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the epistemological
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Young Women Refusing Sex:
The Epistemological Adventures of a Feminist

By

Hannah Frith

A Doctoral Thesis
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of

Doctor of Philosophy of Loughborough University

December, 1997

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Material based on the research undertaken for this thesis and the ideas developed therein has been published in various forms elsewhere:


Contents

1.0 Feminist Psychologies and Young Women’s Sexuality ......................................................... 2

1.1 Feminist Psychology: Re-Placing Women ................................................................. 6

1.1.1 Making Women Invisible ......................................................................................... 8

(i) The Invisibility of Women as Psychologists ................................................................. 8
(ii) The Invisibility of Women as Research Participants ............................................... 9
(iii) The Invisibility of Women’s Experiences .................................................................. 9

1.1.2 Male Experience as the Norm ................................................................................... 10

1.1.3 Pathologising Women .............................................................................................. 13

1.2 Epistemology: Essentialism and Social Constructionism ................................. 18

1.2.1 The Origins of Social Phenomena ......................................................................... 18

1.2.2 The Relationship to Science .................................................................................... 20

1.2.3 The Methodological Approach ............................................................................... 21

1.2.4 Feminist Epistemological Perspectives .................................................................. 24

(i) The Feminist Positivist Approach .............................................................................. 24
(ii) The Feminist Standpoint Approach .......................................................................... 27
(iii) The Feminist Social Constructionist Approach ...................................................... 30

1.2.5 The Political Costs and Benefits of Essentialism and Social Constructionism ....... 32

1.3 Young Women and HeteroSex ................................................................................. 34

1.3.1 Sexual Miscommunication ..................................................................................... 50

1.3.2 Emotion Work ....................................................................................................... 52

1.3.3 Sexual Scripts ........................................................................................................ 55

1.4 Summary and Conclusions ....................................................................................... 59
2.5.2 Materials
(i) The Video 115
(ii) The Focus Group Schedule 115

2.5.3 Procedure
(i) Introduction and Overview 119
(ii) Establishing Ground Rules 119

2.5.4 Ethics
(i) Confidentiality 120
(ii) Researching Sensitive Topics 121
(iii) Feminist Ethics 122

2.6 Interpretation and Analysis ................................. 124

2.6.1 Transparent and Constructed Readings 127
2.6.2 Feminist and Non-Feminist Readings 133

2.7 Summary and Conclusions .................................. 136

3.0 Young Women Refusing Sex:
A Transparent Overview ........................................ 138

3.1 Women’s Experience of Refusing Unwanted Sex .......... 139

3.2 Strategies for Saying ‘No’ .................................... 150

3.2.1 Getting Straight to the Point 151

3.2.2 Excuses 152
(i) Interruption 153
(ii) Postponement 153
(iii) Menstruation 153
(iv) Illness 154

3.3.3 Other Strategies 159

3.3 Constraints on Saying ‘No’ .................................... 161

3.3.1 Sexual Reputations 161
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.3.2 The Person You Are</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3.3 The Man You Say 'No' To</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4 Summary and Conclusions</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.0 Sexual Miscommunication and Refusing Sex</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1 Sexual Miscommunication Theory</td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1.1 Male Misunderstanding</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1.2 Female Miscommunication</td>
<td>181</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2 Sexual Miscommunication and Refusing Sex: A Transparent Reading</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3 Talk About ‘Sexual Miscommunication’: A Constructed Reading</td>
<td>190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3.1 Miscommunication Avoids Blaming Men</td>
<td>192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3.2 Miscommunication Gives Women an Illusory Sense of Control</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3.3 Miscommunication Obscures Institutionalised Power Relations</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4 A Feminist Analysis? The Costs and Benefits of a Transparent Versus Constructed Reading</td>
<td>196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5 Summary and Conclusions</td>
<td>205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.0 Emotion Work and Refusing Sex</td>
<td>207</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1 Emotion Work Theory</td>
<td>208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2 Emotion Work and Refusing Sex: A Transparent Reading</td>
<td>224</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3 Talk About ‘Emotion Work’: A Constructed Reading</td>
<td>228</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4 A Feminist Analysis? The Costs and Benefits of a Transparent Versus Constructed Reading</td>
<td>236</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.5 Summary and Conclusions</td>
<td>240</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.0 Sexual Scripts and Refusing Sex</td>
<td>242</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1 Sexual Script Theory</td>
<td>243</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2 Sexual Scripts and Refusing Sex: A Transparent Reading</td>
<td>248</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2.1 Legitimate and Illegitimate Times to Say 'No'</td>
<td>253</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2.2 Going 'Too Far': Forfeiting the Right to Say 'No'</td>
<td>257</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3 Talk About 'Sexual Scripts': A Constructed Reading</td>
<td>259</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3.1 Constructing Sexual Activity as Scripted</td>
<td>260</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3.2 Constructing Ambiguity</td>
<td>265</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3.3 Constructing Saying ‘No’ and NOT Saying ‘No’ as Ordinary</td>
<td>269</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3.4 Constructing Sexual Coercion as Ordinary</td>
<td>272</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.4 A Feminist Analysis? The Costs and Benefits of a Transparent Versus Constructed Reading</td>
<td>277</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.5 Summary and Conclusions</td>
<td>282</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.0 Looking Back, Looking Forward</td>
<td>284</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.1 Re-Placing Young Women in Psychology</td>
<td>286</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.2 Young Women and Sexual Negotiation</td>
<td>287</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.3 Epistemological Debates: Essentialism and Social Constructionism</td>
<td>289</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.4 Focus Groups and Feminist Method</td>
<td>293</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.5 Insider Research: Similarities and Differences</td>
<td>298</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.6 Looking Back, Looking Forward</td>
<td>308</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>316</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendices</td>
<td>389</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Women’s sexual refusals are central to both conservative and/or religious campaigns to curb and control sexuality, and to feminist campaigns for sexual freedom. While public health messages implore young women to ‘Just Say No’ to premarital/teenage sex, the feminist ‘No Means No’ campaign tries to ensure that women’s refusals are not ignored or disregarded. Drawing on data from 15 focus groups with 58 female, heterosexual, school (age range 16-18) and university student (age range 18-50; modal age 20:8) volunteers, I discuss women’s talk about saying ‘no’ in relation to three existing social scientific theories: miscommunication theory, emotion work theory and sexual script theory. Each of these theories suggests a different explanation for women’s (lack of) sexual refusals: women do not say ‘no’ clearly enough; women are reluctant to say ‘no’ because they are protecting their male partner from feelings of rejection; or cultural expectations dictate that women should refuse sex while men should continue to initiate sex.

I provide two competing approaches to analysing these three theories. The first (essentialist) approach treats women’s talk as transparent evidence of real world events or of psychological phenomenon (i.e. women do miscommunicate or women do perform emotion work). The second (constructed) approach treats women’s talk as produced in a particular interactional setting in order to serve particular interactional functions. This thesis expands feminist debates about the relative value of essentialism and social constructionism for understanding women’s lives and for advancing theory. The majority of feminists, including those who identify their work as social constructionist, adopt an essentialist approach to data analysis. This thesis contributes to the development of feminist psychology both by investigating women’s accounts of refusing sex, and by critically evaluating these two different epistemological approaches to analysing qualitative data.
Chapter One

Feminist Psychologies and Young Women’s Sexuality
Feminists have fought for women’s right to live “Free from all uninvited touch of man” since the advent of first wave feminism in the early 1900s (in Jeffreys, 1985: 5; see Wolstenholme Elmy, 1909; Hamilton, 1892, and Jeffreys, 1985 for a review of these campaigns). During the ‘second wave’ (from the early 1970s onwards) feminists were at the forefront of challenging male sexual practices, including: sexual harassment (MacKinnon, 1979), prostitution (Millet, 1973; Barry, 1979), pornography (Lederer, 1980; Dworkin, 1981; Kappeler, 1986) and child sexual abuse (Armstrong, 1978; Rush, 1977; Russell, 1984). But perhaps the issue which has most united feminist theorising and activism, is rape (see Griffin, 1971; Medea and Thompson, 1974; Brownmiller, 1975; and Russell, 1975 & 1982 for classic ‘second wave’ texts).

Women’s right to refuse sexual activity has been at the heart of feminist campaigns for women’s sexual freedom and safety. In these campaigns refusing sex has become synonymous with saying ‘no’. Nowhere is this more apparent than in relation to rape where whether or not women say ‘no’ has become central to distinguishing between sexual assault and ‘normal’ sex. In court the distinction between consent and non-consent to sex rests upon whether the woman said ‘no’ and whether she has the bruises to ‘prove’ that she was forced (Foley, 1995). Feminist campaigns have focused on establishing women’s right to refuse sex, at any time and under any circumstances, and on ensuring that a woman is heard when she says ‘no’. The feminist ‘No Means No’ campaign was developed to ensure that a woman is taken seriously when she says ‘no’. The campaign included slogans such as ‘What part of no don’t you understand?’ and ‘Whatever we wear, wherever we go, yes means yes, and no means no’ to destroy the popular myth that women ‘play hard to get’ or ‘ask for it’ by wearing short skirts. The recent ‘Zero Tolerance’ campaign in which posters attacking various aspects of violence against women (including child sexual abuse, domestic violence and rape) were featured on buses, public buildings, shops and pubs in Edinburgh included one poster which read ‘When they say no, they mean no. Some men don’t listen’. It is a testament to such feminist activism that ‘No Means No’ is probably one of the most commonly associated phrases with rape.
prevention. This focus on saying ‘no’ has then been prevalent in feminist activism but has been only an implicit feature in feminist academic research. Of the vast range of feminist research on sexual violence, only a handful have explicitly focused on issues around saying ‘no’ (e.g. Gavey, 1992; Lewin, 1985).

Feminists are not the only ones who are concerned about young women saying ‘no’. Young people are being encouraged to ‘Just Say No’ to a whole range of activities including: drug taking (Jones et al., 1995; Englander-Golden et al., 1986), drinking (Stumphauzer, 1983) and smoking (McConnon, 1990; Reardon et al., 1989). Recently this ‘Just Say No’ message has been most closely associated with encouraging sexual abstinence. While feminists assert women’s right to say ‘no’ to undesired sexual activity, conservative and religious groups assert the need to encourage young women to say ‘no’ to sex irrespective of their own desires. Such groups are driven not by a concern for women’s sexual freedom and autonomy but by a desire to curb and control teenage sexuality. Concerned about increasing levels of teenage sexual activity, and the (apparent) decline in sexual morality which this signals, organisations such as Christian Action, Research and Education (CARE) in the UK and the National Chastity Association in North America have developed sex education campaigns which encourage sexual abstinence and the preservation of virginity. Psychologists, too, have been less concerned about establishing the right of women to say ‘no’ and have been more concerned with investigating the ability of young women to refuse sexual activities. These researchers have attempted to pinpoint the particular psychological variables (such as low self-esteem and low self-efficacy) which constrain a woman’s ability to say ‘no’ and often recommend the implementation of education programs which teach ‘sexual refusal skills’ and ways of saying ‘no’ effectively (e.g. Howard and McCabe, 1990; Warzak et al., 1995).

Clearly then, issues around saying ‘no’ have been central both to academic research and to public debates on young women’s sexuality, and are of relevance to both feminist and non-feminist work. My own research is conducted within
Chapter One: Feminist Psychologies and Young Women's Sexuality

the framework of feminist psychology, and brings young women together in focus group discussions to talk about their hopes, fears and expectations around saying 'no' to sex. By focusing exclusively on young women's accounts of sexual refusal my research makes explicit feminist concerns about saying 'no'. In so doing, this thesis has three major contributions to make to feminist psychology.

First, it forms part of a feminist psychology tradition of re-placing women in a discipline which seeks to ignore or to marginalise our experiences. Feminist psychology is a rich and varied discipline which has arisen primarily out of a desire to transform and challenge mainstream psychology. An important part of this disciplinary upheaval has involved demonstrating the ways in which psychology has marginalised or ignored women, producing both sexist and androcentric theories and practice. Feminist psychologists have transformed psychology by investigating previously unexplored and marginalised aspects of women's lives - such as abortion, menstruation, mothering, sexual violence, and menopause, to name but a few. In the first part of this chapter (section 1.1) I briefly review the ways in which feminists have demonstrated psychology's exclusion of women and women's lives. I see my own thesis as firmly located within this feminist practice of re-placing women into a discipline in which they have been under erasure.

Second, this thesis contributes to epistemological debates about the relative value of essentialist and social constructionist approaches to psychology from a feminist perspective. In particular, I explore the costs and benefits for feminists of producing essentialist (transparent) or constructed readings of qualitative data. In this chapter (section 1.2) I introduce the umbrella concepts of essentialism and social constructionism and discuss how current feminist epistemological positions relate to these frameworks.

Third, by exploring issues around saying 'no' to sex this thesis contributes to the existing literature on young women's sexuality and sexual negotiations (a brief
discussion of this literature is presented in section 1.3). I focus on how young women themselves talk about refusing sex: how they say ‘no’, when they say ‘no’, why they say ‘no’, and also why they don’t say ‘no’. As well as providing empirical data on the under-explored area of young women’s sexual refusals, this thesis investigates the utility (for feminists) of three existing psychological and sociological theories (miscommunication, emotion work and sexual scripts) which are used to explain the prevalence of date rape and unwanted sex.

In addition to these three key contributions which I outline in this first chapter, this thesis also makes important contributions to feminist debates about method and also to the focus group literature more generally. These are discussed in detail in chapter two.

1.1 Feminist Psychology: Re-Placing Women

Psychologists have claimed to tell many truths about women’s lives: that we are biologically suited to some jobs (usually lower status and lower paid) than those suited to men (Wilson, 1994; Thorndike 1906); that we possess maternal instincts (Thorndike, 1914a & b); that if we are separated from our children they will be psychologically damaged (Rutter, 1972; Bowlby, 1971; Harlow, 1974); that we are less morally developed or sophisticated than men (Kohlberg, 1966); and that we precipitate rape by the way we dress or act (Amir, 1971). Many of these ‘truths’ hold women responsible for our own oppression and engage in often implicit, and sometimes explicit, woman-blaming. Psychology is used to legitimate oppressive and misogynistic practices. As Celia Kitzinger puts it, psychology is a discipline which labels women as:

... intellectually and morally inferior when we comply with patriarchal models of femininity, and mad when we refuse; a discipline deeply implicated in the enforcement of compulsory heterosexuality and the pathologizing of lesbians; a discipline which blames women for our own
oppression, locating the cause of men’s violence against
us in their inadequate mothers, seductive daughters,
collusive or masochistic wives. (Kitzinger, 1991: 49).

Feminists have mounted a fierce and sustained critique of mainstream
psychological theory and practice since the turn of the century (Wooley, 1910;
Hollingworth, 1916, Calkin, 1896). This critique became more vigorous still with
the rise of second wave feminism in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Chesler,
1972; Sherif, 1979; Weisstein, 1971; Parlee, 1979). But feminists have not been
alone in this critique. The so-called ‘crisis in psychology’ (Armistead, 1974;
Parker and Shotter, 1990; Pancer, 1997), is the result of sustained challenge from
a range of perspectives, including social constructionism (Gergen, 1973; Harré,
1979; Shotter, 1984), discourse analysis (Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Edwards,
and Potter, 1992; Burman and Parker, 1993), post-structuralism and
postmodernism (Hollway, 1989; Walkerdine, 1996), and aspects of community
psychology (Prilleltensky and Nelson, 1997) which have become collectively
known as ‘critical psychology’ (Fox and Prilleltensky, 1997; Ibáñez and Íñiguez,
1997). In the 1990s the feminist critique is as strong as ever. Contemporary
feminist psychologists argue that psychology is a discipline designed to “flatten,
depoliticize and individualize” (Fine and Gordon, 1991: 19) and is “deeply
implicated in the patriarchal control of women” (Wilkinson, 1997: 253).
Feminist critiques of psychology have been well documented elsewhere
(Kitzinger and Perkins, 1993; Ussher, 1992), and it is not my intention to
duplicate this work. Rather, I focus briefly on the key themes of this critique
which have exposed the androcentric and sexist nature of mainstream
psychology. Psychology perpetuates androcentrism by making women invisible,
by using male experience as the norm, and by pathologising women’s
experience. It is these features of psychology that necessitate a feminist
overhauling of the discipline.
Chapter One: Feminist Psychologies and Young Women's Sexuality

1.1.1 Making Women Invisible

Psychology as it has heretofore been defined and portrayed has effectively screened women, women's concerns, and women's work from visibility (Bohan, 1992:1).

Women have been excluded from, and marginalised within, psychology in three important ways. Psychology has created (i) the invisibility of women psychologists, (ii) the invisibility of women research participants, and (iii) the invisibility of women's experiences.

(i) The Invisibility of Women as Psychologists
While the contributions of early male psychologists (e.g. Freud, Watson, Thorndike) are seen as laying the foundations of modern psychology and as an essential component of undergraduate courses, early feminist psychologists have been largely ignored. Women's contributions to theory and research have been written out of the history of psychology as they have in other disciplines (see Lerner, 1979; Spender, 1982). Early women psychologists, such as those included in the first edition of American Men of Science (Cantrell, 1906), have been reclaimed by some 'second wave' feminists as 'foremothers' of psychology (cf. Russo, 1983, see also O'Connell and Russo, 1980, Stevens and Gardner, 1982). This is an important strategy for writing women into psychology and for establishing our presence and activity in the development, growth and establishment of psychology as a discipline. Although things are improving, it is still the case that within British psychology although over 80% of undergraduates are female, women make up less than 20% of the teaching staff, and within clinical psychology while women fill almost all trainee posts they account for less than 25% of the top grade posts (Wilkinson, 1996a: 102).
(ii) The Invisibility of Women as Research Participants

Women are often invisible in psychological research both as participants and as researchers. Psychologists study men much more often than they study women (Dan and Beckman, 1972; Holmes and Jorgensen, 1972; Greengrass and Stewart, 1973; Grady, 1981; Wallston and Grady, 1985). Many of the most influential theories in psychology have been developed by men using all-male samples including: Kohlberg's (1966) theory of moral development; Tajfel and Turner's (1979) theory of social categorisation; Erikson's (1980) theory of identity development; and McClelland et al's (1953) theory of achievement motivation. Women are not considered suitable subjects for particular areas of study and are often avoided so as not to introduce 'nuisance' variables to research. Most studies of aggression, for example, use only male participants. When women are used as subjects in aggression research they are more likely to be given paper and pencil tests rather than the behavioural measures used with men (Frodi, Macauley and Thome, 1977); apparently researchers do not want to use methods that would physically hurt women participants (Prescott, 1978). One researcher justified the use of a male-only sample by saying "I manipulated anxiety and I frankly couldn't bring myself to do this with college girls" (Prescott and Foster, 1974). Studies of interpersonal attraction, by contrast, are more likely to use female participants (McKenna and Kessler, 1977). Women's invisibility within psychological research is exacerbated by an alarming tendency within mainstream psychology to present research findings (as recorded and analysed by male researchers using male subjects) as representative of the norm of human experience. For example, a 1984 report from the National Institute on Ageing containing details of a large scale study of men was entitled "Normal Human Ageing" implying that the findings are equally applicable to both men and women (cited in Tavris, 1992).

(iii) The Invisibility of Women's Experiences

Psychology is also a 'womanless' discipline because it has considered women's lives and experiences too unimportant, uninteresting, and marginal to study
Chapter One: Feminist Psychologies and Young Women's Sexuality

(Crawford and Marecek, 1989). Feminists have identified sex bias in the kinds of topics psychologists have researched and the kinds of research which have been deemed interesting (Grady, 1981). Psychologists have been criticised for assuming that those topics of interest to white, males are 'basic', while topics relevant to other groups are 'specialised' or 'applied' (Denmark et al., 1988). The ways in which questions are asked also fail to address important aspects of women's lives. Carol Gilligan (1982), for example, has questioned the way in which successful development has been couched in terms of autonomy and detachment which obscures the importance of relationship and connection in women's lives. Reflecting on the state of research on the 'transition from school to work' Christine Griffin attributes the focus on education, the labour market, and leisure (at the expense of investigating issues around domestic work and family) to the tendency of psychologists to focus almost exclusively on the experiences of young men (Griffin, 1986). Feminist psychologists have attempted to redress this imbalance by posing questions of importance to women and by exploring specifically female issues such as menstruation, menopause, childbearing and mothering, abortion, eating disorders, mastectomy, career breaks, sexual harassment and rape.

Psychology has, then, excluded women from its research, has restricted their access to the upper echelons of its infrastructure, and has ignored the contributions of those women who have been key figures in the development of the discipline. Women's lives have been underrepresented, disregarded and marginalised. It is against this background that feminist psychologists have sought to refocus attention upon women - a strategy neatly summarised in the notion that feminist scholarship is research "on, by and for women" (Stanley and Wise, 1983: 17).

1.1.2 Male Experience as the Norm

When results (based on male samples and conducted by male researchers) are found not to apply to women, it is often assumed that there is something wrong
with women. Rather than extending, altering or modifying the theory, male psychologists assume that women don’t quite ‘measure up’ to the (male) standard. Feminists argue that this standard is based on a norm for male behaviour and any attempt to fit women into this standard results in a ‘mismeasure’ of women (Tavris, 1992; 1993). Traditional psychological studies depict women as deviant, as suffering from low self-esteem, low self-confidence, and a lack of autonomy, independence and a separate sense of self - a pretty damning picture of the female psyche! Often, feminists argue, these assessments of women are made in comparison to a male norm. Taking male experiences as the norm against which women are judged results in a serious distortion of women’s abilities and experiences. A classic example is McClelland et al.’s (1953) popular and influential theory of ‘Achievement Motivation’. This theory which, like so many others, was based entirely on research with men used the projective Thematic Apperception Test (TAT) to study achievement motivation. Male participants were given deliberately ambiguous pictures and asked to make up stories about them. Stories which featured themes of hard work, striving for success, and rewards for good performance score high for achievement motivation. Once developed the theory and associated methodology were applied to both male and female participants. Unfortunately, although the TAT scores successfully predicted the achievement behaviour of men, they failed to do so for women. Despite this potentially embarrassing inconvenience neither the theory or the method was seen as in need of alteration, rather women’s different responses were interpreted as indicating a lack of motivation (Veroff, Wilcox and Atkinson, 1953). In other words, it was women, not the theory, which were apparently in need of ‘fixing’. In this case, then, women are evaluated in relation to a norm for behaviour generated by research based solely on men in which achievement is defined in stereotypically male terms. This tendency is reflected across the board in psychology where researchers pose questions from within a male framework informed by male expectations. The study of leadership, for example, has been defined in terms of dominance, aggression and other stereotypically male traits, rather than - as Denmark et al. (1988) suggest - in terms of ability to negotiate or resolve conflicts. Similarly Hare-Mustin and
Maracek (1990) point out that there is a large amount of social scientific literature which addresses the psychological disadvantages of children with working mothers, but few studies consider the psychological benefits of having a working mother, or the psychological damage caused by working fathers.

One of the most famous feminist studies exposing psychology’s use of male experience as the norm is Carol Gilligan's (1982) exposé of androcentric bias in one of the most respected moral development theories of the time developed by Lawrence Kohlberg (1966) on an all-male sample. When Kohlberg’s framework was subsequently used to assess the moral development of both boys and girls, many researchers found that girls were less morally developed than boys - a finding challenged by Gilligan who argues that the responses given by male participants became the norm by which girls and women were later evaluated. In her international best-seller In a Different Voice, Gilligan argues that by applying Kohlberg’s androcentric theory, based on male norms to women’s and girls’ responses, a whole host of sophisticated moral judgements based on relationships, connection to others, and communication (women’s ‘different voice’) are left unrecognised. Men and women have, she argues, different but equally valid ways of conceptualising moral dilemmas and of talking about moral issues and women’s voices which are obscured by Kohlberg’s androcentric approach.

A popular feminist technique for highlighting androcentrism of the kind described above, involves hypothesising how men would ‘measure up’ if women’s experiences were taken as the norm. For example, Gloria Steinem provides a tongue-in-cheek reversal of Freudian theories by pointing to worrying trends in ‘Womb Envy’, ‘Testyria’ and ‘Breast Castration Anxiety’ in men (Steinem, 1994: 49). Similarly, according to Carol Tavris (1992; 1993), if women’s experiences were taken as the norm, men could be described as more conceited than women, as overvaluing the work they do, as unrealistic in assessing their abilities, and as having difficulty forming and maintaining attachments.
It is clear, then, that by generalising from theories based on studies of men, and by using male norms to evaluate women, psychology both distorts and misrepresents women's experiences and fails adequately to address women's lives. Feminist researchers drawing on these theories may be faced with male defined and designed frameworks for studying behaviour which, despite claiming to be universally relevant, fail adequately to account for female experience.

1.1.3 Pathologising Women

Androcentrism defines males and male experience as a neutral standard or norm and females and female experience as deviation from that norm (Bem, 1993: 233).

As may have become clear from the previous section, when the experiences of men are taken as the measure of what is normal, experiences which differ from this norm (as many women's experiences do) are deemed deviant or abnormal. Feminist researchers studying sex differences have drawn attention to the ways in which differences between the sexes are often interpreted as female deficiencies (e.g. Hyde, 1994). For example, the majority of studies on field dependence/independence reviewed by Maccoby and Jacklin (1974) report that boys are more field-independent (i.e. better able to perceive objects embedded in a context) than are girls. This ability is interpreted as desirable by the researchers and so boys are said to perform better on the task. The possible values of being field dependent, such as being more sensitive to context, are ignored and so girls are assumed to be deficient or lacking in some way.

Nowhere is the practice of pathologising women more apparent than in the area of psychiatric evaluations. Paula Caplan and Maureen Gans' account of the inclusion of what they describe as the "virtually misogynistic" diagnostic category of the 'Self-Defeating Personality Disorder' (SDPD) in the Diagnostic
and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) is particularly telling. This manual plays a crucial role in clinical judgements about who is normal and who is not. Caplan documents the lack of empirical data to support the inclusion of SDPD and calls for its removal as a diagnostic category. She argues that the ‘symptoms’ of SDPD (e.g. ‘Chooses people and situations that lead to disappointment, failure or mistreatment’, ‘Engages in excessive self-sacrifice’, ‘Rejects or renders ineffective the attempts of others to help him or her’, or ‘Fails to accomplish tasks crucial to his or her personal objectives despite demonstrated ability to do so’) are, despite the careful gender-neutrality of the language, precisely those which identify the traditional female victim of male violence. The category of SDPD, she argues, “is dangerously victim-blaming, implying that suffering people - and especially women - consciously or unconsciously bring their suffering on themselves” (Caplan and Gans, 1991: 263). In addition to being supported by only very flimsy empirical evidence, Caplan also notes that many of the criteria for diagnosing SDPD correspond to the coping mechanisms often used by victims of violence. Psychologists, then, pathologise women when they make biased evaluations which masquerade as professional practice.

Psychology’s tendency to pathologise women results not only from the biases of individual researchers and practitioners but also from its tendency to locate explanations for behaviour inside the heads of women. In a scathing critique of psychology Carolyn Wood Sherif (1968/1992:133) comments that “If one were to design a theory to keep women in inferior position and lowered worth, none is more suitable than one locating the causes of women’s behaviour and problems inside the woman”. Psychology is accused of ‘context-stripping’ - for relying on explanations which emphasise individual psychology at the expense of social factors. When men have problems (drug and alcohol abuse, narcissism, sexual abuse, violence) psychologists typically seek external explanations (e.g. it’s because of their upbringing or environment) rather than relying upon explanations which assume an inherently flawed male psychology. By contrast many of women’s problems are said to be the result of female psychology
(Cannetto, 1992). For example, Paula Nicolson points out that many psychologists describe depression after childbirth as an individual psychological problem in the mother rather than due to adverse material conditions (Nicolson, 1986). Feminists have pointed out that contextual factors (i.e. factors external to the individual) can have an important impact on women’s mental health but that these factors are routinely overlooked by psychiatrists who look for individual factors. In particular women who have been victims of sexual abuse or interpersonal violence suffer high rates of mental illness but psychiatrists rarely consider such factors when making a diagnosis (Brown, 1986). Similarly, Wendy Hollway is critical of the ways in which psychologists “have been trained to think in terms of the individual” (Hollway, 1991: 31). Individualised solutions to eradicate women managers’ poor performance, for example, including initiatives such as assertiveness training, are offered by psychologists. Such an approach obscures contextual factors (such as discrimination) which might better explain women’s ‘poor performance’. By locating the explanation for behaviour inside the individual, psychology engages in woman-blaming. The oppressive social, economic and political context which feminists hold responsible for the condition of women is ignored in malestream psychology.

Feminist psychologists have also been critical of the harm that psychology (and the popularization of psychological ideas) has wrought in women's lives: primarily (but not exclusively) through the location of responsibility - and also pathology - within the individual, to the neglect of social and political oppression. (Wilkinson, 1991a: 8).
The absence of analyses of power and social context within traditional psychology is heavily criticised by feminists who consider an analysis of power to be central to feminist psychology. In sum then, feminists have exposed psychology's androcentric biases including the ways in which it makes women invisible in the discipline, treats male experiences as the norm by which women are evaluated, and by pathologising women by providing individualised explanations for behaviour and producing analyses devoid of social context. Psychology's ability to resist this sustained criticism and to remain steadfast in its approach has frustrated feminists, who have attributed this resilience to the highly institutionalised structure of psychology relative to other disciplines (Wilkinson, 1997).

Psychology, then, is complicit in the oppression of women. Feminists seeking to end this oppression and to change women's lives disagree about whether this is best achieved by dismantling or transforming the discipline. The relationship between feminism and psychology has been variously described as "incompatible" (Wilkinson, 1991b: 201; Kitzinger, 1990: 120), as forming "uneasy partners" (Ussher, 1990: 54), as potentially "enriching" (Lott, 1985) or "revitalizing" (Shaver and Henrick, 1987), and as "antipsychology" (Squire, 1990: 76; Kitzinger and Perkins, 1993: 21). Some warn of the dangers inherent in an alliance between feminism and psychology, including the "psychologization" (Hollway, 1991) and "depoliticization" (Kitzinger, C. 1990, 1991) of feminism. Many feminists have trained in but then moved out of psychology (see Sharpe and Jefferson, 1990 for two personal accounts of leaving the discipline) while others have attempted to improve, reshape, or otherwise restructure psychology. Initially this transformation involved exposing psychology's biased and oppressive practices (such as those presented above), but continually challenging mainstream psychology means devoting time, energy and other resources to addressing an agenda which has not arisen out of feminist concerns or women's experience. Feminist psychologists are increasingly urged to move beyond critique of mainstream psychology and towards pursuing our own areas of interest rather than just reacting against mainstream psychology (Wilkinson,
Feminists are involved in developing new theories, epistemologies and methods in psychology and are making interventions into institutional practices such as professional bodies (Walsh, 1985; Pyke and Stark-Adamec, 1981; Wilkinson and Burns, 1990) and academic programs. So far, debates about how successful feminist interventions have been in transforming the discipline are characterised by disagreement and contradiction. In a recent review Michelle Fine and Susan Merle Gordon (1991: 20) see little to be optimistic about, and conclude that “[w]hen feminism and psychology mate, our evidence has found that feminism seems to bear only recessive genes”. Similarly, Sue Wilkinson suggests that the impact of feminism on psychology has “not been substantial” (Wilkinson, 1991b: 199). Conversely, in a more optimistic assessment Mary Roth Walsh (1993) points to the development of specific journals publishing feminist research (e.g. Sex Roles, Psychology of Women Quarterly, and Feminism & Psychology), the inclusion of feminist psychology in more mainstream psychology journals, and the publication of psychology of women textbooks, as evidence of feminism’s success. Regardless of the degree of success, most feminist psychologists agree that we have “far to go” (Worrell and Etaugh, 1994: 448, see also Wilkinson, 1996).

In this thesis, I hope to contribute both to feminist transformations of psychology and to the development of feminist theory and research practice by making innovations at the empirical, epistemological, and methodological level. In this thesis, by focusing solely on women’s experience, I attempt to re-place women in psychology. I do not compare young women to young men but instead take young women’s experiences as valid and meaningful in their own right. Of central importance in this thesis is an examination of the ways in which analyses from different epistemological approaches are either complicit in portraying young women as passive victims, as deficient, or as unintelligent, or are successful in challenging such negative images presenting instead analyses which recognise young women’s resourcefulness and strength.
1.2 Epistemology: Essentialism and Social Constructionism

The second major contribution to psychological knowledge made by this thesis is in relation to epistemology. Epistemology is the study of knowledge systems: what assumptions form the basis of knowledge, who knows what, about whom, and how these knowledge claims are legitimated. There are two competing frameworks which inform epistemological positions taken by both feminists and non-feminists alike: essentialism and social constructionism. Essentialism and social constructionism can be understood as opposite poles of a continuum of epistemological theorising. In this section I describe how these two poles differ on three specific dimensions: (i) their understanding of the origin of social phenomena; (ii) their relationship to science; and (iii) their methodological approach. Finally, in section (iv) I also look at how essentialism and social constructionism relate to the specific epistemological positions developed by feminists (i.e. feminist empiricism, feminist standpoint and feminist social constructionism). By arguing that essentialism and social constructionism form a continuum I do not mean to imply that these approaches are compatible or that the differences between them can be resolved (see Kitzinger 1995 for a more detailed explanation of why these two approaches remain incompatible). Rather I mean only to indicate that researchers often adopt positions which can not be clearly summarised by either label.

1.2.1 The Origins of Social Phenomena

Essentialists and social constructionists differ in their understanding of the origins of social phenomena - i.e. how we come to behave the way that we do. Vivien Burr (1995: 19) describes the essentialist approach as “a way of understanding the world that sees things (including human beings) as having their own particular essence or nature”. For example, according to Crawford (1995: 8) research on sex differences in communication is often essentialist because it suggests that “women speak in particular ways because they are women” (emphasis in original) - it is the location of these characteristics within
the individual which distinguishes them as essentialist. Psychological phenomena like personality, IQ, memory, emotions, attitudes, and prejudice are seen as an essential part of any individual and as located within the individual. Often, at its extreme, an essentialist approach assumes that the particular features of individuals have a biological base. Describing essentialist approaches to sexuality, for example, Leonore Tiefer (1995: 7) argues that they share the assumption that “once you ‘strip away’ all the cultural and historical trappings, the essence of sexuality that is left is biology”. This does not mean (although it is commonly assumed to be the case) that essentialists rely only on biological explanations. Essentialists are keen to document the influence and importance of culture and socialisation on behaviour, but assume that there is a pre-social essence which is enhanced or modified by such social factors. For example, essentialists may recognise the importance of cultural factors in shaping sex role behaviour and may even conclude that culture dictates appropriate behaviour for males and females. However, essentialist approaches start from the assumption that there is a distinct ‘maleness’ and ‘femaleness’ upon which these cultural factors operate. The aim of research conducted from within an essentialist framework is to discover, as closely and as accurately as possible, the true nature of this essence when cultural factors have been controlled for.

By contrast, social constructionists see the origin of social phenomena not as located within the individual, but as constructed through social processes and interactions. Social constructionists challenge the fundamental assumption that there is a core, essential, basic human essence which is acultural and ahistorical. Rather, social constructionists look at the ways in which the language we use and the categories we employ construct the world in particular ways. These constructions are both culturally and historically specific. The difference between essentialist and social constructionist ways of looking at the origin of social phenomena is described by Janis Bohan (1993: 7) as parallel to the difference between describing a person as friendly, and a conversation as friendly:
In the former case, 'friendly' is construed as a trait of the person, an 'essential' component to her or his personality. In the latter, 'friendly' describes the nature of the interaction occurring between or among people. Friendly here has a particular meaning that is agreed upon by the participants, that is compatible with its meaning to their social reference groups, and that is reaffirmed by the process of engaging in this interaction.

Rather than seeing social phenomena as pre-existing, internal essences, social constructionists see the nature of social reality as continually re-negotiated and re-worked in interaction. Rather than (for example) seeing emotions as distinct qualities of individuals, social constructionists look at the ways in which social life is organised in terms of distinct emotional states which are socially and historically specific and which serve certain ideological functions (see for example the contributions to Harré, 1986). As such, social constructionists challenge the very notions by which essentialists seek to explain the world. Therefore, the aim of social constructionism is not to discover the true nature of social phenomena but to examine the processes by which people make sense of their world.

1.2.2 The Relationship to Science

Essentialists and social constructionists also differ in their relationship to science. For essentialists the way to achieve their goal (of revealing the 'truth' about social phenomena) is by adopting the philosophy and methods of science. According to essentialists there is one social reality which is observable and measurable. In order to know what individuals really think, feel, or behave we can observe, control and manipulate variables, until by following logic and deduction we can establish (say) the real or essential differences between men and women. The social constructionist approach extends to science its general approach to exposing taken-for-granted knowledge. Social constructionists see
science as "socially constituted and historically determined, arguing that our notions about what it is to 'do' science, what 'count' as facts, and what constitutes as 'good' scientific practice are the products of a particular place, time and culture in which they are embedded": as such, social constructionism throws into question the very nature of science itself (Kitzinger, 1987: 188). Social constructionism, argues Gergen, must "eschew the empiricist account of scientific knowledge" and the "traditional Western conception of objective, individualistic, altruistic knowledge" (Gergen, 1985: 271). Constructionists also reject the language of discovery used by essentialists to describe the development of their particular research area which is characterised as 'up the mountain' story or saga (e.g. Kitzinger, 1987; Rorty, 1980), where contemporary research is seen as progressively more sophisticated and progressively less hampered by bias and prejudice and progressively closer to the 'truth'. Instead, social constructionist work should, argues Gergen (1985: 273) be judged on its ability to "invite, compel, stimulate, or delight the audience".

1.2.3 The Methodological Approach

The third, and final, dimension upon which essentialists and social constructionists differ (and this is the one which is of greatest interest in this thesis) is their methodological approach. By methodology I refer not only to the particular choice of method, but also to the "theory and analysis of how research should proceed, how research questions might be addressed, and the criteria against which research findings might be evaluated" (Maynard, 1994: 14). According to essentialists the aim of research is to discover the 'truth' about social reality. Reality, as they perceive it, is located within the individual and the job of the researcher is observe, probe and question individuals so that they reveal their 'true' nature. Essentialists, then, adopt one of two different models for psychological investigation: the model of participant-as-informant, or the model of participant-as-psychological-subject. In the first model participants are treated as informants on social reality. How people respond to questionnaires, perform in experiments, or talk about themselves in interviews is seen as
providing direct evidence about their social world or internal attributes. Of course, this information may not always be entirely accurate; researchers are concerned about possible biases and distortions - the ecological validity of experiments, social desirability in questionnaires and interviewer bias, for example, are all factors which must, as far as possible, be controlled for and their effects minimised. It is not, then, that essentialists naively assume that the data they collect maps perfectly and unproblematically onto social reality. But they do assume that this represents the researcher's 'best guess' - the most accurate knowledge they could possibly collect. In the second model, the model of participant-as-psychological-subject, participants' understandings of their social world are seen as 'filtered' through their individual psychologies. Participants provide information about their social world, but this is a world which is 'real to them' and may or may not map on to 'objective' reality. Participants' responses to data collection tools are seen to reveal more about participants' own understandings, beliefs, values, mental and psychological states, than about social reality. These two approaches differ in their understanding of what, exactly, they are trying to uncover (i.e. social reality or participants' understandings of reality) but are similar in their understanding of the purpose of research - i.e. to uncover the truth about essential attributes located within the individual. They have in common the view that people's responses are a medium through which social phenomena are made available to the researcher's gaze. I refer to this approach as based on a transparent reading of research data and this is a term which I return to and explain in more detail in the following chapter.

I have already commented that methodology refers to more than just the choice of method and it is important to note essentialist research can use either qualitative or quantitative methods. It is commonly assumed that essentialists use only quantitative methods, while constructionists use qualitative methods. Although essentialists may be more likely to use quantitative methods (which afford the researcher greater control and consequently more 'accurate' results) essentialists may also use qualitative methods. Both qualitative and quantitative data is open to the kinds of transparent readings outlined above. Indeed,
Chapter One: Feminist Psychologies and Young Women’s Sexuality

exploring the ways in which qualitative research can be analysed in essentialist ways is one of the key themes of this thesis.

As I noted earlier (section 1.2.1) social constructionists see the origin of social phenomena as located not within the individual but as constructed through social interaction. Consequently, social interactions of all kinds are of interest to the social constructionist (Burr, 1995). In particular, social constructionists pay close attention to the role of discourse/narratives/talk/language in the negotiation and construction of realities, and to the ways in which language categorises and organises how we understand the social world. This may mean mapping the ways in which particular words have been used across cultures or across historical periods (e.g. Harré, 1986; Weeks, 1981). Celia Kitzinger (1987) highlights the difference between essentialist and social constructionist methods of inquiry when she argues that they require answers to completely different sets of questions about sexual identity. Essentialists, she argues, aim to discover “truths” about homosexuals and lesbians; what ‘causes’ homosexuality, whether homosexuals differ from heterosexuals and in what ways, or (in a heterosexist discipline) whether or not the homosexual is ‘sick’. By contrast, social constructionists look at the discursive practices and narrative forms by which homosexuality is constructed as different or as sickness. Similarly, for social constructionist approaches to the self “the question becomes not what is the true nature of the self, but how is the self talked about, how is it theorised in discourse?” (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). With the focus on talk and social interaction, social constructionists use primarily qualitative methods and they adopt a different model for research. Rather than seeing participants as informants or as psychological subjects, social constructionists use a model of participant-as-social-interactor. Instead of seeing the things people say in interviews or focus groups as revealing essential attributes or beliefs, social constructionists treat what people say as talk. Language and participants’ talk is not seen simply as a way for people to express their inner thoughts, feeling, personalities etc. Rather, language is seen as a form of action. According to Gergen the terms with which we describe ourselves and our experiences are
“social artefacts, products of historically situated interchanges among people” (1985: 267). Much of social constructionism is concerned with identifying the vocabularies with which different people describe their experiences (e.g. Kitzinger, 1987), or the ways in which particular vocabularies have developed over time and in particular historical contexts (McIntosh, 1968; Gergen, 1973; Weeks, 1981; Tölöyan, 1989), or the ways in which language constructs experiences differently across cultures (Heelas and Lock, 1981; Harré, 1989).

1.2.4 Feminist Epistemological Perspectives

Feminist commentators have divided feminist epistemological approaches into three different positions: (i) feminist positivist approach; (ii) feminist standpoint approach; and (iii) feminist social constructionist approach (e.g. Oleson, 1994; Riger, 1992; Harding, 1987). I briefly discuss each of these in relation to essentialism and social constructionism.

(i) The Feminist Positivist Approach

Of the three epistemological positions, the feminist positivist approach is most clearly essentialist. This approach is characterised by feminist work on sex differences such as that of Eleanor Maccoby and Carol Jacklin, Janet Hyde and Alice Eagly, and by studies of sex typing such as early work on androgyny by Sandra Bem. Feminist empiricist literature can be most often found amongst the pages of Psychology of Women Quarterly and Sex Roles.

