuality is built on gender identity. Girls learn more inhibitions, shame and guilt about sex than boys because of aspects of their gender socialization. Cleanliness, decorum and separation from dirt are frequently emphasized in everyday ways more for girls than boys. Also in childhood girls learn more self-censorship of their bodies than boys, they must keep more of their bodies covered and avoid certain postures, like sitting with their legs apart (see also Bellotti, 1975; Sharpe, 1976). So when children commonly confuse sex with urination and defecation it already seems more repulsive to girls than boys because of the stronger taboos surrounding their body and dirt. Gagnon and Simon described learning about sex as learning about guilt for both boys and girls. The negative messages from parents about what is not to be touched or exposed, and the rude, bad words that are never to be spoken, are rarely countered by any positive messages about the potential the body offers for sexual pleasure. Parents who expect to have feminine daughters and masculine sons will make considerably more effort to put a stop to exposed bodies and rude words from girls than from boys.

Other conventional gender differences in childhood and youth have consequences for the interplay of sex and intimacy in emerging sexual identities. Aggression is tolerated more in boys than girls. When young people come to see themselves as sexual, many boys are doing so in the context of an aggressive and self-assertive masculine identity and many girls in the context of a modest, self-censoring and self-effacing feminine identity. Of course the biographies of many result in their escaping the stereotypes but boys are more steered away from pursuits designated as girlish than girls are from pursuits designated as boyish. Because of the ranking of conventional masculinity above that of conventional femininity, to be a tomboy is a lesser offence for a girl than to be a sissy is for a boy. A boy trying to be 'like girls' is always more likely to be discouraged by parents than girls being 'like boys'. In adolescence, the physiological changes experienced by girls are often responded to by parents and others in ways which feed into girls' self-censorship, fears and guilt. Menstruation is explained in terms of reproduction. The message which many parents want to communicate is one of heightened danger because of the possibility of pregnancy. Moreover, menstrual blood is to be

hidden; it is treated like dirt as 'matter out of place'. Gagnon and Simon suggested that the adolescent boy's experiences of spontaneous erections and nocturnal emissions are much more readily related to sexual activity and physical pleasure. Moreover, they argued that boys collectively reinforce the focus on sex through sex-talk, valorization of the penis, comparisons of size, and masturbation competitions, while there was no equivalent acknowledgement and celebration of masturbation among girls.

The social constructionist account of sexuality takes for granted that it is possible to learn to be homosexual just as it is possible to learn to be heterosexual. Biographical events can lead people into relationships or sexual encounters with the same sex or to rejecting the dominant heterosexual pattern and redefining themselves as lesbian or gay. Nevertheless, people need not perceive their sexuality as learned or chosen. Those who define themselves as lesbian or gay offer a wide spectrum of explanations ranging from being born that way to making a deliberate political choice (Kitzinger, 1987). Gagnon and Simon (1973) suggested that because of their different gender socialization, gay men were more likely to come to see themselves as gay through experience of sex, while women were more likely to come to see themselves as lesbians through the experience of an intense, intimate relationship with a woman. In testimony to the strength of the heterosexual norms, very few people define themselves as bisexual, despite the fact that many gay and heterosexual men have sex with both men and women. Gay men have created social contexts where they can go for anonymized sex with no need for social niceties or payment. For Gagnon and Simon, the cult of casual sexual encounters in gay culture is the legacy of men's socialization into obsession with sex without the modifying influence of women seeking romantic relationships.