Feminist positivist researchers conceptualise social phenomena as originating from biology or psychodynamics, and as located within the individual. I illustrate this with reference to Sandra Bem’s work on ‘androgyny’ - one of the most influential pieces of feminist work of the 1970s and one which is still popular within mainstream psychology. The concept of androgyny was developed by feminist psychologist Sandra Bem (1974, 1975) to provide an alternative to traditional theories of sex typing in personality. Traditional theories were rigidly sex typed so that women were psychologically healthy only if they possessed
stereotypically feminine traits, and men were seen as psychologically healthy only if they possessed stereotypically masculine traits. Androgyny is "the blending or balancing of psychological traits that are stereotyped as masculine or feminine" (Unger and Crawford, 1992: 52). Bem proposed that androgynous people should be seen as the new ideal in psychological health and functioning, those people with a healthy balance of both masculine and feminine traits are the most well-adjusted. Bem’s theory of androgyny is essentialist because these traits, whether masculine or feminine, are located within the individual. Rather than challenging the idea that men and women possess particular traits or personality characteristics Bem proposed that individuals possess a mixture of both masculine and feminine traits. However, the notion of androgyny does not challenge the idea that people possess psychological traits which are located within the individual and which develop out of biological factors or through socialisation.

Feminist positivists closely follow the scientific method adopted by mainstream psychology. A recent editorial of the *Psychology of Women Quarterly* reiterates this commitment when it described the journal as “a research journal with an empirical scientific tradition” in which “[s]cientific theories and methods are powerful tools for generating knowledge in the service of feminist goals” (Russo, 1995: 1). In common with most non-feminist psychological research the articles in this journal express concerns about confounding variables, inter-rater reliability, random assignment of subjects, representative samples, internal and external validity, replication, generalizability - all factors that are considered important to a study that is attempting to establish ‘the facts’. Feminist positivists are so enamoured with science that their critique of mainstream psychology’s sexism rests on the idea that mainstream psychology is not scientific enough. Feminist positivist empiricists have challenged mainstream psychology’s claims to be producing value free, objective research, and argue that psychology’s sexism (i.e. the ways in which women are made invisible, male experiences are taken as the norm, and women are pathologised) is the result of ‘bad’ science (Harding, 1991). This kind of critique has been a consistent theme within
feminist positivist psychology since the first wave of feminism in the early 1900s when Helen Thompson Wooley (1910: 51) described sex difference research as "sentimental rot and drivel", on into the 1960s 'second wave' of feminism when Naomi Weisstein claims that sexist researchers "simply refuse to look at the evidence against their theory and practice" and support their theories with "stuff so transparently biased as to have absolutely no standing as empirical evidence" (Weisstein, 1968/1993: 197). This critique continues in the 1990s with Paula Caplan's challenge to the inclusion of various 'disorders' into the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-III) which she says "has little to do with science and a great deal to do with ideology" (Caplan, McCurdy-Myers and Gans, 1992: 40) Feminist positivists ultimately aim to create better, more scientific research. As Alice Eagly points out "Science is ultimately strengthened and improved by feminist psychologists' many analyses of the failures of science to live up to its rules" (Eagly, 1994: 517).

Feminist positivists' commitment to science is also reflected in their choice of method: they often adopt quantitative and/or experimental methods in order to study social phenomena. Indeed, these researchers have been at the forefront of developing new tests, scales and questionnaires. Some of the most famous of which include: the Bem Sex Role Inventory (Bem, 1974), the Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (Burt, 1980), and the Attitudes toward Women Scale (Spence and Helmreich, 1978). In analysing their data, feminist empiricists are looking for accurate representations of the world or the psychological subject. Whether relying on qualitative or on quantitative research methods feminist empiricists look beyond what people say (e.g. via interviews or via tests and scales) to draw conclusions about the social world or about individual psychology. For example, the Bem Sex Role Inventory asked people to rate themselves in relation to stereotypical masculine or feminine traits (i.e. they are being informants about their personalities), and their overall score is taken as indicative of their psychological make-up. Feminist positivists use either a model of participants-as-informants or participants-as-psychological-subjects. Therefore, the feminist positivist approach is essentialist on all three of the dimensions I outlined earlier.
It locates social phenomena within the individual, and embraces the principles and methodological approaches of science.

(ii) The Feminist Standpoint Approach
The feminist standpoint approach has a rather more contradictory relationship to essentialism, and has been conceptualised as falling somewhere in between essentialist and social constructionist approaches (Henwood, 1995; Stanley and Wise, 1990; 1993). Standpoint research includes the work of psychologists Nancy Chodorow (1978) and Jean Baker Miller (1976), sociologists Nancy Hartstock (1983, 1987) and Dorothy Smith (1974, 1989), philosopher Sandra Harding (1987), and natural scientist Hilary Rose (1983). The standpoint approach takes as its underlying assumption the idea that social phenomena originate not from individual, inborn, private traits but rather as a consequence of the things we do. Standpoint theorists argue that because women lead different lives to men, they have different experiences, different ways of seeing the world and different ‘ways of knowing’ (Belenky et al., 1986). Women’s different knowledge, then, derives from performing distinct social roles and types of work:

Feminist standpoint emerges from an examination of women’s activities ... [where] the emphasis is on change rather than stasis, a world characterised by interaction with natural substances rather than separation from nature, a world in which quality is more important than quantity, a world in which the unification of mind and body is inherent in the activities performed. (Hartstock, 1987: 164)

For standpoint theorists, the relationship between experience and the production of knowledge is crucial. The particular position and social location of those producing knowledge is central to the standpoint perspective:

Standpoint epistemologies assert that what we know and how we know it depends on who we are, that is, on the
knower’s historical locus and his or her position in the social hierarchy (Marecek, 1989: 327).

Standpoint theorists argue that mainstream psychology is sexist because the male researchers who dominate the discipline simply cannot ‘see’ or understand the world as women do. The uniqueness of women’s experiences have been ignored or undervalued by mainstream psychology and consequently, feminist standpoint researchers often choose to focus on issues which are specific to women such as childbirth, mothering and menstruation. This approach stresses the importance of making women visible in psychology and of doing research which is centred in the lives of women. As Karen Henwood (1995: 15) puts it, standpoint theorists “recognise the need to understand and base research from the perspective of women’s lives”. Standpoint theory, then, builds on and from women’s experience and from the distinctive political positions that women occupy and the distinctive work in which they are involved (Harding, 1987). For example, Sara Ruddick argues that women develop a distinctive way of looking at the world which she calls ‘Maternal Thinking’ which evolves from, and is formed by the practices women are engaged in, and in particular the act of mothering. Ruddick claims that women’s work - “sheltering, nursing, feeding, kin work, teaching of the very young, tending the frail elderly” - is threatened by violence which interferes with their capacity to do their work (1990: 148). According to Ruddick, women’s work creates a connection between maternal work and peace. Standpoint theory draws attention to aspects of women’s lives which have been ignored, devalued or marginalised in mainstream research. Researchers recommend the re-valuing of women’s experience and the celebration of women’s unique qualities. Standpoint theorists are often accused of presenting essentialised and romanticised versions of women’s psychology. Although standpoint researchers are often careful to point out that things like ‘maternal thinking’ are not an essential attribute of women arising from women’s unique biological processes, but rather a product of the social activities and work that women do, they are misunderstood as making claims about ‘essential’ differences in male and female psychology. Standpoint researchers frequently
argue that men too could develop maternal thinking or other qualities if they became engaged in the same activities as women. However, whether these distinctive features of women’s lives arise through biology or socialization, they are nonetheless essentialist because they see psychological phenomena as located inside the individual - i.e. maternal thinking is an attribute possessed by the individual.

Standpoint theorists have typically been highly critical of some aspects of the scientific method. In particular, the notion of objectivity has been subject to close scrutiny and has often been rejected. Because standpoint theorists argue that men and women see the world in very different ways, they argue that what exactly we see is never neutral, impartial or objective but always comes from a particular standpoint. As Belenky et al. (1986: 137-8) put it: “all knowledge is constructed .... answers to all questions vary depending on the context in which they are asked and on the frame of reference of the person doing the asking”. Scientific knowledge is always situated within the particular social location and ideological framework of the researcher and can never be separate from it. We are never just looking at social phenomena, we are always looking from a particular social location. According to Steinberg (1994: 296), the central premise of a standpoint approach is “that science is a site of power/ social relations which is shaped by and which shapes its historical and cultural context”. Since most knowledge is produced from the standpoint of men, the standpoint approach argues that by starting from the perspective of women’s lives a more complete basis for knowledge is possible. So although on the one hand standpoint theory rejects the notion of objectivity as a route to truth, it continues to adopt the rhetoric of scientific discovery by arguing that less partial truths are possible. Standpoint theorists claim that not only does women’s experience produce a different kind of knowledge, but that women’s experience also produces a better kind of knowledge. According to this argument, feminist explorations of women’s lives produce less distorted knowledge because women are ‘outsiders’ to the mainstream structures and are able to critically reflect upon
them (Collins, 1991). Men, whose lives are too closely linked to dominant institutions, are unable to do so. As Nancy Hartstock (1987: 159) puts it:

... women’s lives make available a particular and privileged vantage point on male supremacy, a vantage point which can ground a powerful critique of the phallocratic institutions and ideology which constitute the capitalist form of patriarchy.

(iii) The Feminist Social Constructionist Approach

As noted earlier (section 1.3.1), social constructionists see the origin of social phenomena not as fixed in nature, biology or socialisation, but as actively constructed through social interaction. Social reality is that which, through shared understandings and negotiation, people treat as social reality. The social constructionist approach is illustrated by the following two examples in which feminist researchers describe the social constructionist approach to sexuality:

... sexuality is not a biological given, not an inherent human quality, not any sort of instinct or imperative, but rather a social construction, a way of being and relating that is created by social arrangements. (Tiefer, 1988: 23)

Social constructionist theory in the field of sexuality proposed an outrageous idea. It is suggested that one of the last remaining outposts of the ‘natural’ in our thinking was fluid and changeable, the product of human action, history rather than the invariant result of the body, biology or innate sex drive. (Vance, 1992: 132)

Social constructionism, then, involves questioning and deconstructing common-sense or taken-for-granted knowledge about the world. For feminists this has meant deconstructing common-sense ideas about the nature of women. For
example, the idea that women's sexuality has been constructed as 'weak',
'difficult' or 'reactive' through social processes, rather than being 'naturally'
inferior to male sexuality. This has also meant deconstructing the very categories
which essentialists use to make sense of the world. Most noticeably this has
meant deconstructing the categories of male and female, man and woman. This
approach is exemplified by the work of Kessler and McKenna:

Our theoretical position is that gender is a social
construction, that is a world of two "sexes" is a result of
the socially shared, taken for granted methods which
members use to construct reality. (1985: vii)

Rather than seeing maleness and femaleness as essential attributes of individuals,
social constructionists look at how and when these categories are used and to
what effect:

... gender categories (female-male, feminine-masculine,
girls-boys, women-men) are analyzed to see how
different social groups define them, and how they
construct and maintain them in everyday life and in
major social institutions, such as the family and economy
(Lorber and Farrell, 1991: 1).

In their classic article 'Doing Gender' Candace West and Don Zimmerman
(1987: 126) see gender not as the property of individuals, but as a "routine,
methodological, and recurring accomplishment" something which is undertaken
by men and women in interaction. Rather than attempting to discover the 'truth'
about differences between men and women social constructionists look at the
'doing' of gender, the ways in which gender is an "emergent feature of social
situations" (West and Zimmerman, 1987: 126). Social constructionists, then, are
interested in what people say, how they say it, and how one version becomes
privileged over another as a result of social processes such as communication, negotiation, conflict and rhetoric.

The question in which feminist social constructionists are perhaps most interested, is not how social phenomena are constructed in the ways that they are but why - that is, with what effect, and for whose benefit. Hare-Mustin and Marecek, for example, raise the question of utility in relation to various representations of gender. Rather than trying to establish the true nature of gender differences, they ask “What are the consequences of representations of gender that either emphasize or minimize male-female difference?” (Hare-Mustin and Marecek, 1992: 235). They argue that constructing huge differences between men and women masks inequalities because the focus on the essential attributes of men and women obscures the possibility that these differences may result from social inequalities. Minimising sex differences also has certain consequences such as disguising the differences in resources available to men and women and diverting attention away from women’s special needs.

1.2.5 The Political Costs and Benefits of Essentialism and Social Constructionism

There have been disagreements and charged debates between feminists about the relative value of essentialist and social constructionist approaches to feminist theorising, research and activism. Commentators note how feminists are accused of essentialism as if this in itself were enough to discredit their work. According to Jane Roland Martin, in the 1980s it was commonplace to hear women accuse each other of essentialism. “If I had called your work or you had called mine essentialist”, she says “you or I would not merely have been offering criticism, as we would if we had called that work sketchy or unconvincing or disorganized or badly written or even false [...] the net effect was to place on the work a seal of disapproval” (Martin, 1994: 630). Similarly, Carol Vance (1992: 132) notes that:
Chapter One: Feminist Psychologies and Young Women's Sexuality

In the sometimes heated debates that have gone on about essentialism and social construction, the word 'essentialist', to some ears, sounds increasingly pejorative - a dirty word, a contemptuous put down, a characterization of being hopelessly out of date.

Essentialists are characterised as politically reactionary in comparison to social constructionists (or post-structuralists or postmodernists). These criticisms are levelled at both feminist empiricists who try to discover the scientific truth about the essential nature of women (and, usually, how this is, or is not, different to the essential nature of men), and at standpoint theorists (sometimes perjoratively called 'cultural feminists') who celebrate those aspects of women's nature which have traditionally been devalued. Essentialists (in particular 'cultural feminists') are described as adopting "a homogenous, unproblematised, and ahistorical conception of women" (Alcoff, 1988: 413), and they are said to "indulge in dangerously erroneous generalizations about women" (Echols, 1983: 440). The 'essential' woman of much feminist theorising has turned out, in fact, to be white, heterosexual, middle-class, able-bodied, and North American (cf. Kitzinger, 1996).

Essentialist research which makes claims about the particular nature of women is seen as too closely aligned with patriarchal practices which justify women's subordination, and can be used to support programs and policies which are inimical to women (Martin, 1994). For example, Michelle Fine and Judi Addelston (1996) demonstrate how the works of feminists Carol Gilligan and Kay Deaux are used to justify the exclusion of women from a college in South Carolina. The advantage of essentialism is that it allows for fixed and stable categories to organise around. As Celia Kitzinger (1995: 150) points out, the essentialist concept of 'the homosexual' has "proved valuable in establishing lesbian and gay civil and political rights", biological theories of homosexuality which support the idea that an individual cannot 'choose' to be homosexual are used to argue for equality on the basis that if an individual 'cannot help' being
homosexual, any more than an individual can 'help' being black then it is unfair to persecute or discriminate against them (see also Vance 1992). How can feminists and other activist groups organise politically if the identities on which their activism is based (i.e. lesbian, women, black) are being 'deconstructed' by social constructionists? Essentialism is crucial for undermining biased research and/or social policy by 'proving' the mental stability of lesbians in child custody cases, or 'proving' that children are not psychologically damaged when their mothers return to work.

Social constructionists, then, are charged with political inadequacy. Because social constructionists argue that individuals 'do' gender, 'do' race, or 'do' lesbianism rather than 'being' female, 'being' black or 'being' a lesbian many critics contend that social constructionists imply that identities are "fictional, trivial, unimportant or not real" (Vance, 1992: 133). The attraction of social constructionism is that it offers the promise of increased freedom for women - if we can 'do' gender then perhaps we can 'do' something else. If there is no predetermined gender identity then we can conceivably find new forms of social organisation.

Feminists, then, debate both the intellectual rigor and the political expediency of essentialism and social constructionism. This thesis contributes to these debates by exploring the competing epistemological approaches to data analysis and the implications of these for research, theory, and activism provided by essentialism and social constructionism.

1.3 Young Women and HeteroSex

Feminists are worried about girls and young women. They are worried about the effects of a "girl-poisoning" culture on young women's lives (cf. Pipher, 1994), and the invisibility of young women both within feminism and within psychology. Bonnie Leadbeater and Niobe Way (1996: 1-2) argue that girls are "seldom seen and rarely heard", and their voices are "missing in the
psychological research literature”. Similarly, Anita Harris (1996: 152 & 153) claims that young women are “not particularly prominent on the feminist agenda” and that feminism is a “platform which does not seek to incorporate their experiences” (see also Brown and Gilligan, 1992). However, the past ten years has seen a resurgence of interest from feminist scholars in studying the lives of young women and an attempt to include young women’s voices (Lees, 1989; Apter, 1990; Gilligan, Rogers and Tolman, 1991; Brown and Gilligan, 1992; Ward and Taylor, 1992; Leadbeater and Way, 1996). Feminist interest in the lives of young women covers a huge variety of topics within the social sciences including: their relationships with mothers (Apter, 1990; Cauce et al., 1996; Taylor, 1996), fathers (Sharpe, 1994) parents and/or teachers (Way, 1995; Way and Stauber, 1996; Ward, 1996), ‘mentors’ (Rhodes and Davis, 1996; Sullivan, 1996), peers (Hey, 1997; Way, 1996) and offspring (Apfel and Seitz, 1996); aspects of young women’s schooling (Sharpe, 1994) and career aspirations (McLoyd and Hernandez Jozefowicz, 1996; De Leon, 1996; Sharpe, 1994); their involvement in popular culture (Frazer, 1987; Walkerdine, 1984 & 1990; McRobbie, 1991, 1996; Christian-Smith, 1993); young women’s knowledge about menstruation (Lovering, 1995; Kissling, 1996) and motherhood (Prendergast and Prout, 1980); and their thoughts about class (Phoenix and Tizard, 1996; Frazer, 1988).

Nineteen ninety seven has been termed the ‘Year-of-the-Girl’ (Holman Weisbard and Shult, 1997). In this year the feminist journal Signs has called for contributions to a issue on young women, and Feminist Collections produced a special issue on girls and young women (Holman Weisbard and Shult, 1997). In addition to much psychological research, bookshelves have been dominated by ‘pop’ psychology aimed both at young women and at the adults with whom they come into contact. These include the best selling Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls (Pipher, 1994), and Peggy Orenstein’s (1994) SchoolGirls: Young Women, Self-Esteem, and the Confidence Gap, in addition to books in which young women themselves talk (e.g. Girl Power: Young Women Speak Out! (Carlip, 1995, and For Real: The Uncensored Truth about America’s
Teenagers Pratt and Pryor, 1995). Together, these popular books and the growing body of psychological research on young women have served to heighten concern about the lives of young women.

Perhaps the research which has had the greatest impact on feminist theorising about young women has been from those involved in the Harvard Project on Women’s Psychology and Girls’ Development. In their hugely influential work Meeting at the Crossroads, Lyn Mikel Brown and Carol Gilligan describe adolescence as a “crossroads in women’s lives” (Brown and Gilligan, 1992: 1). In attempting to understand the lives of women, Brown and Gilligan follow women’s psychological development by studying girls in adolescence. They ask what happens between childhood where girls have “strength, courage, and a healthy resistance to losing voice and relationship” and where they “speak freely of feeling angry, of fighting or open conflict in relationships”, to adolescence and adulthood where voice is silenced and conflict avoided (Brown and Gilligan, 1992: 3 & 4). This “relational crisis”, where girls do not feel able to speak authentically but silence their own thought and feelings in order to remain ‘nice’ girls and to retain relationships with others, is seen as a central site of women’s oppression and as psychologically damaging. The findings from this study are echoed in many others which report on girls: most present a catalogue of psychological disasters including depression, addictions, suicide attempts, eating disorders (Pipher, 1994). Girls are identified as “at risk” from pregnancy, low paid jobs, unemployment, inadequate education, dropping out, health problems, they suffer a loss of self-esteem, are more likely than boys to attempt suicide (American Association of University Women, 1991; Orenstein, 1994), and girls are dissatisfied with their bodies (Charles and Kerr, 1986; Tiggemann and Pennington, 1990; Croghan and Wainwright, 1996). According to these writers, something dramatic, something new, and something damaging, is happening to girls in adolescence. It is these observations which have led feminists to re-focus their attention on young women.
One area in which there is renewed attention is that of sexual relationships. Concerns about young women and sexuality are reflected both in the feminist and non-feminist literature. I look first at the non-feminist literature.

In the mainstream literature concerns about young women's sexuality are concentrated on socio-economic and moral issues. Of particular concern are reports that the age of first intercourse is consistently declining (Zelnick and Kanter, 1980; Hofferth and Hayes, 1987a; Zelnick et al., 1981). In an extensive survey of sexual behaviour in Britain, Kaye Wellings et al. (1994) found that for those respondents born between 1931 and 1935 the average age at first intercourse was 21 while for those born later (between 1966 and 1971) it was 17. In mainstream psychological research loss of virginity or sexual initiation is characterised as a crucial moment in the development of a sexual career which sets the path for future activities. In other words, if a young woman has first sex at an early age it is assumed that this will be the start of a downward spiral to promiscuity, early motherhood and/or abortion. Considerable effort is therefore invested in attempting to identify the various factors which mediate the transition between virginity and non-virginity (see Brooks-Gunn and Furstenburg, 1989 for an overview of this literature). Some frequently cited antecedents of sexual initiation include: biological explanations which claim that earlier age of menarche results in earlier sexual initiation (Zelnick, Kanter and Ford, 1981); the influence of the behaviour/attitudes/norms of peers (Daugherty and Burger, 1984; Furstenburg, Moore and Peterson, 1986; Newcomer, Gilbert and Udry, 1980); family structure (especially the connection between mothers' sexual experience/childbearing and their daughters', see for example Newcomer and Udry, 1983 & 1985); communication with parents (Jesser and Jesser, 1977); parental control/supervision (de Gaston et al., 1995; Miller et al. 1986) and religiosity (DeLamater, 1981). The aim is to build up a profile of those women who are 'at risk' from early sexual initiation, pregnancy, child-bearing and motherhood, so that these women can then be targeted for prevention programs. Particular attention is paid to discovering ways of delaying first intercourse through sex education programs.
Health and social policy campaigns have focused on issues around encouraging young women to say ‘no’ to sex, not as a way of empowering young women and enabling young women to control sexual encounters, but a way of curbing and controlling their sexuality and ensuring the reduction of levels of teenage pregnancy, abortion and sexually transmitted diseases. Governments in both Britain and North America are setting targets for reducing levels of teenage pregnancy and abortion. In Britain The Health of the Nation report prioritises and sets targets for health interventions including reducing the number of pregnancies to mothers under 16 by 50% by the year 2000. One of the ways in which both these countries aim to meet their targets is through sex education. In North America the view that teenage pregnancy is best reduced by encouraging the delay of sexual intercourse until adulthood has been increasing in popularity after an explosion of interest in the 1980s and was encouraged by both the Reagan and Bush administrations. Various campaigns aimed at encouraging young people to ‘Just Say No’ have been instigated by right-wing and religious groups. The Postponing Sexual Involvement family planning program, for example was based on the assumption that “Young people need awareness and skills to be able to resist pressure to become sexually involved. They need support and practice in learning how to resist this pressure” and emphasises understanding why young people are having sex and how they might avoid it rather than on the consequences of sexual involvement (Howard and McCabe, 1990: 22). The ‘Sex Respect’ program developed by health educator Colleen Kelly Mast with the aim of lowering the incidence of teenage sexual activity is currently being used in 50 states in North America and in 23 other countries. It aims to provide (according to their internet site) young people with ways to say “no” to sex and to make young people “Realize that true sexual freedom includes the freedom to say “no” to sex outside of marriage” (http://www.lochrie.com/sexrespect/default.html). Other programs include the schools based initiative Teen-Aid and the church based initiatives include True Love Waits. The overall concern of these programs is not with unwanted sex or coercive sex, but with what they consider to be ‘immoral sex’. In contrast to the feminist ‘No means No’ campaigns, then, these sex education campaigns are
primarily concerned with reducing teenage pregnancy (e.g. Howard and McCabe, 1990; Warzak and Page, 1990; Warzak, et al., 1995) or unsafe sex (Rosenthal et al., 1991) than with eliminating sexual violence against women. Sex education produced by pressure groups is aimed at encouraging girls to preserve their virginity and practice pre-marital abstinence (e.g. Teen-Aid, Sex Respect, True Love Waits). Rather than being concerned about women’s control over their own bodies and their sexual autonomy, both mainstream research and public discourse reflect concerns about curbing and controlling women’s sexuality.

By contrast, feminist concerns about young women’s sexuality are centred around issues of pleasure and danger. Feminists are alarmed by research which shows that young women find little pleasure in their sexual relationships. Young women report that first sex is often characterised by boredom, disappointment and pain (Thompson, 1990), and is rarely viewed in positive terms (Holland et al., 1996):

He was very gentle with me. Very. He couldn’t have been more gentle and just the way he talked with me - aw. But it felt like a knife going through me. It really hurt a lot. The pain was like I couldn’t take it (Thompson, 1990: 365).

I wasn’t expecting it to hurt so much. It was like total pain. Even after the first minutes of pain, it’s still like you’re too sore to enjoy anything. I didn’t expect that at all. (15 year old girl, Coles and Stokes, 1985: 74).

Fewer than 40% of women in one study described their experience of first intercourse as pleasurable (Weis, 1983), and many described it as painful (Weis, 1985; Thompson, 1990; Coles and Stokes, 1985). Many women express ambivalence about becoming sexually active describing first intercourse as
unplanned, unprepared for, and as something which ‘just happens’ (Kisker, 1985):

P: The first time, it was like totally out of the blue. You don’t ... say “Well, I’m going to his house, and he’s probably going to try to get to bed with me, so I better make sure I’m prepared.” I mean, you don’t know it’s coming, so how are you going to be prepared?
(Woman aged 16-17, Kisker, 1985: 84)

Women are more likely than men to report feeling sorry or ambivalent about first sex (Ingham et al., 1991), and are more likely to report feeling guilty (Sprecher et al., 1995; Darling et al., 1990). Intercourse itself may be so fast that girls “barely realize what is happening before it is over” and one girl says “It was just like - psssst, one minute here, the next minute it was there” (Thompson, 1990: 344-5). Describing her first time as “horrible” one 15 year old girl explains that “He was so excited by the fact that he could have sex with me that it was so quick that it wasn’t even anything” (Coles and Stokes 1985: 74-5).

Getting young women to talk about their sexual desires and pleasures is notoriously difficult. The Janus Report on sexual behaviour found that, among 18-26 year olds, 68% of males, compared to 18% of females, reported always having orgasms, while 44% of women and only 13% of men reported never having orgasms (1993). Similarly, in their study of 496 British women aged 16 to 21, Janet Holland et al. found that it was “unusual for young women to discuss sex in terms of their own pleasure, rather than men’s sexual needs, or their feelings for a man or a relationship” (1992: 666). One notable exception to this trend is the pioneering work of Deborah Tolman (1991; 1994) who explores the ways in which young women experience sexual desire as embodied. Her findings, in stark contrast to those above, show how young women talk about sexual desire. They describe sexual desire as when “my body says yes, yes, yes”, as “an overwhelming longing”, or as a “wicked urge” (1994: 255). Increasing
women's knowledge about their bodies, sexual responses and sexuality more generally, has been identified by feminists as an important aspect of women's sexual freedom (Jackson, 1980). Feminists stress the importance of providing clear and explicit information about sex to teenage girls in order to ensure that they retain control over their bodies, to enable them to develop an autonomous sexuality which includes sexual pleasure, and to ensure protection against sexual abuse and exploitation.

For the most part, however, feminists have been highly critical of the content of much school based sex education and the (often heterosexist and/or ethnocentric) image of 'legitimate' sexuality which it presents (see for example Espin, 1984; Ward and Taylor, 1992). They have criticised the focus on the negative aspects of sexuality in many sex education programs (i.e. unwanted pregnancy and disease), and the paucity of information about the positive aspects of sexuality (Thomson and Scott, 1991). Sex education teaches young women (and men) that they must protect themselves from the social, emotional and physical risks associated with sexual activity and young women themselves describe sex education classes as teaching about “how to protect yourself from illness and pregnancy” and about “helping us to avoid unpleasant things and danger” (Ward and Taylor, 1992: 191). While male pleasure is taught within the context of biology (i.e. 'wet dreams' as the onset of puberty, 'erection as the preface to intercourse, and 'ejaculation' as the act of insemination) female pleasure and agency is absent. This “sexual disenfranchisement of women” (cf. Thomson and Scott, 1991) is reflected in the way that women's sexuality is discussed solely in terms of reproduction e.g. diagrams of female genitalia frequently show the vagina but not the clitoris. According to Michelle Fine (1988) sex education perpetuates a 'missing discourse of desire' in young women's sexuality. Often women are presented as “passive”, as “potential victims of male sexuality” or at best as reproductive vessels (Thomson and Scott, 1991: 41). Young women themselves have also continuously and consistently criticised sex education programs for focusing on the biological and reproductive aspects of sex at the expense of information about the sexual relationships and how to handle the
feelings, emotions and negotiations within them (Ward and Taylor, 1992; Allen, 1987). Paradoxically, despite the emphasis on the biological aspects of sex young women report feeling frustrated by the lack of information about physical practicalities of sex. As one young woman comments, “He [the teacher] didn’t say how you did it, not how you did it. How can I put it in? He didn’t tell you what it was about” (Thomson and Scott, 1991: 7). Another says she had “no information on like foreplay, what you do and what it feels like, if it hurts” (Hirst, 1994: 42). In one study 82% of young women ages 16 to 21 described their sex education as inadequate, with only 6% describing it as good (Thomson and Scott, 1991). Feminists criticise the ‘Just Say No’ educational messages because they deny female sexual agency (Fine, 1988). Sharon Thompson suggests that a feminist sex education program would include lessons about exploring the body, masturbating, orgasms, desire, and so on, in order that girls’ sexual pleasures could be addressed. To adopt the ‘Just Say No’ approach, she argues, “is to join conservatives in sabotaging the sense of sexual confidence upon which the pleasure narratives - and effective contraception - depend” (Thompson, 1990: 358). Clearly, then, feminists are concerned about young women’s access to sexual pleasure and their ability to develop autonomous sexual identities.

Feminists are also concerned about young women’s vulnerability to sexual danger. Young women are the targets of many different forms of sexual violence including: sexual harassment, courtship violence, stranger rape, date rape, and other forms of unwanted sex. But, as Larkin and Popaleni (1994: 214) note: “The issue of violence in the lives of adolescent girls has received little attention in the vast feminist project of politicising male violence against women”. This situation is beginning to change, one area of sexual violence against young women which feminists (and others) have explored is violence in schools. Empirical evidence suggests that such violence is widespread with young women routinely being subjected to many different forms of sexual harassment. “Secrets in Public: Sexual Harassment in Our Schools” (a joint report produced by the Center for Research on Women at Wellesley College and the NOW Legal Defense and
Education Fund, Stein, Marshall and Tropp, 1993), found that 89% of the girls they surveyed had received sexual comments, gestures and looks, and 83% reported having been touched, pinched or grabbed. The "sexual tyranny" of schools is reflected in the pictures of erect penises which confront girls as they enter the school gates, and the comments about their appearance which follow them around the corridors (Jones, 1985). Girls are taunted with verbal insults such as 'cunts', 'slag', 'pro', 'bitch' (Jones, 1985; Halson, 1989), are targeted for jokes about their periods or bras and are often touched, felt or groped (Halson, 1989). Complaints about boys' behaviour are often ignored by male teachers who imply that male students are "just having a laugh" (Mac An Ghail, 1994), and these teachers may also be the perpetrators of such harassment (Halson, 1989). Girls are given little support by schools who do not recognise sexual harassment as a problem, and instead are left embarrassed, humiliated, horrified and powerless. One aspect of this harassment which has received particular attention is men's categorisation of women into 'slags' or 'drags'. In her groundbreaking work in this area Sue Lees (1986 & 1993) demonstrated that the label 'slag' may be allocated according to appearance (wearing too much make-up, having skirts too high, or tops too low) or behaviour (hanging around waiting for boys, talking to too many boys, or to the wrong boy). The label 'slag', as Lees points out, appears to have little to do with actual sexual behaviour, but rather reputation is very precarious and can be lost and won in minutes. The result is that women must closely police their behaviour treading a fine line between being sexually attractive without being a 'slag'. As Hudson and Ineichen (1991: 19) observe, girls cannot "express desire for sex. If they do, they are labelled 'slags'. On the other hand, if they do not respond favourably to male sexual pressure they are ostracised - as 'frigid', 'tight' and other such adjectives". Concern about reputation places constraints on women's ability to negotiate sexual pleasure and safe sex (Holland et al., 1990), and is used to justify/excuse rape and sexual abuse - i.e. 'nice girls' don't get raped but 'slags' do (Burt, 1980; Scully and Marolla, 1984). Reputation is, then, "a crucial mechanism of ensuring [girls'] subordination to boys" (Lees, 1993: 29).
Young women also face sexual harassment and violence in their private lives, as well as at school, and may be subject to abuse from their boyfriends or dates (I do not address here issues around child sexual abuse although young women are also subjected to this form of sexual violence). Since the publication of Makepeace’s (1981) germinal paper there has been a growth of interest in the phenomena of ‘courtship violence’. Courtship violence covers a wide range of behaviours including: being pushed or shoved, slapped or scratched, punched or kicked, hit with an object, choked, or cut with a knife (Laner and Thompson, 1982; Henton et al., 1983; Larkin and Popaleni, 1994). Although both men and women can be the victims or perpetrators of courtship violence there is some evidence to suggest that the majority of violence is aimed at young women (Sugarman and Hotaling, 1991), moreover, some suggest that young men are hit only when young women fight back in self-defence, and that young women are more likely to be the victims of more serious physical and sexual abuse (Roscoe and Callahan, 1985). Estimates of the prevalence of courtship violence range from as low as 9% (Roscoe and Callahan, 1985) to as high as 60% (McKinney, 1986a). Young women may be unlikely to seek help in cases of courtship violence either because they are trying to assert their independence (Levy, 1991), or because they define the violence as normative (Sugarman and Hotslinger, 1991).

The vast majority of research conducted on issues around rape uses young people (i.e. college students), but these studies rarely focus on the ways in which this violence is specific to young adults. But, according to Mary Koss there are “[s]cientific as well as pragmatic” reasons to study college students. Drawing on statistics from the Bureau of Justice, she argues that college students are a high risk group for rape because they “are in the same age range as the bulk of rape victims and offenders (Koss, 1988: 4). The victimisation rate for females peaks in the 16-19 year age group and the second highest is in the 20-24 age group. Findings from other studies support her claims. The Ms. Survey found that one in four women were the victims of rape or attempted rape, and that 38% of these women were aged between 14 and 17 at the time of their attack. The majority of
rape victims seen by rape crisis centres are between 16 and 24 (Sousa, 1991), and according to Roden (1991: 267) "although adolescents account for less than ten percent of the population they are the targets of an estimated twenty to fifty percent of all rapes".

Adolescents also represent a substantial proportion of those perpetrating rapes, one study estimated that around 20% of rapes are committed by adolescents (Davis and Leitenberg, 1987). Twenty-five percent of the college males surveyed by Kanin (1967) admitted physically forcing, or attempting to force, sexual activities even when the woman responded by fighting or crying. In a series of studies (Malamuth, 1981a; Malamuth and Check, 1980a; 1981a, 1983; Malamuth, Haber and Feshbach, 1980) Neil Malamuth asked male college students to indicate the likelihood that they personally would rape if they could be assured that they would not be caught or punished. Across these studies an average of about 35% of males indicated some likelihood of raping (Malamuth, 1984), although it was as high as 60% of males in one sample (Briere and Malamuth, 1983).

Although some of these rapes are stranger rapes, a substantial proportion are committed by men known to their victims - in other words, they are date rapes. Date rape differs from stranger rape in several ways. First, the type of coercion used is often different. Rapes by strangers use more verbal threats, physical violence and weapons, rapes by dates involve more subtle forms of coercion (Muehlenhard and Schrag, 1991). The presence of physical coercion makes it easier for women to define their experiences as abusive (Kelly, 1987). The most common strategy used by date rapists was holding the victim down or twisting her arm (Koss et al., 1988). While stranger rapes are characterised by verbal threats, date rapes are characterised by verbal manipulation. In one study, for example, 44% of date rapists admitted to telling the woman that if she didn't have sex then it would change the way he felt about her, and 34% threatened to end the relationship (Mosher and Anderson, 1986). Rappaport and Burkhart (1984) found that over 50% of their male sample admitted to forcing sexual acts
on their dates, and 25% of Koss and Oros’ (1982) sample of college males admitted to one or more forcible attempts at intercourse. Of those participants in the Ms. Survey who were raped, 84% knew their attacker, and 57% of rapes occurred while they were on a date (Warshaw, 1988), and rapes by acquaintances account for 60% of all rapes reported to rape crisis centres (Sousa, 1991). These figures are not just descriptive of college students, an early study by Kanin (1957) revealed that 30% of his sample were the victims of attempted or completed rape while on a high school date.

What makes the figures on date rape particularly startling is evidence which suggests that date rape is one of the most under reported crimes (Jenkins and Dambrot, 1987; Mynatt and Allgeier, 1990). Teenagers may be particularly reluctant to tell family members about being raped because they want to protect their family, because they believe that their family would not understand or would disapprove of their lifestyle, because they wish to retain their independence, because they feel psychologically distant from their family, or because their family is not close by (Burgess and Holmstrom, 1979). Teenagers may also feel embarrassed about disclosing details of the rape to others, or be worried that aspects of their behaviour (i.e. drinking or ‘losing’ their virginity) will be judged negatively (Finkelson and Oswatt, 1995). Perhaps one further explanation for this under-reporting, is that many women who experience date rape do not define their experience as rape. In the Ms. Survey (appropriately entitled I Never Called it Rape), only 27% of those women whose experiences met the legal definition of rape defined themselves as rape victims, 42% never told anyone about it and only 10% reported the incident to the police or to a rape crisis centre (Warshaw, 1988). Twenty-seven percent of girls in one study said that they engaged in unwanted sex because of psychological pressure from their dates, they did not interpret this as rape but as part of ‘what happens on dates’ (Miller and Marshall, 1987). Women’s ability to see such experiences as rape may be obscured by the fact that forced intercourse is often considered to be a normal and acceptable part of heterosexual dating relationships. In one study, 56% of girls agreed that it is acceptable for a man to use force to obtain sex
Chapter One: Feminist Psychologies and Young Women’s Sexuality

under certain circumstances (Miller, 1988). Over twenty percent of the 500 male
and female students (mean age 19) in Muehlenhard’s (1988) study thought that it
was justifiable for a man to have sex with a woman against her will under certain
circumstances: i.e. if they went to his apartment rather than to a religious
function, if the woman rather than the man initiated the date, and if he paid the
dating expenses rather than if they split the expenses.

Many discussions of sexual violence against young women, then, suggest that
force and coercion are commonplace in heterosexual relationships (Clark and
Lewis, 1977; MacKinnon, 1982), and that this contributes to the difficulty of
‘proving’ rape in the legal system (Dworkin, 1983; MacKinnon, 1982). In
addition, although women find it easier to identify such experiences as coercive
when they involve physical violence (Kelly, 1987), often, as we have seen, men
use more subtle means of coercion and manipulation - particularly in date rape.
Moreover, according to Clark and Lewis (1977), men who do not use physical
force often consider themselves to be seducers rather than rapists. Some
feminists have found it useful to conceptualise sexual violence as a continuum
which ranges from choice, to pressure, to coercion and force (Kelly, 1987), or
from “mild insistence on giving way to intercourse, or to intercourse on his
terms, to physical assault and rape” (Holland et al., 1992: 647-648). Such a
concept makes explicit the connections between rape and the routine patterns of
heterosexual relationships which have been at the forefront of radical feminist
critiques of heterosexuality. At one end of this continuum are women’s
experiences of (what has been called) ‘unwanted sex’. Unwanted sex is the term
used to refer to when “a reluctant partner is induced to acquiesce against her
(his) will by psychological pressure from the would-be lover, but without the use
of or the threat of force” (Lewin, 1985). Studies of unwanted sex suggest that it
is very common. For example, forty-four percent of women in one study said that
they had “given in” to unwanted sexual activities other than intercourse (i.e.
fondling, kissing or petting) because they were “overwhelmed by a man’s
continual arguments and pressure”, and 25% admitted to having sexual
intercourse for the same reason (Koss, 1988). Over 50% of female university
student volunteers in a study conducted by Murnen et al. (1989) wrote descriptions of unwanted sexual experiences, over one third reported that their coercer used persuasion, and persuasion was the most likely means of coercion when an attempt at intercourse (rather than kissing or touching the woman) was made. Thirty-six percent of female college students reported that pressure to engage in sexual behaviour was a significant dating problem for them (Knox and Wilson, 1983), and in a different study 22% of college students reported that they had experienced unwanted intercourse at least once, and 88% had been pressed to have unwanted intercourse but had refused. According to Kelly, pressurised sex covers “situations in which women chose not to say ‘no’, but in which they were not freely consenting” - 83% of her sample said that they had experienced pressure to have sex (Kelly, 1988). Pressurised sex, according to Liz Kelly, involves women weighing up the costs of refusing sex, but if they don’t say ‘no’ then they find it difficult to label it as rape.

I didn’t say no, I didn’t dare to ... you know you don’t want to, but you are still doing it. That’s why in my eyes now it’s rape with consent. It’s rape because it’s pressurized, but you do it because you don’t feel you can say no (quoted in Kelly, 1996: 200).

According to Nicola Gavey, sometimes women do not seem to have the language to be able to say no to unwanted sex; as one of her participants said “it’s partly having the language to say no. Like, this sort of amorphous feeling of, ‘Ooh, I’m not sure about this’, but not having the language to say it” (Gavey, 1992: 334). If being raped involves non-consent, then women who do not signal their non-consent by saying ‘no’ may not recognise their experience as rape. The difficulty of saying ‘no’ can result in women being almost ‘unrapeable’ (cf. Gavey, 1992).

It is clear then that young women face a huge range of different forms of sexual violence. Feminists have approached the issue of saying ‘no’ in relation to sexual violence by highlighting the ways in which when women do say ‘no’ their
refusals are ignored or over-ruled. Feminists have pointed out that one of the most common strategies used by date rapists is simply to ignore a woman's protests even when she repeatedly indicates her refusal by saying 'no' (Rapaport and Burkhart, 1984; Muehlenhard and Linton, 1987). According to Robin Warshaw, author of the groundbreaking *I Never Called it Rape*, many men "simply discount what a woman is saying or reinterpret it to fit what they want to hear", such that "saying 'no' is often meaningless when spoken by a female" (1988: 42). One of the ways in which rapists justify their behaviour is to argue that when women say 'no' they really mean 'yes', and that the woman didn’t resist enough to convince them that she didn’t ‘really’ want it (Scully and Marolla, 1984). This is linked to the common rape myth that ‘Any woman can successfully resist a rapist if she really wants to’ (Burt, 1980: 290). By focusing on saying ‘no’ to sex, rather than explicitly on sexual violence or coercion, this thesis makes an important contribution to the blurred borderlands between coercive and ‘ordinary’ heterosexual sex.