There is some evidence to suggest that Gagnon and Simon's, and Jackson's account of childhood and adolescent sexuality need to be updated and a great deal of evidence that confirms much has remained the same. Contemporary studies confirm the continuance of boys' more confident use of their bodies and of public space, with its implications for sexuality. Barrie Thorne, in her study of 6-9-year-old US schoolchildren in the playground, found that games sometimes label girls negatively as a group, in a way that boys as a group are never labelled. Already boys are able to express separation from girls and power over them by treating them as contaminating. 'These pollution rituals suggest that in contemporary US culture even young

girls are treated as symbolically contaminating in a way that boys, as a group, are not' (Thorne, 1993, p. 75). Research on schoolchildren aged 12 and 13 shows that girls' menstruation is used sometimes by boys to treat girls as contaminated. While menstruation is not as taboo as it once was, a recent British study indicates that menstruating schoolgirls are in constant fear of becoming an object of ridicule (Prendergast, 1994). Among their fears are the possibility of boys getting sight of, drawing attention to or seizing their supply of tampons or sanitary towels in order to cause them extreme embarrassment.

Data suggest that self-knowledge obtained through masturbation is less exclusively a male experience than earlier this century, although large gender differences still exist. In a random sample of about 150 18–24-year-olds (Laumann et al., 1994), 41% of boys and 64% of girls said they had not masturbated in the last year. In her 1994 report Shere Hite declared a 'major change in how girls feel about masturbation today, as compared to the 1970s . . . 61% now as opposed to 29% in the 1970s, feel no shame but even a kind of pride in their skill and knowledge about their own bodies, especially by their teenage years' (Hite, 1994, p. 73). Hite found that the majority of women and girls masturbated but her self-selected sample cannot be treated as representative of any bigger population. Nevertheless, the numbers taking part in her study are large and she can compare the results with that of her earlier similar study (1976). Hite stressed that women often report their girlhood masturbation as a solitary, private, guilty secret separated from 'grown-up, adult' sex. While many men who completed questionnaires had masturbated as boys with other boys (60% of her sample), women had not typically taken part in group masturbation (only 9% of her sample). If childhood masturbation is less taboo for boys than girls, this is not always the case for older teenagers and young adults. Interviews with working-class British boys indicate that once these teenagers expect each other to be having sex with girls, then masturbation becomes a sign of childishness and failure at achieving manhood (Wight, 1994).

However, the ability to negotiate sexual pleasure or achieve the ideal in which sex is a peak of intimacy continues to elude most young women. Rachel Thomson and Sue Scott (Women, Risk and AIDS Project) interviewed 70 young women aged 16–21 in Manchester about how they learned about sex in the late 1980s. They found that sex education in school generally stuck to a biological/reproductive paradigm. Neither the emotional, relational, social aspects of sex

nor the physiology of sexual pleasure were typically discussed. The authors comment that

This style of sex education shapes young women's understandings of what is normal, acceptable and discussible and, while many of them resist and reject these constraints they are nevertheless materially affected by them. What is left out of school sex education is often more significant than the actual content, what is left unsaid can be more powerful than what is spoken. Diagrams which show the vagina but not the clitoris are a powerful example of the sexual disenfranchisement of young women. (1991, p. 13)

Family-based sex education was also very limited and experienced by young women as protective warnings. Michael Wyness's interviews with Scottish parents indicated that parents prefer to rely on the school for formal sex education. While parents and children were able to communicate informally through reactions to TV programmes and the behaviour of others known to the family, these exchanges were often also limited to parents imparting moral judgements or giving brief answers to children's questions (Wyness, 1992). Parents were not typically filling the silences left by formal sex education in school.

The researchers on the Women, Risk and AIDS Project also confirmed that in adolescence sexual pleasure is not a regular topic among young women. There is far more sharing of experience about periods than sex, and general ignorance about female sexuality among 16-year-olds. Girls who did know about orgasms had usually learned about them from the problem pages of magazines or from books. Girls who were sexually experienced were often too concerned about their reputation to discuss sex. Deborah Tolman (1994) similarly found in the US that girls in high school lack a vocabulary for sexual desire and believed that gaining pleasure through their bodies made them bad or unworthy. But despite their rejection of sex for the sake of sexual pleasure the majority of young women become sexually experienced by their late teenage years as a part of their search for, or development of, a relationship with a young man. Boys' sexual talk is largely boasting rather than any real exchange of information or disclosure of feelings. Teenage boys typically communicate about sex through exaggerated talk, jokes and sexual insults (Wight, 1994; Wood, 1984) which can heighten anxiety about sexuality and deter openness about ignorance.

The first occasion of heterosexual intercourse is typically a shock and disappointment to young women. Lillian Rubin's studies in the US found that first heterosexual intercourse was rarely pleasurable for either sex (1990). For young men anxiety about performance dominates. For young women ignorance (about the details of conventional sex and their own body) and the romantic image of sex as the ultimate intimate expression of love make disappointment very likely, particularly if the young man is simply concerned to 'get the thing done'. To quote one of the Women, Risk and Aids Project respondents 'You see all these love scenes on TV and they are all panting away and saying that's lovely. And you think "Oh!" But when it comes to the real thing it's a big disappointment. I think it's the mass media that I got my expectations from' (Thomson and Scott, 1991, p. 32). Describing how her teenage daughter viewed the *Top Gun* 'love scene' which she played to herself over and over again, a mother commented 'She sees it in a sort of romantic, loving way; she doesn't really see it as sex. She sees it as love, and at the moment that's how she views sex, to do with love.' (Rafanell, 1995, p. 69). Clearly the mother may have misjudged her daughter but her account is confirmed by how many young women themselves spoke of their expectations of sex. A minority of young women interviewed for the Women, Risk and Aids Project had learned about sexual pleasure through experience, typically because they were in a relationship characterized by adequate time, space and intimacy to make this possible. Others had continued in pleasureless sexual encounters, anxiously worrying if they were 'doing it right' and often defining 'right' in terms of the man's sexual pleasure, not their own.

John Gagnon and William Simon emphasized that young women were more schooled in romance than sex. While this remains true, the Women, Risk and AIDS Project suggests it may reflect the depths of ignorance about sex more than the extent of immersion in romance. Angela McRobbie has questioned whether young women organize their lives around the pursuit of romance in the 1990s. Having argued in the 1970s that the focus of young working-class female British teenagers was 'bedroom culture' where girls schooled each other in romance, dress codes and attractiveness, she now suggests a shift away from this previous emphasis on getting and keeping a boyfriend. She takes the popularity of 'raves', huge all-night disco dancing events associated with use of the drug Ecstasy, as exemplary of the trend, arguing raves are not about romance, finding a partner or sex, but the fun of 'pure physical abandon in the company of others'

(McRobbie, 1994, p. 168). However, other authors continue to speak in terms of young women obsessed with romance. Eisenhart and Holland (1983, Holland and Eisenhart, 1990) have argued that in US college culture young women are, above all, educated in romance, constructing their femininity in romantic relationships. They argue that friends and classmates are particularly powerful promoters of conventional masculinities and femininities (Holland and Eisenhart, 1990).

Studies of young people's rules of sexual conduct invariably illustrate the strength of the assumption that 'normal sex' is heterosexual. Daniel Wight sums this up with reference to his own research with young men:

In the course of both ethnographic and formal research explicit references to homosexuality were rare. However, this did not indicate that sexual orientation was not important to young men's identities, rather it demonstrated how taken-for-granted compulsory heterosexuality is as the cultural norm . . . When boys touched on the subject in group discussion there was a predictable expression of homophobia, as found amongst the young in other parts of Britain. (Hendry, et al., 1993; Clift, et al. 1990; Wight, 1994, p. 720)

And Stevi Jackson sums up more generally in her review article: 'We all learn to be sexual within a society in which "real sex" is defined as a quintessentially heterosexual act, vaginal intercourse, and in which sexual activity is thought of in terms of an active subject and a passive object' (Jackson, 1994, p. 10). There are no question marks in the literature about the tendency of all-male groups of friends to promote conventional, unromantic, sexually obsessed masculinity among boys and young men. Miriam Johnston (1988) has argued that the male peer group is the key source of social pressure which turns young men away from intimacy. The power of the all-male peer group as a promoter of a sharp separation between sex and loving intimacy has been documented in a number of studies. Recent British examples include the study of Janet Holland and her colleagues of 16-21-year-old men in London and Daniel Wight's work with 14-16-year-old young men in Glasgow. The young men talked of the competitive pressure to perform sexually. While some could reject such pressures, many felt compelled to lose their virginity as quickly as possible. As one young man put it when asked if sex means something different for boys and girls: 'Yes, definitely, men just see it