Having established date rape and unwanted sex as a key area of feminist concern I now move on to briefly outline three existing social scientific theories (miscommunication theory, emotion work theory, and sexual script theory) which are used to explain instances of date rape and unwanted sex. I highlight these theories because they relate explicitly to issues around saying ‘no’. Miscommunication theory suggests that date rape occurs because women fail to say ‘no’ clearly and effectively, or because men fail to understand when women say ‘no’. Emotion work theory suggests that young women fail to say ‘no’ because they are too emotionally involved with their partner, and are either afraid of losing him or are unwilling to hurt his feelings. Sexual script theory suggests that women are expected to say ‘no’, while men are expected to try and ‘persuade’ women to have sex. Script theory argues that because everyone knows about these roles, men ignore women’s ‘no’s because they assume that women don’t ‘really’ mean it, but are saying ‘no’ simply because they are expected to. These theories are examined in detail in chapters four, five and six, in relation to their ability to explain the data collected as part of this thesis, for their utility to
Chapter One: Feminist Psychologies and Young Women's Sexuality

feminist researchers and for their epistemological status as essentialist or social constructionist. For the moment, I will briefly introduce each of the three theoretical approaches to date rape and unwanted sex.

1.3.1 Sexual Miscommunication

Miscommunication is one of psychology's most popular theories to explain why women's sexual refusals are ineffective, and why men apparently do not 'hear' women when they say 'no'. According to this theory, date rape is the result of misunderstandings between men and women; women fail to say 'no' clearly and effectively, and men fail to understand women's sexual communications. Studies of miscommunication (or "misunderstandings" or "misperceptions" - these terms are used interchangeably) around sex suggest that it is very common. A survey conducted on nearly a thousand college undergraduates in the USA found that two-thirds of them replied "yes" to the question "Have you ever been friendly to someone of the opposite sex only to discover that she or he had misperceived your friendliness as a sexual come-on; you were just trying to be nice but she or he assumed you were sexually attracted to him or her?" (Abbey, 1991: 97). Significantly more women than men reported having their friendliness "misperceived" as sexual interest, and women were most likely to become aware of this "misperception" because the male kissed or touched them. After having been subject to "misperception" in this way, women were more likely than men to feel upset, angry and embarrassed, while men (who were more likely than women to learn of the "misperception" indirectly through a friend, rather than directly from the other person), were more likely to feel flattered, happy and amused (Abbey, 1991). Miscommunication theory argues that these "misperceptions" occur, in part, because women are ineffective communicators. Many studies suggest that women find it difficult to say 'no' to sexual activities. Fifty-one percent of women in one study could describe instances of unwanted sex when asked to describe any experiences of being "sexually involved with any person against your will or when you wanted to say no but didn't or couldn't" (Neal and Mangis, 1995: 174). Similarly, in another study Warzak et al. (1995)
found that sexually active women aged 13 -19 rated the following statement among the top three situations most likely to lead to unwanted sex: “My first sexual experiences occurred because I had difficulty saying no effectively”. The authors recommend that ‘refusals skills training’ may be useful for individuals who report “difficulty saying “no” or have difficulty communicating decisions about their preferences regarding sexual contact and contraceptive use” (p. 98). Of the young women in their study 45% said they lacked effective refusal skills and 77% expressed an interest in learning more, which indicates that young women themselves are concerned about their ability to communicate their sexual refusals. Despite the fact that 90% of women in one sample said they felt that they had moderate to total control over dealing with unwanted intercourse, the authors report that over one third of the women reported making no response to an unwanted intercourse attempt and that the most commonly reported coping response (72.2% of responses) was to accept or ignore what had happened (Murnen et al., 1989). In other words women may be reluctant to communicate their desire not to have sex. In addition, miscommunication theory argues that men’s poor comprehension skills are also partly to blame for date rape and unwanted sex. Apparently, men see a more sexually orientated world than women, and are more likely than women to interpret a range of different cues as indicating sexual interest. It is men, then, as we have seen, that are more likely to interpret friendliness as a sexual come-on. According to miscommunication theorists males are more likely than females to rate both male and female actors as higher in sexual desire (Abbey, 1982; Abbey et al., 1987; Abbey, 1991). If a woman wears revealing clothes, men are more likely to see her as more sexual (Abbey et al., 1987). While women see dressing or acting in certain ways as unrelated to a desire for sexual intimacy, men are likely to interpret such behaviours as a signal for them to make a sexual advance (Goodchilds et al., 1988; Goodchilds and Zellman, 1984; Muehlenhard, 1988). Abbey gives the following example of a “misperception”:

Consider an example of misperception involving a man and a woman who meet at a party. She is wearing tight
jeans and a low cut shirt. They both have several beers and dance and laugh together. She agrees to let him walk her home and come inside to talk. Later, when she resists his sexual advances he gets angry, pushes her down, and forces her to have sexual intercourse with him. In this example, the male misperceived a series of cues throughout the evening (e.g., the woman’s clothing, alcohol consumption, and willingness to be alone with him). He felt justified forcing sex because he felt he had been teased and led on (Abbey, 1991: 96-7)

Researchers draw on both biology and socialisation to explain sex differences in the perception of sexual intent, and to explain why women are unable to communicate effectively and why men are unable to understand a woman’s sexual refusals. I discuss these various explanations in more detail in chapter four where I look at the implications of using miscommunication theory to explain my own data on young women saying ‘no’ to sex.

1.3.2 Emotion Work

I use the term emotion work to encompass two different literatures on women’s sexual relationships which seek to explain why women acquiesce, rather than say ‘no’, to unwanted sex. The first emphasises women’s emotional involvement in sexual relationships, which is sometimes characterised as pathologically intense, or at the very least as constraining their ability to say ‘no’ to sex. The second (related) literature emphasises the ways in which women care about, and protect, the emotions/feelings of their male partners. I discuss how both of these literatures relate to young women refusing sex.

First then, women are commonly assumed to be more emotionally involved in sexual relationships than men. One frequently reported finding is that men and women engage in sexual relationships for different reasons: women have sex for
love while men have sex for pleasure (e.g. Peplau, Rubin and Hill, 1977; Juhasz and Sonnerstein-Schneider, 1987; Ingham, Woodcock and Stenner, 1991). One major national study of young people conducted in the 1960s investigated the sexual behaviour of young people concluded that “Girls prefer a permanent type of relationship in their sexual behaviour. Boys seem to want the opposite; they prefer diversity and so have more casual sexual partners [...] the boy seeks adventure while the girl looks for security” (Schofield, 1965: 2). Young women are often seen as emotionally needy and are depicted as using sex to fulfil these emotional needs. Young women themselves often describe being ‘in love’ as the main factor which influenced their decision to have sexual intercourse (Wellings et al., 1994), and some have argued that young women’s sexual decision-making is based on intimacy, affection and “the quality of caring in the relationship” (Bollerud et al., 1990: 277). Although some feminists have questioned whether the primacy of love expressed by young women reflects their ‘true’ feelings or merely socially sanctioned views (e.g. Wilson, 1978; Lees, 1993; Thompson, 1984), researchers argue that strength of feeling and a commitment to relationship may influence their decision to engage in unwanted sex. Much of the mainstream literature problematises women’s emotional involvement with the men with whom they are having sex. In one study, one of the top three situations which young women reported most likely to lead to unwanted sexual activity was “I felt that I had to have unwanted sexual activity with my partner because I love him” (Warzak et al., 1995: 99). Another study suggested that “a woman’s emotional involvement with her date may in essence increase her sexual exploitability”, high levels of investment in a relationship may, the authors suggest, make women more willing to give in to sexual pressure in order to maintain the relationship (Quinn et al., 1991: 27). According to one sex educator interviewed by Holly (1989: 21) refusing sex can be “a problem for someone who has grown up without love” and she adds “Quite a few girls are in that position”.

Second, and in addition to their own emotional involvement, women are also assumed to be concerned about hurting men’s emotions as an adjunct to their
caring role more generally. In sexual situations this leads to reluctance to refuse sex to a male partner who may be hurt by this rejection. Popular writing for young people reflects this apparent difficulty: Your Pocket Guide to Sex (originally for a Health Education Authority but was then banned by the government and labelled as smutty in the media) says “A lot of time people don’t say no to sex because they feel guilty. There’s often a sense that because you’ve given the other person encouragement up to a point, then it’s your duty to follow through [...] It can be hard to say no to a regular partner because you’re frightened of hurting them” (Fisher, 1994: 72-3). Teen magazines also address this issue, in one article on how to ‘say no to sex’ the magazine identified five coercive ‘lines’ used by boys including ‘You would if you really cared about me’ and ‘I love you and I just want to show you how much’ (Sugar, 1996: 59). Feminists have argued that one reason women feel pressured to engage in unwanted sex in the absence of any physical force or threats is because they are expected to be ‘sexual servicers’ to men, and are expected to be sexually available to their partners (Hamblin, 1983). Women apparently feel unable to prioritise their own feelings and experiences and have difficulty saying ‘no’ to sex which they themselves do not desire (Kelly, 1996). Some have described this as ‘altruistic sex’, where women do not say ‘no’ because they feel guilty or feel sorry for the man (Bart, 1983). According to one author, women “clearly felt that they ‘owed’ sex to their partners regardless of their own feelings” (Kelly, 1987: 55). In a study of college students, Kathleen Cairns (1993: 205) found that consent was “constrained by their perceived duty to be co-operative” and by the feeling that they were expected to provide sex in order to maintain the relationship. Miriam Lewin (1985) described the results of her study, in which 75% of her sample considered it very likely that women’s reaction to refusing a sexual relationship would be concern that she has hurt the man, as evidence of the ‘stroking norm’ - where women have been brought up to put men’s needs ahead of their own. Here women’s apparent inability to refuse unwanted sex is linked to their connection of sex, love and intimacy - women are unable to refuse sex, because the rejection will hurt the men they wish to protect, or out of some sense of commitment. Kelly (1996) links women’s sense of obligatory sex to
models of sexuality in which male sexual needs are given the status of drives or biological urges (see for example Wendy Hollway’s description of the ‘male sex drive discourse’, 1984), and where women internalise a sense of responsibility for men’s sexual pleasure. Women report engaging in unwanted sex because they had ‘led him on’ to the point where they felt obliged to continue (Holland et al., 1992), because they felt that they would ‘let him down’ if they didn’t continue (Lewin, 1985), because they didn’t want to cause a scene (Hite, 1976), or because they might appear ‘silly’ if they didn’t (Gavey, 1992).

In sum, women are described as experiencing a form of “paralysis of the will” in which “feelings of obligation, service provision, fear of negative repercussions for refusal, and guilt over having possibly given conflicting messages to the partner” combine to make saying ‘no’ extremely difficult (Cairns, 1993: 205). I refer to this as ‘emotion work’ and in chapter five I link the research outlined above to sociological research on emotion work when I consider the utility of this theory for understanding my own data on young women’s sexual refusals.

1.3.3 Sexual Scripts

Psychologists have also drawn on the theory of sexual scripts to explain the prevalence of rape. Sexual scripts are generally described as culturally defined patterns of behaviour which prescribe what counts as sex and what people ‘do’ sexually. These scripts are heavily gendered, men and women are expected to behave very differently in sexual situations. This has frequently been referred to as the ‘sexual double standard’ (Reiss, 1960, 1967; Delamater and McCorquodale, 1979; Coles and Stokes, 1985; McCabe and Collins, 1990; Janus and Janus, 1993). Research has consistently shown that men are expected to initiate sexual activities, and that women are expected to restrict or refuse sexual activities: people attribute strategies for having sex to men, and strategies for avoiding sex to women (McCormick 1979), and men also report that they themselves are more likely to use strategies to have sex, while women report using strategies to avoid sex (LaPlante, McCormick and Brannigan, 1980). Men
also initiate sex more often than women (O’Sullivan and Byers, 1992). Women also report feeling more comfortable about refusing sex than do men, and less comfortable about initiating sex (Grauholtz and Serpe, 1985), and men report being more willing to engage in initiating behaviours than women (Green and Sandos, 1983). In short the sexual script “dictates that men use any available strategy to have sexual intercourse and women use any available strategy to avoid intercourse” (LaPlante, McCormick and Brannigan, 1980: 350). According to sexual script theory, then, men are expected to initiate or say ‘yes’ to sexual activity while women are expected to restrict or say ‘no’ to sexual activity. As Zimmerman et al. (1995: 395) succinctly state “saying no is more likely to be part of the female sexual script than the male sexual script”.

Some have argued that this socialisation of men and women into different sexual roles provides the context for rape. In one of the earliest papers to advance this argument feminist Stevi Jackson argued that “the same sexual scripts which govern ‘normal’ sexual behaviour also provide a potential vocabulary for the rapist” (1978/1995: 18). In her groundbreaking paper The Social Context of Rape: Sexual Scripts and Motivation, Jackson asked not why some men rape, but how conventional sexuality was defined in such a way as to create the potential for rape. She argued that conventional sexual scripts are highly gendered, and mirror the scripts for conventional masculinity and femininity in which, for example, boys are encouraged to be independent, and to actively seek success through their own achievements, while girls are encouraged to be dependent and seek success by passively pleasing others. The aggressive aspects of masculinity and the passive aspects of femininity become incorporated into the sexual scripts:

The man becomes the seducer, the woman the seduced, he the hunter, she the prey. It is he who is expected to initiate sexual encounters and to determine the direction in which they develop; her part is merely to acquiesce or refuse. (Jackson, 1978; reprinted 1995: 19)
Power, aggression, and sexuality as conquest, creates the potential for rape, without this association, argues Jackson, rape would not be possible. At the time Jackson was writing this paper it was commonly assumed, both within the psychological literature and beyond it, that rapists are different to ordinary men: they are unusual, beastly, evil or suffering from some kind of mental instability.

The majority of psychological research was directed towards identifying the particular characteristics which differentiated rapists from ordinary men and this remains a prevalent theme in contemporary psychological research - see, for example, research which aims to identify the different personality characteristics (Mahoney et al., 1986; Mosher, 1991), arousal patterns (Quinsey, Chaplin and Uphold, 1984; Malamuth, 1986), or communication styles (see previous section on misconimunication theory and chapter four) which differentiate rapists and 'ordinary' men. Script theory offers feminists a different way of theorising rape: rape is not seen as committed by a brutal madmen or monsters but by ordinary men, rape is not extra-ordinary but is rather an extension of 'normal' heterosexual behaviour (see Kelly, 1987; Stanko, 1985; Cameron and Frazer, 1987). This research also introduced the idea of a 'rape supportive' culture (cf. Russell, 1982) and the idea that the social context within which rape takes place is more important that looking at the attributes of individual rapists. Jackson argues that not only did traditional sexual scripts provide the context for rape but also the 'techniques of neutralisation' available to the rapist to excuse or justify his actions. Rapists deny responsibility for their actions, according to Jackson, by calling upon conventional notions about sexuality: including, for example, the popular misconception that women are not easily aroused and need their desire to be awakened by an ardent male. It is assumed, she argued, that “women need some degree of persuasion before they will engage in sexual activity, but that once their inhibitions have been overcome or their sense of propriety demonstrated, they will respond” (Jackson, 1978/1995: 20). This is a popular notion among convicted rapists who deny that they have raped, and among those who admit to raping but indicate that they thought, at the time, that the woman was willing (Scully and Marolla, 1984). Over one third of convicted rapists in
one study who denied that they had raped described their victim as resisting or as having said ‘no’ but justified their behaviour by arguing that the victims either did not resist enough or that her ‘no’ had really meant ‘yes’. As one rapist explained:

A man’s body is like a coke bottle, shake it up, put your thumb over the opening and feel the tension. When you take a woman out, woo her, then she says “no, I’m a nice girl,” you have to use force. All men do this. She said “no” but it was a societal no, she wanted to be coaxed. All women say “no” when they mean “yes” but it’s a societal no, so they won’t have to feel responsible later (Scully and Marolla, 1984: 535).

The idea that women don’t really mean it when they say ‘no’, or that deep down they enjoy it when they are raped, are central rape myths which feminists have identified and investigated (Burt, 1980). Rape, then, is seen as an extension of the ‘normal’ heterosexual roles for sexual activity, and explains why women’s ‘no’s may be ignored. Men “are taught to take the initiative and to persist in attempts at sexual intimacy even when a woman indicates verbally that she is unwilling to have sex....” (Check & Malamuth, 1983: 344). According to Charlene Muehlenhard (1988a: 97), who writes widely on this topic, the sexual script dictated by the sexual double standard means that:

when a man makes a sexual advance and the woman refuses he can ignore her refusal, assuming it is merely token. In fact, according to this script, not only can he ignore her refusal, he should ignore her refusal, because a man who stops when a woman says no is not sufficiently masculine.
Script theory, then, provides yet another way of explaining date rape and unwanted sex, which makes explicit claims about women saying 'no'. In chapter six I explore how script theory could be used to explain my own data on young women saying 'no' to sex. By exploring these three theories from the position of a feminist psychologist I hope to contribute both to the social scientific literature on sexual negotiation and specifically to feminist theorising around sexual negotiation.

1.4 Summary and Conclusions

This thesis, then, addresses a number of key feminist concerns. By focusing exclusively on the psychology of young women I bring women's concerns to the forefront of a discipline which repeatedly fails to address women's lives. In so doing I treat what young women have to say about their own lives as valid, interesting and worthy of considered attention in its own right; that is to say not only (as is often the case in psychology), as an interesting point of comparison to the lives of young men. In addition, this thesis strengthens feminist attempts to restructure psychology at both the epistemological and methodological level. In particular I explore the costs and benefits for feminist researchers of adopting an essentialist or social constructionist approach to data analysis. Finally, this thesis makes an important contribution to feminist debates around sexual negotiation and sexual coercion, and by focusing explicitly on sexual refusals I bring issues around saying 'no' (which have often implicitly been addressed in feminist research) sharply into focus. In short, this thesis makes a positive contribution to the development of feminist psychology.
Chapter Two

Focus Groups:

A Feminist Method?
In this chapter I outline the methodological approach to data collection and analysis used in this thesis. In order to explore women’s talk about saying ‘no’ to sex I use focus groups as my tool of data collection. Although feminists have carefully scrutinised research methods and have been pivotal in the development of new and innovative methods and research practices (see section 2.1. where I review this literature), they have paid little attention to the use of focus groups. This is not to say that feminists do not use focus groups, but rather that on those few occasion when they are used, their potential as a feminist method is often unexplored or unacknowledged. In this chapter I consider how aspects of the pre-existing literature on both feminist methodology and on focus group research reveal some interesting parallels which raise questions about whether, and in what ways, focus groups can be useful for feminists. In addition, I outline the specific ways in which the focus group methodology has been implemented in this particular piece of research (see section 2.5), and the particular analytical approach adopted (see section 2.6).

### 2.1 Feminist Methodology

Feminist concern about psychology’s methods initially derived from anger about the ‘truths’ which psychology claimed to have ‘discovered’ about women, and from the frustration experienced by feminists trying to use traditional methods to study women’s lives. Feminists began to explore new (mainly qualitative) methods in the hope that this research would be better able to account for women’s lives. In the early 1980s, debates about feminist methodology centred around the relative value of quantitative versus qualitative methods, and around whether or not there was a feminist method (unstructured or semi-structured interviewing was the favoured candidate for this position). Feminists then began to focus more clearly on the ethics and politics of conducting research and of implementing research methods, giving greater consideration to issues of power and representation. I reflect this chronology in the following review of the literature on feminist methodology by looking first at debates around qualitative and quantitative methods, and second at the ethics and
politics of research. I finish by reviewing feminist theorising on the process of interpretation and analysis as this is a central theme of this thesis and is one to which I shall return both throughout this chapter and also throughout the remaining chapters. In reviewing this literature I have tried wherever possible to draw on psychological research to illustrate important points but, given the particularly conservative nature of psychology (in comparison to other disciplines such as sociology), and the multi-disciplinary nature of feminism, I have had to incorporate innovations made within other social scientific disciplines in order better to discuss the range and variety of feminist methods.

2.1.1 Feminist Method(s)?

Psychology has been (and continues to be) dominated by the use of quantitative methods. Experiments, surveys, and questionnaires are the primary tools by which psychologists have ‘discovered’ what they call the ‘truth’ about women. Feminists have angrily contested these ‘truths’ and have challenged the pathologisation, degradation and oppression of women which these ‘truths’ often perpetuate. Within the ‘psychology of women’, the critique of psychology’s methods has, in the main, been rather limited, and has been designed to ‘patch up’ rather than revolutionise methods. Those working within the positivist empiricist tradition (see section 1.2.4i), which dominates the ‘psychology of women’ and psychology generally, have been content merely to identify and correct the biases in traditional scientific practices. Feminists have generated numerous critiques of sample selection, control groups, and the interpretation of results, in order that experimental and other quantitative methods can be more carefully applied. Such an approach is reflected in the development of guidelines for non-sexist research which advise researchers how to avoid the pitfalls of quantitative research (e.g. Denmark et al., 1988). Other researchers have provided more radical critiques of quantitative methods, arguing that quantitative methods are by their very nature designed to distort women’s experiences. They point out that quantitative methods, by definition, rely on the
quantification of experiences, and that this can lead to a narrow or misleading focus in the research. Research on battering women exemplifies this problem as it often includes only those variables (such as physical violence) which are most easily quantified, at the expense of others (such as verbal or emotional abuse) which may be more important for explaining battering but which are more difficult to count and categorise. Feminists have been critical of pre-defined, pre-coded questionnaires because they incorporate only those factors which the researcher (usually male) defines as important, and fail to capture the full range of women’s experiences (Graham, 1983; 1984). Quantitative methods can measure only those variables identified as relevant by the researcher at the beginning of the study. Bart (1971) for example, criticised the narrow view of sex roles in sexual behaviour contained in one questionnaire. Respondents’ roles in sexual intercourse were categorised as “passive”, “responsive”, “resistant”, “aggressive”, “deviant” or “other”. Squeezing women’s experiences into such narrow and biased categories may seriously misrepresent their experiences. As Bart suggests, quite different results may have been obtained if the categories had read “active”, “encouraging”, “playful” or “creative”. When Susan Condor (1986: 101), as part of a pilot study, asked women to “talk through” some standard psychometric tests on sex roles, she found that they had difficulty answering the questions and sometimes became “aggressive” and infuriated because the questions were “unanswerable”. Ultimately Condor opted for a qualitative technique in order to understand women’s sex role beliefs “in their own terms” (p. 103). Rather than being investigative and exploratory quantitative methods serve to maintain the status quo by leaving no room for the unexpected.

The narrow focus which characterises quantitative methods has also been criticised for removing women’s experience from the social context in which it is meaningful. Experimental research, in particular, has been criticised for ‘context-stripping’ which Mary Parlee (1979: 131) describes as the process by which “concepts, environments; social interactions are all simplified by methods which lift them out of their contexts, stripping them of the very complexity that characterises them in
the real world". Experiments have the capacity to "strip natural settings of richness by controlling extraneous variables [...] or by restricting responses to pre-set categories" (Peplau and Conrad, 1989: 388). Moreover experiments involve artificial environments in which to study 'natural' behaviour (Sherif, 1979; Wallston and Grady, 1985). Quantitative methods, then, are accused of distorting, fracturing, or misrepresenting women's experiences by pigeon-holing them into man-made, pre-defined, categories. Although some feminists suggested abandoning experiments and quantitative methods in favour of more qualitative and descriptive measures (Graham and Rawlings, 1980; Mies, 1983), in psychology at least (but less so in sociology), quantitative methods have never seriously come under threat and continue, particularly in North America, to provide the bedrock for research on the 'psychology of women'.

By contrast, and as a direct consequence of this disillusionment with quantitative methods, excitement about qualitative methods has grown. Feminists have, over the last two decades, begun to explore the potential of qualitative methods for meeting their concerns about the distortion and fragmentation of women's experiences. Rather than seeking to test pre-defined hypotheses, qualitative methods are valued for allowing the generation of new ideas. The aim of this more open-ended approach is to understand the social world 'through the eyes' of the participant. Rather than imposing meanings and categories on to participants, it is hoped that participants will set their own agendas for research and focus on those things which they consider important. According to Fine (1985) one defining criterion of feminist research is that researchers should focus on topics of importance to women themselves. The flexibility of qualitative approaches makes this participant agenda-setting possible. Chris Griffin (1986), for example, noted how the importance of leisure in young women's lives, a topic which she had not originally anticipated, became apparent only after she had conducted unstructured interviews. Feminist researchers welcome qualitative methods which, unlike quantitative methods which abstract and compartmentalise, are said to allow researchers to "say something
meaningful" about women's lives (Scott, 1985: 69), and are seen as better able to capture the complex and contradictory nature of people's lives (Griffin, 1986).

Qualitative methods are said to ideally suit feminist research needs because they give voice to women's experiences. According to Du Bois (1983: 108, emphasis in original), "to address women's lives and experience in their own terms, to create theory in the actual experience and language of women" is central to a feminist research agenda. Qualitative methods seem ideally suited to meet such an agenda. Giving women the opportunity to talk about their experiences "in their own words" is "an antidote to centuries of ignoring women's ideas altogether or having men speak for women" (Reinharz, 1992: 19). Consequently, sociologist Ann Oakley describes qualitative interviewing as a "strategy for documenting women's own accounts of their lives" and "a tool for making possible the articulation and recorded commentary of women on the very personal business of being female in a patriarchal society" (1981: 48-9). Many feminist psychologists emphasise the value of allowing women to 'speak for themselves' when justifying their choice of qualitative methods (e.g. Sen and Daniluk, 1995; Belenky et al., 1986). These factors (participant agenda setting and women speaking for themselves) led some to conclude in the early 1980s that the semi-structured interview was the feminist method (Bowles and Duelli Klein, 1983; Graham, 1983; Reinharz, 1983).

Other feminists have consistently denied that some methods are inherently more feminist than others (Peplau and Conrad, 1989), and have continued to reassert the value of quantitative methods (Jayaratne, 1983; Kelly, et al., 1992a; Unger, 1996). Indeed, feminists continue to explore and develop a range of new and alternative methods for social research, including: repertory grids (Wilkinson, 1986; Baker, 1989); Q-methodology (Senn, 1996; Kitzinger, 1986); memory work (Kippax et al., 1988; Crawford et al., 1992; Haug; 1992; Stephenson et al., 1996); the voice-centred relational method (Brown and Gilligan, 1992; Taylor et al., 1995; Taylor et al., 1996; Taylor, 1996); narrative analysis (Espin, 1996); and discourse analysis
Chapter Two: Focus Groups: A Feminist Method

(Marshall and Wetherell, 1989; Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 1995). Others continue to investigate the possibility of using more conventional experiments, test/scales and questionnaires in feminist ways (e.g. Hyde, 1981; Eagly and Wood, 1991; Shaw-Barnes and Eagly, 1996; Shields and Crowley, 1996). In general, however, feminist concern with method has moved away from attempting to distinguish a particular method as feminist, and towards exploring in more detail the ways in which research methods are implemented including, in particular, the exercise of power in the research relationship. It is this aspect of feminist methods to which I now turn my attention.

2.1.2 The Ethics and Politics of Research

Perhaps feminism's greatest contribution to the critique of traditional research methods has been to reveal and make visible operations of power between the researcher and the researched. Traditional positivist research, with its reliance on quantitative methods, emphasises the importance of emotional detachment and objectivity in relation to research participants. The relationship between the researcher and researched adopted in this approach is characterised as a "nonegalitarian hierarchy of power, with the all powerful, all knowing researcher instructing, observing, recording, and sometimes deceiving the subjects" (Peplau and Conrad, 1989: 386). In a wry tone, Corinne Squire describes the 'ideal psychologist' as "an active investigator, controlling the experimental environment, making specific interventions in it, and quantifying their effects" (1989: 44). The traditional model of research requires the researcher to enter the research situation with aims and questions to be answered, and, caring little for the feelings and questions of the participants, and to leave after having quickly and cleanly extracted the answers. Feminists have explored ways of reconceptualising the relationship between the researcher and the researched in ways which are less exploitative and which redress imbalances of power.
One approach has been to bring the researcher and her respondents closer together. In her classic and groundbreaking early paper on ‘Interviewing Women’ Anne Oakley (1981) condemned the advice of methodology textbooks to parry participants’ questions or requests with bald replies as antithetical to feminism and argued instead for an ethics of involvement. The strength of Oakley’s paper was to demonstrate both the ethical inappropriateness and the practical implausibility of this kind of rebuff when faced (as she was) with the anxious questions of distressed pregnant women. During her research on the transition to motherhood Oakley reports that she was asked over 800 questions, many of which were requests for information or advice such as ‘Is it right that the baby doesn’t come out of the same hole you pass water out of?’, ‘Who will deliver my baby?’ or ‘How do you cook an egg for a baby?’. Oakley argued that faced with apprehensive women who were often reticent about questioning medical staff (and frequently received unsatisfactory answers when they did) it is morally indefensible to do other than answer questions “as honestly and fully” as possible (p. 43). Oakley questioned whether it is appropriate to exploit research participants by regarding them solely as sources of data. She proposed an alternative model based on the idea of ‘no intimacy without reciprocity’ (p. 49). In other words, the researcher should answer respondents, questions, share knowledge and experience, give support and otherwise invest herself in relationships with her respondents such that a “transition to friendship” may be possible (p. 44). Indeed, as strong support of the possibility of genuine reciprocity between participants and the researcher Oakley remarked upon remaining friends with some of the women she interviewed for some time after the study had ended. However, the rather rosy picture of feminist qualitative research painted by Oakley was challenged in well cited papers by Janet Finch (1984) and later by Judith Stacey (1988). Finch argued that friendship between the researcher and research participants may have a greater potential for exploitation. The fact that women find it “great to have someone to talk to” should not necessarily be taken as a sign of camaraderie or as a justification for asking probing questions about women’s lives. According to Finch, developing friendship and intimacy with women
participants may represent a more effective way for researchers to further exploit women as research resources. Reflecting on her own unease at the willingness of women to share intimate details of their lives, Finch says:

I have emerged from interviews with the feeling that my interviewees need to know how to protect themselves from people like me (Finch, 1984: 80).

Some have suggested that it is the most vulnerable women, deprived of other social contact, who may be the most willing to speak to researchers (e.g. Ribbens, 1989; Cotterill, 1992). The blurring of the boundaries between researcher and friend suggested by a ‘transition to friendship’ may serve only to obscure, rather than to alleviate, the relationship of power and powerlessness between the researcher and her respondents.

Others have questioned whether it is really possible to generate ‘genuine’ relationships with research participants by ‘investing ourselves’ in the research. Jane Ribbens (1989), for example, points out that many of the questions Oakley’s respondents asked were requests for information which did not require the disclosure of the kinds of personal or intimate details which would parallel the information which her participants were asked to reveal. When researchers are asked ‘difficult’ questions they are not always happy to honestly and openly share their views. For example, although happy to share details about her own experiences, Pamela Cotterill (1992: 603) reports feeling “uncomfortable” and “especially vulnerable” when asked to make judgements about participants (in this case about their status as in-laws) based on their responses during the interview. In addition, some researchers have pointed out that their attempts to develop more intimate relationships with participants and to include themselves in the research have not always been welcomed by participants (Ribbens, 1989).
Another way in which feminists have attempted to minimise the social distance between the researcher and the researched by including researchers in the research process has been to encourage what has become known as insider research. Although feminists recognise that researchers always have the potential to exploit participants, according to Patai (1991: 137), “this danger is increased when the researcher is interviewing ‘down’, that is, among groups less powerful (economically, politically, socially) than the researcher herself” (Patai, 1991: 137). Initially, this was seen as a problem only when men were interviewing women. Reinharz claims that “[f]or a woman to be understood in a social research project, it may be necessary for her to be interviewed by a woman” (1992: 23). Early feminist articles claimed that when a woman interviews women she is, by definition, ‘inside’ the culture she investigates (Oakley, 1981). Feminists challenge the idea that researchers can best represent the experiences of others when objectively reporting on events in which s/he has no special interest, no particular axe to grind, and no personal stake in the research outcome. By contrast feminists have emphasised the importance of being personally involved in research, and of using personal experience to direct or stimulate research questions (Stanley and Wise, 1983). Feminists routinely research topics of which they have personal experience including: adopted women’s experience of childbirth (Hampton, 1997); therapy (Kitzinger and Perkins, 1993); women’s experience of being clergy wives (Finch, 1984); mothering sons (Rowland and Thomas, 1996), heterosexuality (see contributions to a special feature in Feminism & Psychology, 1994), and class (Ferreira De Macêdo, 1996; Reay, 1996; Palmer, 1996). These researchers often reflect on the value of this insider position for encouraging women to speak about difficult issues, while being sympathetic and bringing a special kind of understanding to the research. As Anne Woollett, reflecting on research with infertile women conducted with Pfiefer, comments:

Our own position as infertile women was a common link with the women we interviewed: many welcomed the
opportunity to talk to other women who shared what we all considered to be a difficult position. As 'insiders', who had experienced some of the feelings and experiences our participants reported, we felt able to write about women's distress and anger at 'not being heard', and about the ways in which women's feelings were ignored or used against them [...] We also felt able to write about women's sense of isolation when the people they usually counted on for support could not deal with the strong feelings generated by infertility (Woollett, 1996: 68)

There was a tendency in early writing on feminist research to engage in a "celebration of shared experience" (cf. Bola, 1996) assuming that women were united in common experiences of oppression simply by being women. Those who are oppressed because of their 'race', class, sexual identity, disability or age have challenged this unitary notion of 'woman'. In a recently published thought provoking collection of writing on 'Representing the Other' (Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 1996) the feminist researchers reflect on the ethics and politics of conducting research with women who are unlike themselves. This includes examining the implications of white women representing black women (Edwards, Russell), of young women representing old women (Titley and Chasey), of older women representing young women (Harris), and of able-bodied women representing disabled women (Marks). And, lest we get too complacent about researching only those like ourselves, Tracey Hurd and Alice McIntyre warn against the 'seduction of sameness'. Clearly then, feminists continue to struggle with issues of power related to the idea of insider research and this is something I will return to when I reflect upon my own research in chapter seven.

In addition to attempting to reduce the distance between the researcher and the researched by bringing the researcher closer to the researched (i.e. by building
reciprocal relationships or by conducting insider research), feminist researchers have also considered the parallel strategy of bringing participants closer to the research. In other words, feminist researchers attempt to include the participants in all (or as many as possible) levels of the research; from the choice of topic to the interpretation and analysis of data. One of the most common techniques is to ‘give back’ transcripts or analyses to participants in order to receive further comments (e.g. Acker et al., 1983; Ribbens, 1989; Kissling, 1996). For example Liz Kelly (1988) asked women to talk about what it was like to participate in her study on sexual violence, and to give their reactions to transcripts of their conversations, a process which enabled a discussion of the themes, interpretations and analysis which she was developing. Another approach is for participants to become co-researchers and study themselves, for example Patti Lather describes a project sponsored by the Women's Economic Development Project where low-income women were trained to research their own economic circumstances, and a study which she herself conducted in which students interviewed each other about their experiences of an introductory Women's Studies course (Lather, 1988). Not all attempts to include participants in the research have been successful as Beverly Skeggs discovered:

I did try to make the research accountable to the young women by giving them chapters and articles to read. ‘Can't understand a bloody word it says’ was the most common response. They were especially upset by pseudonyms, wanting to see their names with their comments in print (Skeggs, 1994: 86).

According to Opie (1992: 62) the purpose of this practice is to “realign the balance of power in the research relationship by minimising appropriation through a deliberate attempt to avoid misrepresentation and stereotype”. However, researchers have encountered considerable difficulties when faced with respondents who
disagree with their interpretations, or disagree with each other about what the correct interpretation should be.

2.1.3 Interpretation and Analysis

Many researchers suggest that although feminists can make some attempt to conduct non-hierarchical relationships during the research, once the process of data collection is over, it is at the point of analysis and interpretation that the researcher is most powerful and the potential for exploitation is at its greatest:

... when the researcher leaves the field and begins to work on the final account, the responsibility for how the data is analysed and interpreted is entirely her own (Cotterill, 1992: 604).

Even with qualitative research the analysis is usually unilateral and the researcher is placed in the powerful position of translator or presenter of other women’s lives, searching for quotable quotes to aid the development of an argument (Scott, 1985: 80).

It is also true that the telling of a story can be empowering, validating the importance of the speaker’s life experience ... On the other hand, narrators typically are not true partners in the process. Whatever control they exercise during the interview, when they are able to negotiate the terrain, usually ends once the session is completed. This shift of control over the narrative reveals the potential for the appropriation hiding under the comforting rationale of empowerment (Gluck and Patai, 1991: 2).
The issue of interpretation is central to feminist theorising about methodology. The idea that mainstream research has distorted and misrepresented women’s experiences has been a central strand of feminist critiques of psychology. Feminists assert that women are experts on their own lives and that feminist researchers should validate women’s reality. Problems with validating women’s reality arise when women’s interpretations of their experiences and feminist interpretations of those same experiences are different. The women we research rarely identify as feminist, and while ‘they’ may disagree with the interpretations ‘we’ produce, ‘we’ may also profoundly disagree with the things that they say. As Katherine Borland (1991: 64) puts it:

For feminists, the issue of interpretative authority is particularly problematic, for our work often involves a contradiction. On the one hand we seek to empower the women we work with by revaluing their perspectives, their lives ... [o]n the other, we hold an explicitly political vision of the structural conditions that lead to particular behaviours, a vision that our field collaborators, many of whom do not consider themselves feminists, may not recognise as valid.

To summarise, then, feminists have challenged the prominence of quantitative methods, and explored the ways in which qualitative methods might be better suited to meet the needs of feminist researchers. Although initially it was assumed that some methods are more feminist than others there is now general agreement that “no method comes with a feminist guarantee” (Peplau and Conrad, 1989: 380). Feminists have explored ways of developing different models of conducting research; ones which do not exploit participants as sources of data but which promote egalitarian research relationships. These debates and developments are ongoing, and debates around methods are becoming ever more sophisticated, rather
than finding the answers feminists have generated more questions. In this thesis I hope to add to these questions by focusing on the feminist ethics and politics of analysing and interpreting qualitative data.

2.2 Introducing Focus Groups

Focus groups are not new. Their development in social science is usually attributed to Robert Merton and colleagues in the 1940's and 50's (Krueger, 1988; Morgan, 1988; Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990). Merton used the ‘focussed group-interview’ to examine audience responses to radio programs and wartime propaganda (Merton and Kendall, 1946, Merton et al., 1956). Despite their popularity within other fields including marketing, media, health and education, focus groups have, until recently, received little interest within the social sciences, leading one commentator to note that the method had “virtually disappeared from the social sciences” (Morgan, 1988: 11). Textbooks on research methods rarely mention focus groups, with only a few of the most recent books dealing with this method in any detail (e.g. Fontana and Frey, 1994; Breakwell et al, 1995). Over the last five years, focus group research is said to be making a ‘come-back’ and gaining in popularity among social scientists (Fontana and Frey, 1994; Millward, 1995; Morgan, 1997). Although focus groups, sometimes referred to as ‘group interviews’ or ‘group discussions’, may take many forms their defining feature is that a small group of people engage in a collective discussion of a topic pre-selected by the researcher. According to Stewart and Shamdasani (1990: 10), a focus group “generally involves 8 to 12 individuals who discuss a particular topic under the direction of a moderator who promotes interaction and assures that the discussion remains on the topic of interest”. Unlike interviews, where the researcher asks questions and elicits responses from each individual in turn, in focus groups participants collectively discuss and negotiate diverse responses to the question, sometimes ending in agreement, but more often not. The hallmark of focus groups is that group members interact not only with the researcher but also with
each other, and this “produce[s] data and insights that would be less accessible without the interaction found in a group” (Morgan, 1988: 12).

2.2.1 How are Focus Groups Used?

The focus group is predominantly a tool for the collection of qualitative data (although it is possible to produce some quantitative measures - see Krueger, 1988) and may take many forms, for many purposes, with disparate groups of people, using a variety of techniques to elicit discussion and to analyse the resultant data. Some of the methods used to provoke group discussion include: showing coloured slides depicting people with varying numbers and types of tattoos to explore young people’s awareness of the physical and mental health risks of tattooing (Houghton et al., 1995); asking school students to provide individual responses to questions about sources of stress which are then discussed by the group as a whole (Mates and Allison, 1992); and showing a ‘Western’ film to ‘American Indians’ and ‘Anglos’ to examine how they understand it (Shively, 1992). In focus group research the moderator or facilitator is not necessarily the researcher: often, particularly in marketing, a moderator can be bought in to conduct the research, and this may be particularly useful when conducting cross-cultural research or research where the participants and the researcher do not share a common language. For example, in order to investigate factors which deter non-English speaking women from attending cervical screening, Naish et al. recruited bilingual health advocates who were trained to conduct focus groups in a series of six workshops. These advocates not only ran the group discussions but were also involved in planning the project and analysing the data gathered. The advantages of training these advocates extends beyond the actual research with the authors reporting that the training will “enhance their ability to act as true advocates for their community” and that the advocates are “keen to extend this approach to other aspects of health promotion” (Naish et al., 1994: 1127). Similarly, in their study of health services for women in rural Yunnan in China, Wong et al. recruited seven local researchers from the Yunnan Academy
of Social Sciences (YASS) to act as group facilitators. The facilitators attended three training sessions on the methodology and practice of focus group research. The authors point out that the trainees were actively encouraged to "use their first-hand experience to revise the focus group questions to enhance their appropriateness for the targeted village women" (Wong et al., 1995: 1150).

Focus groups can be used for a range of different purposes including: investigating service provision (e.g. Cooper et al., 1993; Murray et al., 1994; Seals et al., 1995), educational or media messages (e.g. Liebes and Katz, 1986; Kitzinger, J. 1990; Keck and Meuller, 1994), or specific products (e.g. Chambers and Jones, 1993; Davies and Lillis, 1993), with the aim of improving these services or products, conducting exploratory research in order to develop quantitative measures (e.g. Mates and Allison, 1992; Cooper et al., 1993; Babin, Darden and Griffin, 1994; Heneman et al., 1995; Houghton et al., 1995; Okonofua, 1995), and, to explore the range and diversity of experiences, attitudes or discourse in order to understand more about a particular topic (e.g. Norris et al., 1996). Often a particular project will incorporate more than one of these aims.

One of the advantages of focus group research is that it allows the researchers to generate a wide range and diversity of attitudes, opinions and beliefs and this is particularly valuable when researching a topic about which little is currently known. One such area is children's attitudes towards tattooing. Although much is known about the long and short term health risks of amateur tattooing and body marking practices, Houghton and colleagues point out that relatively little is known about the development of children's and adolescents' attitudes toward tattoos, or their awareness of the health and social consequences of tattoos. Consequently, these researchers conducted focus groups with 48 primary school and 32 high school students in order to "obtain as full an account as possible of young people's perspectives in their own terms, and to elicit any relevant views, concerns, or misunderstandings that may exist among particular age groups" (Houghton et al.,
1995: 973). Similarly, as very little is known about how college women perceive the threat of sexual aggression, Norris et al. (1996: 129) elected to use focus group research as a way of both “understanding these respondents’ experiences and for developing hypotheses that could be tested in the future”. Focus groups are a useful tool for exploring previously under investigated areas because they allow the researcher to canvass the opinions/experiences of a range of people at the same time, to discover the issues which are of importance to the target group, and to hear these issues discussed in a vocabulary with which groups members are comfortable.