as something that has to be done, that's what I think, so your friends don't tease you. Women see it as something that really means something to them. We are using them to get something, I don't know, it's all ego when it comes down to it for men . . . it's like an achievement' (Holland et al., 1993, p. 14). Boys talk of sex as something that men do to women (Wight, 1994). A number of young men described how during their first experience of conventional sex they were thinking throughout 'I've got something to tell my mates now' (Holland et al., 1993, p. 22). At this stage in their lives, such young men have uncritically accepted a male model of sexuality which separates sex and intimacy and identifies male power as sexual conquest over women.

Janet Holland and her colleagues found young men pursuing different sexual careers after using a girl to dispose of their own virginity. Some then sought something more like a sexual relationship. Others made a sexual career out of pursuing women for sex and then immediately losing interest in them. Young men who chose this career as self-styled 'bastard' wanted to believe in themselves as star sexual performers: 'men then have to prove their prowess to women, as well as report it back to men' (Holland et al., 1993, p. 31). But the lack of communication and caring in their sexual performance meant the impossibility of knowing anything other than their own version of good sex. Some were aware of this paradox and had a conscious policy of never asking 'was it good for you?' for fear of shattering their faith in their sexual prowess. One young man maintained indifference to what girls thought or felt for him as a person while asking them what they liked in terms of sexual technique to 'keep them happy'. Like some others in the sample, he eventually abandoned his 'bastard' career. He described himself as having fallen in love and talked of the contrast between sex in his previous relationships and with his girlfriend: 'It feels totally different . . . because I love her and that, we can actually make love without actually having intercourse, just being nice to one another and that . . . it feels we are making love. But with other girlfriends sex had to be intercourse, so it was sex' (Holland et al., 1993, p. 26). Daniel Wight (1993a, 1994) also found divergences between the norms of masculine sexual conduct and young men's behaviour. While conventions of masculinity required sex without emotional attachment, some teenage men did want to know and did have feelings for young women. However, those who had revealed a more sensitive side to themselves in individual interviews, nevertheless objectified women and stuck to the

norms of masculinity in group discussion, remaining publicly vague or silent about sexual details in their actual relationships.

Research on gay men continues to give qualified support to Gagnon and Simon's inferences about men's and women's socialization into a search for sex versus a search for romance. Studies find that the majority of gay men seek intimacy as well as sex; most want lasting intimate sexual relationships (Bell and Weinberg, 1978; Blumstein and Schwartz, 1983; Weston, 1991). However, their frequent ability to separate sex and intimacy means that visits to cruising areas and the like for casual sex are not necessarily considered a threat to a relationship with a partner. On the other hand, there are many gay men in stable partnerships who never visit the sex scenes. Research confirms that women's sexual relationships with other women are more typically based on friendships and mutual support than sex. For example, Lillian Faderman referring to her own US research (1991) and that of Philip Blumstein and Pepper Schwartz (1983) notes that the emphasis on sex of the 1960s and 1970s passed lesbians by:

Because most lesbians had been socialized first and foremost as female, they were no more able than most heterosexual women in the past to form relationships primarily on the basis of sexual lust. And unlike heterosexual women in the 1970s, lesbians generally did not have partners who would prod them on to greater sexual looseness. . . . Not only were lesbians outside of committed relationships far less sexual than gay male and heterosexual singles, but even within long-term relationships they tended to be much less sexual. (Faderman, 1991, p. 247)

Kath Weston (1991) is critical of the notion that sharing the same gender results in an intensification of gendered characteristics, but notes that because this is a commonly held belief among gays and lesbians, it impinges on the way 'both lesbians and gay men configured eroticism and commitment' (1991, p. 143). For example, some men considered their relationships as particularly susceptible to breaking down because they believe men do not learn to 'nurture' while many lesbians worry that their relationships are over-nurturing, causing excessive dependency (Weston, 1991). In the 1990s some lesbians are actively reacting to the notion that lesbian identities are about relationships not sex by advocating a more aggressively erotic sexuality.

Adult sexualities and social change

Psychoanalysis teaches that many of our early emotional reactions become lost to conscious scrutiny, yet they are consequential for the patterning of our subsequent emotional life. Robert Connell suggests that one of the most valuable insights of psychoanalysis is the fact that it does not conceive of the self as a simple homogeneous core identity but rather anticipates people building psychological tension and conflict within themselves and then acting in ignorance of their self-constructed contradictions. Connell attempts to build some of the insights of psychoanalysis into the social construction paradigm of how sexuality is acquired.

In his recent text on masculinity (1995) Robert Connell provides detailed accounts of the biographies of men who have chosen a route other than conventional macho masculinity, with its associated separation of sex and intimacy, emphasis on male sexual performance and conquest of women. In interpreting the stories that men tell about their lives he is drawing on a psychoanalytic framework and its feminist variants, including the work of Nancy Chodorow and Dorothy Dinnerstein.⁷ Connell is not searching for definitive causes of particular sexualities, since sexuality is not predetermined but produced through specific practices. Rather he is illustrating the unfolding of sexuality in an individual biography by reference back to the emotional attachments, resistance to attachments and rejections of early family life, as well as the backdrop of conventional stories of masculinity, femininity and heterosexuality. Among the groups of men Connell studied were a group of eight men who identified themselves as gay. Connell used the phrase 'very straight gays' to communicate their commitment to much of conventional macho masculinity despite their sexual orientation. They all grew up in households with conventional divisions of labour and power structures between their mother and father. All learned to embrace aspects of the project of male dominance. However, in childhood all identified closely not just with their father but also with their mother or sister thus allowing them to internalize the possibility of being more like their mother or sister than their father, although as boys they all conformed to masculine stereotypes. The realignment of their sexual identity typically followed on from a same-sex encounter. Realignment of sexual identity typically coincided with a new sense of self and ended a phase of rebellion or unhappiness. Another group

studied were men contacted through the environmental movement. They were self-consciously 'new men' who had distanced themselves from macho masculinity, were sympathetic to feminism and wanted to treat women as equals. In examining the biographies of these men Connell shows the point at which they reversed their developing commitment to conventional masculinity and how realignment of their childhood feelings for their immediate family were part of what made this possible. For example in his story of Danny Taylor, the implication is that if circumstances had not resulted in Danny feeling excluded by the strong bond between his father and brother then he would probably have continued down the route his older brother already followed. By early adolescence, his brother had tutored him in two important aspects of masculinity, sex (celebrating sex for its own sake, objectifying women as sex objects) and football. If Danny had followed the conventional mould then in his adult relationships he would have pursued sex without intimacy perhaps until deciding to 'fall-in-love' and settle down in a relationship in which he played the dominant partner to a woman. Instead, however, he formed a strong bond with his mother in adolescence, reassessed conventional masculinity and now in his adult life seeks open and honest relationships with women.

Although analysing alternative sexualities to conventional macho masculinity, Connell's analysis suggests how robust gendered patterns of sex and intimacy are. Both gay men and 'new men' rework rather than abandon the conventional male mould. While Danny Taylor's biography demonstrates how a profound psychosexual reworking is possible it also suggests the strength of the contradiction in conventional masculinity between sex and mutually disclosing intimacy. Danny sought a relationship of openness, intimacy and greater equality but the woman he sexually desired and with whom he fell in love was not an equal in his eyes but a superior. He saw his partner as a strong woman whom he looked up to. Connell implies that Danny is unwittingly recreating the contradiction between sex and mutual intimacy in his own psyche and replacing the mother of his adolescence with a strong woman in adulthood. The gay men who Connell also interviewed were 'very straight gays' in that although they sought men as sexual partners they liked masculine men and had not themselves broken wholly with conventional masculinity. They all wanted long-term, mutually loving relationships with other men but most found they were making do with casual sexual encounters.