### 2.2.2 Recording Focus Group Data

Advice on how to record focus group discussions is very varied, but most frequently focus groups are tape recorded (Taylor and Ward, 1991; Kisker, 1985; Lupton and Tulloch, 1996; Seals et al., 1995; Jarrett, 1994; Stanton et al., 1993), and sometimes are video-recorded (Dignan et al., 1990; Houghton et al., 1995; Rosenthal et al., 1996). Researchers often make transcriptions from their audio or video recordings, and this has been described as “one of the most challenging aspects of the focus group method” (Millward, 1995: 287). Working with tape-recorders and transcripts is seen as an important way of systematising qualitative data analysis, ensuring an objective and methodologically sound analysis which is less open to subjective bias and inaccuracies found in other methods. As Parakyla notes, this approach:

... eliminates at one stroke many of the problems that ethnographers have with the unspecified accuracy of field notes and with the limited public access to them [...] Tape recordings and transcripts based on them can provide for highly detailed and publicly accessible representations of social interaction. (Perakyla, 1997: 203).
In addition to the greater accuracy of transcripts (as opposed to field notes), a further crucial reason for transcribing focus group data is to ensure that the analytic process is open to verification by other researchers such that the data from which interpretations and conclusions are derived can be cross checked (Krueger, 1988).

Whether or not to transcribe focus groups data, and indeed, how to transcribe it, is a decision which is made in relation to the theoretical and analytical interests of the researcher. How researchers choose to transcribe their data depends on the analytical concerns they have - i.e. on the sorts of questions they want to answer. For some analytical questions it may not be necessary to transcribe at all, or to only transcribe the quotations one wishes to use. For example, Murray et al. (1994) used focus groups as part of their rapid appraisal research designed to assess a community’s own views on its needs in relation to general practice. Two focus groups were conducted to discuss and prioritise the problems identified in previous stages of the research (using interviews, observations, and written documents), and to explore possible interventions. With this aim in mind, meticulous transcription of the focus group discussions would appear to be an unnecessary use of time and resources. The aim was to generate a list of the changes requested by members of the community, the researchers were able to meet this aim by simply summarising the suggestions and did not need to transcribe the data (Murray et al., 1994). Similarly, where focus groups are used in order to generate hypotheses, or as a preliminary step in the development of other research tools, detailed transcription of the discussion is again an unnecessary step. This approach was taken by Michael Hyland and colleagues who conducted six focus groups to generate items for a questionnaire designed to measure quality of life in asthma sufferers. Many of the questionnaire items consisted of verbatim comments taken from the focus groups. The authors make no mention of the method of transcription or data analysis used to make sense of the group discussion, but it is clear from their report that little in-depth analysis of the qualitative data was necessary (Hyland et al., 1991).
Chapter Two: Focus Groups: A Feminist Method

The vast majority of researchers who use focus groups as their main method of study (i.e. not as a prelude to something more quantitative) do transcribe their data, but most provide little or no detail about how the data was transcribed. Often the only reference to transcription in published articles is something along the lines of “Recordings of all groups were transcribed verbatim” (Norris et al., 1996: 130), “Each discussion group was audio-taped and transcribed” (Lupton and Tulloch, 1996: 256), or in the fuller versions: “Each of the discussions was recorded, a transcript made and this put into machine readable form” (Cooper et al., 1993), or “[focus groups] were audio-taped and later translated and transcribed” (Taylor and Ward, 1991: 125). Quotes from research participants are then used to illustrate the particular analytic focus of the researcher.

As anyone who has conducted qualitative research will know, interviews and group discussions typically produce ‘messy’ data. As Stewart and Shamdasani point out, focus group participants rarely speak in clear, grammatically correct sentences, rather they express “incomplete sentences, half-finished thoughts, pieces of words, odd phrases” and other seemingly inconvenient and incoherent features of ordinary talk. In order to increase the readability and clarity of the transcript some editing may be necessary, although they warn us that “it is important that the character of participants’ comments be maintained, even if at times they use poor grammar or appear to be confused” (Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990: 104). This is particularly true of researchers who are explicitly interested in discovering how participants talk. Conversely, Sandelowski argues that some editing of the talk may be necessary for capturing the true meaning of the talk, she says: “researchers may have to clean, or edit out certain features of, the more ‘complete’ punctuation which functions to join or separate and emphasise or de-emphasise words and phrases, [which] may capture those words accurately but still misrepresent talk, thereby contributing to errors in the analysis of data” (Sandelowski, 1994: 312). In some cases, argues Krueger, like when participants are using humour or irony, the speakers actual words do not convey the meaning, in such cases “some minor editing to correct grammar is
appropriate as long as the meaning is not changed” (Krueger, 1988: 118). Although editing the data may make it more easily readable and may facilitate the readers understanding of what went on in the groups, there may be some costs associated with this approach. As DeVault aptly notes, “some approaches to analysis depend on those aspects of talk that are routinely discarded by other analysts” (DeVault, 1990: 105). Her own analysis rests on the meaning of ‘you know’, like the example of one woman who, talking about shopping, says “My husband likes to just get in and out, and then that’s it. Whereas me, I like to look around, you know.” (DeVault, 1990: 103). According to DeVault, halting and inarticulate talk such as this, which appears to have little content, would typically be discarded from most analysis. She argues, however, that the phrase ‘you know’ often occurred in places which are “consequential in our joint production of our talk in the interview” and apparently signalled a “request for understanding” (DeVault, 1990: 103). The point is not whether DeVault’s analysis is right or wrong, but simply that a transcript which edited out this feature of the talk would have rendered DeVault’s analysis impossible. Nowhere is this more apparent than in those analytic approaches (such as conversation analysis, discourse analysis and linguistics), in which the research object is the nature of talk itself.

One of the most detailed systems of transcription conventions was developed by Gail Jefferson (1985b) (though much has been added since its origin) and is used mainly by conversation analysts (see for example, Schegloff, 1968; 1988a, Pomerantz, 1984c; 1986). Conversation analysts are interested in, and analyse, the organisation of talk, the ways in which conversationalists produce socially organised interaction, and as such their favoured transcription system is “particularly concerned with capturing sequential features of talk” (Heritage and Atkinson, 1984: 12). As such the Jeffersonian system includes, for example, conventions for recording ‘simultaneous utterances’ where two or more people begin speaking at the same time, ‘overlapping utterances’ where one person begins speaking after another speaker has started but before they have finished, and ‘continuous utterances’ where
there is no interval between one speaker finishing speaking and another beginning. All of these features attend to the sequential organisation of the talk. It is the particular analytic concerns of the researchers which have necessitated the development of such an elaborate system which is designed to capture those features of talk which are often overlooked by other researchers, indeed additions to this system are often not intended to improve the accuracy of transcripts, but instead to draw attention to features of the talk previously unattended to by analysts (Heritage and Atkinson, 1984). There are very few examples of researchers using this transcription system with focus group discussions (but see Myers, 1997; Edley and Wetherell, 1997 for exceptions). The following (shortened) extract in which the group is talking about environmental sustainability is taken from this paper:

F3 =the Downs are particularly bad actually . now you’ve said that it’s almost as if the owners think - ah - you know=

F1 =yeah=

F3 =long grass - leave it/

F1 /that’s right

F3 but it’s (2.0)

F1 um - but it -always happens - especially [out there] - and sea pollution (Myers, 1996: 17-18)

The conversation analytic mode of transcription is essential for Myers’ analysis. His comment on this extract is that “the preference for agreement is shown by the fact that it comes without delay, sometimes even interrupting, first in the turn.” (p. 18), according to his transcription notation, / represents the beginning of an overlap,
Chapter Two: Focus Groups: A Feminist Method

represents that there is no interval between turns, and (1,0) represents a timed pause. Of course for those unfamiliar with this transcription method, the extract can prove very difficult to read and make sense of. Commenting on Jeffersonian style transcripts Moerman says: "They are ugly to look at and clumsy to handle and refer to. Their splatterings of "[ ]" and "(.)" and ":::" would try anyone's patience and aesthetic sensibilities." (Moerman, 1988: 13). As Elinor Ochs notes: "One of the important features of a transcript is that it should not have too much information. A transcript that is too detailed is difficult to follow and access" (Ochs, 1979: 44). A further disadvantage of this more 'complete' transcript is that it is incredibly time consuming to produce. Potter and Wetherell (1987), for example, estimate that with the more conventional verbatim transcription one hour of tape will take ten hours to transcribe, while a full Jeffersonian transcript will take about twenty hours to transcribe one hour of tape. This means that the analyst should be absolutely sure that the type of analysis she wishes to conduct necessitates such detailed transcription.

Some focus group researchers also report their observations of non-verbal behaviour in the text of the report, Quine and Cameron (1995: 458) for example, observe that in focus groups with the disabled elderly there were "initial looks of surprise at the appearance of hip protectors, murmurs and nods of approval on the high quality of the specially designed undergarment material, [...] time spent handling the protector pads and undergarment, raising hands and shaking heads in disbelief at the high cost of producing the appliance ...". In addition, these same authors also include non-verbal behaviours in their transcripts:

Mrs D.: Would people think it made them look too wide on the hips? (after handling a protector pad further) .... There's not really that much difference is there? I don't care a bit, but maybe other people do.

(Quine and Cameron, 1995: 457).
A rather more detailed approach to the transcription of non-verbal behaviours is offered by Christian Heath (1997) who has developed elaborate transcription codes for gaze and other non-verbal behaviours. The following example is a transcript of a doctor/patient consultation;

Fragment 1, Transcript 3 and Figure 12.2

walks

\begin{verbatim}
up down up down up down up down
\end{verbatim}

\begin{verbatim}
\textbackslash V \textbackslash V \textbackslash V \textbackslash V \textbackslash V \textbackslash V \textbackslash V
\end{verbatim}

P: I was coming up the steps like this all the way up I felt,

\begin{verbatim}
\wedge \wedge \wedge \wedge
\end{verbatim}

Dr: writes turns to turns to nods &

\begin{verbatim}
prescription P's face P's legs smiles
\end{verbatim}

(Heath, 1997: 194)

Heath argues, as someone interested in conversation analysis and ethnomethodology, that a transcript which includes non-verbal behaviours will aid our understanding of how bodily activities feature in talk.

It is clear then, that “there is not, and cannot be, a ‘neutral’ transcription system.” (Psathas and Anderson, 1990: 75), and that each method of transcriptions has both advantages and disadvantages. It is testament to the wide variety of ways in which focus groups are used that researchers use so many different ways of recording their data.

2.2.3 Analysing Focus Group Data

Commentators frequently lament the lack of “nuts and bolts” (cf. Vaughn et al., 1996: 98) information on how to analyse focus group data (see also Bertrand, Brown
and Ward, 1992; Hedges, 1985). ‘Experts’ express concern that the “unanticipated volume” and “complexity” (cf. Krueger, 1988: 107) of focus group data may lead researchers to feel “overwhelmed” by transcripts and uncertain of how to proceed (Vauhgn, 1996: 98). This uncertainty is reflected in the brevity of discussions in research reports which, despite making frequent references to ‘analysis’, give little (e.g. Press, 1991) or no indication of how they have reached their analytic conclusions or the type of analysis conducted (e.g. Naish et al., 1994; Quine and Cameron, 1995; Nix et al., 1988; Wong et al., 1995; Dignan, et al., 1990). In this section I have deliberately sought out, and drawn attention to, those rare occasions on which researchers using focus groups comment (albeit briefly) on the ways in which they analyse data.

The ‘experts’ often allude to the diversity of ways in which focus group data can be analysed. According to Stewart and Shamdasani:

Virtually any analytic tool may be employed, ranging from simple descriptive analyses to more elaborate data reduction and multivariate associative techniques [...] although focus group data tend to be regarded as qualitative, proper content analysis of the data can make them amenable to the most sophisticated of analysis. (Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990: 113).

Morgan (1988) concurs with this view and suggests that the key to successful content analysis is the identification of items or units which can be systematically counted, (although he recognises the problems associated with deciding what counts as a unit), and can then form the basis for quantitative and statistical analysis. Morgan himself prefers to provide simple numerical counts rather than extensive statistical analyses and in this way his analysis is similar to that presented in chapter three.
According to Morgan (1988) there are two key approaches to the analysis of focus group data - ethnography and content analysis. Although the former is seldom discussed either in the research literature or in the ‘how to’ books, the latter is present in the literature (Morgan himself provides no information on how to do ethnography through focus groups). The ‘experts’ often recommend the application of techniques used to analyse interview data to the analysis of focus group data. Researchers involved in focus group research often report following Zemke and Kramlinger’s (1985) approach to data analysis which involves: “generating a list of key ideas, words, phrases, and verbatim quotes; using ideas to formulate categories; examining the contents of each category for sub-topics and selecting the most frequent and most useful illustrations for the various categories” (cf. Houghton et al., 1995: 975 and see also Kline et al., 1992; Stanton et al., 1993). According to Jenny Kitzinger, analysing focus groups is “basically the same as analysing any other qualitative self-report data”, the researcher “draws together and compares discussions of similar themes and examines how these relate to the variables within the sample population” (Kitzinger, 1995: 301). She notes that the only different aspect of analysing focus is the need to account for interaction between participants and group dynamics, she suggests that ‘special categories’ of analysis, such as jokes and anecdotes, would usefully capture this quality for analysis.

Following Vaughn et al. (1996) I discuss five steps for data analysis which draws together many of the suggestions offered by other ‘experts’. The first step involves identifying the big ideas which “emerge after involvement, rereading, and careful consideration of the data” (Vaughn et al., 1996: 105). Krueger describes the process of analysis as like “detective work” where the analyst searches for the re-occurrence of “trends and patterns” which are the “clues” to what is going on (Krueger, 1988: 109). These clues include: looking at remarks in context; noting consistencies and inconsistencies; listening to tone of voice, enthusiasm or degree of conviction; and noting body language.
The second step is to unitise the data which often involves using highlighter pens (or, for the technologically advanced, re-typing extracts into a computer) to mark extracts of the data which contain a particular piece of information or an idea. Describing the process of analysis of their focus groups with young women Norris and colleagues report that "research assistants read through the text and highlighted all key words and phrases for each response that accurately represented the original intent of the passage" (Norris et al., 1996: 130). Alan Hedges (1985: 88) describes his own approach to dealing with data in the following way: "I go through each transcript while listening to the tape, and type into the word processor both my own notes and comments about the material, and a series of possible verbatim quotations for possible use in the report".

The third step involves categorising the units where previously identified units are cut up into separate slips of paper and "sorted into relevant piles which will eventually represent categories or themes" (Vaughn et al., 1996: 107).

The fourth step is for analysts to compare their categories and re-negotiate category boundaries until agreement is reached. A great deal of emphasis is placed on the systematic and verifiable nature of qualitative data analysis (particularly at the point of data categorisation), no doubt intended to counter potential criticisms from 'hard-line' quantitative researchers who consider qualitative analyses to be soft and woolly. Kisker, for example, notes that the interpretation of focus group discussions is highly subjective and recommends that several people are involved in analysis. Despite this the only information she provides about the processes involved in her own analysis is "After each session was taped and transcribed, an analysis of the content was carried out" (Kisker, 1985: 83). This fourth step is important method for establishing the reliability and validity of qualitative research. Miles and Huberman recommend double coding as a technique in which disagreements sharpen the definition of the category/theme and is a good reliability check (Miles and
Chapter Two: Focus Groups: A Feminist Method

Huberman, 1984). The need for inter-rater reliability is also stressed by David Silverman who advises that a number of analysts should perform an analysis so that differences can be “discussed and ironed out” (Silverman, 1993: 148). Often then focus group researchers adopt this practice and refer to coding the data sometimes with the help of an assistant (Press, 1991), sometimes with separate independent coders (Norris et al., 1996) and sometimes with the aid of computer programmes such as ‘The Ethnograph’ (e.g. Cooper et al., 1993; Stanton et al., 1993). Rosenthal and colleagues discuss three stages to their coding procedure; transcripts were first reviewed by two authors for recurrent themes, next all three authors independently coded the transcripts for the identified themes and finally authors compared their categorisations and when there was a disagreement this was negotiated until all three authors reached a consensus (Rosenthal et al., 1996). Similarly, Seals and colleagues who analysed the data from the focus groups they conducted with women with HIV about their experiences of social services by independently coding each instance which related to a social service and then comparing the results until a consensus was reached about which data fit into which categories.

Finally, the fifth step involves identifying themes and the use of theory. At this stage the analyst reconsiders whether the initial big ideas are supported by the categories generated. Again, this process is often rather vague, even on the rare occasions, when it is reported one example is provided by Norris et al., who state simply that “[i]nterpretations were formed by weaving together various responses into themes” (Norris et al., 1996: 130).

A further area of concern for focus group analysts is how to report results and present analyses and it is in this respect that focus groups are perhaps most similar to other qualitative methods (Morgan, 1988). Most frequently, analysts use quotes from research participants to provide evidence for analytic claims, an approach shared by Norris et al., who use quotes to “illustrate common themes that emerged from discussions, and to reinforce findings from the questionnaire.” (Norris et al., 1996:
129). This requires a process of ‘thinning out’ vast amounts of qualitative data into concise, clear analytic statements. The aim is that these statements should not distort but rather accurately represent the larger data set. Researchers are, however, warned to guard against the corruptive influence of various factors including what Krueger describes a ‘tendency’ in ‘novice’ researchers selectively to identify data extracts which confirm, rather than contradict, prior expectations (cf. Krueger 1988: 111, see also Hedges’ discussion of ‘selective perception’ 1985). Group processes may also influence the analysis and can be mitigated by researchers trying to ‘tune out’ the effects of (for example) a dominator in the group (Vaughn et al., 1996). While researchers sometimes attend to this concern there is rarely any detailed information about how they have ensured such representativeness. Norris and colleagues writing on this very subject state only that “in order to ensure that quotes selected from focus group discussions were truly representative, careful analysis of focus group material was undertaken”! (Norris et al., 1996: 129).

2.3 Issues In The Mainstream Focus Group Literature

There are now several books which address the issue of how to conduct focus groups. ‘Focus Groups as Qualitative Research’ by David Morgan, and Richard Krueger’s ‘Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research’ (both published in 1988) are the two most frequently cited resources, although the slightly more recent text by David Stewart and Prem Shamdasani ‘Focus Groups: Theory and Practice’ published in 1990, is also very useful. These “how to” books cover such issues as how to recruit focus group participants, how to design the focus group question schedule, and how to conduct and organise focus group data. The key issues which I wish to highlight here are (a) power and control in focus groups - the role of the moderator, and, (b) the person in context.
2.3.1 Power and Control in Focus Groups

According to the "how to" books, (compared with the one to one interviewer) the focus group moderator has less control over the direction which the research may take, simply by virtue of the greater number of research participants. According to Frey and Fontana (1993: 26), "[t]he interviewer's influence on the interviewee, while not eliminated, would be diffused by the very fact of being in a group rather than in a one-to-one situation". As Krueger (1988: 46) points out, focus group participants "influence and interact with each other", and as such are "able to influence the course of the discussion". The advantage of this approach, according to David Morgan (1988: 18), is that "participants' interaction among themselves replaces their interaction with the interviewer", which in turn places a "greater emphasis on participants' points of view" and consequently "focus groups offer a stronger mechanism for placing the control over this interaction in the hands of participants rather than the researcher". Participants are encouraged to challenge and ask questions both of each other and of the moderator. These 'how to' books are not feminist and therefore while feminists search desperately for research methods which allow the researcher less control, this feature of the focus group method is viewed by mainstream researchers as a potential weakness of the method:

The corresponding weakness, as noted in the comparison to individual interviews, is that the researcher has less control over the data which is generated. The degree of control is not an all-or-nothing issue, but focus groups can never match the potential of individual interviews in this regard (Morgan, 1988: 21).

Focus groups participants can influence the direction of the discussion which, we are warned, may result in inefficient and distracting 'detours' where participants spend a
great deal of time passionately discussing issues which are of little or no interest to
the researcher. It is at this point that the researcher may wish to regain control, and
adopt a more directive style. Although theoretically the level of moderator control
can be highly variable (moderating style can vary from highly directive to relatively
non-intervening - particularly in the case of self-managed groups), in practice
moderators are advised to retain some “mild, unobtrusive control” over the group in
order to “carefully and subtly” guide the conversation back on target and so address
the research question (Krueger, 1988: 73). The ability to “cut off” unproductive
discussion (Morgan, 1988: 50), is apparently an essential attribute for running
efficient and effective focus groups.

In addition, in order to ensure the participation of all members of the group the
moderator may need to be aware of the dynamics of the group and develop special
techniques to deal with ‘problem participants’ (Merton et al., 1956, Krueger, 1988,
Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990). Krueger, for example, identifies four problem
participants; the ‘expert’ who considers themselves to have the best knowledge
about the topic in the group and may inhibit other members from expressing their
views, the dominant talker whose opinions pervade the discussion at the expense of
others, shy participants may say very little or may interject comments very quietly
making it very difficult for the moderator to draw out their contributions, and lastly,
the ‘rambler’ who may talk a lot but rarely seem to make their point clearly.

Moderators are encouraged, in these text book accounts, to use various strategies to
limit the effects of the participants by limiting/maintaining eye contact or using
other body language, by manipulating the seating arrangements, and by verbally
shifting attention from certain participants by asking for different points of view. For
example Stewart and Shamdasani advise the following for dealing with an ‘expert’:

The moderator can make it clear that he or she is interested
in all members of the group ... [i]f this fails, however, the
moderator may use more assertive techniques such as cutting
the individual off in mid-sentence, avoiding eye contact, and not recognising the individual when he or she wishes to speak ... acting uninterested and immediately changing the subject after the expert speaks may also be useful for maintaining control of the group (1990: 97).

The exercise of this kind of control of the moderator may be necessary to ensure that contributions are gained from all members of the group. The purpose of the group is to discuss a range of viewpoints rather than to discover the correct ‘answer’ or the ‘truth’. It is important then, that the moderator gives license to possible disagreements and differences of opinion, and produces an environment where every group member feels comfortable expressing their own views “regardless of how different or unusual” (Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990: 92). The overall role of the moderator is summarised by Stewart and Shamdasani:

The initial job of the interviewer is to create a nonthreatening and nonevaluative environment in which group members feel free to express themselves openly and without concern for whether others in the group agree with the opinions offered. Once this environment has been established it is the job of the moderator to keep the discussion on track and to assure active participation of all members of the group (1990: 87).

In sum then, focus groups are said to afford research participants a greater degree of control over the discussion (than, say, one-to-one interviews), and consequently the power of the moderator is limited. This has the advantage of ensuring the production of a dynamic group discussion but the ensuing costs of participants ‘going off track’ are also seen as cause for concern. Some level of moderator control is considered desirable in order to ensure that the research questions get answered and that all
participants have the chance to speak. Clearly, then, issues of power and control in focus groups are presented in the mainstream literature as intimately bound up with issues of quality assurance and the efficient collection of data rather than about ethics and a concern for safe-guarding participants' needs.

2.3.2 The Person in Context

One of the underlying themes in the mainstream literature on focus group research is a consideration of the costs and benefits of conducting social science research with individuals in a group context. In this section I review the concerns raised in the 'how to' focus group literature around the facilitation or inhibition of disclosure in a group setting, and demonstrate how these concerns reflect an essentialist approach to research methodology. I then show how a social constructionist approach to focus group research sets aside these concerns about individual disclosure and focuses instead on group interaction.

(i) Essentialist Approaches

Focus groups, as I have already mentioned, are valued because they allow the researcher to observe interaction between participants. (Morgan, 1988). However, for the most part, researchers who use focus groups are not interested in looking at group interactions; they rarely cite data extracts in which participants talk to each other, and on the few occasions when such as examples are given they are seldom discussed as interactions (Kitzinger, J. 1994; Wilkinson, in press b). Rather, most of the ‘how to’ books assume (and this is reflected in the research) that the aim of focus group research is to examine the beliefs, attitudes, values and opinions of individuals within the group. Interaction between participants is seen as valuable, not in its own right, but as a useful way of eliciting information about individuals. Focus group members are encouraged to disclose as much information as possible to ensure that the researcher has the most accurate picture of their views. According to the literature, by studying the individual in a group context, focus groups facilitate
this process of disclosure in three ways. First, the group context is said to provide a more natural setting in which to study individuals’ attitudes. As Krueger (1988: 44) puts it:

People are social creatures who interact with others. They are influenced by the comments of others and make decisions after listening to the advice and counsel of people around them. Focus groups place people in natural, real-life situations as opposed to the controlled experimental situations typical of quantitative studies.

The ‘how to’ books argue that because much of social life takes place in groups, and because attitudes are not formed in isolation but in relation to others, focus groups are an ideal format for studying attitudes. According to Albrecht et al. (1993: 54) focus groups are “social events” which involve the “interaction of participants and the interplay and modification of ideas”, as such they are, they argue “more ecologically valid than methods that assess individuals’ opinions in relatively asocial settings”. This may be particularly pertinent when studying pre-existing groups where the researcher may be privy to “fragments of interactions that approximate to naturally occurring data” (Kitzinger, J. 1995: 301).

Second, by allowing participants to discuss issues with others, focus groups may encourage “the disclosure of internalized opinions” (Albrecht et al., 1993: 57). According to Stewart and Shamdasani (1990: 16) the group context produces “synergistic effect” where participants “react to and build upon the responses of other group members” producing ideas that might not otherwise have been uncovered. Kline et al. (1992: 448) favour focus groups because they hope that the “informality of the group setting” might “encourage a degree of candidness and spontaneity among participants” that might not be accessible with more rigid format of a one-to-one interview. Participants may share common experiences, remind each
other of half forgotten memories, or spark off a different train of thought in a way that is very different from a simple question and answer session. The responsibility for answering a question is diffused among group members so that any one individual need only respond to that question which s/he has a strong opinion about (rather than simply providing and answer because one is required), and so individual responses can be “more spontaneous, less conventional, and should provide a more accurate picture of the person’s position on some issue” (Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990: 19). The group setting may also encourage the participation of shyer members of the group (Kitzinger, 1995). Mates and Allison, for example, report being “impressed” with the “openness” of their participants and conclude that “the process was successful in encouraging the more reticent members of the group to participate” (1992: 473).

Third, the group context also allows participants to talk ‘in their own words’ and using their own vocabularies to explain their views (Houghton et al., 1995; Cooper et al., 1993). Consider the following example from the work of Jenny Kitzinger where she asks gay male participants to assess how much people in different ‘risk groups’ are at risk from contracting HIV/AIDS:

JK: Fine, one last one, how at risk are [reads] “Female homosexuals, that is lesbians?”

E1: They’re all faggots aren’t they, everyone of them

E2: No, they are faggotesses!

E3: They’re quite a lot at risk
[All shouting at once]

JK: They are quite a lot at risk?
Several voices: Aye

JK: Why

E2: They're faggotesses

E3: Muff divers [oral sex]

E4: Licking pussycat

(Kitzinger, J. 1990: 328)

The researcher (JK) introduces the topic in one language using terms such as “female homosexual” or “lesbian” but this language is not used by the group participants who use language more familiar to themselves. Not only might participants feel more comfortable discussing issues in a way that is familiar (and so disclose more information), but it is hoped that by allowing participants to use their own words researchers may gain a more accurate picture of what participants ‘really’ think than if they are constrained by the researcher’s choice of words.

Although the group context can (as we have seen) exert a positive influence on research, researchers also warn us that interaction between participants can threaten to contaminate, inhibit or distort data collection. Results may be biased by a very dominant or opinionated member, participants may manipulate their responses in order to tell us how they wish to be seen as opposed to how they really are (Krueger, 1994: 10), or else the group might “censor any deviation from group standards” (Kitzinger, J. 1994: 110). If respondents are influenced by others and ‘change their minds’ during the course of a group discussion (as they often do), which view should be taken by the researcher as indicative of what they ‘really’ believe? How can we tell if what they say is what they ‘really’ think, or the way they wish to appear, or is the result of intimidation by another participant. As Crabtree et
al. (1993: 144) note it "may be difficult to distinguish the individuals' beliefs from those they expressed as a result of group pressures". Focus groups, then, produce 'messy' data filled with untidy and complex interactions where the laughing, joking, boasting, teasing, persuading and arguing so characteristic of focus group research creates difficulties when coming to analyse this data. It is for this reason that the "how to" literature contains a disproportionate amount of information about the 'right' composition of groups: this includes, for example, information about appropriate group size, about the demographic or personality characteristics of participants, concerns about group cohesiveness and homogeneity, and discussion about how best to arrange the seating to facilitate discussion.

According to the literature, then, group processes can facilitate better, quicker, cheaper disclosure, but must be moderated carefully as the potential for group dynamics to undermine and contaminate the research is great. Underlying these concerns is an essentialist model of research (i.e. participant-as-informant or participant-as-psychological subject, see section 1.2.3), in which the objective of research is to discover what people think, or feel, about a particular issue. Researchers are concerned about the accuracy of the data they collect and worry about possible biases which may affect the quality of the data. A 'good' method, then, is one which allows for the collection of better quality data which gives a more accurate reflection of what people 'really' think about a particular issue. From this approach focus groups have both advantages and disadvantages.

(ii) Social Constructionist Approaches
From a social constructionist approach, these concerns about studying individuals in a group context (outlined above) are based on the misguided assumption that meaning is somehow located within the individual, and that group processes may either facilitate or inhibit the individual from disclosing or making visible these meanings to the researcher. The underlying assumption, then, is that it is the individual which is the focus for analysis. An alternative, social constructionist
approach, is that it is the interaction between participants within the context of a group which gives meaning to what they say, and the content of the group discussion is best understood as produced within that context. Focus groups are seen as revealing social processes rather than individual psychologies. For example, Jenny Kitzinger discusses how group processes could been seen to ‘inhibit’ group members from revealing how much they know about the transmission of AIDS. Participants who disclosed detailed knowledge about HIV transmission were censored by other members of the group and questioned with suspicious cries of ‘How come you know so much about this then?’ If one is interested only in the analysis of the individual then this censoring is indeed problematic because it has the effect of preventing the researcher from accurately assessing how much that individual ‘really’ knows about the transmission of HIV. What this censorship does reveal, however, is the existence of group norms which stigmatise ‘knowing too much’ about AIDS. Rather than invalidating the data, this censoring may provide information about what is not possible to say, which may be as important as what is said in group discussions. The ways in which people interact, the agreements and disagreements, the ways in which participants respond to each other are, from this perspective, interesting in their own right.

According to the social constructionist approach, then, the meaning of what is said is understandable only in relation to the context in which it is said. Michael Billig’s interpretation of families talking about the Royal Family is intricately bound up with the dynamics of the family group. The following example involves a middle class mother and father and two sons; the older son is described as “left of centre and critical of royalty” while the other family members are “solidly Conservative and traditionally royalist”. The following extract of talk must be understood as taking place within a context in which talk of national pride implies superiority over other nations and thus prejudice, but also where critical talk about the royal family implies criticism of the nation and therefore implies that the speaker is unpatriotic.
Mother: ... did you watch the royal weddings, Rob?...

Older son: Yeah, I did, yeah

Mother: Were you proud? (2) [Did you feel

Older son: [I can’t remember my feelings at the time, but I remember [I remember watching it on TV but

Mother: [No but you felt that you wanted to watch it

Father: I think no, I think the (.) I don’t know whether pride comes into it, Kate, I think that you realise at the time, even watching it on telly, that all that pomp and pageantry, probably you couldn’t see, find, anywhere else in the world

Mother: for definite, for definite you couldn’t

Father: because people, this is what I was going to say a while ago, that come from all over the world just to see little brief snatches of it

(Billig, 1992: 38)

In this extract Billig argues that the notion of national pride introduced by the mother is replaced by the father with the idea that you ‘realise’ that the pageantry of royal weddings is unique. Instead of analysing this with a view to discovering whether these people ‘really’ think that royal weddings are a matter of pride or not, Billig looks at what function this change of emphasis serves. He argues that the emphasis changes from the emotion of pride in ourselves to the more rational ‘realising’ that ‘others’ see ‘us’ as unique, so that:
They see ‘us’ as unique; we ‘realise’ this. In so realising, ‘we’ lay claim to ‘our’ lack of prejudiced pride: ‘we’ are only seeing ‘ourselves’ as others see ‘us’ (Billig, 1992: 38).

What results is a powerful rhetorical argument produced in the context of the Royal Family, prejudice and nationalism. The meaning of this talk can only be understood in relation to the particular context within which it is produced. From a social constructionist approach, one which uses a model of participant-as-social-interactor, the group context allows the researcher to investigate the interaction between research participants and to analyse the meaning of this interaction in relation to the group context.

In sum, then, the value of researching the person in context depends on the particular epistemological position taken by the researcher in relation to the data collected through focus group research. The kinds of concerns which researchers have, the ways in which they analyse the data and the conclusions they draw, vary depending on whether they use a social constructionist, or an essentialist approach. From within an essentialist approach, studying individuals in a group context has the advantage of allowing a more naturalistic discussion in which participants are more likely to disclose what they ‘really’ think about a particular issue, while from a social constructionist approach focus groups allow researchers to study the construction of meaning through group interaction.

2.4 Focus Groups: A Feminist Method?

The recent resurgence of interest in focus group methodology has been particularly noticeable among feminist researchers, although it would be misleading to imply that the use of focus groups is common in feminist research. One indication of the continued marginality of focus group research is that in the first six volumes of the journal *Feminism & Psychology* (1991-1996) only eight of the studies published
used focus groups, and over a similar period *Psychology of Women Quarterly* published only three (Wilkinson, in press b). This feminist focus group research covers diverse topics with heterogeneous groups including: incest survivors talking about their abuse (Barringer, 1992), men talking about sex (Crawford, Kippax and Waldby, 1994), ‘immigrant women’ exploring their life narratives (Espin, 1995), groups of boys and groups of girls talking about sexual risk-taking (*Vera et al.*, 1996), and lesbians discussing safer sex practices (Lampon, 1995). In addition, other studies have utilised a group setting for their research (which although not explicitly defined as focus groups appear to have many similarities), including: the use of ‘girls’ groups’ to explore experiences of sexual harassment (Herbert, 1989); semi-structured, single-sex ‘discussion groups’ with young adolescents talking about ‘growing up’ (Lovering, 1995); interviews with a group of girls about race, gender and class (Macpherson and Fine, 1995); group discussions with young people about power and social relations (Raabe, 1993); group discussions with girls and women about homemaking (*Pastor et al.*, 1996); small groups of girls talking about ‘feeling good’ (Erkut, 1996); and group interviews with girls and their mothers about menstruation (Kissling, 1996). Despite this there are very few articles and NO “how to” books which address the issue of doing feminist research using focus groups (but see Wilkinson in press a, b for recent articles addressing this issue). Few of the studies mentioned above provide any theoretical justification for their choice to use focus groups rather than, say, interviews (e.g. Griffin, 1986; Frazer, 1988; Lovering, 1995), or discuss the method’s strengths and weaknesses.

In section 2.1. I outlined feminist debates about research methods and concerns about the best way to conduct research. In section 2.2 I reviewed the literature on focus groups, and in section 2.3 I detailed two particular aspects of the mainstream focus group literature. In this section I discuss the potential of focus groups as a feminist method, and consider the interrelation of feminist concerns about research methods and the two features of focus groups which I identified above - i.e. power and control, and the person in context.
2.4.1 Power and Control in Focus Groups: Feminist Perspectives

Feminists have been critical of the hierarchical and potentially exploitative relationship between the researcher and researched which characterises much of the mainstream research (see section 2.1). In particular, the power of the researchers to set the research agenda, to impart minimal information about themselves, to ask the questions and control the research, and to appropriate the words of others by imposing their own analytical framework onto the talk has been seen as cause for concern. Feminists have created an alternative (although constantly contested and developing) ethical framework within which to conduct research which emphasise the importance of reciprocal, non-hierarchical, non-exploitative, collaborative relationships between the researcher and her participants. To this end feminists are exploring different ways of reducing the power and influence of the researcher and of empowering research participants.

As illustrated earlier (see section 2.3.1), it is often assumed that compared to other methods, the power and influence of the researcher/moderator is reduced in focus group research. The balance of power in focus groups shifts, simply by virtue of the greater number of research participants. While in the non-feminist literature this apparent relative lack of control is seen as potentially problematic, it is generally welcomed by feminists conducting focus groups with other women (but see Green et al. 1993, for a discussion of how this may be problematic when conducting groups with men). The reduced control of the researcher, and the corresponding increase of participant control, is valued by feminists because it enables women (i) to set their own research agenda, and (ii) to give voice to women's experience. I noted earlier that these are key feminist concerns.
(i) Agenda Setting
Feminists have documented the ways in which group discussions facilitate the privileging of participants' own research agendas. For example, although initially Carrie Herbert wanted to examine the sexual harassment of girls by male teachers, by six months into the project she had not been able to collect any data on this topic. What she did collect was girls accounts of 'unpleasant experiences' they had encountered with men; thirteen of the seventeen girls reported being sexually assaulted and others reported instances of unwanted sexual attention. By allowing the girls to set their own agendas, by letting them discuss the issues which were important to them Herbert, although unable to collect any information on the sexual harassment of girls by their male teachers, was able to obtain a wealth of information about the sexual abuse of children (Herbert, 1993). Similarly, when Elizabeth Frazer started her research with groups of girls issues around 'class' were not part of her agenda, however she noted that “the public school girls frequently brought it into the discussion” and so in subsequent groups she explored the importance of class to these girls (Frazer, 1988: 344). Focus groups allow feminist researchers to be less directive in their approach to moderating, allowing the dynamic group interactions to steer the progress of the research to issues of importance to the women themselves. Schlesinger et al. (1992: 28-9) claim that focus group discussions allow women to “determine their own agendas as much as possible”. Focus groups “allow for the expression of thoughts and feelings while inviting participants to introduce their own themes and concerns” (Espin, 1995: 228). Focus groups, perhaps more so than interviews, allow participants to direct the discussion and introduce new themes, ensuring that women talk about those things which they consider to be most important.

(ii) Giving Voice
Focus groups are ideally suited to being used to “provide ‘voice’ to the research participant by giving her an opportunity to define what is relevant and important to understand her experience” (Norris et al., 1996: 129). Like other qualitative methods
focus groups allow women to describe their experiences in their own words using their own vocabularies. Focus groups "legitimize the voice of participants" (Ward and Taylor, 1992: 189). Some argue that participation in focus groups may provide a cathartic or clarificatory function for women who are angry or upset about their experiences. According to Jarrett "[t]he unsolicited candor of the individual group members indicates that such revelations, aside from their positive influence on group dynamics, satisfy personal needs" (Jarrett, 1993: 199). Similarly, Elizabeth Frazer notes "the need for opportunities to talk about their lives" experienced by the girls in her study and the "time spent in girls' groups" helped make the research process rewarding for her participants (Frazer, 1988: 354). The group context may be particularly beneficial when women are being asked to talk about issues which are emotionally charged. Women who participated in Schlesinger and colleagues study in which women viewed, and then discussed, violent incidents on television valued the supportive environment of a group setting which encouraged discussion (Schlesinger et al., 1992). Commenting on her focus groups with women about the intersection of national and sexual identities Oliva Espin praised focus group research for exploring "the vocabulary of sex in different languages", she noted that after group discussions conducted in English some participants said that they could have expressed themselves better if they had used their first language, but that they felt more comfortable discussing these issues in English (Espin, 1995: 232).

2.4.2 The Person In Context: Feminist Perspectives

Although there is very little feminist research which uses the focus group method, and although those few studies which do use this method rarely discuss its potential as a feminist method, the ways in which focus groups are discussed generally parallel the concerns of mainstream research. In this section I outline feminist concerns about disclosure and distortion resulting from a group context - concerns which reflect an essentialist framework. I then go on to explore the use, by
feminists, of focus group research to explore social constructionist concerns about the construction of meaning in context.

(i) Feminist Essentialist Approaches

Feminist researchers are interested in the particular methodological issues which arise from the dynamics of a group situation. Feminists share the same concerns about the possible distorting effects of a group setting as mainstream researchers. In their research using focus group discussions with black and Hispanic women exploring attitudes and behaviours surrounding sexual decision making, Anna Kline and colleagues report being concerned about the potential “tendency for participants to offer, or emphasise more socially desirable responses in a group situation” (1992: 455), and noted that their respondents attitudes towards condom use were more positive than the trends reported in most qualitative studies at that time. Participants are, argues Jarrett, responding to an audience and that this more public arena may influence their responses. She discusses how the African American women in her focus groups generated an ‘audience effect’ occurred where group members ‘performed’ for each other providing “exaggerated accounts of themselves” as strong women. Although this may initially be a disadvantage, Jarrett argues that ultimately “it facilitates rapport so vital for the disclosure of more personal information” (1993: 195).

Group discussions are valued for their ability to “produce a wider range of material than the more traditional one-to-one formal interview” (Lovering, 1995: 15). As noted earlier researchers are often advised that groups should have some degree of homogeneity in order to facilitate the development of rapport between participants. The key assumption is that these common concerns and experiences will make participants more willing to disclose information. Robin Jarrett offers the following extract from her research exploring contemporary patterns of family life to illustrate this process at work:
Trish: Everybody in my family got kids. [The] three oldest girls, all three of us got kids. ... [If] I want [something] from the store ... [and ask my mother to watch the kids, she says,] “Trish do not talk to nobody. [Laughter in the background] Go to that store. You come on back here. ... I do not have no kids in this house. My kids are grown.”

Shelly: My mother just like that, just like that! My kids, they potty trained. ... Sometimes they don’t be at home at all. I just bring them home and I say, “Mama, would you watch them ‘till I come home from the store?” [She says,] “What store you goin’ to?” [I say.] “I’m goin’ to the store. I’m comin’ right back.” [She says,] “Take [them] with you”.
(Jarrett, 1993: 193)

Jarrett argues that the common experiences shared by these women facilitated their disclosure of this information and in addition “sets the stage for deeper levels of disclosure” (p. 193). Again, it is the researcher’s emphasis on gaining accurate disclosure from participants which marks their approach as essentialist.

(ii) Feminist Social Constructionist Approaches
A social constructionist approach sets aside questions about the accuracy or otherwise of focus group data. Rather than assuming that talk in focus groups relates to pre-established attitudes or beliefs, a social constructionist approach looks at how meaning is produced in the context of a focus group discussion.

The question of how to interpret what people say is particularly salient in research with groups as this method is more likely to “elicit ambiguity and indeterminacy” in participants’ responses (Frazer, 1988: 351). In her research with groups of teenage girls talking about ‘class’ Elizabeth Frazer was faced with many instances of
contradictory and ambiguous discussions between the girls. Rather than assuming that these girls have a pre-existing image of class society which they present to the researcher (albeit in a confusing and patchy manner) through their talk, which can then be transformed (through careful interpretative work) into clear representation of their class system, Frazer examines “the ways in which responses are negotiated and answers arrived at in the research context” (1988: 351, emphasis added). The meaning of a response can only be interpreted in the context of all that is said, what is important, argues Frazer, is to examine the range of ways in which respondents can talk about the topic, what determines which approach is used, and which ways of talking are legitimated in the culture. Reflecting on their interviews with a group of girls, about issues of ‘difference’ and ‘sameness’, Pat Macpherson and Michelle Fine discuss the construction of racial identities within the group. After both Shermika, who describes herself as “Negro. Not black, not African-American” (p. 188), and Janet, who thinks of herself as Korean, discuss their own racial identity the conversation then turned to the issue of the invisibility of race in whites.