Lillian Rubin's interview study also found contradictions in how men and women talked about what they wanted from heterosexual relationships. Her analysis suggests that individual conflicts and contradictions reflect a process of social change. Rubin (1990) interviewed 300 heterosexual men and women aged 18–48 (from 'all over' the USA) from a range of ethnic and class backgrounds (as well as a sample of 75 younger people), some in couple relationships and some not. Many of her interviewees, particularly those outside of coupledness, conveyed a sense of unsettled heterosexual relationships. Men stated both that they were seeking strong independent women who would be their equal and yet that they also wanted women who would be soft and submissive, in other words their subordinate. Or they admitted that when they found the spirited women that they sought, they then got nervous and were not sexually interested. Some women also wanted possibly contradictory characteristics in men – successful and ambitious as well as sensitive and feeling. Some men were very angry at their perception of the impossibility of living up to what women wanted: 'The women are always talking about how they want a man who's different, you know, one who's not just an aggressive prick. Then when a guy tries to be like that, what happens? They call him a wimp' (1990, p. 154). On the double standard in sexual conduct Lillian Rubin concluded that 'Men still hold the power to define the acceptable; women still conceal their sexual behaviour. But it's no small change that many, if not most, men now question the legitimacy of their own thoughts and feelings and that most women are now angry about such sexual inequalities' (1990, p. 120). Similar findings led the British sociologists Jean Duncombe and Dennis Marsden to conclude that 'traditional role and behaviour have been disturbed to the extent that men as well as women now experience an uncertainty and ambiguity in the most intimate areas of emotional and sexual behaviour' (1995, p. 11). Some men in Rubin's study had, nevertheless, opted for the separation of sex from intimacy characteristic of conventional macho male sexuality. A fifth of men had visited a prostitute in the previous year, a considerably higher proportion than the averages reported by Laumann et al. in their survey of sexual behaviour.

While Rubin found that the overwhelming majority of women and many men valued intimacy more than sex, those who had embarked on new relationships typically started having sex before they felt they really knew the other person. Even those respondents who strongly believed that it is better to delay sex until you get to know somebody

in other ways found it impossible to do this. Elisabeth Badinter has suggested that sexual passion and consuming desire have faded from human experience as the price paid for greater sexual equality and freedom (Badinter, 1981). While not accepting Badinter's romanticized view of the passionate past, it is clear that building intense passion through years of sexually desiring someone would be an unusual pattern of behaviour in the late twentieth century. Public stories of the naturalness of sex if you are in love, portraying sex as the ultimate form of intimacy, and promoting sexual consumerism, sex as a good in itself, help set the scene for quickly progressing to sexual acts. The desire to 'know the other' combined with sexual desire almost inevitably leads to sex if there are no clear proscriptions against it and when the wider culture makes sex the obvious next stage. Other agendas for developing intimacy, loving and caring, knowing and understanding, are not necessarily subverted in the process, but studies of couple relationships indicate that this can and does happen. In so far as women pursue something like 'disclosing intimacy' more typically than men, then women are more likely to be dissatisfied if intimacy is reduced to sex. This is confirmed by a number of studies, although exceptions to the rule are also found.