**Michelle:** Sophie, what do you consider yourself ethnically?

**Sophie:** Assorted flavors. I don’t know, a lot of different things. German, Welsh, Scotch-Irish. What else am I?

**Janet:** Sophie, do you feel ... do you identify with any of those groups? No?

**Michelle:** How do you attach to being white?

**Sophie:** I’m not white. Same thing with not being black. [Shermika had said she’s not black, but dark brown.] I don’t know what to call myself because I’m such a mix. I guess I’m European-American. Yeah, that! [Sarcastically] I don’t
have much of a cultural identity. It doesn’t extend beyond my parents or grandparents, really. It doesn’t go back to Europe ...

(Macpherson and Fine, 1995: 189)

Attentive to the context of the group discussion, Macpherson and Fine interpret this extract in the following way. Sophie is the only WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) in the group, in the debates about multiculturalism in which Sophie has participated. ‘Whites’ often get cast as racist. Where differences mean deficits to identify as White would mean the devaluation of others and possible accusations of racism. “Sophie’s refusal of what she sees as the white position has left her with no power to make meanings from her experience; no power to do difference” (Macpherson and Fine, 1995: 189). Rather than imposing categories of black or white onto Sophie, or trying to determine whether Sophie ‘really’ identifies as one or the other, Macpherson and Fine look at how these identities are constructed and negotiated in this particular context. Using the following data extract taken from Chris Griffin’s research on young women’s transition from school to jobs, I illustrate how essentialist and social constructionist concerns lead researchers to treat focus group data differently. The extract forms part of a discussion between four teenage girls about sex and marriage:

**Treena:** But if a bloke asks you for sex, what do you do?

**Brid:** I’d tell him to go off and have a wank!

**Stella:** You dirty thing!

**Kate:** It’s wrong, you ought to get married in a white dress.

**Stella:** But I don’t think it is - if you like the bloke why not?
Why wait until you’re married?

**Treena:** She’s talking - I bet she’s done it!

**Kate:** You ought to sleep with a bloke if you love him and he asked you to.

**Stella:** But you just said that you have to get married in white!

(Griffin, 1986: 182-3)

Griffin provides no analysis of this extract using it merely to provide an example of the complexity and contradictions inherent in the discussion. If we were analysing, as many feminists do, this data from an essentialist approach we might be both pleased and discouraged at the same time. That the girls question each other and react to each other and that, in particular, Stella questions Kate’s apparently contradictory statements could be seen as the group dynamics working to the advantage of the researcher to elaborate on and clarify their views. Alternatively the teasing of each other which the girls engage in could be seen as disruptive to the process of data collection. When both Brid and Stella express sexually permissive views about, for example, not waiting to be married before having sex, they are teased by other members of the group. For a researcher concerned to get at the ‘truth’ about what these girls ‘really’ think this teasing is problematic, it may inhibit these girls from expressing more sexually permissive views as this is something which has been censured by the group. From a social constructionist approach concerns about the truthfulness or otherwise of the girls’ statements are rejected, instead this extract could be analysed in terms of how the meaning of female sexuality is co-constructed within the group. For feminists concerned about the decontextualisation and individualisation of women’s voices this approach has some obvious advantages.
Bringing women together for a focus group discussion in order to discover common experiences may be welcomed by feminists not simply for pragmatic reasons, but also for political reasons. It may be that focus groups have the potential to function like consciousness raising groups. Maria Mies argues that ‘good’ feminist research which empowers women can only be achieved by shifting away from individual interviews and towards group discussions, she claims that the “collectivisation of women’s experience” may help women to “overcome their structural isolation in their families and to understand that their individual sufferings have social causes” (Mies, 1983: 128). Reflecting on her experience of conducting (with Pat Macpherson) group discussions with adolescent women, Michelle Fine describes the “collective consciousness work” they undertook, in which they moved from a “stridently individualist feminism” to a “collective sense of women’s solidarity among differences” (Fine, 1992: 173-4).

In sum then, focus groups have many advantages for feminist researchers. They enable the researcher to ‘give voice’ to women’s experience within a supporting environment, women are encouraged to talk about their experiences using their own vocabulary, and researchers can study the things that women say in a contextualised way. Despite these advantages focus groups are little used by feminist researchers, although they do appear to be becoming more popular in recent years. I return to a discussion of the relative benefits of the focus group method for feminist research when I reflect upon my own use of focus groups in chapter seven.
2.5 Focus Group Research On Young Women Saying ‘No’ To Sex: The Methodology Of This Research

In this section I outline in detail the particular application of focus group methodology used in this research, including details about the sample, the materials used, the particular ethical considerations, the materials used, the procedure followed, the transcription method adopted, and the analytical approach taken.

2.5.1 Sample

Focus group text books advise researchers to recruit participants who share certain background characteristics such as age, race, class, status or sex (Krueger, 1988; Morgan, 1988). Groups need to “maintain a reasonable amount of homogeneity ... in order to foster discussion” (Morgan, 1988: 46). Often the topic under investigation will determine the most important dimension of homogeneity, Cooper et al., for example, decided to match group members in terms of age and sex to allow for “uninhibited discussion” on the sensitive topic of family planning (Cooper et al., 1993: 328). This advice is based on the assumption that differences in participants’ backgrounds or lifestyles may inhibit the flow of the discussion or that the discussion will deteriorate because of “a refusal to share experiences and opinions” or due to “uncontrollable conflict” (Morgan, 1988: 47). The participants in the main sample for this study all identified as heterosexual, all were white, female, and were of a similar age.

(i) Pilot Group

The pilot group consisted of 31 university student volunteers (age range 18 - 50; modal age 20) most of whom were recruited from undergraduate social science classes at Loughborough University and through the university women’s group. All volunteers were white which perhaps reflects the demography of a predominately white institution. Students were asked to volunteer to take part in the author’s Ph.D. research on ‘Saying no to sex’. Six groups of from three to ten students were
conducted either in the author's own home or in a comfortable room in the university. All groups met only once with the exception of the initial group who expressed a wish to meet again and agreed to assist the author with piloting various different methods of initiating discussion including story completion (Horner, 1972; Kitzinger and Powell, 1995) and memory work (Kippax et al., 1988; Crawford et al., 1992; Haug; 1992; Stephenson et al., 1996). The aim of the pilot study was not only to 'test out' different methods of initiating the discussion groups, but also to pilot the focus group schedule, and to enable the author to become familiar with the method of focus group discussions. My decision to include only heterosexual volunteers in the main sample is one consequence of this piloting; the need for this arose because it later transpired after the pilot focus groups were completed that at least one of the pilot volunteers identified as a lesbian but had not felt able to 'come out' as such in the group. I was concerned that her experiences as a lesbian were being silenced in the group and therefore took the decision to make the groups heterosexual-only. Although these groups were initially set up as pilot groups, the data collected were so rich that I decided to include it in the main body of the thesis.

(ii) Main Group
The sample group for the main study was school students recruited from a Sixth Form Psychology conference held at Loughborough University. Female, heterosexual students over the age of sixteen were asked to volunteer in group discussions on the topic of 'Saying no to sex'. Students were assured that their level of sexual experience (i.e. whether they had engaged in sexual intercourse or not) did not preclude their participation in the study as the researcher was interested in their views rather than their experiences. The students were aged 16 - 18. This age group was sampled because it was thought that they would be at different stages of their sexual careers so that there were likely to be some who had engaged in various different forms of sexual activity (including intercourse) and some who had not. All of the volunteers were white; again this reflected the demographic characteristics of the conference attendees, although it may also be the case that women from other
'racial'/ethnic backgrounds may have chosen not to volunteer because the research was conducted by a white woman. Eight focus group discussions consisting of between two and five students were conducted in a comfortable university room. Although many of the "how to" books on conducting focus groups suggest group sizes of between six and eight, after conducting pilot groups with up to nine participants I felt that smaller groups were preferable. This is because when groups are larger it is more difficult to ensure that each participant is given equal opportunity to contribute, and because transcription of the tapes becomes more difficult when there are more participants.

The focus group text books recommend that participants should not be acquainted prior to the group discussion (Krueger, 1988; Morgan, 1988). Conducting focus groups with friends may cause special problems for the quality of the data collected. According to Krueger (1988: 28), acquaintances "present special difficulties for the focus group discussion" and familiarity may "inhibit disclosure". Similarly, Morgan advises that:

Although friends converse easily this is often the result of their ability to rely on the kind of taken for granted assumptions that are exactly that the researcher is trying to investigate. This problem is even more severe when the assumptions include invisible boundaries around the subjects that friends have agreed not to discuss among themselves (Morgan, 1988: 48).

It seems that although pre-existing groups may facilitate the development of rapport and a relaxed atmosphere may be more easily established, they may also inhibit disclosure or distort the information given. In addition, researchers are warned that pre-existing groups may create problems of analysis:
Chapter Two: Focus Groups: A Feminist Method

The concern about familiarity is really an issue of analysis. The analyst is unable to isolate what influenced the participants. Were the findings related to the issue being discussed or could the comments have been influenced by the past, present, or future interaction with other group members? (Krueger, 1988: 29)

Nonetheless, several studies have successfully utilised ‘naturally occurring’ or pre-existing groups including family members (Billig, 1992; Gervais, 1993), members of ‘Mothers’ Club’ groups (Coreil et al., 1994), and colleagues (Gervais, 1993; Zimmermann and Applegate, 1992). The AIDS Media Research Project studied the effects of media messages about AIDS using a number of pre-existing groups - including women whose children attended the same play group, civil engineers working on the same site, and members of a retirement club - in order to “explore how people might talk about AIDS within the various and overlapping groupings within which they actually operate” (Kitzinger, J. 1994: 105). All but one of the participants in the main study knew at least one other participant in the focus group discussion in which they participated, and most focus groups consisted of friendship groups who collectively volunteered to take part. This had the advantage of encouraging participation and making the invitation to take part in a psychological study less threatening. Objections raised in the mainstream texts were rejected because of their underlying assumption that the primary focus of research interest is the individual psychology of each participant. The concern of this project is not with the examination of individual opinions and attitudes which just happen to have been collected in a group setting, rather I am interested in exploring the collective negotiation of meanings within the group as a group. Concerns about the facilitation and inhibition of disclosure implies that the researcher wishes to ‘discover’ previously hidden, or at least only partially visible aspects of the individual’s psyche to get at the ‘truth’ about what they ‘really’ think. Similarly, concerns over the ‘accuracy’ of interpretations are also, from the approach taken in this project,
misguided. The variety of communication (the arguing, story-telling, joking, and teasing) is one of the most exciting and distinguishable features of focus group research, rather than being seen as obscuring analysis they can be taken as data available for analysis.

All focus groups lasted for between thirty and ninety minutes and were conducted, tape recorded and transcribed by the author. As noted earlier (section 2.2.2) focus groups can be transcribed in a wide variety of ways, and each method of transcription has both advantages and disadvantages. If my research question were "how do women say no to sex?", and if my data were examples of women actually saying 'no' to sex with men then a Jeffersonian style transcript would illuminate the ways in which saying 'no' is done. However, although this would have given a great deal of information about the way in which things are said, it would give very little about the content of what is said. Take, for example, Myers’ analysis of focus groups (presented on page 81), he has much to say about how disagreement gets done in focus groups but very little to say about environmental sustainability which is the topic the participants were talking about. My own analytic focus is on what gets said rather than how it gets said, I am interested in what young women say about saying 'no' rather than in how they actually say 'no'. Of course, in taking this approach I may be losing a great deal of detail about how the participants talked about saying 'no'. There may be some features of the discussion, some aspect of how things were said, which (for example) indicated their embarrassment about talking about a particular topic, something which would be very interesting to capture. Just like any other researcher I have to make decisions about the level of detail I want in my transcriptions and the amount of time and resources I want to allocate to this task. Given the size of my sample and the number of discussion groups I ran, I decided to adopt the transcription method used by most focus group researchers of transcribing all of the groups verbatim. I was unhappy about transcribing only those bits of data which were of immediate interest as I did not know in advance of transcription which aspects of the discussion would be
analytically important, and so I followed the advice of other researchers and planned to transcribe all of at least some data collection sessions, and in the end I transcribed all of the focus groups in this way.

2.5.2 Materials

(i) The Video
Participants were shown short extracts from a sex education video 'Make Love Last', which was designed for use in schools and youth groups. The video is produced by Christian, Action, Research and Education (CARE), and according to the accompanying ‘Teacher’s Pack’ is designed to “provide teachers with resource materials and ideas to present the case for abstinence from premature sexual relationships outside of a permanent and committed relationship. i.e.; marriage.” (p. 3). The video revolves around sketches involving two juxtaposed characters; ‘Uncle Roger’ who is portrayed as giving outdated and old-fashioned advice, and ‘Randy Factor’ who is loud, obnoxious and in the words of the video a “sex-sodden old git”. In addition to this the video also includes comments from sex educators, teen magazine agony aunts and from young people themselves (for a more comprehensive review of this video see Frith, 1996).

(ii) The Focus Group Schedule
The number of questions which the moderator aims to cover within a focus group study can vary considerably. One schedule, used by Kline, Kline and Oken (1992), consisted of 35-40 core questions about sexual decision making which were asked of all participants and an additional 10-15 questions which were specific to each of their target groups, for example, in the case of HIV infected groups they were asked about attitudes/behaviours in relation to the risk of transmission to partners and children. Kathleen Irwin and colleagues report using a pre-tested discussion guide consisting of 29 open-ended questions to investigate factory workers attitudes and beliefs about HIV infection (Irwin et al., 1991), while Mates and Allison had just
two questions to investigate sources of stress (Mates and Allison, 1992). Regardless of the number of questions asked, most of the studies emphasise that the guide should not be used as a rigid schedule to be followed unwaveringly, instead the guide should be suggestive of the topics to be covered “affording the moderator considerable latitude to improvise fruitful questions and pursue unanticipated lines of inquiry” (Millward, 1995: 284). The focus group discussion guide schedule used in this study consists of ten open-ended questions:

1. What is the main message of the video?
2. How effective or convincing do you think that message is?
3. What are good/bad reasons for waiting before you have sex? How long do you wait?
4. What do you think are good/bad reasons for having sex?
5. Why might people choose not to wait?
6. Would it be easy or difficult to wait?
7. If someone was pressuring you to have sex when you didn’t want to what reason/excuse would you give not to have sex with them? How would you convince them that you do not want to have sex?
8. How confident do you feel in being able to tell someone that you do not wish to have sex?
9. Do you think it makes a difference if you have been intimate with them before - kissing, touching, oral sex?

10. Is there anything else you wish to add? Anything you think we should have covered but haven't? Or, any other questions which you would like to ask me?

The relatively small number of questions contained in this guide is indicative of their purpose as reflecting the main topics to be covered in the group rather than being an exhaustive list of queries. The guide is flexible enough to allow me to phrase the questions in a language and manner which was comfortable for me and, I hope, the group participants. Following other researchers I did not attempt to ask the questions in a particular sequence (with the exception of the first two questions which always came first for reasons explained below), but rather allowed the flow of the discussion to dictate when a particular topic could be introduced (e.g. Cooper et al., 1993; Kline et al., 1992). I used a considerable number of probes in order to explore fully the responses to each topic area.

It is usual for focus group research to utilise discussion guides in which the questions get progressively 'harder'. Often the moderator will start the group with an 'ice-breaker', Norris et al., for example, report initiating their focus groups on how women perceive the threat of sexual aggression with the question 'What did you expect Greek life would be like before you joined?'. This initial question allowed the group members to "become more acquainted and more comfortable with each other" (Norris et al., 1996: 129). Often the first few questions of the discussion are more specific, less personal and less threatening (although this is not always the case), Andrea Press (1991) initiated her discussions about the impact of television on reasoning about abortion with a series of relatively innocuous questions about her participants' television viewing habits before encouraging them to talk about their own decisions (or those of their friends or relatives) about unwanted pregnancies.
The initial questions on the focus groups discussion guide used in this research relate directly to the extracts of the 'Make Love Last' video shown to each group. These questions ask the group participants to give their views and comment on the video, and were designed to be non-intrusive and non-threatening in order to galvanise the group into discussion. Questions three, four, five, and six were developed in order to explore how young women talk about decisions about whether or not to have sex, how they talk about how and why they make the decisions they do. These questions are worded in such a way that they mix generalised questions about what 'people in general' might do, and more personal, specific questions about what these young women themselves might do. This use of vocabulary was partly an attempt to acknowledge the differing sexual experience between the participants, and partly an attempt to explore how young women talk about what is expected of them, and what they expect of others, compared to what 'really' happens in sexual negotiations. The later questions deal more explicitly with issues around saying 'no' to unwanted sexual activity. Question seven investigates how young women talk about different strategies, other than saying 'no', to avoid unwanted sexual activity, while question eight examines how young women talk about the ease or difficulty of negotiating saying 'no' in sexual encounters. Question nine explicitly addresses issues of sexual experience and previous sexual intimacy in relation to saying 'no'. This question does not presuppose any specific knowledge on the part of young women but gives them the opportunity, if they have not already done so, to talk about sexual activities other than intercourse. Question ten performs two important functions. First, it allows me, as moderator, to bring the discussion to a close in a way which doesn't bring an abrupt stop to the discussion. Perhaps more importantly though, this question marks an explicit invitation for participants to introduce aspects of the topic which they feel are important but which may not have been covered already.
2.5.3 Procedure

(i) Introduction and Overview
Participants were asked to volunteer to take part in group discussions around issues of saying ‘no’ to sex which were part of the author’s Ph.D. research. They were informed that the groups would take about an hour to an hour and a half and that they would be tape recorded and transcribed. They were also reassured that the researcher was interested in what young women thought about saying ‘no’ to sex and so whether or not they had any experience in actual sexual encounters of saying ‘no’ was not a factor which prevented their participation. Group members were told that they would view a short extract from a film designed for use in sex education classes and that they would be asked to discuss a range of issues prompted by questions from the researcher. They were told that the researcher had a set of questions to ask but that she was unconcerned about whether or not all the questions were covered and was happy for the discussion to go in any direction which the group thought was important. At the end of each group participants were thanked for their time and asked if they thought that the researcher had missed anything which they felt should have been covered, whether they had anything else to add, and whether they wanted to ask any questions.

(ii) Establishing Ground Rules
Prior to the start of each group the moderator must establish some ground rules for the conduct of the group. This is important for a number of reasons. First, it allows the researcher to introduce and expand upon issues of ethical importance such as anonymity and confidentiality. Second, it allows the moderator to create an environment which is both non-threatening and non-evaluative in order that each member of the group feels that their views are respected (Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990). Third, it allows the researcher to explain how the group will be conducted and what the participants role in the research is and how they should respond to each other.
The ground rules are also an appropriate place to license different and differing opinions. Participants were assured that there are no right or wrong answers to the questions being asked, and that the researcher did not expect that they would all agree on all matters and would be actively seeking different viewpoints. However, at the same time group members were encouraged to respect the opinions of others and not to be thoughtless, insensitive or insulting. This latter point included being attentive to the views of others, allowing everyone the chance to speak and not all talking at once - not least because this makes it impossible to transcribe. Participants were told that the format of the session would be similar to an ordinary conversation, the moderator would not be asking them all questions in turn but that they would be encouraged to discuss questions with each other, and that they were welcome to ask questions of each other and of the moderator.

2.5.4 Ethics

This project was conducted in accordance with the British Psychological Society ethical guidelines. Participants were informed prior to the group sessions about exactly what would be expected of them, the length of time that their participation would entail, and I requested permission to audio-record the discussions. Participants were made aware of the sensitive nature of the research topic (i.e. sexual and personal relationships) and advised that this might cause them some embarrassment. Participants were given a rape crisis help-line number at the end of the session so that, in the event of the group discussions being upsetting or distressing for any of the women, they would feel that they had somewhere to turn to for help. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the research at any time, whether during the group discussion or at any time afterwards. Group members were reminded that they were not required to answer any questions (posed either by myself or by another member of the group), if they did not feel comfortable responding. Participants were reassured that their names, and any locations
mentioned during the discussions, would be altered on the transcripts to ensure their anonymity, and that I alone would transcribe the tapes or listen to them in their entirety. As none of the participants were under sixteen no arrangements were made for parental consent. They all signed a consent form acknowledging that they had been informed about all aspects of the research and that they had voluntarily agreed to participate (see Appendix One). All of the above considerations are typical of any research project, but I now go on to discuss three issues which are specific to this research project in a little more detail.

(i) Confidentiality

Issues of confidentiality are a little more complicated in focus group research than, for example, in one to one interviews. Participants disclose information not only to the researcher but also to other member of the group. One of the few commentators on ethics in focus groups states that researchers cannot ensure absolute confidentiality over the contents of the group discussion because they have no control over what participants may reveal to others after they leave the group (Smith, 1995). It is important, then, that participants are informed of this possibility before they take part. One of the few researchers to do this (or at least to say that they do it) is Norris and colleagues who asked participants to “honor an agreement of privacy and confidentiality by not discussing the contents of the group discussion or the participants” (Norris et al., 1996: 129). A similar approach was taken in this research. Participants were encouraged to think of the group discussions as somewhat different from ordinary conversations, and to feel a sense of responsibility to each other, which would include not repeating outside of the group anything which they had heard inside of the group. This was particularly important, they were reminded, because as they were friends it was likely that they would be seeing each other again in a different context.
(ii) Researching Sensitive Topics
Sensitive, embarrassing, or potentially taboo topics (such as sexual negotiations), may initially seem to be inappropriate for discussion in a group setting. However, many researchers have successfully used focus groups to study sensitive topics such as menstruation (Lovering, 1995; Kissling, 1996), sexual relationships (Roberts et al., 1995) and incest (Barringer, 1992). Some researchers suggest that the group dynamics may facilitate, rather than inhibit, the discussion of sensitive topics (Cooper et al., 1993), and Jenny Kitzinger, who has conducted many focus groups exploring attitudes to AIDS, concludes that:

Group work can actively facilitate the discussion of taboo topics because the less inhibited members of the group break the ice for shyer participants. Participants can also provide mutual support in expressing feelings that are common to their group but which they consider to deviate from mainstream culture (or the assumed culture of the researcher) (Kitzinger, 1995: 300).

In this particular project in which participants were being asked to talk about how they negotiate sexual encounters I felt that young women would find it less threatening to talk in a group setting with other young women of a similar age rather than in a one to one intensive interview situation with an interviewer who although also female was older and of higher status. This is a decision that was not based on a concern that a group setting would make for a more accurate or truthful account but that this setting would be less threatening for the young women involved (for a detailed discussion of the issues involved in researching sensitive topics see Renzetti and Lee, 1993).
(iii) Feminist Ethics

I have attempted throughout this study to attend to issues around ethics and politics of research to which feminists have drawn attention (see section 2.1.2). In moderating the focus group discussion I tried to be as non-directive as possible, allowing participants to set their own agendas and introduce issues which they see as important. I indicated, when establishing the ground rules, that participants were welcome to introduce their own ideas and topics, and that I wanted them to feel that their views had been adequately represented within the discussion, and that the discussion as a whole had captured the aspects of the topic which they considered to be important. I attempted to ensure that there was ‘no intimacy without reciprocity’ (cf. Oakley, 1981) by sharing aspects of my own experience of refusing sex where I felt it was appropriate. When establishing the ground rules, I also emphasised the fact that participants should not feel that I was the only one allowed to ask questions, rather they were encouraged to ask questions both of each other and of myself. In addition, question ten on the focus group schedule is an explicit invitation for participants to ask questions; either about the research process, about my own experiences of refusing sex, or (given their attendance at a conference about universities) my experience of university life. I attempted to answer their questions as fully and as honestly as possible.

Although, I am older and of higher status than the young women who participated in this study, to some extent this was an example of insider research. I am, like them white, and heterosexual, and possibly still young enough (I was 23 when I conducted the group discussions) for age not to make me too much of an outsider. These factors may have made it easier for the women in this study to talk about their experiences of refusing sex. I reflect on the notion of insider research in relation to this study in Chapter Seven.
Chapter Two: Focus Groups: A Feminist Method

2.6 Interpretation and Analysis

I began this research with the idea that I would interpret my data by using the same kind of broadly thematic analysis conducted by most focus group researchers (see section 2.1.3), which is also the kind of approach favoured by feminists conducting qualitative research. My previous experience with qualitative data analysis had been of this type, and I had found it fairly straightforward, particularly as I had approached the data with a clear theoretical framework within which the experiences of the women I interviewed neatly fitted (see Frith, 1993). At the onset of this research, then, I assumed that my data analysis would be fairly straightforward, and that the analysis was simply a means to an end - the end being telling a good, coherent, and compelling story about the experiences of young women saying 'no' to sex.

It turned out to be not quite so straightforward. In this section I will discuss the evolution of my data analytic procedures, and the impact this has upon my thesis. I began my empirical analysis by conducting and transcribing three pilot focus groups, reading through the transcripts, both quietly to myself and aloud with my supervisor, and (like other researchers engaged in focus group research) identified some extracts of the talk which were of interest to me and which seemed to ‘belong together’. I then conducted a further seven focus groups with 16-18 year olds and began the analysis proper. Like other researchers I identified themes, key ideas, patterns and trends. These included talk about reputation, about personal experience, about excuses and about men. I generated criteria by which membership of certain analytic categories could be established. For example, the category of “personal experience of saying ‘no’ to sex” had three criteria for inclusion: describing a specific event in the first person, describing sexual activities as desired or expected by their male counterparts, and describing the sexual activity as unwanted (see chapter three, section 3.1 for more detail). Following Morgan (1988) I provide simple numerical counts to exemplify the frequency of the various different categories, and use quotes
from research participants to illustrate the content of these categories. It is this kind of analysis which forms the basis of chapter three, and in this respect chapter three most closely resembles the sort of analysis that most researchers using focus groups present, and reflects my own initial approach to data analysis. Chapters four, five and six move progressively further away from this model and instead reflect my growing concern with the epistemological status of qualitative data.

It is at the point of categorising and coding data that qualitative researchers usually assert that themes 'emerged from the data'. I have deliberately chosen not to use this term because it obscures the work done on the part of the analyst. It suggests that data extracts have a life of their own - that they jump out from the transcript, forcing the passive, neutral and observant researcher to take notice. This obscures the researcher's own relationship to and investment in the data. My own theoretical background frames what I 'hear' in the data and what I find interesting. This became even more apparent when, while reading through the transcripts, it became obvious that my supervisor (Celia Kitzinger) and I 'hear' quite different things in the data. Perhaps due to differences both in our sexual identities (Celia is a lesbian while I am heterosexual), and our ages (Celia is 40 while I am 26) things which I considered to be common knowledge needed careful explanation to become meaningful to Celia, while Celia challenged and problematised things which I took for granted. Indeed, I am sure that there are aspects of the data to which both Celia and myself were unable to 'hear', things which we both took for granted or didn't notice. Our similarities, as well as our differences, influence our interpretations of the data (see, for example, Hurd and McIntyre, 1996 for a discussion of how white-on-white research can lead to assumptions and misrepresentations). The feminist literature is full of examples where researchers 'hear' different things and disagree about the 'proper' interpretation of data. For example, Kathy Davis' (1994) alternative analysis of Lyn Mikel Brown and Carol Gilligan's (1993) interpretation of a story relayed by a respondent called Neeti; Sue Widdicombe's re-working of an interview (initially analysed by Nicola Gavey) in which a woman talks about her experiences.
of unwanted sex (Widdicombe, 1995); and Stevi Jackson and Angela McRobbie’s different readings of girls’ magazines (Jackson, 1996; McRobbie, 1996). These examples clearly demonstrate is that it is not just that as feminists and women we ‘see’ things that men do not (as suggested by standpoint theorists), but also that as feminists, involved in various feminisms, interpretations are varied within feminist thinking. What is interesting about these differences in interpretation is not that they occur, nor that one is ‘right’ or more ‘accurate’, or better represents the world view of those that it claims to represent. Rather, what I am interested in is the extent to which the basis on which a researcher reaches one interpretation rather than another remains either unexplored or unarticulated. Analyses which rely on the ‘God trick’ (cf. Haraway, 1988) and claim objectivity, “typically neglect to discuss why one research question or interpretation prevailed over others” and as such they “render oblique the ways in which we, as researchers construct our analyses and narratives” (Fine, 1992: 211). From a feminist positivist position it is often assumed that one or other of the analyses is simply inaccurate or that there is some problem with the analytical tools being used. According to Davis, for example, the disagreement between her own reading of Neeti’s story and that of Brown and Gilligan arises because of the inadequacy of the ‘Listener’s Guide’ (Brown and Gilligan, 1992; 1993) which, she argues, directs analysts to listen to narratives in order to seek confirmation or voice (or the loss of voice) which “seems to prevent them from ‘hearing’ voices which are different or do not ‘fit’ their notion of what voice is all about” (Davis, 1994: 359). In this case, then, Davis is criticising Brown and Gilligan on a methodological basis - their measuring instrument (the Listener’s Guide) is simply not sensitive enough to pick up all the different stories that Neeti is narrating, or is skewed towards detecting some rather than others. The implication is that if only a more sophisticated tool were developed then information about what Neeti ‘really’ meant could be gathered.

It is not my intention to develop such a tool, or to suggest that others do so. Rather my interest lies in attempting to take seriously the idea that there is no ‘right’ (i.e.
Chapter Two: Focus Groups: A Feminist Method

objectively correct) way to analyse data, and to explicate some of the
decisions/choices which researchers make when producing their own interpretations.
What follows in the subsequent chapters (chapters four to six) is, then, not only an
engaging account of young women’s talk about sexual experiences, but also an
intensive investigation of the process of interpretation and analysis. I explore how
differences between researchers about the ‘right’ analysis of particular pieces of data
are underpinned by different epistemological and political choices. These chapters
(four through to six) investigate in detail three themes from the focus group
discussions: miscommunication, emotion work, and sexual scripts. Using these
themes as illustrative examples I examine the epistemological and political choices
which influence the analytic work and interpretative choices made by researchers.
This interrogation of qualitative data is organised around two polarised axes: (i)
transparent and constructed interpretations, and (ii) feminist and non-feminist
interpretations. I introduce these two axes briefly below. These axes are interwoven
throughout my analysis chapters, and I will return to both of them in the final
chapter (chapter seven).

2.6.1 Transparent and Constructed Readings

This analytical axis explores the relationship between theory and empirical data at
the epistemological level. As discussed in chapter one (section 1.2) epistemology is
the study of knowledge systems - who knows what, about whom, and how? In
chapter one I outlined the distinction between essentialism and social
constructionism. I argued that these two positions differed in relation to their
conceptualisation of the origin and location of social phenomenon, and in their
relationship to science, and finally in relation to their methodological approach. I
noted that it was this last aspect, the methodological approach, which is the primary
focus of this thesis. I described an essentialist approach to data analysis as involving
transparent readings of qualitative data, and a social constructionist approach to data
analysis as involving constructed readings of qualitative data. In this section I
explain exactly what I mean by transparent and constructed readings. By treating the data as transparent, analysts assume that participants' talk provides a (more or less) accurate description of the world or of their own experience. By contrast, a constructionist approach treats what people say as talk produced in a particular context (i.e. in discussion with a researcher and other participants), and as produced by participants who have certain investments in what they say: they are attending to expectations, potential accusations, managing identities, providing excuses and justifying actions. I will provide some examples to illustrate these differences.

By treating data as transparent researchers assume that in interviews and in focus groups individuals are reporting, more or less accurately, on real events in their lives or about what they think or feel. Here talk is treated as descriptive, and individuals are portrayed as describing events in their lives in a neutral and straightforward manner. This 'open souls' approach to research posits that if researchers want to know why people do what they do then they should simply ask (cf. Harré and Secord, 1972). There are two different approaches to treating the data as transparent. The first approach uses a model of participant-as-informant, where the participant is valued for providing information about her social world (e.g. the world of sexual negotiation amongst adolescents). One study which used this model conducted focus groups with women from different ethnic minority groups in order to discover the factors which deter them from cervical screening. Here, women's talk is taken as a more or less accurate reflection of their social world, the authors conclude (for example) that “[m]ost of the women had had their first smear taken at postnatal examination”, and that “[m]ost women gained their information through women friends or relatives” (Naish, Brown and Denton, 1994: 1127). Similarly, in another study, the social service concerns expressed in focus groups by women infected with HIV (e.g. about whether they are eligible for certain services and about the consequences of not having services) are assumed to reflect the reality of these women's lives in relation to such things as the attitudes of service providers, legislation, and organisational definitions of illness (Seals et al., 1995). In both of
these studies, research participants are seen as providing information about the world. According to Wendy Hollway (1989), it is this kind of ‘descriptive interviewing’ analysis which is most common among feminist researchers.

The second approach uses a model of participant-as-psychological-subject, where a participant’s understanding of their social world is seen as ‘filtered’ through their individual psychology. In this latter approach a participant may or may not provide information about her social world but it is a world which is ‘real to her’ whatever its ‘objective’ reality. A participant’s talk is seen to reveal more about her own understandings, beliefs, values, mental and psychological states, than about social reality. Jenny Kitzinger (1990), for example, argues that the discussions she conducted with diverse groups of men and women around the media coverage of AIDS were useful for revealing people’s understandings of media representations and for making explicit their assumptions about the ‘kinds of people’ described. However, a group of gay help-line workers who rated ‘People who have sex with many different partners of the opposite sex’ as at a higher risk than ‘Homosexuals - that is gay men’ is not taken as evidence that such people are at greater risk, rather - this is seen as revealing important information about how this gay help-line workers understand the notion of risk in relation to AIDS. This study then, uses the model of participant-as-psychological-subject: that is, participants’ talk is treated as transparent data which reveals their ‘understandings’ or their ‘assumptions’ about the social world as they understand it. This can then be contrasted with objective reality - i.e. what we ‘really’ know about HIV and AIDS risk.

These two approaches differ in their understanding of what exactly analysts access through participants’ talk (i.e. social reality or psychological states), but are similar because they attempt to access something behind, underneath or beyond the talk - i.e. treating talk as a transparent window to social reality or as a route to cognitions. Much data from focus group discussions (and other forms of qualitative data) are analysed in this way. Brown and Gilligan’s analysis of Neeti’s interviews also
Chapter Two: Focus Groups: A Feminist Method

provides (in common with much feminist work) a transparent reading of (in this case) interview data. The accounts that young women give of their lives during interviews is taken as evidence of both social reality - Neeti at age twelve displays "resistance to oppressive authority" (i.e. the camp guide) - and, psychological states such as a "loss of voice" or a "struggle for self-authorization" Brown and Gilligan, 1992: 39).

In my own research, then, treating the data as transparent, treating what these young women say as neutral descriptions of their lives outside of research, would allow me to answer certain analytical questions. If I were to use the model of participant-as-informant I would be interested in understanding the world of adolescent sexual negotiation and what young women said about this world in focus groups would be taken as a more or less accurate description of what 'really' happens in sexual negotiations. This model would allow me to ask analytical questions such as: What are sexual negotiations like between men and women?; What happens when women say (or try to say) 'no' to sex with men? I would, presumably, be able to answer such questions simply by asking participants how they negotiate sexual encounters, and about how they refuse sexual activities or avoid unwanted sex. But here I run in to problems. If I want to use the data to draw conclusions about the nature of actual sexual negotiations between men and women I would ideally have to have data in which men and women are conducting actual sexual negotiations. I would have to be privy to those conversations in which men 'persuade' women to have unwanted sex, or in which women refuse unwanted sex. Such data would, of course, be difficult - if not impossible - to collect. If I were to take what people say as a more or less accurate indication of what they actually do my data would still be considered deficient in a number of ways. It could be seen as deficient because I have 'only' conducted focus groups with young women and not young men - surely, then, this account of sexual negotiations would be skewed towards the perspective of women and perhaps misrepresent young men. Others might criticise my reliance on self-report data which is open to problems of recall, social desirability and/or
interviewer effects. Perhaps their disclosures are adversely influenced by the sorts of group effects mentioned earlier (see section 2.3.2 i); perhaps they are too embarrassed to admit to engaging in unwanted sex, perhaps they want to appear more (or less) sexually experienced than they are; maybe the views of one influenced the others; perhaps one person changed their mind at the end of the session. All of these problems cast doubt upon the validity of any conclusions which I subsequently draw.

Alternatively, still treating the data as transparent, I could use a model of participant-as-psychological-subject. Using this model I can still gain insight into the world of adolescent sexual negotiations, but this will be the world as my participants perceive it (which may or may not correspond to how the world ‘really’ is). This world view might also provide insights into young women’s psychological states. To give a crass example, young women may argue in focus groups that they are equal to men in sexual negotiations, which gives me an insight into how young women see the world. As a feminist this vision may not correspond to what I know is the ‘truth’ about sexual negotiations (i.e. that men have greater power in sexual negotiations than women), and this mismatch between my own and my participants understanding of the world may lead me to conclude that young women are falsely conscious.

Treating the data as constructed means problematising the link between talk and social reality, and between talk and psychological states. It assumes that there is no way of knowing whether the accounts given by participants to researchers correspond to what actually happens ‘out there’ in the real world, or to internal psychological processes. Rather than using a model of participant-as-informant, or participant-as-psychological-subject, this approach uses a model of participant-as-social-interactor. Rather than assuming that talk in interviews takes place within an “interactional vacuum” (as is the case in transparent analyses) the participant is seen as providing information about the particular, localised context in which the talk is
produced (Widdicombe, 1995: 110). This attention to the social context within
which talk is produced is a feature of the work of both Elizabeth Frazer on class, and
Pat Macpherson and Michelle Fine on ‘race’, which I discussed earlier (see section
2.4.2 ii). As Holland and Ramazanoglu (1994: 144) point out “An interview is a
specific account given to a particular interviewer at a particular moment”. The
providing of this account takes place then within a particular interactional context,
and as such it is “primarily produced to address the interactional business deemed
relevant to particular circumstances” (Widdicombe, 1995: 110). This approach then
looks at the social functions of talk in the context in which it is actually produced.
As noted earlier, this approach is taken by Billig (1992) in his analysis of talk about
the Royal family, where he looks at the function of talk rather than trying to assess
what people ‘really’ think (see section 2.3.2 ii). In contrast to transparent
approaches, participants’ talk is examined in its own right and “not as a secondary
route to things ‘beyond’ the text like attitudes, events or cognitive processes” (Potter
and Wetherell, 1987: 160). Rather than treating the talk of the young women
involved in this study as representations of what ‘really’ happens, or of internal
psychological states, this approach treats the talk as an ‘account’ of what happens.
This may seem like a minor step but it has far reaching consequences for the kinds
of conclusions that one can draw from data. Rather than being seen as descriptive,
talk is seen as constructive; people do not use language in a neutral way but rather
“... people use their language to do things: to order, request, persuade and accuse”

From this perspective then, I look at how the descriptions which young women give
about their lives are not neutral, disinterested descriptions but rather serve particular
functions in the local context in which the talk is being produced (i.e. in the focus
group). This approach considers the descriptions people produce to be a resource
which participants use in order to present themselves in a favourable light and to
counter potential negative assumptions about them. It is the social functions of talk
which Kathy Davis perhaps alludes to when she says “What I couldn’t help hearing,
in fact, was a Neeti who is engaged in justifying and explaining actions and feeling which she finds problematic". Neeti is not neutrally describing her actions, she has certain investments in the descriptions she provides and her talk must function to justify and explain, rather than to simply describe, her actions. Similarly, Ine Gremmen (1994: 364) claims that Brown and Gilligan's approach "makes it difficult to keep seeing conflicts, confusion and struggles as conflicts, confusion and struggles" rather than as evidence of deep rooted psychological difficulties. Rather than being seen as a means of obtaining information about 'reality' these accounts provide information about how individuals present themselves in a specific context. This approach, then, looks at how talk is put together, in what context, which what interactional implications.

To summarise, then, in chapter three I present a conventional analysis of my focus group data which parallels the kinds of analysis produced by most researchers (both feminist and non-feminist). I then move on, in Chapters Four, Five, and Six, to explore themes from the focus group discussions (miscommunication, emotion work and sexual scripts) using these two very different epistemological approaches to data analysis (transparent and constructed readings) and examine the kinds of analytical questions they address, and the kinds of conclusions which can be drawn from these two positions.

2.6.2 Feminist and Non-Feminist Readings

The second axis around which the analysis chapters revolve is a distinction between feminist and non-feminist interpretations of the data. When faced with a multitude of competing analyses, and with epistemological positions which problematise the notion of a 'right' way to analyse data, the interesting question becomes how the researcher can decide which interpretation (from the myriad of those available) to endorse? Committed to feminist research, the obvious answer for me is to endorse a feminist interpretation. Such a position is taken by Holland and Ramazanoglu who
observe that interview transcripts are indeed open to different interpretations, but note that this does not mean that all interpretations are equally valid. They highlight how their own feminist politics leads them to produce conclusions which "favour feminist policies which empower young women, over masculinist policies that affirm sexuality as an area to be controlled and policed" (Holland and Ramazanoglu, 1994: 133). Although initially I planned to follow in Holland and Ramazanoglu’s footsteps, as I began to produce some analyses of my data it became obvious that it is often not at all clear (especially given the wide variety of feminisms) what a feminist interpretation would look like, or just which interpretations qualify as ‘feminist’ and to whom.

The value of a feminist interpretation is perhaps most easily identifiable when it is contrasted with analyses and interpretations which are most noticeably anti-feminist - see, for example, feminist critiques and reinterpretations of Freud (Rush, 1977), Paula Caplan and Maureen Gans’ critique of ‘Self-Defeating Personality Disorder’ (Caplan and Gans, 1991), or Carol Gilligan’s critique of Kohlberg’s theory of moral development (Gilligan, 1982). It is more difficult, however, to identify the feminist interpretation among competing feminist analyses. Feminists disagree, for example, about the feminist interpretation of women who work as prostitutes; about women taking pleasure in viewing soap operas or reading romance novels; about the feminist interpretation of women’s cosmetic surgery; and about lesbian sadomasochism. Having discovered that qualitative data is often open to more than one interpretation, and given the difficulty (if not impossibility) of identifying the feminist interpretation, I am still left with the problem of trying to distinguish between, and evaluate, opposing and competing interpretations. Instead of asking questions about whether an analysis is ‘right’ or ‘wrong’, or whether it is ‘feminist’ or ‘anti-feminist’, I frame the question differently by asking what are the costs and benefits of analysing the data in this way, and for whom. This may include the costs/benefits of an analysis for feminism (i.e. does it advance feminist theory, does it make a clear statement, does it blame women for their own oppression) and the
costs and benefits of adopting particular ways of talking for the women themselves. At the beginning of this chapter (section 2.1.3) I identified some of the ways in which feminists have talked about issues around interpretation and analysis including issues around ‘validating women’s reality’ or providing political analyses, presenting women as victims or as active agents, and giving or appropriating voice. We can see how these aspects of feminist research practice become central in disagreements between feminists about interpretations and analyses. Giving voice to women’s experiences and taking these voices seriously is one aspect of Brown and Gilligan’s work that is highly praised by other researchers, even by those who ultimately disagree with their analysis. Ine Gremmen, for example, describes feeling “moved and inspired” by Brown and Gilligan’s attempts to take girls’ knowledge, experience and problems seriously (Gremmen, 1994: 362), and Kathy Davis reports being “[i]nspired by the project of taking women’s voices seriously and validating their approaches to morality and care” (Davis, 1994: 354). Critiques of their work are focused on other aspects of feminist research practice.

Ine Gremmen, for example, suggests that the distinction between ‘authentic’ and ‘fraudulent’ relationships drawn by Brown and Gilligan can only be made on moral and political grounds. Accused of elevating their own political agendas, Brown reiterates that the distinction between ‘genuine’ and ‘fraudulent’ relationships comes directly from the young women themselves: there are references to what girls “told us”, to what they “described” and what they “talked about” their lives (Brown, 1994: 387). This reaffirms the importance of listening to women and of women speaking for themselves both in feminism more generally and more specifically as a guiding principle for their own research. What this implies, of course, is that analysts should merely reflect the words, voices, experiences, of the women they research. Brown concludes that “There is no doubt we interpreted such distinctions and their implications for girls’ lives on feminist grounds but we did not ‘paternalistically’ impose the distinctions or these categories themselves” (Brown,
1994: 388). It is clear, then, that issues over the appropriation and control of data are central to feminist debates about ‘good’ analysis.

Another way in which the costs and benefits of different analyses could be addressed is by considering the implications of certain interpretations and the possibilities for direct activism and intervention they create. It is to this aspect of Brown and Gilligan’s work that Ine Gremmen again draws attention. According to Gremmen, the ‘solution’ to the ‘relational impasse’ faced by girls at adolescence offered by Brown and Gilligan’s work is that girls should “resist external constraints and keep trusting their ‘true’ feelings ‘inside’ and speak openly” (Gremmen, 1994: 363). The advantage of this solution is that girls are seen as active agents rather than passive dupes manipulated by patriarchal society, and that it opens up possibilities for change. At the same time girls who do not ‘speak openly’, those who do not remain ‘in connection’ could be implicated in their own oppression and blamed for passively accepting their fate. These may of course be concerns for young women themselves which they orient to in group discussions, but equally they may be a concern for feminist analysts who are also concerned about the image of young women which they present in their research.

This axis, then, looks at the implications and consequences of privileging one interpretation over another. These implications can include which behaviours come to be defined as problematic (in the case of rape, for example, is it men’s sexual aggression or women’s ‘loose’ behaviour which is at fault), who is held to be accountable, and the ‘solutions’ which are endorsed.

2.7 Summary and Conclusions

In this chapter, then, I have reviewed the literature on the use of focus groups as a methodological technique, including an exploration of the ways in which focus groups have been used in other research. I drew particular attention to issues of
power and control in focus groups, and to the competing tensions of essentialist and social constructionist understandings of the relative advantages of studying the person in context. In addition, I also explored feminist approaches to research methodology, including concerns about method, ethics/politics and analysis. There seemed to me to be clear parallels between issues raised in the focus group literature and the concerns expressed by feminists about research method. Consequently, I explored (in section 2.4) the ways in which focus groups might prove fruitful as a specifically feminist method. Moreover, I explained in full detail the ways in which focus groups were implemented in this particular study, including information about the research sample, the materials used, the procedure adopted, and the particular attention given to ethical issues. Finally, I explained how the particular analytical approach adopted in this research would revolve around two dimensions: transparent versus constructed readings of the data, and feminist versus non-feminist analyses.
Chapter Three

Young Women Saying 'No' to Sex: A Transparent Overview
In this chapter I present an overview of the group discussions which is based on the kind of transparent reading of qualitative data which I outlined in the previous chapter (see section 2.6.1). I provide a broad outline of some of the key features of the focus group discussions. These features were identified using a broad thematic approach to data analysis, which (as I discussed in chapter two) is characteristic of most focus group research. First, I look at women’s experience of unwanted sexual attention and sexual coercion, whether or not they said ‘no’ in these situations, and what happened after they said ‘no’. Second, I discuss the various different strategies which women say they use (or could use) in order to refuse sexual encounters: these include getting straight to the point, using excuses, and other strategies such as humour. Third, I explore the constraints on saying ‘no’ which women face. The constraints which I explore (although these are by no means the only constraints) are bound up with issues of identity. Women describe how refusing sex is constrained by sexual reputation, by the kind of person you are, and by the kind of man to whom the ‘no’ is said. Finally, I reflect upon the content of this chapter and its place within the thesis as a whole.

3.1 Women’s Experience of Refusing Unwanted Sex

In chapter one I introduced the idea of essentialist and social constructionist approaches to research. One of the values of essentialist research is that it allows researchers to make strong claims about the nature of social phenomenon. From an essentialist perspective, some of the most important questions to answer from this research might include: do women experience unwanted sexual attention, and do they say ‘no’? In this section I present an essentialist analysis which attempts to answer these kinds of questions.

In the 15 focus groups (with a total of 58 women) there are 35 ‘personal accounts’ in which participants describe themselves as being in sexual situations which they wanted to refuse. ‘Personal experiences’ were defined as those which were reported as personal experiences by young women, usually using the first
person, and describing a specific event as opposed to a hypothetical generalised event which could happen. These accounts are prefaced with statements such as "I’ve been in quite a dodgy situation ..." (Jane, 9\(^1\)), "...I was actually in that situation once..." (Cath, 7), or "in fact this happened to me just the other week..." (Jan, 8) which mark the following accounts as examples of ‘real-life’ personal experiences. The accounts also often give some indication that some form of sexual activity is desired or expected by their male counterpart, for example "...he tried it with me for a couple of months..." (Lara, 3), "... I felt very pressured to do it ..." (Susie, 13) or "...he started getting really pushy..." (Michelle, 1). There is also, in the accounts, some indication that this sexual attention is unwanted: sometimes this is simply implied by the use of words such as ‘pressured’ and ‘pushy’, sometimes it is made explicit as, for example, "...basically I wasn’t enjoying myself ..." (Cath, 7), "...I decided I didn’t want to do it..." (Kate, 1), "...I definitely knew that I didn’t want to have sex..." (Michelle, 1). These are all accounts then, of specific incidents in which the speaker reports that she was in a (potentially) sexual situation in which some form of sexual activity was experienced as unwanted. The accounts come from over 30% of the women who participated, with some women reporting more than one incident. In other words 18 of the women in this study had experienced some form of unwanted sexual attention which they wanted to refuse.

Despite being in situations where they did not want to engage in a particular sexual activity, these women (like women in other studies) report that they do not always say ‘no’. In twenty percent of the situations they describe, women explicitly state that they did not say ‘no’. In a further twenty percent of situations it is unclear from the woman’s description of the event whether or not she said ‘no’. This means women did report saying ‘no’ to unwanted sex in over half (55%) of the situations they described, and in a further two situations women said that they indicated ‘no’ without actually saying it.

\(^1\) All the names are pseudonyms and the numbers refer to the number of the focus group discussion from which this extract is taken. A full list of the focus groups and participants is provided in Appendix Two.
In twenty percent of incidents then, women report that they did not say ‘no’ to unwanted sexual activity. Kate, for example, describes one situation in which she did not say ‘no’:

... I went out with this bloke for three months and I finished with him because I didn’t fancy him at all, and the night we finished we had this massive row - and we’d both had a bit too much to drink which probably didn’t help - but all the time I’d been seeing him I said no, I didn’t want to sleep with him and the night I finished with him I felt so upset and so guilty that I’d hurt him that I ended up having sex with him (Kate, 1)

Although Kate reports that she had said ‘no’ on previous occasions without difficulty, she reports that this time she does not say ‘no’ because she feels guilty about hurting him. Earlier in her focus group Kate reports another incident in which she also does not say ‘no’, but for a very different reason:

... I invited the bloke that I really fancied at the time back, and basically we were naked and I decided that I didn’t want to do it. And he forced me and I just didn’t know what to do, I was so scared that he was going to hit me and get violent, and he had my hands pinned up and everything [...] at the time I was just like ‘oh god is it my fault? How do I say no?’ (Kate, 1)

Kate explicitly defines this as date rape. Other reasons for not saying ‘no’ include the following from Sarah:

I’m in that situation at this very moment in time. I just don’t find him sexually attractive at all but I really like him, and he’s like really trying to force me and I just put
my foot down and said you know ... and I haven’t told him no because I don’t want to lose him as a friend ...
(Sarah, 1)

A different reason again is given by Sharon:

She sat there on the sofa wondering when he would go home, she had met him earlier on in the evening, a friend of a friend, and he had walked her home. Now he just wouldn’t leave. She was really tired and quite drunk and just wanted to go to sleep [...] but he wasn’t shifting, eventually she knew he wasn’t going to go and she wouldn’t get any sleep at all. Finally she grabbed him, she grabbed his hand and dragged him upstairs, ‘why not’, she thought ‘at least I’ll get a decent night’s sleep afterwards’ (Sharon, 3)

In other words, women don’t say ‘no’ for a variety of reasons - out of fear, relationship reasons, or for more pragmatic reasons.

In a further twenty percent of incidents there is no clear indication of whether the women said ‘no’ or not. For Jane, circumstances ensured that she avoids having to say ‘no’:

I’ve been in quite a dodgy situation but his parents arrived back so he just gave up but it was quite .. I was like kind of saved (Jane, 9)

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2 This extract is taken from the pilot study in which various different approaches to data collection were explored (see section 2.5.1). The nature of this extract differs from the others, then, because Sharon is reading out (to the rest of the focus group) a memory elicited using ‘memory work’ (see Haug, 1992 or Kippax et al. 1988 for a description of how to do memory work). One ‘rule’ for recording a memory invoked in memory work is that the memory should be written in the third person. So, the ‘she’ to which Sharon is referring in this extract is taken by the groups to really be referring to herself.
Chapter Three: Young Women Saying ‘No’ to Sex

In some cases the circumstances were such that the woman was not given an opportunity to say ‘no’:

... I’ve been in a situation, really crude, which was I was drunk and I fell asleep in this guy’s bed, which is a really silly thing to do, and I woke up with his penis in my hand and he just put it there

(Lara, 7)

For Lara there was no opportunity to say ‘no’ as his penis was already in her hand when she woke up.

Encouragingly, in the majority of incidents (55%) women report that they did say ‘no’. In many of these accounts, the young women report feeling confident and able to say ‘no’ to unwanted sexual activities with their male partners:

... and then at that stage you can say ‘I’m not going to have sex with you so don’t start getting that idea’ because that’s what I said to my present boyfriend ‘I’m not having sex with you’, you know (Liz, 6)

I personally feel that I could say no and I have done lately and I wasn’t bothered [...] I have said no and they accepted that [...] I did consider myself to be in control (Jan, 8)

I have been - in certain situations - been fine, I haven’t at all been bothered about saying no (Cath, 7)

I was all right with my first proper - like the only boyfriend with a proper relationship that I’ve had - I was fine with him. I basically told him how it was and he
tried it for a couple of months and then he gave up (Lara, 7)

... I said no, I said no and I said no... (Linda, 1)

... and I was just no, look no way, I don’t know you at all (Sarah, 1)

In a further two incidents women report trying to convey their refusal in other ways:

... And one night he was trying to come on to me and that, and it was such an awful feeling because we were best friends and that, and I didn’t want to hurt him in the slightest way or anything like that and yet I definitely knew that I didn’t want to have sex. And it was just such an awful feeling, a really awful feeling ... yeah but obviously I just turned over and pretended to be asleep... (Michelle, 1)

... What I’ve usually done in the past when I’ve got into tricky situations is given them this whole rather exaggerated life history of how.. of how.. how I’ve had so many bad experiences with blokes and basically that they’ve put me off sex... (Lara, 7)

These two accounts were not included in the ‘not clear’ category because they report that they did communicate, or attempt to communicate, their refusal to have sex either by pretending to be asleep or by providing a convoluted reason for not wanting sex, but did not explicitly say ‘no’.
It would have been useful to categorise this material in terms of what happens after they have said ‘no’ (i.e. whether they managed to avoid unwanted sexual activity), and to document what happens when they don’t say ‘no’, unfortunately this was extremely difficult because often this was not made clear in the accounts given by the women. Consider for example the following account given by Sarah:

Sarah: well this bloke was really nice and I'd liked him for quite a long time and erm he didn't know what was on [...] and we were in a night-club and he asked if he could walk me home and [...] we walked past his house and er if I'd been more pissed and I think I would have been .. no he was quite forceful and I was just like going no look no way I don’t know you at all

Linda: were you actually in bed

Sarah: yeah

[Laughter]

(Sarah, 1)

In this account Sarah reports that she said ‘no’ but it is unclear what happened after this. The laughter is followed by another member of the group talking about how Sarah is giving ‘mixed signals’. However, in some of the accounts women did describe what happened next. Two of the women report having been raped or ‘virtually raped’, in Linda’s case this has happened more than once:

I can think of two times that you could say I was date raped. Because I said no and I said no and I said no, but I was forced. And I can remember being in the back of a van with about four guys, I don't know how .. I don't know how I got myself in to the situation. I went out with
them thinking it was going to be a sociable occasion with friends of my boyfriend, if you want to call it that. And I was resisting and they were laughing, and I must have been about 15/16, and they were laughing. And I was sort of... I suppose a virgin really, and then this guy was pushing himself on me, and then when I got back to the house, you know, he was kind of pushing himself on me, and I was kind of no no no.

(Linda, 1)

Linda clearly states that she said ‘no’ more than once but her refusal was overruled and ignored by the men who raped her. Kate describes how she was “pinned down” and was scared that the man might “get violent”. In both of these instances women explicitly define their experiences as rape and emphasise the physicality of the coercion they endured (i.e. they were ‘forced’). As noted earlier the presence of physical coercion makes it easier for women to define their experiences as abusive (Kelly, 1988). In many of the accounts women give of engaging in unwanted sex, they do not explicitly define what happened as rape. Kate, for example, describes how she ‘ended up’ having unwanted sex with one ‘bloke’ after a big row in which she ‘finished with him’ because she felt “so guilty and so upset that I’d hurt him” (Kate, 1). Sharon also reports an instance in which she ends up having sex with someone when she doesn’t really want to, after a double date with a friend. They go back to Sharon’s house while her parents are away:

... I ended up in one bedroom with him and she ended up in another bedroom with his friend and ermm we were in bed and he sort of like started making advances and I said no I don't think so, I don't think this is right, and he said: well what on earth did you invite me in for? Why did you ask me here you know if you didn't want anything like
that? Why did you ask me to stay the night? And actually
I felt pressurised into having sex then
(Sharon, 2)\(^3\)

Sharon reports that she did eventually have sex with this man. Rose, for example
describes being forced to do all sorts of stuff” (other than sexual intercourse) and
that she’d “say don’t do that and they’d do it anyway” (Rose, 8).

In addition to those accounts in which women describe being raped, and those
accounts in which women report having sex which they do not want, in many of
the accounts women describe encountering further coercion or pressure to
engage in unwanted sexual activity but it is unclear whether their coercer is
successful in ‘persuading’ them to have sex. These women describe occasions
where, despite having made their refusal clear, the man “would just not take no
for an answer” (Jan, 8). Lara and Helen describe the kinds of verbal coercion
which they have faced in response to their refusals:

they then kind of go ‘well, you know I’m different, I can
do things that you know that I can do’ (Lara, 7)

oh I’m really lucky I’ve just said oh no I’m not ready and
that’s been the end of the conversation they’ve tried a bit
of ‘oh but you always are, but when’s ready’ (Helen, 7)

It is this kind of verbal coercion which was identified as a substantial factor in
women’s victimization by Mary Koss. In her study forty-four percent of women
reported “giving in” to fondling, kissing or petting because they were
overwhelmed by a man’s continual arguments and pressure, and 25% to sexual
intercourse for the same reason. In another study of sexual coercion, Holland et

\(^3\) Despite saying no and despite feeling ‘pressured’ unusually Sharon reports that she was “actually
quite glad” that she had sex with this man. The only other example which bears some relation to
this response is given by Charlotte who reports that she regrets saying ‘no’ to a “nice guy” that she
“really fancied” but who she “didn’t want to sleep with”, and that she “kicked [her]self so bad and
[she] never saw him again” (Charlotte, 1).
al. (1992) distinguish between verbal pressure as persuasion in which men need not “take any decisive action” to exert pressure and for women to acquiesce, and verbal pressure as coercion. It is clear that the women in this study describe experiencing both forms of pressure. For these women saying ‘no’ is not enough to avoid unwanted sex, they (like the women in other studies) report that their refusals can be over-ridden, ignored, disregarded and dismissed.

Women’s refusals are not always ignored. Women report that their ‘no’s are sometimes accepted relatively unproblematically: “he just gave up” (Jane, 9); “then he just went” (Cath, 7); “and then he gave up basically” (Lara, 7); “I just turned round and said ’look I don’t want to do it’ and that was fine [...] that was acceptable” (Cath, 7); “I have said no and they just accepted that” (Jan, 8); and “he was sort of fairly reasonable about it” (Tina, 1). Even when a refusal is accepted as a refusal women may still face negative reactions from men; so even when men do accept women’s ‘no’s they do so ungracefully. Natalie describes how when she said ‘no’ to ‘Dave’ he “threw his diary on the floor”, she concludes that “the easiest thing to do would be to kiss him because then I wouldn’t have that to cope with all the aggression afterwards” (Natalie, 13). Similarly, Carla describes how a ‘friend’ who had “come on” to her was “really horrible” and “really took it badly” when she turned him down (Carla, 4). The difficulty of saying ‘no’ implicit here is in the way which women see themselves as fortunate when their ‘no’ is accepted: “I was kind of saved” says Jane (9) and Helen comments “Oh I’m really lucky I’ve just said ‘oh no I’m not ready and that’s been the end of the conversation” (7). The young women also report that these situations are intimidating, embarrassing and make them feel vulnerable. Helen, talking about a man who was “a lot older” than her, reports feeling “frightened”, “vulnerable” and “intimidat[ed]” (Helen, 7) and Natalie also reports feeling “vulnerable” (Natalie, 13). Jan describes one incident in which a man who “just wouldn’t get out of [her] car” and who “would just not take no for an answer” as “awful” and a “nightmare” (Jan, 8). Charlotte describes her experience of being harassed by a man in his room:
... and basically he persuaded me into his room. And once he was in his room he locked the door behind me, and I sobered up like that. And I was totally sober and I thought shit! I’ve got to get out of here because I knew that I was in a situation that was potentially awkward. [...] And... he started to take his top off and er... he started to er... take mine off basically, and all I could think was don’t make him angry, get some help, get out of the room (Charlotte, 1)

Charlotte, recognising a dangerous situation, is worried about making the man “angry” and counts herself “lucky” that she was with “loads of friends”. Embarrassment may also be a concern as Lara points out, you might be “worried that they’re going to judge you and it’s going to be embarrassing... “ (Lara, 7). By contrast Carla reports feeling “annoyed” and “cross” that someone she had thought was a friend would put her in the “embarrassing situation” where she had to say ‘no’ to them (Carla, 4). Some report feeling guilty about saying no:

.. I just felt so guilty because he was so upset that I just gave in (Kate, 1)

... we went so far and I said ‘no’ and I said, you know, this is our first date and everything. But I had this massive pang of guilt [...] and even though it did scare me a bit that he’d been so pushy I still felt very guilty, you know, the first few times saying no (Michelle, 1)

Others are concerned that saying ‘no’ might hurt their partner, as Michelle explains, “I didn’t want to hurt him in the slightest way [...] I didn’t want to reject him and ruin our friendship” (Michelle, 1). This talk of guilt suggests that women feel responsible for men’s arousal and responsible for meeting men’s sexual needs. This has been identified as a factor which constrains women’s
ability to refuse unwanted sex (see Bart, 1983; Cairns, 1993, Kelly, 1988, and section 1.3.2), and is a key theme which I pick up and explore in more detail in chapter five.

It is clear, then, from these personal accounts that on at least half of those occasions when women experience unwanted sexual attention they do say 'no', although the evidence is that saying 'no' is not always considered easy. In addition, despite having clearly said 'no' these women report that they are often subject to further pressure for unwanted sexual contact and sometimes raped. In this respect the women in this research are no different from the women who participate in other research of the kind which I reported in chapter one.

These personal accounts are unlike most of the talk in the focus groups which is more often of a generalised or hypothetical nature with young women speculating on what they might do in certain situations rather than what they have done. Talk is prefaced by the pronoun 'you' rather than 'I' - an ambiguous term which could refer to everyone or to the specific person being addressed - and men are referred to as 'they' meaning men in general rather than a specific man (the significance of this is discussed in more detail in chapter six on Sexual Scripts). In the following section I outline some of themes which I identify both from the personal experience accounts and from the more generalised hypothetical talk.

3.2 Strategies for Saying 'No'

These women were asked to talk about the ways in which they would refuse unwanted sexual attention - the kinds of things they would say and do to indicate that a certain form of behaviour is undesirable (see question seven of the focus group schedule reproduced in section 2.5.2ii). In this section, I outline the kinds of strategies they talked about. These include: getting straight to the point; using excuses; and, 'other' strategies.
3.2.1 Getting Straight to the Point

When asked how they would tell a male partner that they do not want to have sex, some young women reported that this was a fairly straightforward matter:

Jane: You just get straight to the point

Zoe: mm

Pam: just say I’m not ready, and if they don’t like that well then they can just - I don’t know

Zoe: I think we’re both quite outgoing people and we’re quite likely to just put our cards on the table and say sod off!

(Group 9)

Jane reiterates this point later when she notes that you just say “no I don’t want to”, similarly Jan reports that she just “tell[s] them to sod off”. Helen and Cath portray being able to get straight to the point as something to be valued:

Helen: but I’d like to think that I was cool enough
Cath: Man enough!
Helen: to say to someone I’ve just met .. to say bugger off basically

(Group 7)

Saying ‘no’ is sometimes seen as something that could (or should) be discussed with a partner:

Deb: Well you’d just explain it rationally and if it was like two adults together, which is what I think you’ve got
to be or you should be to have that sort of relationship is
even discussed, and then discuss it ...

(Group 10)

And, if this partner was a boyfriend (rather than a recent acquaintance) some sort
of explanation might also be required:

Jill: you would explain yourself more as well, if you
knew him, you’d want to sort of say “oh no I don’t want
to sleep with you because ..” and then explain it

(Group 10)

Another direct strategy which the young women report using (or expecting to
use) was that of non-verbal signals. Jill reports that she has “never actually said
‘no don’t do that’” instead she says ‘no’ by “showing them with my body
language” (10). Similarly, Jan argues that “normally you don’t have to say
anything it’s what you do [...] I mean just like physically force them [to stop],
they get the message” (8).

3.2.2 Excuses

As noted above (section 3.1), women report feeling guilty for saying ‘no’, and
they count themselves lucky if they can say ‘no’ effectively. Sometimes, they
say, they feel the need to explain why they have said ‘no’ - particularly to a
boyfriend. One way to avoid unwanted sex without making an explicit refusal,
might be to use an excuse. The women in this study were able to come up with a
number of different excuses (a total of 36) that they could use in order to avoid
sexual activity. These excuses fall into four main categories: (i) interruption, (ii)
postponement, (iii) menstruation, and (iv) illness. I discuss each of these excuses
in turn and explore young women’s discussion of the efficacy of each.
(i) **Interruption**

Over one fifth (n=8) of these excuses were designed to interrupt or ignore the request or to change the subject abruptly: “I’d just say that I needed the loo” (Jan, 8); “is that the time?” (Deb, 10), “my mum might walk in” (Jan, 8); “I think my mum’s got my dinner ready” (Karen, 10); or in a night-club “ah there’s a good song, wait a minute” (Zoe, 9). Other ‘interruptions’ included saying “oh it’s a bit cold” (Jane, 10); “Oh god I’m hungry, let’s see what’s in the freezer then” (Zoe, 9); and saying that “you’ve got to leave or something” (Deb, 10). Often these excuses imply a change a scenery perhaps away from the ‘threatening’ environment of a bedroom:

Jan: I actually if I was under loads of pressure I’d say that I need the loo and run to the loo and hope that by the time I’d come back that passion would fade away

(Group 8)

(ii) **Postponement**

Over one fifth of excuses (N=8) involved women reporting that they are ‘not ready’ for sex or ‘not ready yet’: “I’m not ready yet can we wait a while” (Sam, 5), “I’m not ready yet” (Pam, 9); “just say you’re not ready yet” or “you want to keep it for a special time” (Zoe, 9); one way is “not to say ‘no’ as in you never want to but ‘no’ as in not now” (Cath, 7); “I’ve just said oh no I’m not ready” (Helen, 7); or slightly differently “I don’t know you well enough” (Jane, 9); and finally, Karen reports that some people would “make out like they were just postponing it” (Karen, 10).

(iii) **Menstruation**

Five of the women reported that one possible excuse was to indicate that they were menstruating. Women said, for example, “I’m on my period” (Rachel, 11); “I’m on my period and things like that” (Cath, 7); “I got my period” (Rose, 8); “I
think most people would just say they've got their period" (Jill, 10); and "I think you've got your period works best" (Ros, 11). Although this number is relatively small this particular excuse created a lot of interest. My assessment is that the importance of this category of excuses is not reflected in the number of times it was mentioned. This observation highlights the difficulty of quantifying focus group data. Does the researcher count only those times when the word 'period' is mentioned, or the length of time for which menstruation is discussed, or count each separate instance when different members of the group talk in one condensed piece of discussion? Elizabeth Kissling, for example, comments that the conversational dynamics of group interviews means that often not all of the questions on the schedule are answered by all of the participants “making quantitative summaries of their answers or attitudes impossible” (Kissling, 1996: 485, and see Morgan, 1988 for further discussion of the problems of quantifying focus group data). I return to the category of menstruation after briefly outlining those excuses which rely on some form of illness.

(iv) Illness

Six of the women reported that some kind of illness such as a “headache” (Karen, 10 and Cath 7) might also be an excuse to use to avoid unwanted sexual activity. Cath reports that saying “I’m tired” (7) could be one excuse and Jane and Pam both indicate that “I’m knackered” might be used as an excuse (9), while for Wendy “I just feel really ill or something” is another (11).

Other excuses sometimes involved practical worries such as “you’ve got nowhere to do it” (Ros, 11) or that you “could get expelled” (Zoe, 9) or you are “scared of getting pregnant” (Rose, 8). One young woman (Ros, 11) reported that “I’ve got a boyfriend” might be an excuse, or that you could “bore them to sleep so then you could run off” (Helen, 7).

As noted above, one type of excuse which provoked much discussion was ‘I’m on my period’. There was a range of opinion about whether this was a ‘good’ or
a ‘bad’ excuse, and as to whether or not it ‘works’. Jill is very positive about the advantages of using ‘I’m on my period’ as an excuse not to have sex:

Jill: I think the main one [excuse] is you've got your period ... that's the easiest ... I think most people would just say they've got their period because that would stop the boy from blaming you ... and it stops them from undoing the trousers in the first place so you know

(Group 10)

Here Jill argues that menstruation is a good excuse for two reasons; first a male partner will not blame a woman for not wanting or being able to have sex (presumably because women have no control over menstruation) and second, because this excuse (unlike some others) will stop all sexual activity immediately and a male partner will not continue to ‘persuade’ a woman to have sex. Some researchers claim that people more often use excuses which emphasise their inability (rather than lack of desire) to comply with another’s wishes (Drew, 1984), because they have a “no blame” quality (Potter and Wetherell, 1987: 86). In the following extract, Ros, Wendy and Rachel agree that menstruation is a good excuse and expand on the reasons why this should be so:

Ros: because lads go ‘oh periods, oh no, best not talk about that’ it’s like that's like women’s -

Hannah: so there’s -

Rachel: they’re ignorant, aren’t they, a lot of the time

Wendy: they shy away from it, they’re very .. they don’t have a clue
Ros: they might get a bit suspicious if you say that every night of the month

Rachel: I think the idea of periods would put them off anyway because they automatically think 'oh blood'

Ros: yeah it sounds very messy

(Group 11)

Men's revulsion to menstrual blood may make 'being on your period' a good excuse to use. As Sophie Laws has effectively demonstrated, the link between menstruation and men's sexual access to women is an important aspect of the sexual politics of menstruation. She comments that:

The avoidance of heterosexual intercourse during periods is often viewed as a crucial part of the playing out of women's oppression. Many theories of the origin of menstrual 'taboos' imply that all men are repelled by the idea of sex with a menstruating woman. (Laws, 1990: 110)

While 'being on your period' may be an effective and useful interpersonal strategy for avoiding unwanted sex, it both works within and reinforces male definitions and understandings both of menstruation and of female sexuality. Not all of the women who talked about using menstruation as an excuse saw it as a good or effective excuse. Helen for example, argues that 'being on your period' "just gives you a few days respite" (7), while Rose comments that excuses such as this are "all really obviously lies" (8). Jan adds that she thinks it's "better to try and be nice and explain why [you don't want to have sex] because if you say
you've got your period then they'll just come back next week and say yeah yeah yeah” (8).

One of the dimensions upon which excuses are judged, then, is their ability to evade - consistently, continually and convincingly - male pressure for sex. This is a feature of discussions about menstruation (as noted above), and also of strategies to postpone sexual activity. Cath suggests that a “real coward’s way out” is not to say “‘no’ as in you never want to, but ‘no’ as in not now” (7). The idea that some excuses may simply ‘postpone’ sexual intercourse rather than being final refusal is seen as a weakness which undermines the value of some excuses. The problem which these young women identify is that postponing, rather than firmly declining, sexual intercourse may leave one open to further pressure from young men (usually characterised as verbal pressure). For example Lara and Helen respond to Cath’s suggestion to say “‘no’ as in not now” in the following way:

Lara: oh I think that [postponing] is just terrible because then you get in to the situation where they try to start convincing you

Helen: playing on a weak spot

Lara: yeah exactly and then and then if you're lying they'll always be able to argue it out and then you're in the position where you'll have to say 'oh well all right then'

This excuse, then, has a “weak spot” which can (and, it is assumed, will) be exploited by young men who will “try to start convincing you” or “argue it out” until worn down and with no further options women acquiesce to the pressure. A further example is given by Lara who describes one excuse which she has used in the past:
Chapter Three: Young Women Saying ‘No’ to Sex

Lara: What I've done what I've usually done in the past when I've got into tricky situations is given them this whole rather exaggerated life history of how I've had so many bad experiences with so many blokes and basically that they've just put me off sex

As Lara points out, this may not be the end of the conversation and this excuse too is open to further coercion:

Lara: they then kind of go 'well, you know I'm different, I can do things that you know that I can do' but so yeah I've tried that

(Group 7)

Similarly, excuses around feeling ill are not fail-proof:

Hannah: it’s like if you say ‘I don’t feel very well’

Ros: they say ‘I'll make you feel better’

In addition to the discussions about the efficacy of the various different excuses that could or had been used in order to avoid engaging in sexual activity, the young women also talked about whether excuses were a desirable and valuable part of sexual negotiations. Some participants resented the idea that excuses could or should be used in unwanted sexual encounters:

Lara: that's horrible why should you have to lie on an issue that is just perfectly right and you feel strongly about, why do you have to come up with excuses
Chapter Three: Young Women Saying 'No' to Sex

Cath: that's right

Lara: I mean I would much rather it would just be so nice just to be able to say no, for no particular reason 'I don't really know, I haven't felt the need to think about it, I just don't particularly fancy it'

(Group 7)

Here, Lara and Cath appear to be resisting the 'normality' of male sexual coercion as acceptable, asserting that women have the right to say no, and should be able to say no to sex without being held accountable for this and without having to present elaborated excuses (lies) to explain their behaviour. What they appear to be searching for is an autonomous sexuality in which you “shouldn’t [wouldn’t] actually have to have a reason” (Jane, 9).

3.3.3 Other Strategies

Sometimes (as we have seen) just saying 'no' is not enough and the young women report having to use additional strategies in order to ensure that they are not coerced into unwanted sex. In the following extract Jan and Rose discuss such a situation:

Rose: Now I think I’d just really tell them to stop and if they didn’t I’d run away

Jan: In fact this happened to me just the other week [...] he just wouldn’t get out of my car, and that was a nightmare, so I physically -

Hannah: - ejected him -
Jan: Physically. But no it was awful he would just not take no for an answer

Rose: I don’t think I’d try and hit someone because they’re likely to be stronger than me and you’re likely to provoke them even more, so I think I’d run

(Group, 8)

Here the answer to a male partner who ignores a woman’s ‘no’ is to run away and remove yourself or him from the situation. Another strategy is to say something which “makes a joke of it” (Jane) as these young women report when asked what reasons or excuses they would give for refusing sex:

Jane: I’m a man!?

Zoe: Yes, I’m beautiful

Jane: I'm knackered

Pam: I’m a lesbian. That is such .. I swear that one works. And loads of people use that at home especially in night-clubs and things. I’m not that way. It’s quite a classic [...] I’ve already had ten tonight I'm knackered thank you

(Group 9)

It is interesting to note the dimensions to which these jokes address themselves including gender identity (I’m a man), sexual identity (I’m a lesbian) and female desire/active sexuality (I’ve had ten tonight I’m knackered).

In sum then, women report using a wide variety of different strategies to avoid or refuse unwanted sexual attention. These range from the more direct tactics of just getting straight to the point to using humour to undermine the initial
request/invitation/implication. One of the most frequently discussed strategies was to use some kind of excuse, generally these excuses fell into four categories: (i) interruption, (ii) postponement, (iii) menstruation, and (iv) illness. These different excuses were carefully evaluated and discussed in terms of their ability to make sexual refusals as unproblematic as possible and to ensure no further coercion.

3.3 Constraints on Saying ‘No’

3.3.1 Sexual Reputations

As noted in chapter one (section 1.2) the sexual double standard ensures that men and women are evaluated differently when it comes to sexual relationships. In particular, women are judged more harshly than men for sexualized behaviours. One of the most thoroughly researched aspects of this double standard are the ways in which women are judged and categorised (usually as ‘slags’ or ‘drags’) in relation to their sexual behaviour. Many have documented the fine line that women have to tread between being seen as sexually attractive while remaining sexually unavailable (Lees, 1993; Wood, 1984). In this section I document the ways in which young women’s concerns about sexual reputation may constrain their ability to refuse unwanted sexual attention.

During the group discussions talk about the precariousness of sexual reputation and the threat of the label ‘slag’ is evident. Sometimes this is talk about other women who are labelled ‘slags’, stories which serve as a ‘cautionary tale’ of what might happen. The following extract from Sam illustrates this:-

but I remember a while back there were some signs going back down the road [...] about some girl who’d slept with some guy and they’d written .. they’d put all these signs on the lamp-post and that saying that she was such a slag and giving out her phone number and stuff because she’d slept with this guy...
In the data I collected, the label “slag” is generally used to mean young women who have intercourse with several different partners (see Lees 1993 for a discussion of other ways in which this label is used). As Michelle notes “there seems to be quite a big stigma attached to someone who’s slept around” (1). Girls who “sleep around” have got, according to Rose “such bad reputations” (8) and often become “branded” (Michelle, 1). However, the young women in this study were very much aware that their own reputations were also at risk from the label “slag”. As Liz comments, one ‘bad’ reason for having sex is that people call you a ‘slag’, a label which is then internalised and “you think well yeah I am, then you feel bad and all that stuff” (6). In particular, women report that one effect of the label ‘slag’ is that they are unlikely to take the initiative in sexual activity with men, or to openly express (hetero)sexual desire. According to Rose: “it makes you look like a real whore if you really want sex and they’re not interested”: she adds that she would “be really scared they’d tell everyone about it” (8). When asked to imagine initiating a sexual encounter with a young man and being told ‘no’, Cath exclaims that she “would just feel like a complete slut [...] like a complete slag” (7). Expressing sexual pleasure, and asking for specific sexual activities, was described as likely to attract the label “slag”. Arguing that it is difficult and “embarrassing” to negotiate sexual pleasure with a partner, Lara predicts that the male response to explicit sexual requests would be “what are you some kind of sexual animal?” (7). Pam implies that only a “slapper” would be so direct as to say “come back to my house” while anyone else would be “cautious” (Zoe), “subtle” and not that “direct” (Jane). Although the threat of being labelled a ‘slag’ may lead some women to refuse sexual invitations out of fear, it may also mean that they refuse sexual invitations which they desire as well as those which are unwanted. The threat of being labelled a “slag”, then, prohibits or constrains young women’s expression of sexual desire and as such is effective in perpetuating the “missing discourse” of female desire (Fine, 1988).
Previous researchers have developed extensive documentation of the existence and operation of labels such as ‘slag’ and the ways in which it constrains young women’s sexuality and sexual negotiations. Its counterpart, the ‘drag’ has been less well documented. However, it was clear from the focus group discussions that these women were equally concerned about the threat of being seen as sexually naive and they were anxious to avoid the stigma associated with being seen as a ‘drag’ or as ‘tight’4. Sam comments that “I thought virginity was something to be gotten rid of as soon as possible” in order to “get rid of the stigma” (5). If sexual experience and knowledge are seen as a form of currency between young people (Measor, 1989; Thomson and Scott, 1991), then those who are sexually naive are at a disadvantage. Although fear of being labelled a virgin was not considered a ‘good’ or ‘sensible’ reason for engaging in first sexual intercourse by these young women, it was nevertheless identified as a source of pressure. As Liz says “it’s when you’re younger that all your mates are going ‘oh have sex it’s great blah blah blah’, ‘I had sex with such and such last week and it was really good’ and ‘you’ve got to have sex’” that the pressure from peers is greatest. It is at this time, claims Liz, that young women think “‘oh I’m the odd one out, OK I will’, and then the next person you get off with you’ll have sex just so you can be like your mates” (6). Karen and Jill argue that pressure can come both from friends and from young women’s own feelings of worry:

Jill: [a bad reason to have sex is] if you’re worried because you’re still a virgin

Karen: or if you’re worried because the rest of your friends have had sex and you haven’t yet, you might think ‘oh no’

4 ‘Tight’ in this context has many connotations. Under the heading ‘If you’re too tight’ psychosexual therapist Ruth K Westheimer (1995) discusses vaginismus, but being ‘tight’ could also mean being ungenerous with sexual favours in the same way that being tight-fisted means being ungenerous with money.
Jill: and you want to keep friends with them

(ITEM 10)

Jan, agrees that “if you’re still a virgin there’s definite peer pressure” but also that pressure can come from within as well as from peers if, for example, “you’re just frightened of getting old and not losing your virginity” (8). The words used to describe their feelings (i.e. being ‘worried’ or ‘frightened’) indicate the level of anxiety which appearing sexually naive can evoke. The frequent references to peer pressure to gain sexual experience suggest that virginity is a source of stigma. It is clear, then, that young women identify the threat to reputation of being labelled a ‘drag’ as a source of pressure to engage in sexual activities. Consequently, the fear of being labelled ‘tight’ or a ‘drag’ constrains women’s ability to refuse sex. As Ros (11) comments that “if you know that it would get back to your friends or people in your year [at school]” then you would be less likely to say “I just didn’t want to [have sex]” and more likely to make some kind of excuse such as “oh I feel really ill”. The embarrassment and stigma of not wanting to have sex would, apparently, be too much to bear.

In addition, the expected (and experienced) intolerance of men to sexual naivety is also a feature of young women’s talk about sex. The negative repercussions of appearing sexually inexperienced or unwilling, and the constraints this places on women’s ability to refuse unwanted sex, are clearly articulated in the following exchanges between Lara and Cath, and between Karen and myself:

Lara: I’ll tell you the sort of thing I imagine if I imagine being in that kind of scenario [of saying no] and then in the morning, you know, he’s with his mates [...] and they’re laughing and saying ‘so how was it last night’ and he goes, you know, ‘silly cow’ and just starts laughing at you basically. And they go, oh you know, ‘what’s her
problem’ and it’s like you can just imagine them saying basically derogatory things like ‘tight’ and stuff like that

Cath: Frigid yeah ...
(Group 7)

Karen: and also some of the rumours that would go round if they said no they would find more frightening than if they just had sex

Hannah: Why? What would happen?

Karen: because they would be ‘oh they’re frigid ..’
(Group 10)

The negative comments and names these young women expect to be called for not engaging in sexual activity and for being seen as sexually naive indicate the power and force of this threat to identity. As Karen notes “some of the rumours that would go round if they said no [to sex] they would find more frightening than if they just had sex” (10). The constraints on female sexuality resulting from the threat of being labelled ‘tight’ or ‘frigid’ are clear and may even result in young women engaging in unwanted sex in order to avoid such labels.

In sum, then, women are concerned about their sexual reputations and can clearly articulate these concerns in focus group discussions. They discuss the ways in which they have to negotiate their sexual reputations not only with their male partners, but also in relation to their peers. The difficulties they face in attempting to negotiate their sexual reputations can be a factor which constrains their ability to say ‘no’ to unwanted sex.
3.3.2 The Person You Are

The young women in this study often presented an image of themselves in relation to contrasting images of ‘other’ women. The following extract from a focus group discussion in which Zoe, Pam and Jane talk about how they would say ‘no’ clearly illustrates this:

Jane: You just get straight to the point,

Zoe: mm

Pam: just say I'm not ready, and if they don't like that well then they can just - I don't know

Zoe: I think we're both quite outgoing people and we're quite likely to just put our cards on the table and say sod off!
[Laughter]

Pam: but but I can see that quite a shy or slightly more backward person would find it quite difficult

Jane: yeah like a weak character or something

Zoe: yeah

Jane: would probably feel they have to

Pam: especially if they felt they were going out with someone who was quite cool if you know what I mean or older than them it was giving them an image by going out with them because I mean you see quite a lot of people
who go out with people for the image of going out with them

Hannah: mm

Zoe: so they wouldn't want to lose that, especially if they're quite shy or not happy in themselves, so they didn't want to get themselves out of that relationship so to keep in it they'd do anything a lot of people, well I've seen girls make mistakes like that

(Group 9)

So, while they describe themselves as "quite outgoing people" who are "quite likely to out our cards on the table and say sod off", others are described very differently, as "shy" or "slightly more backward", as "not happy in themselves" or as having a "weak character". This may be a way for these young women to both recognise stereotypes about young women and their sexuality while at the same time resisting such stereotypes. We can see this when we look at how closely the participants' descriptions of 'bad reasons for having sex' match with their descriptions of what 'other' girls do. These young women also see fear of being 'dumped' as a bad reason for having sex:

Sam: bad reason because you're pressured into it by your boyfriend because you're scared he's going to dump you

(Group 5)

It is other 'girls' who make the mistake of having sex for this reason as Zoe illustrates:

Zoe: so they wouldn't want to lost that [the image of 'going out with someone who was quite cool'], especially

5 Being 'dumped' is a colloquialism for one's partner ending the relationship.
if they were quite shy or not happy in themselves, so they
didn't want to get themselves out of that relationship so
to keep in it they'd do anything a lot of people - well I've
seen girls make mistakes like that.