While surveys suggest that both men and women value intimacy, in-depth studies find that reducing intimacy to the physical intimacy of sex and seeing sex as all the intimacy you need remains more common among men than women. The following typical example of what many women and men feel about this is taken from Lillian Rubin's North American study of working-class families. A woman said, 'If we have a fight, I want to talk about it so we could maybe understand it. I don't want to jump in bed and just pretend it didn't happen'. Her male partner said, 'I want to make love to her and she says she wants to talk. How's talking going to convince her I'm loving her?' (Rubin, 1976, p. 146–7). Many women find sex increasingly burdensome without the flush of romance or any effort from their partner to make them feel loved and special. In the following example, a woman explains that sex has got worse not because her partner is doing things differently but because there is no romance to make it tolerable. 'He didn't really bother with foreplay. But somehow I was so into him that it didn't matter, and I never said anything' (interviewee quoted in Duncombe and Marsden, 1996a, p. 226). Pat O'Connor (1995) found that for most of the working-class women she interviewed (57 predominantly white married women living in London) good sex and high intimacy typically went together. How-

ever, a small minority of women rated sex as pleasurable and a time of closeness but yet did not rate their relationship highly on other measures of closeness. They had very segregated marital relationships with little disclosure or sharing of activities. For them, sex was evidence of love, and all the evidence they had. An earlier study of British middle-class marriages similarly identified unusual couples in which sex was the only time when the woman felt close to her partner. For example, a couple who were collusively drawing on both the public story of sex as the most intimate expression of love, and macho masculine notions of sex as something-men-do-to-women, said,

'At least, while we're having sex, I know that Brian is with me. I have his attention and his mind is completely on the job and he's not thinking of anything else.' . . . 'I can't talk to my wife, but I can throw her on the bed and then talk to her. I do feel I communicate in bed. It's obviously an intense awareness of each other, and afterwards, that's it, I change the subject mentally and physically.' (Deverson and Lindsay, 1975, p. 153)

A recent British study of long-term heterosexual couples found men complaining about lack of sex and women complaining about lack of intimacy, illustrating persistent gender differences and inequalities. Jean Duncombe and Dennis Marsden found that of the 40 long-term married couples they interviewed, the happier couples felt close and had maintained a sexual agenda of mutual orgasm but in many couples at least one partner was unhappy with their emotional or their sexual lives. Most had experienced a diminishing of sexual activity and some were currently celibate. Women's main sources of dissatisfaction were inequality in providing 'emotional reassurance and comfort' (1993, 1995b, p. 13). Cuddling, kissing, saying 'I love you' and other such emotional reassurances were wanted by women but rarely initiated by men. The complaints that men made to the interviewers were of women who 'don't try' or were 'not interested' in sex. The paucity of men's 'emotion work' influenced how women felt about sex. These themes were found to be already present among recently married couples (Mansfield and Collard, 1988). The newly wed wives reported that after marriage, men were less likely to express love when having sex, that they found it difficult to say no to sex because they did not want their husbands to feel rejected and that they tolerated sex they found less than pleasurable. Duncombe

and Marsden suggest that women as new wives felt obliged to do more 'sex work' on behalf of their husbands, but men as husbands felt that 'security of possession' in marriage meant they could expend less effort on sex. Women were doing more 'sex work' to please men while men were doing less to please women. In conventional heterosexual activity men take the initiative and the lead throughout the action and are responsible for it being 'good sex' for their partner as well as themselves. What is being suggested is that, after marriage, men want to carry less of this burden. Given that most men regard their orgasm, unlike women's, as a more or less inevitable outcome of conventional sex, this means resentment at carrying the work of 'giving her one'. The consequence for women is both less satisfactory sex and feeling less loved, a loss of intimacy which feeds back into less satisfactory sex.

When men regarded women 'letting them' have sex as a part of the marriage contract, then their resentment at women's reluctance to have sex became righteous perhaps justifying coercive behaviour: 'It would be no skin off her nose . . . Sometimes I just want her to let me put it in and do it . . . She's broken the contract. Sex is part of marriage, and I can't see that anything's changed enough to alter that' (Duncombe and Marsden, 1996, p. 12). 'Pete used to say, like, he didn't mind . . . [when she did not feel like sex after the birth of their child]. But every now and then, you know, 'the erection in your back' . . . I used to feel it was my duty . . . and sex was horrible, I used to cry afterwards' (Duncombe and Marsden, 1996a, p. 229). The nature of intimacy between these couples did not lead to them talking about dissatisfaction with their sexual lives, despite a cultural backdrop of public talk about sex.