(Group 9)

These ‘girls’ are clearly not similar to the young women providing the
description they are ‘shy’, ‘not happy in themselves’, and clearly having sex for
the ‘wrong’ reasons. In contrast to these ‘shy’ and ‘unhappy’ girls, Pam and Zoe
present themselves as confident and able to say ‘no’:

Pam: It’s always going to be difficult, but I’d be quite
happy to yeah

Zoe: But you’re not going to let him take you to bed [...] just because you’re afraid to say no or whatever

(Group 9)

The implication is that although saying ‘no’ is difficult they are the sort of
women who are clued up enough to be able to so. A similar parallel between
‘other’ girls and themselves is drawn in the following extract:

Jill: I think a lot of people don't really find it [saying no to
sex] very easy at all it just depends I suppose in the
relationship

Karen: or what the person or what the girl’s like

Deb: mm some people especially if they're not
particularly outgoing or a bit shy then, you know,
Karen: they can be persuaded round or they just let it happen
(Group 10)

It is ‘other’ girls, then, who are vulnerable to the pressures to have sex and who are “worried because the rest of [their] friends have had sex”. According to Sam:

Sam: ... if you’re a really strong character then you are going to be able to say no, you don’t want to do this. But if you’re worried that sort of you’ll be completely rejected by him, and sort of the crowd that you’re with, because you won’t have sex with him then you might just sort of go along with it because you’re worried about losing everybody else around you
(Group 5)

Helen comments that she has “never felt that it would damage our relationship if I said no, so I always have done” and Lara reiterates this when she states that she has “never said had to say no for fear of losing someone I really loved [...] I’ve just said no through self-respect” (Group 7). These young women construct themselves as perfectly confident and capable of saying no to sex in contrast to “a lot of people” who make “mistakes”. They are agents in control of their own sexuality ready and willing to protect their own interests while others may be shy and unhappy and potential victims for coercion and unwanted sexual experiences.

In sum, by constructing descriptions of what ‘other’ girls are like - what they say, what they do, and why - the women in this research are also able to imply certain things about their own identities. By constructing ‘other’ girls as weak, pathetic and as victims these women present themselves as knowledgeable and proficient sexual actors.
One of the most frequent responses to the questions I raised about saying 'no' to sex was “it depends”:

Karen: it depends so much though, do you know what I mean - the situation, how close to him you are, whether you’ve just met him and whether he’s expecting you to have sex on the first date or something, and if you don’t want to then it depends on how well you know him
(Group 10)

Rachel: it depends on who they are, how well you know them, how long you’ve known them, what sort of relationship you have, all sorts of things
(Group 11)

How young women say ‘no’ and how they feel about saying ‘no’ depends (amongst other things) on how well they know the man they are saying ‘no’ to. A clear distinction was made between saying ‘no’ to sex with a boyfriend and saying ‘no’ to sex with a more casual acquaintance. Lara, for example makes a comparison between saying ‘no’ to her boyfriend in which she “basically told him how it was and he tried it with me for a couple of months and then he gave up”, and a “casual relationship” in which it would be very hard to say ‘no’ because “you’re worried that they’re going to judge you and it’s going to be embarrassing” (7). Ros agrees that it would be harder to say ‘no’ to somebody you just met arguing that if “they’re trying to push you into having sex it’s a bit more difficult because you don’t know what they’re going to react, what they’re going to say, or how it’s going to turn out or anything” (11). It is the unpredictable, unanticipatable nature of men with whom women are newly acquainted which makes it difficult to refuse sexual activities with them.
Chapter Three: Young Women Saying 'No' to Sex

There was some disagreement across the groups about whether it would be more or less difficult to say ‘no’ to a boyfriend or to a more casual acquaintance. Helen, for example, argues that it would be much easier to say ‘no’ to “someone you meet in a pub or club” because there are less likely to be repercussions at school and amongst peers (7). Similarly, Cath claims that she would “definitely be more assertive if I wasn’t involved with them in any way” (7). Deb, Jill and Karen discuss the different strategies of saying ‘no’ that they would use with a boyfriend and with someone they had just met. With the latter:

Deb: you just say no

Jill: I would lose complete interest and just walk off

Karen: just make and excuse and leave

(Group 10)

Saying ‘no’ to someone you’ve just met then appears to be fairly straightforward, compare this with saying ‘no’ to a boyfriend:

Jill: you would explain yourself more as well, if you knew him you’d want to sort of say “on no I don’t want to sleep with you because ..” and then explain it.

(Group 10)

Likewise, Jane, Pam and Zoe make a similar comparison with Pam asserting that “If it’s someone I’ve just met I wouldn’t think twice about it [...] because I don’t know them I’d say no straight away”. With a boyfriend “if you had been going out with them for quite a long time then it would make it more difficult” says Jane, Zoe adds that “then again in some ways it’s easier to talk” in a relationship (9). This ‘ideal’ notion of what saying ‘no’ in a relationship is like is further illustrated by Lynn and Lucy:
Chapter Three: Young Women Saying 'No' to Sex

Lynn: depends how close you are if you can't talk, if you can't say it to their face that you don't want to sleep with them then you shouldn't be in that relationship at all

Lucy: you're not ready for anything at all if you can't talk to this person, if you can't talk about contraception, if you can't talk about diseases and the consequences of what you are going to do then you can't really do it because you haven't been through it all

(Group 5)

This idea is echoed in another group in which Deb argues that “if you’re not close enough to talk to them about it then you’re not close enough to be having sex”, and that if, after you’ve talked about it, he still wants to have sex and you don’t then “he’s not the right bloke for you” (10). However, although Jill agree that it is easier to talk to someone “you know very well” and you “expect them to understand” it is also difficult because this kind of relationship bring other expectations as Jill explains:

... if you have sex a lot and then one day you’re just too tired, or one day you just don’t want to do it and everything else, then I think there it’s going to be harder to say it to him than if it’s just a one night stand. a) because he [the one night stand] probably expects you to say no at some stage

(Group 10)

By implication a boyfriend does not expect you to say ‘no’ and consequently might “get worried and think whether you were still interested or not”. Rachel and Wendy note that saying ‘no’ to sex with a boyfriend brings new responsibilities:
Rachel: If it’s someone you trust, someone who knows you, just the best way [to say no] is just to explain how you feel, just talk about it - apart from anything else it doesn’t have to go that far anyway if you’ve got a good relationship.

Wendy: Just saying no is not enough if you’ve got a good relationship, because if you say no it puts doubts in other people’s minds and they think ‘Oh no what’s wrong with me? Why does she not want to’ or whatever, so if you explain it then there’s more chance that they’re going to think ‘Oh it’s ok, it’s not that she’s not attracted to me’ or whatever. It’s so that they don’t feel so bad in themselves so they know it’s you.

(11)

In a relationship with a boyfriend women report that they have to take into account his emotional reactions to being told ‘no’ when they decide how to, and whether to, say ‘no’.

Another dimension upon which the ease or difficulty of saying ‘no’ to particular men is judged is that of age. Cath describes one experience with “someone who was older” in which although “nothing happened” she felt worried and “quite intimidated by it all” and didn’t like “feeling that vulnerable” (7). Helen too reports an experience with a man who was “a lot older” than herself which she describes in the following way:

Helen: ... when he said to me ‘Do you want to come back to my flat’ it just frightened me so much, I mean I was probably being really stupid and overreacting sort of thing, but I just felt so.. yeah so vulnerable [...] so intimidating.
Cath, expressing empathy, reports that she would find such a situation “incredibly scary” (7). Lara, by contrast, argues that “it’s ok with boys our own age but with anyone older I just find it hard”. This difficulty is attributed to the higher expectations of older men who “as soon as you’re in a room alone with them, or whatever, then that is basically equal to sex”, whereas boys their own age will “just want to snog” (7). Jan makes a similar comment apparently about boys her own age:

Jan: yeah with the people we’re with. I mean if they .. if
they did anything they wouldn’t harm us, the particular
people - I mean that might be a bit naive of me, maybe a
bit later on maybe but not now

Older men are seen as particularly intimidating and difficult to say no to while younger men are not seen as so threatening. This is particularly worrying in the light of evidence which suggests that women are more likely than men to have their first sexual intercourse with someone older, particularly those women who have first intercourse at a younger age (Ingham et al., 1991; Wellings et al., 1994). In sum then these women construct issues around saying no differently depending on the type of relationship they have to the man whom they are refusing. They discuss the differences between saying no to a boyfriend and saying no to a casual acquaintance, and in the process construct what ‘relationships’ are like and the place of sexual behaviours within them.

### 3.4 Summary and Conclusions

This chapter represents an analysis of the focus group data which most closely resembles the kind of analysis commonly used by focus group researchers and by feminists. What I mean by this is that I have identified some themes, patterns and
trends, some data extracts which seem to belong together, which I developed into themes. At the beginning of this chapter I clearly stated the criteria by which I identified relevant data extracts and throughout the chapter I use data extracts to illustrate themes. For the most part I treat the research participants as either psychological subjects or as informants (see section 2.6.1, for a detailed description of these approaches). Although my thinking and analytic interest have moved on since conducting this analysis (see section 2.6 for an overview of my approach and the following chapters for an illustration), I decided to include this chapter in the thesis for two reasons. First, it provides a useful contrast to the following chapters and marks the start of my analytic progress. Second, it provides an illuminating overview of the content of the focus group discussions. Although I have not taken any precise measurement of, for example, the amount of time spent on one topic rather than the other, this chapter illustrates the kinds of things which preoccupied these young women during the group discussions. In the following chapters (chapters five, six and seven) I self-consciously compare this kind of transparent approach to the data with an approach which treats the data as constructed. Each of these chapters focuses in more detail upon one specific theme identified both from the social scientific literature more generally and from the data presented in this chapter.
Chapter Four

Sexual Miscommunication and Refusing Sex

“Men Just Don’t Understand When you Say ‘No’”
In focus group discussions about their sexual negotiations with young men, young women often report being misunderstood, misinterpreted and misread. They describe how men misunderstand their intentions; often interpreting their friendly behaviour as a sexual come-on. They are concerned about giving 'contradictory messages' and feel guilty when they think that they have not communicated clearly. Often, they say, men fail to understand that 'No means No'.

In chapter one (section 1.3.1), I noted that miscommunication theory is widely used to explain instances of date rape and gave a brief outline of this theoretical approach. Miscommunication theory is not just popular within the social sciences but is also prevalent in pop psychology and books dealing more generally with relationships between the sexes. In addition, women (and men) themselves also use a 'lay' version of miscommunication theory when attempting to make sense of, and account for, unwanted sexual experiences. In this respect, then, the accounts of sexual miscommunication provided by the women in this research are analogous to existing research in which women talk about being misunderstood. Miscommunication theory would seem an appropriate place to start trying to make sense of this data. In this chapter I look in detail at the social scientific literature on sexual miscommunication which looks both at women's (apparently) poor communication skills, and at men's (apparently) poor comprehension skills. I then briefly outline miscommunication theory's relationship to essentialism and social constructionism on the three main factors I identified in chapter one (i.e. the origin of social phenomenon, relation to science, and methodology). As discussed in chapters one and two, my own particular interest is in the relationship of essentialism and social constructionism to the analysis of qualitative data, and more specifically in comparing transparent and constructed readings of such data. In this chapter I begin to explore these two analytical approaches in relation to talk about sexual miscommunication. I present, then, two analyses of my focus group data in which women explain instances of sexual coercion and rape as the result of a misunderstanding or 'miscommunication' between themselves and their male
partners. The first is an analysis of women’s talk as transparent data, as reflecting either the ‘truth’ about sexual relationships (i.e. a participant-as-informant approach), or the ‘truth’ as women themselves see it (i.e. a participant-as-psychological subject approach). The second is an analysis of women’s talk as constructed data, in which the investments women have in talk are investigated, and the functions of ‘miscommunication talk’ are examined. I then discuss the costs and benefits of these two different approaches to analysing qualitative data for feminism, in other words, which approach can be used to produce a stronger feminist analysis.

4.1 Sexual Miscommunication Theory

In this section I outline the social scientific literature on sexual miscommunication looking both at explanations which focus on men’s poor comprehension skills which are used to explain why men fail accurately to understand a woman’s sexual refusals, and at explanations which focus on women’s poor communication skills which are used to explain why women fail to communicate clearly and effectively what they really think, feel or want.

According to most versions of miscommunication theory, men and women speak different languages (or “genderlects”, Tannen, 1991), so that when it comes to communication between the sexes, Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus (Gray, 1992). This clash of conversational styles between the sexes leads to misunderstandings which in turn cause confusion, frustration and tension. In one of the earliest papers to advance this argument, Maltz and Borker (1982) claim that:

American men and women come from different sociolinguistic subcultures, having learned to do different things with words in conversations, so that when they attempt to carry on conversations with one another, even if both parties are attempting to treat one another as
equals, cultural miscommunication results. (Maltz & Borker, 1982: 200)

These claims are echoed in the writing of Deborah Tannen, whose work is widely acclaimed as offering a "feminist" explanation of difficulties between men and women:

Women and men have different past experiences... Boys and girls grow up in different worlds... And as adults they travel in different worlds, reinforcing patterns established in childhood. These cultural differences include different expectations about the role of talk in relationships and how it fulfils that role... When styles differ, misunderstandings are always rife. (Tannen, 1991: 125& 127)

This theory, then, suggests a cultural approach to sex differences in communication. Men and women are portrayed as members of different cultures which have their own, very different, assumptions and rules for communication. When these two diverse cultures meet in sexual negotiations misunderstandings are inevitable. As applied to sexual violence, miscommunication theory is used to argue that rape and other forms of sexual abuse are often the outcome of "miscommunication" between partners: he misinterprets her verbal and non-verbal communication, falsely believing that she wants sex; she fails to say "no" clearly and effectively. Both biology and socialisation are invoked to explain why this form of "miscommunication" is so common. I will look first at theories advanced to explain male misunderstanding - that is, why men apparently misunderstand women's refusal of sex; and second, at theories offered to explain female miscommunication, that is, why women apparently exhibit such poor communication skills in refusing sex.
4.1.1 Male Misunderstanding

Explanations focusing on men’s problems in understanding typically claim that men (whether for reasons of biology or socialisation) see a far more sexually oriented world than do women (Abbey, 1982; Goodchilds et al, 1988): the implication is that men’s preoccupation with sex means that they are liable to interpret any behaviours as sexual, whether women intend them that way or not. According to Ellis (1991: 631), who favours biological explanations, “natural selection has favored men who more readily learn forced copulatory tactics than women, and women who are more inclined than men to resist forced copulations”. In seeking to account for why some men rape and others (apparently) do not, theorists explain that some men are more inclined than others to over perceive sexual intent. These men (rapists) may have “deficits in their ability to separate seductive from friendly behavior” (Murphy et al, 1986: 260) or may suffer from “a blind spot” (McDonel and McFall, 1991: 19) - a specific cue-reading impairment such that these men are unable to decode a woman’s negative cues. As Muehlenhard (1988b: 31) points out: “this discrepancy could cause some men to feel led on if they thought that a woman was acting as if she wanted sex more than she actually did, and some men regard being led on as a justification for rape”. Ellis (1991, 1993) argues that neurological and hormonal factors are responsible for rapists’ perceptual deficits.

Socialisation theories are also widely invoked to explain rape. Media presentations of sexuality encourage men to believe that sexual violence against women is acceptable. Studies of pornography, for example, typically find a high percentage of sexual episodes involving male force: “Regardless of the force used, however, in most cases the female is aroused by the ministrations of the male, her body belying her verbal protests and, to her humiliation, she responds physically” (Smith, 1976: 22). In general, men “are taught to take the initiative and to persist in attempts at sexual intimacy even when a woman indicates verbally that she is unwilling to have sex....” (Check & Malamuth, 1983: 344).
Finally, some social scientists have advanced the idea that sexually aggressive men have a "suspicion schema" (Malamuth and Brown, 1994); men's apparent failure to "understand" when a woman says no to sex is neither the result of a biological imperative nor (in a straightforward sense) a socialised incapacity. Rather, it is due to men's belief that women's communications about romantic or sexual interest cannot be trusted: i.e. women don't tell the truth when it comes to sex. Malamuth and Brown (1994) argue that "sexually aggressive" men (i.e. rapists) discount the veridicality of women's communications, particularly when the woman appears to be communicating a clear and strong message (e.g. "she protests too much"):

Aggressors may be more likely to perceive women's "no" responses as seductive teasing [so that] an assertive rejection might be interpreted as somewhat seductive by those with an adversarial orientation to women. (Malamuth & Brown, 1994: 706)

According to sexual miscommunication theory, then, men have difficulties understanding women's communications regarding sex either because they regard women's communications as untrustworthy, or because biology favours men who don't take 'no' for an answer and because sexual aggression represents adaptive behaviour.

### 4.1.2 Female Miscommunication

Explanations focusing on women's poor communication skills claim that women often fail to say no clearly and unambiguously, partly because "women and men often communicate indirectly when initiating sexual relationships... One problem with indirect sexual signalling is that women and men often interpret behaviors differently" (Muehlenhard, 1988a: 96). Apparently, adolescent females interpret non-verbal communicative behaviours (including clothing, posture, gaze and so on) in a "less sexualized way" than do males (Zellman et al, 1979:...
12). Arguing that “much of the sexual violence directed against women may be generated out of cross-sex pseudocommunication”, Cahill (1991: 83) focuses on sex differences in non-verbal communicative behaviour suggesting, for example:

... females' high levels of interactive gaze may simply reflect a learned and adaptive attentiveness to the cues of others. If males respond to females' gaze as intimacy indicating, pseudocommunication may result. For example, a male may reply to a female's gaze with another form of intimacy indication behavior. The female will interpret this behavior as forward and respond accordingly. This response, in turn, will be interpreted as a violation of the understood terms of the contact. (Cahill, 1991: 81)

In other words, women may unintentionally invite sexual interest from men by ‘giving off’ non-verbal behaviours which are understood by men as indications of sexual interest. “Undercommunication of disinclination to have sex” is also described (Allgeier, 1986 cited in Murnen et al, 1989: 102) as a contributing factor in date rape. According to a group of psychologists writing in the Journal of Sex Research, the stereotypical feminine gender role (passivity, submissiveness, nurturance, acquiescence to male needs and helpfulness) means that “women are often trained to be ineffective communicators in a sexual relationship.... Perhaps if more women were able to communicate their disinterest [sic], more of the unwanted sex could be eliminated” (Murnen et al, 1989: 102). As Charlene Muehlenhard, (1988a: 101) puts it, “direct, open communication might help reduce misinterpretation”. A final complicating factor is that (contrary to the feminist slogan that no always means no), women do sometimes give deliberately misleading verbal signals about their willingness to engage in sex: that is, they say “no” but mean “yes” (and, of course, vice versa). Self-report data from 610 female undergraduates indicated that over a third of them had engaged in what psychologists have described as “token
resistance" to sex (saying no but meaning yes) on at least one occasion (Muehlenhard and Hollabaugh, 1988). Consequently, men may learn to disregard women’s signals:

The problem for the man is how to differentiate between sincere rejections and requests on the one hand, and those that are ambivalent or merely facades on the other hand. Since the task is difficult and since the risks in backing off when the rejection is not real are so grave [i.e. contempt of his unmanliness], many men simply give up trying to make the distinction and forge ahead regardless of what the woman says (Zilbergeld, 1978: 32, cited in Muehlenhard and Hollabaugh, 1988)

In sum, then, women are seen as ineffective communicators, unable to articulate their sexual desires or dislikes, unable to refuse unwanted sexual attentions, because socialisation has taught them to be passive, unassertive and to attend to the needs of others before their own. Women are portrayed as communicating indirectly about sexual matters - leading to ambiguity and confusion - or as being uncomfortable about sexual communication, particularly around sexual refusals.

Sexual miscommunication theory is essentialist because, like other essentialist theories, it assumes that the origin of social phenomenon (such as rape) can be found in biology or in socialisation. Miscommunication theorists assume a cause and effect relationship: they start from observations of social phenomenon (i.e. that men and women miscommunicate in sexual negotiations) and then try to locate the cause of this phenomenon. In this way miscommunication theory uses the language of scientific discovery so characteristic of essentialist theories. They aim to discover the truth about what ‘really happens’ in sexual negotiations and to progress towards a better understanding of sex differences in communication and the origin of rape. In order to do this they generally use tests, scales, or experiments. But regardless of the methods used, research participants
are seen as informants or as psychological subjects who are neutrally reporting on their social world, or who are revealing aspects of their individual psychology. In other words, and this is the aspect which is key to this thesis, the research on sexual miscommunication relies on a transparent reading of self-report data. Researchers look beyond the talk to draw conclusions about the social world. Think, for example, of how Antonia Abbey’s research, in which students reports of having their friendliness ‘misperceived’ as sexual interest, is taken as evidence that “gender differences in sexual and dating role socialization may cause some men to force sexual relations on dating partners, mistaking their partners’ true lack of interest for flirtatious repartee” (Abbey, 1991: 103). In other words, what people say in response to questionnaire items is taken as a more or less accurate description of what ‘really’ happens in sexual negotiations. It is this kind of approach that I outline in relation to my own research in the following section.

4.2 Sexual Miscommunication and Refusing Sex: A Transparent Reading

The notion of sexual miscommunication is popular not just within the social scientific literature, but also in other fora - as illustrated by the phenomenal success of Deborah Tannen’s (1991) book You Just Don’t Understand which has sold well over one million copies. Other “pop” psychology texts dealing with “the babble of the sexes (e.g. Shapiro, 1996) are also widely read, as are those which claim to take a humorous look at gender relations and offer ‘helpful’ translations through which men and women can better understand each other. In The Little Book of Romantic Lies, for example, Bruce Smith and Laura Goeke Burns try to help men and women negotiate “these times of uncertain relations” where “no one ‘really’ knows what the other means” by offering translations of what men and women ‘really’ mean (1996: 1). Interestingly, one of the translations they include is that when she says ‘Can’t we just talk for a while’, what she ‘really’ means is ‘I’d rather make love to a trailer hitch’. In other words, when a woman indicates that she does not want a sexual relationship, this
is not immediately understandable as such, but rather needs translating. Paradoxically, part of what makes these books humorous is that ‘everybody’ knows that ‘Can’t we just talk for a while’ is a sexual rejection. Media representations of rape also draw on miscommunication theory. One article published in *The Sunday Times* which commented on the trial of Austen Donnellan (who was acquitted of raping a fellow student) concluded that the case illustrated the “confused and complex relationships forged by students freed of the old constraints on behaviour but without a blueprint for today” and the problems which arise when someone “misunderstands” the signals (Driscoll, 1993: 14). From many people’s point of view, then, miscommunication theory is “intuitively” correct: it fits with their experience - that of women as much as that of men.

In addition, various versions of sexual miscommunication theory are in common use amongst ordinary men and women seeking to explain their own, and each others’, sexual behaviours. Both sexes provide accounts of their own and each others’ sexual behaviour which rely on notions of “misunderstanding”, “misinterpreting” or “miscommunicating” sexual signals. Men accused of rape often say they “misunderstood” - that the woman didn’t communicate clearly enough, that she gave off mixed messages, and that even if she did say “no”, she didn't say it as if she meant it. According to Gager & Schurr (1976 cited in Check and Malamuth, 1983: 346), probably the single most used cry of rapist to victim is “you know you want it. You **all** want it”, and afterwards, “There now, you really enjoyed it, didn’t you”. Consistent with these observations are the results of more systematic studies demonstrating that rapists generally believe their actions did not in fact constitute rape (i.e. that the woman was a willing participant or enjoyed the experience) (Check & Malamuth, 1983).

Women, too, often provide accounts which explain unwanted sexual behaviour in terms of miscommunication: they say that the man didn’t understand that they didn’t want sex, and that it was probably their own fault anyway for not communicating effectively enough. Often they express guilt over having
possibly miscommunicated (Cairns, 1993a) - and the label “miscommunication” apparently serves to remove the act of forcible intercourse from the category of “rape”. In Mary Koss’s (1988) study, only 27% of the students whose sexual assault met the legal definition of rape believed they had been raped: almost half of them (49%) labelled the experience “miscommunication” instead. Women often believe that they have “failed to make their refusal sufficiently clear” (Cairns, 1993a: 205).

Miscommunication theory was also popular with the young women who participated in focus group discussions in the current study. I have already described (in Chapter Two, section 2.6) how my own analysis of the focus group data will revolve around two axis: transparent versus constructed analyses, and feminist versus non-feminist analyses. In this section I present the data on sexual miscommunication from this study and show how, when subjected to a transparent reading, it parallels the existing social scientific literature on sexual miscommunication, and in the next section I present an alternative (constructed) analysis.

During the focus group discussions, then, women frequently frame their experience in terms of sexual miscommunication theory. Young women are often explicit about their use of “miscommunication” theory as an explanatory framework for their experiences of sexual coercion:

I mean, like, a lot of times there is just a total misunderstanding between men and women... I don’t think the bloke realises that you’re just going back for a chat or whatever. I think that he always thinks that you’re going back for a shag. (Carol, 4)

I think, for me, the whole sort of thing about misreading people ... I had misread his character and behaviour, and he mine - a lot of men don't believe it when you're saying
no because you're still, as far as they’re concerned, you're
giving contradictory messages. (Tina, 1)

According to these female students, males believe that they want sex, whereas in
fact they are just “being friendly”:

I mean, how many times have we heard, in our four years
here, boys say ‘she’s gagging for it’... All you have to do
is be friendly and they're all like ‘she's gagging for it’.
And whilst it’s funny, and we can all have a good laugh
about it, we’ve all had to dig ourselves out of situations,
and been and to look really stupid, when all we’ve
wanted to do is carry on a friendship... (Megan, 13)

In the group discussions women often told stories about their sexual experiences
which featured sexual “misunderstandings” between themselves and men. For
example:

... and he sort of like started making advances, and I said
‘no I don’t think so, I don’t think this is right’, and he
said, ‘well what on earth did you invite me in for? Why
did you ask me here, you know, if you didn’t want
anything like that? Why did you ask me to stay the
night?’ (Sharon, 1)

I push him away and try to show by words and actions
that this is not what I want and that I am not ready for
this. I am not sure how I appear to him as I am doing
this. He doesn’t appear to understand. (Lisa, 4)

I had a misunderstanding with Dave... He invited me
back to his room for a cup of coffee and I went thinking
‘yeah, this is just coffee’... and he asked if he could kiss
me... I thought it was just coffee and friends but obviously he meant something else .... (Natalie, 14)

Susie: I went out with this bloke about a year ago, and he’d just split up with his girlfriend and after about five or six weeks he says, ‘do you want to sleep together?’, or whatever... I felt very pressured to do it, because I thought, ‘if I don't, then he's going to look for someone else, or go back to his girlfriend or whatever’. I think that's got a lot to do with it - whereas men don't read women as being pressured.

Janet: Did he know that you didn’t really want it?

Susie: He just assumed that I would, because everyone else that he’d been out with had - because he just basically thought he was a complete sex God.

(Group, 14)

The kind of data presented above reflects many of the issues raised in the social scientific literature in this area, including a distinction between men’s poor comprehension skills and women’s poor communication skills. These women lament that men don’t “realise” what women mean, that they don’t “believe” what women say, or that they simply don’t “understand”. They concur with the social scientific evidence that men overperceive sexual intent; they “always think you’re going back for a shag”, or assume that you’re “gagging for it” when you’re being friendly. Women also worry about the status of their own sexual communications, whether they are giving mixed messages and feel unsure about whether their “words and actions” are being interpreted correctly. There are, then, lots of examples of women talking about specific instances in which men misunderstand them, and lots of examples of women talking more generally about misunderstandings and miscommunications as a problem in male/female
relationships. A transparent analysis assumes that these women are neutrally reporting on their experiences in a relatively straightforward way. Using a model of participant-as-informant this talk can be used as supporting evidence for miscommunication theory - women talk about misunderstandings because men and women do misunderstand each other. Using a model of participant-as-psychological-subject, women’s reports of sexual miscommunication represents their own understanding and interpretation of their experiences, which may or may not map onto what really happens in sexual relationships. In either case what women say about sexual miscommunication maps directly onto what social scientists say about sexual miscommunication. The women who participated in this study are saying the same kinds of things in focus groups that participants in other studies have said in response to questionnaires and other self-report measures. The data I present here could be used to strengthen and support the existing literature on sexual miscommunication theory as women refer spontaneously to misunderstandings and misperceptions, rather than (as is the case in much of the miscommunication literature) being able to frame their experiences in terms of miscommunication theory when asked to do so by the researcher. For example, Antonia Abbey asked students to respond to questions about ‘misperception’, while in other studies miscommunication is inferred. In Charlene Muehlenhard’s (1988b) research college students read dating scenarios, in which items such as who initiated and paid for the date and the dating activity were varied, and rated how willing the woman in the scenario is to have sex. The discrepancy between the ratings of male and female students (males consistently rated the woman as more willing to have sex than females) is interpreted by Muehlenhard as evidence that men and women miscommunicate. This study in which women spontaneously refer to miscommunication could be seen as a methodological innovation within the pre-existing miscommunication literature which provides persuasive supplementary evidence for miscommunication theory.

In sum, then, women explain experiences of sexual coercion in terms of miscommunication and use notions of misunderstandings and misperceptions
between the sexes to explain sexual relationships more generally. By treating the data as transparent, as (more or less) accurately reflecting real world events, such an approach could be used to provide supporting evidence for the social scientific theories on sexual miscommunication. In section 4.4 I discuss the costs and benefits of this kind of transparent reading for feminists. Having outlined a transparent reading of the data I now go on to provide an alternative explanation for women’s talk about sexual miscommunication which relies on a constructed reading of the data.

4.3 Talk About ‘Sexual Miscommunication’: A Constructed Reading

As the preceding section illustrates, one explanation for the popularity of miscommunication theory is that it is an accurate reflection of experience: it reveals a truth about the social world. Most of the social scientific research on miscommunication aims to test this first possibility. This first approach assumes (by using a model of participant-as-informant or participant-as-psychological-subject) that participants’ talk is an appropriate route through which to gain accurate knowledge about the world. In other words, when women talk about their experiences of sexual negotiation and rape in terms of sexual miscommunication, then this represents an accurate reflection of what really happens in sexual encounters between the sexes. It is this first approach which I have outlined in section 4.2 above.

The second possibility - and this is the one which I am interested in here - is that miscommunication theory is popular (both in the social scientific literature and in ordinary people’s accounts) because it serves some useful functions. I noted previously that a focus on the function of talk is key to the (discourse analytic variation of the) social constructionist approach (see section 2.6.1). From this second approach talk about sexual miscommunication is not read as a transparent account of what ‘really’ happened, but rather as a means by which women explain, and account for, their experiences. This approach then, uses a model of
participant-as-social-interactor - participants are not neutrally reporting on their lives, but rather the way in which events are described or constructed serves particular functions in the interaction. The aim is not to assess the accuracy of participants’ reports or to establish their validity or otherwise, but to look at the implications or consequences of describing an event in a particular way and to establish the functions which this description serves. Just as Billig (1992) looked at the functions of talk about the royal family (reviewed in chapter three section 2.3.2ii) in this section I explore the ways in which talk about sexual miscommunication serves particular functions for the women who use it. In this section, then, I illustrate the use of miscommunication theory as a resource through which women seek to explain their experiences and to maintain their heterosexual identities and relationships. This approach asks what are the functions and implications of sexual miscommunication theory for the women who use it - in other words, what’s in it for women?

The advantages for men of using miscommunication theory may be fairly self-evident. For example, Frank Saal, says of miscommunication in relation to sexual harassment that: “... if we [men] could appeal to honest misperceptions to explain our unacceptable social-sexual behaviors in organizational setting (“Everyone makes mistakes!”), we might thereby render sexual harassment less premeditated and therefore less deserving of criticism and punishment” (Saal, 1996: 81). In other words, talk about miscommunication may function to excuse men’s bad behaviour. The advantages for women of talk about sexual miscommunication may not be immediately apparent. I argue that sexual miscommunication theory is useful for women attempting to sustain heterosexual relationships because: (a) it avoids blaming men; (b) it gives women a sense of control; and (c) it obscures institutionalised gender power relations. Because it enables women to sustain heterosexual relationships - by dismissing male exploitation of power as simply “misunderstandings”, it is also useful in the maintenance of heteropatriarchy.
Feminist critics point out that one negative consequence of miscommunication theory is that it obscures the fact that men are responsible for rape (see section 4.4 for further details of this critique). However, for heterosexual women, the belief that men are not manipulative and coercive abusers, but are well-intentioned (if clumsy) sexual partners, may be necessary in justifying their continuation in heterosexual relationships. Miscommunication theory by diverting attention and blame away from the man may be instrumental in permitting the woman to continue her relationship with him. In one focus group discussion, for example, Sarah, describes how she spent the night with a “really nice bloke” who was quite “forceful” and who was pressurising her to have sex. Initially Sarah places the blame for this incident with the forceful man, but this is reformulated by the group into a problem with Sarah’s poor communication skills. Sarah is practically accused of ‘leading him on’:

... where do you draw the line? And where the hell does he know where he is if you’re getting into bed with him. I mean it’s like you’re saying ‘no’ but you don’t really mean it. (Tina, 1)

The “forceful man” described by Sarah is deleted from this scenario; instead he becomes a well-intentioned person, subjected to mixed signals by Sarah. The solution, then, lies not with changing his sexually aggressive behaviour, but in encouraging Sarah to communicate more effectively. As another member of the group advises her “It’s best just to make clear what you feel about sex” (Michelle, 1).

It was often the case that “miscommunication” was used by women in focus groups as an explanatory resource to account for sexual coercion in women’s current relationships, while sexual coercion in previous relationships was judged more severely. Explanations in terms of miscommunication enables women to
maintain their relationships with coercive men and avoids women having to confront the possibility that men are abusing their power in heterosexuality relationships. In essence, miscommunication allows women to remain friends with their rapists. For example, the Ms. survey found that about three-quarters of the women had some contact with the attacker after the incident; in fact $25\%$ still considered the man a friend and $11\%$ still considered the man their boyfriend (Warshaw, 1994).

### 4.3.2 Miscommunication Gives Women an Illusory Sense of Control

Women often take responsibility for sexual assault upon themselves. About three-quarters of the women in the Ms. survey on date rape (Warshaw, 1994) indicated that they felt they were at least partly to blame for the incident. In diverting the responsibility for sexual assault from the rapist to the victim, ironically women derive a sense of control over sexual violence. If the cause of rape is attributed to a set of “risky” behaviours (hitchhiking, going out alone at night, dancing provocatively, wearing a miniskirt, not saying no clearly) then refraining from these behaviours is supposed to guarantee the avoidance of rape. As Carole Corcoran (1992: 135) points out, “Most acquaintance rape programs stress misinterpretation as the cause of date rape and therefore suggest that the remedy lies in assertive verbal communication on the part of the female”. As Camille Paglia (1995: 25) puts it, with characteristic bluntness, “The only solution to date rape is female self-awareness and self-control”. The burden of rape prevention lies with women and:

If you were unfamiliar with our [North American] culture and you happened to attend a typical college date rape program, you might have a hard time figuring out that men have any responsibility for rape or rape prevention. It is impolite to say that men rape and outrageous to point out that the only way to change the incidence of
rape and eliminate rape is for men to stop raping. (Corcoran, 1992: 137)

Paradoxically, this is experienced by many women as empowering, and as giving them ways of protecting themselves. Miscommunication theory offers to the woman who adopts it the hope that if she can learn to communicate more effectively, she will avoid male abuses of power. In one focus group discussion, for example, Kate describes an experience of date rape, and goes on to say that she now takes precautions to ensure than this does not happen again.

And sort of since then it's sort of changed in a way, because if I'm with a bloke and they think they're going to stay the night, I sit there and say 'no way, you can stay if you want to but there's no way that I'm going to have sex with you because I don't want to just yet'. And I feel more confident about getting out of that, but at the time it was like 'Oh my God, is it my fault, how do I say no?' (Kate, 1)

The ‘precautions’ that Kate advocates involve clearly communicating the limits of a sexual interaction. Implicit in this is the assumption that the initial experience of rape was the result of faulty communication, and that clearer communication will prevent the re-occurrence of rape. As Corcoran (1992: 134) says, “the victim-control point of view.. can serve a self-protective function. It may preserve one’s belief in a just world... and reinforce the idea that “rape won’t happen to me”. Similarly, according to Camille Wortman (1983: 203) “Blaming oneself may be more tolerable than the conclusion that no one knows who is to blame, and/or that the person is living in a meaningless chaotic world where events occur at random”. Janoff-Bulman (1979) has drawn a distinction between two different types of self-blame and has suggested that the impact of self-blame attributions will be dependent on the type of attribution that is made. She suggested that people who make characterological attributions, (attributions
to their own character or personality), may show subsequent deficits in motivation and considerable distress. In contrast, attributing the victimization to some aspect of one's *behaviour* (e.g. miscommunication) may be quite adaptive. Such an attribution may provide people with some hope that if they can change their behaviour such outcomes will be prevented in the future.

### 4.3.3 Miscommunication Obscures Institutionalised Power Relations

Finally, "miscommunication" theory obscures unequal power relations between men and women. In presenting rape as the unfortunate, but innocent, by-product of cultural differences, sexual miscommunication theory obscures male power and female subordination. But as Henley and Kramarae (1991) ask, is rape in such a circumstance truly a matter only of "missed" communication? They answer their own rhetorical question:

> No; in actuality, power tracks its dirty feet across this stage. Greater social power gives men the right to pay less attention to, or discount, women's protests, the right to be less adept at interpreting their communications than women are of men's, the right to believe women are inscrutable. Greater social power gives men the privilege of defining the situation - at the time, telling women that they "really wanted it", or later, in a court. (Henley and Kramarae, 1991: 27)

In sum, then, unlike previous researchers, I interpret young women's accounts of sexual miscommunication not as transparent data providing evidence for miscommunication theory, but as a participant resource, an accounting mechanism used by some women in making sense of their experience. I have indicated the ways in which sexual miscommunication theory is useful to young heterosexual women insofar as it enables them to avoid blaming men, gives them
a sense of control, and obscures institutionalised gender power relations. For heterosexual women struggling to maintain (sexual) relationships with men, it may well be that as Henley and Kramarae (1991: 42) point out, “the construction of miscommunication emerges as a powerful tool, maybe even a necessity, to maintain the structure of male supremacy”.

4.4 A Feminist Analysis? The Costs and Benefits of a Transparent Versus Constructed Reading

As I have already demonstrated, the data from focus group discussions in which women describe their experiences in terms of sexual miscommunication theory can be interpreted in two different ways (i.e. as transparent data or as constructed data) resulting in some very different conclusions. In the first (transparent) reading, the data are used to support the existing social scientific literature on miscommunication which argues that rape is the result of a misunderstanding or communication breakdown between men and women. In the second (constructed) reading, the question of whether or not men and women actually miscommunicate is put to one side. Instead the consequences, implications, and functions (for the women themselves) of describing sexual experiences in terms of miscommunication are examined. As I described in chapter two, my analysis is differentiated along two different axis. The two readings of the data presented above represent the first axis (transparent and constructed readings), in this section I discuss these two different readings of the data in relation to the second axis - feminist and non-feminist readings. I discuss the implications of these two very different readings for feminist theory and analysis.

As I noted above, the first (transparent) reading of the data can be used to support miscommunication theory and strengthen the pre-existing social scientific literature. In trying to decide whether or not this analysis would ‘qualify’ as feminist it is important to note that miscommunication theory has been widely criticised by feminists for presenting women as deficient, for obscuring male responsibility for rape, for disguising structural inequalities
between men and women, for blaming women for their own abuse, and for holding women as primarily responsible for rape prevention. Ironically, some of the researchers whom I have identified as part of the miscommunication tradition would consider themselves to be feminist. In the light of this contradiction it is clear that attempting to decide whether or not miscommunication theory, and a transparent reading of the data which supports this theory, ‘qualifies’ as feminist, is not an easy task. I look first at the advantages of producing a transparent analysis which supports miscommunication theory, and second at some of the reasons why feminists have criticised miscommunication theory and so why supporting such a theory might be disadvantageous for feminists.

One of the attractions of miscommunication theory for feminists is that, in stark contrast to the once dominant ‘female deficit model’ in which female communication styles were seen as inferior to men (see for example Jespersen, 1922; Lakoff, 1975), miscommunication theory offers a ‘different-but-equal’ approach to understanding sex differences in communication styles. In miscommunication theory, women are not seen as having an inferior communication style but simply as having a different communication style to men. The result of these diverse communicative styles is that men and women find it difficult to communicate effectively with each other and misinterpret or misunderstand each others’ cues. In this respect, miscommunication theory can be seen as a move away from the ‘victim precipitation’ model of rape (cf. Amir, 1976) in which women were blamed for inviting sexual assault. When applied to rape, miscommunication theory removes blame from women. Women are no longer blamed for wearing skirts too short, or for wearing revealing clothes which invite sexual interest. Such an approach mistakenly assumes that women share men’s (over-sexualised) view of the world, and recognise (as men apparently do) that such behaviours signal sexual availability and invite sexual interest. Rather, miscommunication theory assumes that men and women inhabit different social locations in which these behaviours might mean very different things; neither understanding is ‘wrong’, but the disparity between them may have unfortunate consequences. Theoretically, then, miscommunication theory
may be useful to feminists for countering victim blaming theories which are still prevalent (although perhaps more subtle) in social science research.

In addition, one further advantage of treating the data as transparent is that it taps into women’s understandings about the nature of sexual experience, it follows feminist advice to ‘take women seriously’ and to allow women to be the ‘experts on their own lives’. By giving scientific legitimacy to the ways in which women themselves understand and explain their experiences a transparent reading of the data would ‘validate their reality’. This approach ‘gives voice’ to women’s experience allowing them to explain difficult sexual situations in their own terms using their own language (i.e. the language of miscommunication). Women’s own explanations, their own understanding of their experience are seen as primary. As demonstrated in chapter two (section 2.1) these methodological innovations are the defining feature of feminist research, and by this criterion a transparent reading of the data which supports miscommunication theory ‘qualifies’ as feminist.

Perhaps one of the greatest advantages for feminists of explaining sexual coercion in terms of miscommunication is that it offers easily implemented, practical solutions to date rape. According to sexual miscommunication theory, men force women into unwanted sexual experiences because women simply don’t communicate their desires (or lack of them) effectively. Sexual violence is portrayed as an unfortunate breakdown in communication, so the logical solution is to improve communication between the sexes and so eradicate date rape. Indeed, many psychologists (some of whom would identify as feminists) recommend just such interventions. Antonia Abbey suggests that “educational programs need to be implemented to teach dating-age youth how to honestly and clearly convey their intentions” (Abbey, 1991: 108). Others suggest the need to find “a way to reduce the risk of date rape by facilitating more open communication between the sexes, which could reduce misinterpretations of dating behaviour and perhaps cause males to feel less ‘led on’” (Muehlenhard, 1988b). Many researchers proclaim the value of preventing rape by teaching
women assertiveness techniques and/or self-defence (e.g. Barth et al., 1991; Mann et al., 1988, Muehlenhard et al., 1989), and many educational programs focus on problems with cross-sex communication (e.g. Haggard, 1991; Feltey et al., 1991). Attempts to influence male comprehension include social skills training with rapists (Dobash et al., 1995), feminist campaigns with messages such as “No means No” or (poking fun at the idea that it is male comprehension which is at issue here) “What part of the word ‘no’ do you not understand?”, and the highly controversial Antioch College rules for dating which emphasise the importance of men acquiring verbal consent for each sexual activity they initiate. The advantage for feminists of supporting miscommunication theory is that it provides concrete, workable, easily implemented suggestions for ending, or at least decreasing, sexual violence generally and date rape in particular. It offers women practical advice and the chance to avoid sexual coercion and abuse by taking it upon themselves to improve their faulty communication skills. This approach might provide a more palatable alternative to the model of eliminating rape through social change which is, at the very least, a “formidable” task (Corcoran, 1992: 139).