Stories, Practices and Social Change

Neither public stories nor what is known about everyday practices indicate a clear trend in sexual relationships towards equality, disclosing intimacy, and mutually negotiated do-as-we-enjoy sex. Public stories about sex offer a variety of contradictory messages which sustain both a strong narrative of predatory male sexuality separated from intimacy and a romantic fusion of sex and intimacy. The dominant narrative of official 'expert' stories emphasizes the fusion of sex and intimacy, although expert supporters of 'male sex drive' sto-

ries can still be found. The emphasis in expert stories on 'relationships' rather than roles, responsibilities and obligations has seriously displeased sections of the Moral Right. It is impossible to definitively judge the balance of narratives of popular culture, films, advertising, television soaps, novels and the like, but predatory male sexuality remains a celebrated theme and a commercially successful formula. While feminist and homosexual stories can be heard in public discourse, the dominance of heterosexual conventional sex certainly remains ensconced. New sexual stories are being told but assertions that they are the leading edge of social transformation remain a radical political desire and a conservative nightmare rather than an established trend. Stories which speak of equality, disclosing intimacy, and mutually negotiated do-as-we-enjoy sexual relationships are popular but easily matched by more conventional tales predicated on gender inequality and conventional heterosexual practices. In these stories men are propelled by sex drives and women are perpetually seducible. Although contradictory, both stories are inevitably consequential for everyday life.

Recent empirical work suggests that most adult men and women, heterosexual or homosexual, share the ideal of a fusion of sex and intimacy. It also suggests some diversification in heterosexual repertoires beyond conventional sexual intercourse. However, research also reveals a fairly bleak picture of sexual relationships between young men and women. It is a picture which incites sympathy with the more damning feminist accounts of heterosexuality (MacKinnon, 1982, 1987; Rich, 1980). It shows that young men and young women often share a phallogentric view of 'normal sex': it begins with penetration of the vagina by the penis and ends in male ejaculation. Young women lack a vocabulary for sexual desire; early sexual experiences are often devoid of pleasure and many young women continue to fake orgasm in order to please their male partner. John Gagnon's and William Simon's description of heterosexuality over twenty years ago continues to capture how many men and women begin their heterosexual careers: 'males - committed to sexuality and less trained in the rhetoric of romantic love - interact with females who are committed to romantic love and relatively untrained in sexuality' (1973, p. 74).

The image of young women cut off from their own bodies and denied sexual pleasure in their first heterosexual relationships sits uneasily with the recent findings of Shere Hite. A similarly upbeat analysis of changes in women's sexuality is to be found in the work

of Barbara Ehrenreich and her colleagues who wrote in the 1980s of the quiet revolution of an historical shift in women's power to demand and receive sexual pleasure. The evidence they cited included the earlier Hite reports and figures for the increased sales of vibrators. Ehrenreich and her colleagues were concerned with the experiences of adult women rather than young women entering sexual relationships. The evidence of women in long-term couple relationships provides very limited support for this optimism. Indeed, it is impossible to wholly reconcile these optimistic views with the grimmer picture painted by other researchers. Perhaps they serve as an important reminder that many more women live in circumstances which allow them to explore the possibilities their bodies offer for pleasure than earlier in the 'modern' period. Women's expectations of sex and intimacy are higher than ever before and so perhaps it is not surprising that disappointment is common. The public stories which talk of passionate sex and intense intimacy constantly flag the possibility of negotiating mutually satisfying sex. Even when men and women come together in conditions and with ideas which work against a fusion of sex and intimacy, they both have some notion of a possibility which they are not inhabiting, even if they consider it 'not for them'. The celebration of separating sex from intimacy in conventional masculinity does not cancel out nor is it cancelled by the stories of the loving, disclosing, mutual intimacy. Each remains a consequential representation of a possible way of being in the world.