By contrast, those who criticise miscommunication theory point out that although in theory it emphasises that men and women have ‘different-but-equal’ conversational styles, in practice it is women’s communication which is seen as problematic (Crawford, 1995). It is women who are seen as the cause of miscommunication, women’s communicative styles which are seen as “handicapped, maladaptive, and needing remediation” (Henley and Kramarae, 1991: 19). In common with other psychological research which takes male experience as the norm and which pathologises women (see for example, the research reviewed in section 1.1.3), ‘male’ styles of communication are presented as the unproblematic norm while ‘female’ styles are, by comparison, considered deviant and ineffectual. Rather than being accused of ‘asking for’ rape by wearing tight skirts, too much make-up, low cut tops and the like, miscommunication theory suggests that women invite rape by giving off mixed messages, sloppy signals, or by generally ambiguous communication. As one
study argues "it is the passivity and lack of assertiveness of many individuals [i.e., women] that often allows date rape to manifest itself" (Mann et al., 1988: 271). Miscommunication theory is not devoid of victim blaming but implicitly blames women for their abuse and as such represents a 1990s modification of, rather than repudiation of, the victim precipitation model (Crawford, 1995).

In addition, critics of miscommunication theory point out that often women are still held responsible for rape prevention. Despite a cursory nod in the direction of gender neutrality, the vast majority of the advice derived from these attempts to improve cross-sex communication is aimed at improving women's communication skills, rather than men's comprehension skills. While women are implored to say what they do not want, men are not equally encouraged either to make clear their intentions or to ensure that their partner consents - the examples given above represent rare exceptions (Crawford, 1995: 119). For example, the American College Health Association (cited in Turner and Rubinson, 1993: 605), advises women to "be aware that your non-verbal actions send a message: if you dress in a 'sexy' manner and flirt, some men may assume you want to have sex"; they go on to point out that "Often most men interpret timidity as permission", so it is important to "Say 'no' when you mean no". Assertiveness training workshops aim to "provide women with the skills to avoid victimisation by learning to say "no" effectively" (Kidder, Boell and Moyer, 1983: 159). Women who may be "at risk for sexual coercion" can be identified through administration of a battery of psychological tests (the Sexual Assertiveness Questionnaire, the Sexual Assertiveness Role-Play test, and the Sexual Assertiveness Self-Statement Test), and these women can then be enrolled on a three-session cognitive-behavioural group training program "for preventing sexual coercion" which includes cognitive structuring and behavioural rehearsal (Muehlenhard et al., 1989). According to Cameron assertiveness training, of the kind advocated by miscommunication theory, "tells women that something is wrong with the way they are: it assures them that it is not their fault, society is to blame, but nevertheless it is they who have to change" (Cameron, 1994: 10). Assertiveness training attempts to fit women into a world in which they do not
operate effectively without ever challenging the organisation, and the institutionalised power differences, which excludes them. In short, it provides individualised solutions to social problems, and encourages women to think that there is something wrong with the way they communicate rather than collectively challenging the ways in which their communications are over ruled or not attended to.

While women are held responsible for rape and rape prevention, feminist critics of miscommunication theory have also pointed out that the ‘different-but-equal’ approach suggests that men are not responsible for rape. Within miscommunication theory rape is not something which one person (usually a man) does to another (usually a woman) but rather it is something which ‘just happens’. Men are presented as inadvertently raping women, not because they are deviant monsters, not because they wanted or thought that they could get away with it, but because they interpret (just as any man would do) her behaviours in a sexualised way. Rape occurs to the “honest bewilderment of men who rape women without realising that they are doing so” (Crawford, 1995: 118). Miscommunication theory has been accused of ‘letting men off the hook’; men’s selfish, rude and ignorant behaviour is excused under the guise of conversational style (Troemel-Ploetz, 1991). Women are urged to stop blaming men and to accept what they cannot, and should not, change. By contrast, feminist critics of miscommunication theory argue that gender differences in communicative styles can also be interpreted as evidence of conflict and inequality (Cameron, 1992), or as cultural dominance (Henley and Kramarae, 1991) rather than cultural difference. In contrast with miscommunication theory Henley and Kramarae argue that “Greater social power gives men the right to pay less attention to, to discount, women’s protests, the right to be less adept at interpreting their communications than women are of men’s” (1991: 27).

Finally, despite the emphasis on women being ‘different-but-equal’, miscommunication theorists often portray women in very negative ways. In an
early paper which clearly illustrates this, Weis and Borges argue that women’s sex role socialisation leaves them vulnerable to sexual assault:

Through the process of sex-role learning, the girl is taught to conceive of herself as more or less permanently passive, weak, childlike, mindless, and in need of economic and emotional independence upon men [...] when faced with a sexual attack and realizing their psychological and physical inability to protect themselves, are immobilized with fear. (Weis and Borges, 1973: 81 & 83)

In other words women are (at best) positioned as passive victims of men’s sexual aggression, unable successfully to resist their advances having been intensively inducted into the female sex role. Women are portrayed as weak, ineffectual, and infantile beings who are unable to communicate their desires, or lack of them, clearly or effectively. Women are presented as victims rather than as victimised, and this is a tendency which has been criticised by some feminists (e.g. Roiphe, 1993; Wolf, 1993).

It is clear then, that a transparent reading of the focus group data on miscommunication would entail some serious costs for the feminist researcher. In taking such an approach feminist researchers risk supporting a theory which holds women responsible for rape prevention, which denies male responsibility for rape, and obscures men's abuse of power in heterosexual relationships. There are, however, also some potential benefits of such an analysis; it recognises the contextual factors associated with sexual coercion, and provides clear suggestions for eliminating some types of rape (particularly date rape). These apparent contradictions highlight the difficulty of identifying the feminist interpretation of a piece of data.
By contrast, a constructed reading sets aside many of the questions raised by a transparent reading. A constructed reading of the data sets aside questions about the accuracy of miscommunication theory for describing women's experiences, and questions about the link between the social scientific theory of miscommunication and women's talk about sexual misunderstandings. A constructed reading does not provide information about why rape happens, about why it happens to some women and not others, or why some men rape while others do not. A constructed reading provides no evaluation of miscommunication theory's attempts to answer these questions. What a constructed reading does do is to provide information about how women talk about sexual encounters. This is important for a number of reasons. First, it has implications for feminist concerns with validating women's experience, second, it has implications for the representation of 'other' women in feminist analysis, and third, it has implications for feminist theorising/activism about rape. I discuss each of these in turn.

As I noted above a constructed reading does not allow the researcher to evaluate the social scientific literature on miscommunication theory. But, what it does allow the researcher to do is to disagree with the miscommunication theory without discrediting those women who use a lay version of miscommunication theory to explain their experiences. When evaluating the value of a transparent reading of the focus group data on miscommunication I noted than one advantage for feminists was that the easy fit between what women say and the social scientific literature on miscommunication theory validates women's own understanding of their experiences. The disadvantage (at least for critics of miscommunication theory) is that this means supporting a theory which depoliticises rape. Alternatively, if I disagree with my participants' assessment of what 'really' happens in sexual negotiations (which allows me to critique miscommunication theory), I may be accused of invalidating their experience and of appropriating their talk to serve my own ideological and political agendas. If I insist that miscommunication is an inadequate or antifeminist explanation for rape, I risk characterising those women who do consider miscommunication
adequate (i.e. my participants) as deluded, feeble-minded or as falsely conscious. By insisting on calling their experiences as rape while women themselves call describe it as miscommunication, feminists risk creating a distinction between feminists and 'ordinary' women where feminist knowledge is privileged - i.e. if only 'they' were more enlightened they would label what they currently describe as a misunderstanding, rape, just like 'we' do. If I describe miscommunication theory as central to the obfuscation of gender power relations (i.e. instances of 'sexual miscommunication' are excluded from the more explicitly political category of 'rape'), I risk characterising my participants as complicit in their own oppression and in this process of 'erasure' (cf. Kitzinger and Thomas, 1995). By focusing on the functions of talk, a constructionist reading of the data allows me to critique miscommunication theory while recognising that there may be specific advantages for women of describing their experiences in this way. A similar approach has been used by Nicola Gavey (1992) to explain why women do not label experiences of rape as rape, and by Kitzinger and Thomas (1995) to explain why women might describe instances of sexual harassment as 'just a bit of fun'. By focusing on the advantages for women of explaining their experiences in this way, a constructed reading portrays women who talk about miscommunication as rational, coherent, women rather than as passively soaking up patriarchal doctrine, unable to see beyond the confines of male definitions of sexual situations.

This also provides an important contrast between the ways in which women are represented in transparent and constructed readings. Earlier I pointed out that miscommunication theory often presents women as deficient in some way - as possessing poor communication skills, as being socialised into passivity and/or learned helplessness. By contrast a constructed reading re-presents women in a way which does not present them as victims or as victimised, but as knowledgeable women, who are working hard to present themselves as having learnt from past mistakes and who are able to avoid 'unpleasant' sexual encounters including rape. A constructed reading recognises the ways in which women present themselves as conducting sexual negotiations with men who are
well intentioned, with whom they have equal relationships, and who they are able to control and manage.

Finally, focusing on these advantages (miscommunication theory avoids blaming men, gives women an illusory sense of control, and obscures institutionalised power relations) may have serious implications for feminist politicisation of rape. Feminists cannot hope to politicise women’s experiences, naming them as rape, without recognising the costs that such an approach might have for the women they are trying to ‘help’. A constructed reading explains why women might be so resistant to labelling their experiences as rape despite feminist attempts to encourage them to see them as such. What it doesn’t address is how knowing about these advantages can help take feminist activism around rape forward. What is less clear from a constructed reading (both my own and in other literatures) is how the information gained could be used to politicise rape.

4.5 Summary and Conclusions

In chapter one I introduced the social scientific literature on miscommunication theory as an explanation for sexual violence, and for date rape in particular. In this chapter, I described how the women in my research also talked about experiences of date rape, sexual violence and unwanted sex as the result of ‘misunderstandings’ or ‘miscommunication’ between themselves and their male partners. Miscommunication theory, then, would seem to provide a readily available framework within which to explain this focus group data. In order to make sense of this talk I reviewed the literature on miscommunication in more detail, looking both at explanations which focus on men’s apparently poor comprehension skills and at women’s apparently poor communication skills. I demonstrated how my own data can be read either as transparent data which supports the theory of sexual miscommunication, or as constructed data which illustrates the functions which miscommunication serves for the women who use it. I demonstrated how a transparent reading parallels the existing research on sexual miscommunication in which participants are treated as informants or as
psychological subjects, and can be seen as making an important contribution to this area. When read as constructed data I illustrate how talk about sexual miscommunication can be seen as serving particular functions for the women who use it, including the ways in which talk about miscommunication avoids blaming men, gives women an illusory sense of control, and obscures unequal gender power relations. These functions may account for the popularity of miscommunication theory in the social scientific literature, in ‘pop’ psychology best sellers, and in the talk of ordinary men and women. The idea that talk serves particular functions is key to a constructionist reading of the data and while the concept is introduced in this chapter it is developed and built upon in chapters five and six. Importantly then, I have illustrated that rather than reporting on their experiences neutrally, the ways in which women describe events has certain implications and serves important functions.
Chapter Five

Emotion Work and Refusing Sex

“You Can’t Say ‘No’ You Might Hurt His Feelings”
In talking about their sexual negotiations with young men, young women often report being concerned about, and anxious to take care of, men's emotions. They routinely express concern about 'hurting his feelings' by saying no to sex; they assert that they 'don't want to hurt him in the slightest way'; they express guilt at the possibility that their partner might 'end up getting really hurt' and 'might not be able to understand' why they have refused to engage in sexual activity. In this chapter I explore how these accounts of sexual refusal might be explained by existing research on 'emotion work', which explores the ways in which individuals manage both their own and each others' emotions. In chapter one (section 1.3.2) I gave a brief summary of the literature which describes women's emotional involvement with men, and women's greater emphasis on the emotional rather than sexual aspects of relationships, and indicated how this is seen as a contributory factor in women's acquiescence to unwanted sex. In this chapter I link this to the sociological literature on 'emotion work' theory which argues that women are required to care for the emotions of others, often at the expense of subjugating their own emotions, both in the public and private spheres. I illustrate the link between these two literatures with reference to the focus group discussions in which women discuss the kinds of emotion work required in refusing sex.

Following the same kind of analysis which I introduced in chapter four, I present two different ways of analysing my data. The first (transparent) reading of the data parallels the kind of analysis typically found in the emotion work literature. The second (constructed) reading looks at how talk about 'emotion work' performs important functions for young women themselves. Finally, I consider the costs and benefits of these two different readings for feminist researchers.

5.1 Emotion Work Theory

In this section I offer a broad overview of the concept of 'emotion work' as it is generally used in the social scientific literature, including an outline of its use in relation to unwanted sexual behaviour. I indicate the ways in which emotion
work theory is underpinned by both an essentialist and a social constructionist framework - particularly in relation to the methodological approach used. I demonstrate the ways in which the majority of the research on emotion work takes an essentialist approach to data analysis by treating data as transparent.

The concept of ‘emotion work’, initially developed and popularised in Arlie Hochschild’s classic study, *The Managed Heart* (1983a), is generally used to refer to the work involved in “dealing with other people’s emotions” (James, 1989: 15). It includes regulating and managing others’ feelings - “soothing tempers, boosting confidence, fuelling pride, preventing frictions, and mending ego wounds” (Calhoun, 1992: 118). Emotion work has also been used to refer to the work we do on ourselves in order to conform to socially designated ‘feeling rules’; rules which “govern how people try to feel or try not to feel in ways which are appropriate to the situation” (e.g. feeling sad at a funeral, or happy at a party) (Hochschild, 1979: 552). When a discrepancy arises between the experienced and expected/appropriate emotion, individuals will engage in ‘emotion work’ in an attempt to “change in degree or quality the emotion or feeling” (Hochschild, 1979: 561).

Hochschild’s classic study of the commercialisation and marketing of the emotion work performed by female flight attendants provided a template for many other studies that followed. Using interviews with female flight attendants and the training materials used at Delta airlines, Hochschild demonstrated that in a commercial setting emotion becomes a resource to be sold in exchange for a wage. She illustrated how, as part of the job, flight attendants are expected to perform ‘emotional labour’. Of particular importance is the flight attendants smile which, they are told, is their “biggest asset”; flight attendants must always be seen to be happy and smiling (p. 4). These ‘feeling rules’ dictate appropriate emotions on the job. The flight attendant’s smile is, then, part of the job; it is offered as part of the service which is sold to consumers such that the “emotional style of offering the service is part of the service itself” (Hochschild, 1983a: 5). Emotion work is therefore a required, non-negotiable, part of the job of a flight attendant. The emotions of flight attendants are commodities which are bought.
and sold for profit. In an industry of fierce competition airlines compete with one another on the basis of the service they provide. Flight attendants have the most customer contact and the service the customers are sold through advertising, argued Hochschild, is “human”, personal and often sexualised.

Hochschild argued that it is not enough for flight attendants to simply change their outward expression of emotions in order to match the ‘feeling rules’ which dictate the expression of emotion on the job (e.g. that flight attendants must smile and look happy and not express anger). Rather, flight attendants must actually alter the way that they feel, they must actually feel happy. It is in this respect that ‘feeling rules’ differ from ‘display rules’. As Hochschild describes it “the flight attendant is obliged not only to smile but to try to work up some warmth behind it” (p. 19). It is in this alteration of feeling that flight attendants perform ‘emotion work’ upon themselves. Flight attendants told Hochschild during interviews that they regularly attempted to alter their own emotional states in order to meet the expectations of the job. As one flight attendant said:

Even though I’m a very honest person, I have learned not to allow my face to mirror my alarm or my fright. I feel very protective of my passengers, Above all, I don’t want to be frightened. If we were going down, if we were going to make a ditching in the water, the chances of our surviving are slim, even though we [the flight attendants] know exactly what to do. But I think I would probably - and I think I can say this for most of my fellow flight attendants - be able to keep them from being too worried about it. I mean my voice might quiver a little during the announcements, but somehow I feel we could get them to believe ... the best. (p. 107)

Others describe some of the methods they use to modify their feelings:

You think how the new person resembles someone you know. You see your sister’s eyes in someone sitting at
that seat. That makes you want to put out for them. I like to think of the cabin as the living room of my own home. When someone drops in [at home], you may not know them, but you get something for them. You put that on a grand scale - thirty-six passengers per flight attendant - but it’s the same feeling. (p. 105)

Sometimes I purposefully take deep breaths. I try to relax my neck muscles. (p. 55)

I may just talk to myself: “Watch it. Don’t let him get to you. Don’t let him get to you. Don’t let him get to you.” And I’ll talk to my partner and she’ll say the same thing to me. After a while the anger goes away. (p. 55)

The performance of emotion work on themselves is integral to the flight attendants’ ability to perform emotion work on others. Emotional labour is interpersonal, it “requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others - in this case, the sense of being care for in a convivial and safe place” (Hochschild, 1983a: 7, emphasis added). Referring to the sexualisation of flight attendant work, a woman who was once active in Flight Attendants for Women’s Rights comments that:

The company wants to sexualise the cabin atmosphere. They want men to be thinking that way because they think that what men really want is to avoid fear of flying. So they figure mild sexual arousal will be helpful in getting people’s minds off of flying. (Hochschild, 1983a: 94, emphasis in original)

In order to induce the proper state of mind in others (i.e. sexual arousal rather than fear), the flight attendant may have to try to feel as if her passengers’
flirtations are a sign of her attractiveness rather than as demeaning or intrusive behaviour.

Since Hochschild's work on the flight attendants at Delta airlines there is now an extensive literature identifying and exploring the emotional labour required of other service professionals, including: police officers (Pogrebin and Poole, 1991; Stenross and Kleinman, 1989), supermarket clerks (Tolich, 1993), clerical workers (Rogers, 1995; Wichroski, 1994), medical students (Smith and Kleinman, 1989) and nurses (Aldridge, 1994; James, 1989, 1992; O'Brien, 1994; Small, 1995; Smith, 1989, 1991, 1992). Researchers typically interview participants about aspects of their job in order to assess whether emotion work is an expected part of the job, and in what forms emotion work is manifest. Studies looking at the emotion work performed by clerical workers are typical in this respect. Clerical work, particularly that of the secretary, is primarily a female occupation and as such has been the focus for some of the research on emotion work. Expectations of women on the job are gender-based, although this is not formally recognised by the institution and many of the tasks performed by secretaries remain invisible. Mary Anne Wichroski surveyed 61 secretaries and did follow up interviews with 25 secretaries and 8 supervisors in order to explore the various different kinds of labour performed by secretaries including the often invisible emotional labour. Secretaries describe "covering" for their boss - a procedure requiring tact, careful negotiations, and precise judgement. One secretary reports holding back a memo dictated by her boss when she found out that the circumstances requiring the memo had altered. She says "I held it back for revision until my boss came back ... to save face. He would have looked like an idiot. This was a sensitive matter that would have made my boss look uninformed" (Wichroski, 1994: 37). Secretaries must also engage in impression management which is considered important because they are often the first person that clients meet, they must according to one physician be "well spoken, pleasant, cheerful, and caring". (p. 36). In order to achieve this image workers may (apparently) have to suppress what they 'really' feel. The temporary clerical workers interviewed by Jackie Rogers related instances of having to take the
blame for others’ mistakes and having to accept abusive comments without responding:

I know my boss has blamed me on this assignment for a lot of things that he’s misplaced, that he’s screwed up, and he goes, “Well, you see, Sarah didn’t get it on time” or “Sarah’s lost it.” And it’s really embarrassing because he asks me in front of people like, “Sarah, where did you put this?” And I know full well that he didn’t give it to me. This has happened 3 days in a row now. After a while you just go, “Well, you know, I’m just really sorry. I guess I just really screwed up”. (Rogers, 1995: 153).

From these descriptions Rogers concludes that “Emotional labor is a significant component of temporary work. Temporary workers are expected to gain favor with the agency and to manage difficult situations on the job” (Rogers, 1995: 154).

According to most researchers in this area, the concept of emotion work is heavily gendered. In seeking to explain why emotion work is so heavily gendered they rely on psychological research (e.g. Chodorow, 1978; Gilligan, 1982) which indicates that women’s socialisation makes them “better prepared than men for the interpersonal demands of frontline service work” (Wharton, 1993: 225). Some suggest that emotion work is closely associated with women’s traditional caring role, women are “deemed to be ‘naturally’ good at dealing with other people’s emotions because they are themselves ‘naturally’ emotional” (James, 1989: 22). The skills involved in ‘people work’ in the commercial sphere are assumed to be the same as those which women employ in the private, domestic sphere (James, 1989), some women are keen to highlight this affinity between their personal and professional lives, as one nurse notes:
... we use *past experience*. We've *brought up families* and been a long time in the job. It just comes naturally, you don't think about it. (Original emphasis, O'Brien, 1994: 401)

Similarly, Hochschild argues that "[a]s traditionally more accomplished managers of feelings in private life" women's emotional skills are 'naturally' extended to the workplace (1983a: 11). Women are most likely to be employed in jobs which require emotion work, Hochschild estimates that approximately one half of all working women have jobs that call for emotional labour, and the study of emotion work has, therefore, a "special relevance" for women and relates more closely to their lived experience (1983: 11). Researchers argue that the emotions bought and sold for profit in traditionally female occupations include comfort, patience and compassion (in nurses, Smith 1989; O'Brien, 1994), and tact and discretion (in secretaries, Wichroski, 1994). By contrast, emotional labour in traditionally male occupations includes stoical control (in police officers, Pogrebin and Poole, 1991) or anger (in bill collectors, Rafaeli and Sutton, 1991). Moreover, women in traditionally female occupations see emotion work as a crucial component of their job. For the nurses in James' study good care involves more than simply performing the physical tasks of nursing (such as administering drugs or emptying bed-pans), it involves 'spending time', 'listening' and 'being there' (James, 1988). Part of the routine work of a nurse involves: "establishing trust and confidence, comforting and consoling their patients and clients as well as cheering them up and acting as a stable source of support" (O'Brien, 1994: 398). Patients judge the quality of the nursing they receive on the emotional style in which it is delivered, emphasising the importance of attitudes and feelings, rather than technical competence. As one patient comments:

A nurse has to be aware of the patient's condition and how to tackle it. She has to have a lot of patience and
forethought and to try and relieve pain and suffering, not by medical means but by compassion (Smith, 1989: 50).

By contrast, emotion work is often considered marginal in typically male occupations; the detectives in one study considered crime solving and arresting criminals to be core to their job and although sometimes necessary (i.e. when dealing with the victims of crime) emotional labour was considered peripheral (Stenross and Kleinman, 1989).

Emotion work in personal relationships (i.e. in contexts in which it is unpaid) has not been so extensively researched, although there is now a small and growing body of work which presents emotion work as “an integral part of the work that is done in the home” (Erickson, 1993: 888). Researchers have explored the relative importance of ‘emotion work’ done at home and emotion work on the job, and found that women’s level of job-related well-being is threatened more by their provision of emotion work in the family than by their performance of emotional labour at work. In addition, those women whose jobs require emotional labour are also more likely than others to perform emotion work in the home. It seems then that women have a ‘second shift’ of emotion work on the job as well as in the home (Hochschild, 1989). The authors conclude that “Women’s work and family lives are thus structured in ways that encourage their disproportionate performance of emotion management.” (Wharton and Erickson, 1995: 274). In a related study using the same data set Rebecca Erickson examines women’s perception of the distribution of household tasks (including housework, child-care, and emotion work) between married couples and the ways in which women’s emotional labour might effect her “marital well-being and relationship burnout” (Erickson, 1993: 889). Wives were asked to rate their feelings of marital burnout in response to items such as “My relationship make me feel emotionally drained”, and to estimate the relative amount of household tasks performed by their husbands (i.e. doing dishes, paying bills etc.) and their husbands’ level of emotion work - assessed by items such as “Offers me encouragement” or “Acts affectionately towards me”. The results suggest that
while husbands’ housework is associated with wives’ marital quality the contribution of husbands’ emotional labour may be even more significant. The major work on emotion work in the area of personal relationships is by Duncombe and Marsden who claim that women are “left with emotional responsibility for the private sphere” (1995b: 150; see also Hochschild, 1983b and 1989; Cahill and Eggleston, 1994; Wharton and Erickson, 1995; Zajdow, 1995, for further accounts of emotion work in interpersonal contexts). The women interviewed as part of their study report having to make the “emotional running” in the relationship, having the sole “emotional responsibility” for the children, and having a need to feel emotionally “special”. They complain of their male partners’ “inability or unwillingness to express intimate emotion - to ‘be there’ emotionally, to ‘do intimacy’ and to assume their fair share of emotional responsibility in the private sphere” (Duncombe and Marsden, 1995b: 151).

Women’s expressed dissatisfaction with their relationships is in contrast to discourses of love and intimacy and the ‘ideologies of coupledom’, a discrepancy which, according to Duncombe and Marsden, is minimised through emotion work in which women convince themselves that ‘we’re ever so happy, really’ (1995b: 162).

More recently Duncombe and Marsden explore how women perform ‘sex work’ (a concept they describe as analogous to emotion work) in order to “bring their sexual feelings more into line with how they suspect sex ‘ought’ to be experienced” (1996: 220). In an ‘ideal’ relationship, argue Duncombe and Marsden, sex work would be unnecessary; there would be no mis-match between women’s expectations about sex and their lived experience of sex. However, in a phallocratic society obstacles to this ideal relationship (such as men’s disregard for their partners’ sexual needs) means that “sex work is performed by dependent women upon themselves, in order to suppress their distaste or to protect male self esteem.” (p. 223). Using self-report data from 38 white couples who had been married for 15 years (as well as some additional data from pilot interviews) Duncombe and Marsden illustrate the mis-match between women’s expectations about sex and their reported experience of sex claiming that “it was surprisingly
common for women now to confess that they had always ‘at some level’ found their sexual relationship unfulfilling” (p. 226, emphasis in original). Couples may attempt to ‘restage romance’ (p. 234) through sexual experimentation, pornography and/or masturbation which is usually initiated by the male in order to get his partner ‘worked up’. Demands made by husbands on their wives to watch pornography, to perform oral sex, or to behave erotically were resented by women, who felt that their husbands were not providing the emotional intimacy necessary for them to feel comfortable engaging in such acts. In such situations a woman may engage in ‘sex work’ in order to quell their distaste for her husband’s body or sexual practices. Therefore Duncombe and Marsden suggest that women may engage in unwanted sexual activities in order both to meet expectations about what sexual relationships should be like (i.e. by performing emotion work on themselves) and in order to protect their male partner’s feelings.

As I outlined in chapter one (section 1.3.2) there is abundant evidence in the social scientific literature which suggests that ‘emotion work’ may be an important explanatory factor in women’s apparent willingness to comply to male sexual demands, and to engage in sexual activity which they themselves do not want. Young women are portrayed in the social scientific literature as having greater emotional investments in sexual relationships than men. Young women’s emotional involvement in sexual relationships are seen as key to their (in)ability to refuse unwanted sexual attention (Quinn et al., 1991). Popular advice to young women reiterates this view by purportedly offering ways to say ‘no’ without hurting their partners’ feelings (Fisher, 1994). Research in which women express concern about causing feelings of “hurt” or “rejection” when refusing unwanted sexual attention illustrates how such investments are implicated in sexual coercion. According to Cairns (1993), who carried out an extensive interview survey of students’ attitudes to unwanted sexual attention, “women were more likely to be concerned about the impact of their refusal on the offender” (Cairns, 1993: 203). While men had no difficulty assigning responsibility for the incident to their harasser, and did not express concern about her possible feelings of
rejection but rather "let the emotional chips fall where they may" (p. 203), women described feeling confused about how to respond and about whether their own behaviour had contributed to the incident, and "often tried to soften refusals out of concern that the man in question would be hurt" (p. 205). Young women also report feeling obliged to have unwanted sexual activity with a male partner because, they say, 'I love him' (Warzak et al., 1995). Mansfield and Collard (1989: 167) report that married women find it difficult to refuse sex with their husbands and worry about whether they will feel rejected:

In courtship the lack of opportunity kept a check on ardour, so that it was always possible to avoid intercourse without either partner having to say 'no'. In marriage the only way to refuse was not to be interested and this could seem like a rejection.

In responding to a hypothetical scenario in which a man issues "an unmistakable invitation that you do not feel ready to accept", 75% of women expressed the view that the woman would feel "concerned that she has hurt the man" if she refuses to have sex (Lewin, 1985: 186 & 188). A survey of over 1,000 sexually active girls aged 16 and under revealed that, from a choice of over 24 different options, 84% of teenage girls said that they would like more information about "how to say 'no' without hurting the other person's feelings" (Howard, 1984 cited in Howard and McCabe, 1990: 22). In her study of heterosexual coercion, Nicola Gavey describes how women often report 'consenting' to unwanted sex because of 'nurturant' reasons - i.e. deciding to have sex with a man because he appears 'needy', 'pathetic' or because she wants to 'give him something', to 'take care of him', or in order to 'not hurt his feelings' (Gavey, 1992: 242-3).

There is, then, a great deal of evidence to suggest that women are responsible for doing emotion work for others, both at work and in their private lives and sexual relationships. Women's responsibility for the emotional welfare of others, particularly male partners, is implicated in their experience of unwanted sex.
Before moving on to look at how this emotion work theory can inform an analysis of the data gathered as part of this research I first briefly consider the epistemological framework which underpins this body of literature.

In contrast to miscommunication theory which was very clearly essentialist on all three of the aspects I identified in Chapter One (i.e. origin of social phenomenon, relationship to science, and methodology), emotion work theory is a little more difficult to place. Emotion work theory (which is primarily a sociological, rather than psychological, theory) incorporates notions of what emotions are and how they work which are very different to those of the mainstream (primarily psychological) work on emotions. This psychological literature relies on essentialist notions of emotions. Emotions are seen as private and hidden within the individual, and are usually thought of as innate or biological drives. As such, emotions are often studied by measuring physiological changes which are associated with changes in emotional states such tears, sweating, and changes in heart rate or skin conductance (e.g. Berry and Martin, 1957; Shamavonian et al., 1965). By contrast, emotion work theory sees emotions as arising in response to social arrangements rather than as pre-existing biological attributes. Referring to their work on sex differences in emotional behaviour, for example, Duncombe and Marsden argue that their claims are not essentialist because they do not claim that all men cannot express intimate emotions (i.e. they reject the view that emotional inexpression is an essential part of man’s nature and a part of their biological make up), and argue instead that:

... under the prevailing conditions of persistent gender inequalities of power and gender divisions of labour and emotion work - most men find themselves ‘unable’ or ‘unwilling’ or ‘do not choose’ to [express intimate emotions] in the context of close heterosexual relationships. (Duncombe and Marsden, 1996: 156)
In other words, gender differences in emotion are the result of socialization. So, Duncombe and Marsden's claim not to be essentialist rests on the (mistaken) assumption that essentialist theories rely on biological explanations, while social constructionist theories rely on the social (usually thought of as socialisation). Contrary to popular belief, socialisation also plays an important part in essentialist theories of emotional expression, including, for example, research which demonstrates the tendency of parents to mould sex appropriate emotional expression by responding to crying as a sign of anger in boys or fear in girls (see Condry and Condry, 1976). Although these approaches differ in their understanding of the origin of social phenomenon (i.e. as the result of biological factors and/or socialisation) they are all essentialist because they share the view that emotions pre-exist their expression. For example, a person feels angry and then his/her heart beat increases, or feels angry but then disguises this anger because it is not polite to express it. In both of these cases the emotion is there in essence before it is expressed, both of these are based on an essentialist understanding of the origin of emotions. In addition, these approaches are all essentialist because they locate emotions within individuals, as individual traits, capacities or features. So, although Duncombe and Marsden claim not to be essentialist because they argue that men and women are not biologically programmed but rather learn to have different emotional styles, by assuming that there is some kind of emotional essence which is developed in women and suppressed in men, and by locating emotions within individuals, their approach is clearly essentialist.

Emotion work theory is most clearly associated with social constructionism in relation to the work of Hochschild and her notion of 'feeling rules'. In contrast to essentialist theories which see emotions as biological drives or as moulded by socialisation, social constructionist theories reject the idea that emotions are pre-social, innate or pre-existing bodily sensations. Rather, emotions are seen as defined by, and brought into being by, systems of cultural beliefs and values. Social constructionists argue that the capacity to experience certain emotions depends on the cultural knowledge which brings them into existence. Members
must learn the ‘feeling rules’ which dictate emotional life in their community; they learn what emotions exist, when to feel them, what they feel like, which emotions are appropriate in which situations, and how to react to the emotions of others. This differs from the ‘display rules’ which govern the expression of emotion favoured by essentialists, feeling rules are not simply regulative of emotions but constitutive of emotions. Celia Kitzinger (1995: 142) makes a distinction between ‘weak’ versions of social constructionism which argue for the importance of socialization and environmental factors on behaviour, and ‘strong’ versions which look at “the ways in which the taken-for-granted categories we use are themselves social constructions”. Strong versions of social constructionism document the ways in which taken-for-granted emotional vocabularies have developed and gained meaning, and the social, ideological and political functions which they serve (e.g. Averill, 1982, Armon-Jones, 1986). This includes research which looks at emotional vocabularies in their historical (Crespo, 1986; Harré and Finlay-Jones, 1986) and cross cultural contexts (Lutz, 1990). Clearly, then, although, much of the research on emotion work tends towards the side of social constructionism this approach rarely explicitly defines itself as social constructionist and is often infused with essentialist notions. Nowhere is this tendency more apparent than in the methodology adopted by the emotion work literature. I will now outline in some detail how the majority of the research on emotion work adopts an essentialist approach to data analysis by treating data (and I focus on qualitative data) as transparent.

The majority of evidence in support of the existence and nature of ‘emotion work’ relies on self-report data - usually in the form of interviews or focus group discussions (e.g. Hochschild, 1983; James, 1989; O’Brien, 1994; Rogers, 1995; Zajdow, 1995), less often on the form of questionnaires (e.g. Wichroski, 1994; Wharton, 1993) and occasionally a mix of both (e.g. Wharton and Erickson, 1995). Extracts from self-report data are taken as unproblematic evidence that emotion work is being performed, in other words data extracts are being treated as transparent evidence in support of ‘emotion work’ theory. I will illustrate this
more fully with reference to two fairly typical extracts of data analysis from the emotion work literature.

The first extract is drawn from Duncombe and Marsden’s (1993) research. They claim that “the dominant pattern of our female respondents’ experience of coupledom was an asymmetry of emotional response” (1993: 225) and they support this claim with the following data extract:

I think I always loved him too much. I didn’t really have a ‘falling in love’ ... but I had a deep love for him, but it was all very unequal ... I never really felt very loved, and I think that for every one of the sixteen years of my marriage, it was a struggle to make him love me more and to get the relationship equal (Divorcee: group discussion).

Note that this extract has been framed as an example of how women ‘experience’ (rather than, for example, ‘describe’) coupledom as asymmetrical. In other words, this woman’s description of her marriage is treated as a transparent window through with analysts are clearly able to see what the marriage was ‘really’ like. Although there is no further discussion of this extract at the time they later refer back to it to forcefully conclude that “there was clear evidence of emotion work devoted to attempts at managing the emotions of ‘the beloved’ - for example, the woman who spent sixteen years struggling to make her husband love her” (p. 236). Because this woman says she tried to make her husband love her, the analysts take this as evidence that she did indeed try (i.e. as an accurate reflection of her marital situation), and this trying is in turn, taken as evidence for her performance of emotional labour within this marriage.

The second example is (a condensed version of) an extract quoted in Nicky James’ (1989) discussion of ‘emotional labour’ in a hospice. The following extract is introduced with the comment: “one 19-year-old nurse described the intensity of emotion being dealt with as she gave a moving account of her supposed failure to care adequately for patients”: 

222
[...] You remember Mr Toon? The time he was buzz, buzz, buzz, calling for us. And it was never really very much he wanted. It worked as well to come and stand by his bed, and just hold his hand. Often he'd just grab your hand, someone to hold on to. Walking in the valley of the shadow of death. It's not the physical act of dying, it's all the mental anguish that goes round it. That's what this place is trying to treat. There are so many instances of people being scared, patients being scared. Crying out for someone to help them. I feel very inadequate.

Other than the introductory material quoted above, James provides only one sentence of analysis of this data: "This is a dramatic example of a relationship between carer and cared for which involves the management of emotion." (p. 21). These two extracts are interesting because the analysis offered by both is very brief. The authors expect that the reader will 'see' the data as a clear example of 'emotion work' or 'emotional labour' without needing further detailed explanation. The value of letting women 'speak for themselves' (and, by implication, letting the data speak for itself) is that the reader can hardly fail to be persuaded by this 'moving' and 'dramatic' account. Research on emotion work, then, relies predominantly on a transparent reading of self-report data.

Emotion work theory, then, is a well established approach to explaining women's emotional labour, the labour involved in caring for others, in their occupational roles. More recently researchers have explored the utility of emotion work theory for explaining women's emotional labour in their personal and sexual relationships. In addition, psychological research suggests that young women's emotional involvement with male sexual partners may constrain their ability to refuse unwanted (or unsafe, or inappropriate) sex. This theory, then, which purports to explain women's management of others' emotions, would appear to be an appropriate starting point from which to explain why young women in this research describe being unable or unwilling to refuse sexual
activities with their male partners because they do not want to hurt their feelings. It is this last possibility which I explore in the following section.

5.2 Emotion Work and Refusing Sex: A Transparent Reading

In this section I explore the ways in which a transparent reading of the data in which young women talk about sex could make a positive contribution to research on unwanted sex and on emotion work. In other words, I provide a methodologically parallel analysis to that presented in the work of Duncombe and Marsden, James, and many of the other researchers on emotion work which I presented above. I treat women’s talk about emotion management as transparent evidence in support of the idea that young women engage in emotion work during sexual negotiations.

Young women express concern about hurting a man’s feelings, and they anticipate that men will react to sexual refusals with feelings of hurt and rejection. In focus group discussions these young women (like women in other research) express concern about “hurting his feelings” by saying no (Carla, 4), they assert that they “don’t want to hurt him in the slightest way” (Michelle, 1), and they express guilt about the possibility that he might “end up getting really hurt” (Jill, 10). In the following extract, two university students discuss the problem:

Tara: I’ve got that sort of problem where somebody’s keen, I just can’t ... I just can’t say to somebody, ‘Look, sorry, I’m not’, and I’ll end up ... I’ll avoid it in the end, but I’ll quite often end up speaking to them for hours and hours, and I’m just thinking like, ‘I really don’t want to be here; I want to be doing something else’ [...] I just can’t drop it.
Hannah: Why?

Pat: You don’t want to hurt their feelings. [...] I really try and avoid ever having to be in the situation of having to say to somebody, ‘Look, no, I’m sorry’ [...] I wouldn’t really risk to have a sort of flirty jokey conversation with someone that I don’t know very well in case they suddenly just say, ‘Okay, how about it?’, and then it would just be like ‘uuuuhhhhh!’.

(Group 13)

In this extract, Pat is quite clear that she “couldn’t ever just say ‘oh well no’” in response to a (sexualised, but not explicitly sexual) invitation: she would “just have to do it” (accept the invitation), and Tara agrees, saying “I do that, yeah”. Tara describes how, although she would rather be “doing something else” she finds herself spending “hours and hours” talking to men who are “keen” to have sex with her: although she does “avoid it [sex] in the end”, she “just can’t” reject them outright. When the interviewer asks why she finds herself in this position, Pat (apparently with some empathy for Tara’s predicament), explains that “you just don’t want to hurt their feelings”. The difficulty of refusing sex is, then, intricately bound up with the emotional implications of such an act. There are many examples from my data in which women describe their concern about “hurting” men, or causing them to “feel bad in themselves”:

I try to think of a way to turn him down without hurting his feelings ... Next time I do see him, in a way I make a special effort to talk to him to show that there are no hard feelings (Carla, 4)

Just saying ‘no’ I think is not good enough if you’ve got a good relationship, because if you just say no it puts doubts in other people’s minds, and they think, ‘Oh no,
what’s wrong with me?’ or ‘Why does she not want to?’ or whatever. So if you explain it, then there’s more chance that they’re going to think ‘Oh it’s OK, it’s not that she’s not attracted to me’, or whatever. It’s so that they don’t feel bad in themselves.
(Wendy, 11)

But I mean if it was like someone you’d been going out with, like I can see that in a way because I mean they might get a bit offended and think ‘what’s wrong with me’, or they might think ‘don’t you feel the same way’ kind of thing.
(Pam, 9)

Yeah I got into that kind of situation with a best friend of mine because er ... We used to go out a lot together, and we used to sleep in the same bed and nothing happened. And one night he was trying to come on to me and that, and it was such an awful feeling because we’re best friends and that, and I didn’t want to hurt him in the slightest way, or anything like that, and yet I definitely knew that I didn’t want to have sex. And it was just such an awful feeling, a really awful feeling. But obviously I just turned over and pretended to be asleep ... But it was an awful feeling, and I really did love him and everything like that. I didn’t want to reject him and ruin our friendship, but I didn’t want to go ahead with it because that would probably ruin our friendship, and it’s a very tricky situation to be in.
(Michelle, 1)
Clearly then, refusing sex is problematic, young women worry about the emotional effects that a refusal might have on a potential sexual partner. They discuss the various strategies they might use, either to avoid a refusal (“I just turned over and pretended to be asleep”), to turn him down gently and so minimise the hurt (as Wendy suggests, “if you explain it” then “they don’t feel bad in themselves”), or to try to bolster his ego after a rejection (by making “a special effort to talk to him”). Such strategies might even include engaging in sexual activity which they themselves do not want, as the following story from Kate illustrates:

Kate: But have you ever slept with anyone because you didn’t want to lose them as a mate, or ...

Sharon: But you do, that’s the worse thing.

Kate: ... because I mean, I went out with this bloke for three months, and I finished with him because I didn’t fancy him at all. And the night we finished we had this massive row, and we’d both had a bit to drink, which probably didn’t help. But all the time I was seeing him, I said no, I didn’t want to sleep with him. And the night I finished with him, I felt so upset and so guilty that I’d hurt him that I ended up having sex with him. [...] I just felt so guilty because he was so upset that I just gave in.

(Group 1)

Despite reporting that she “didn’t fancy” this young man, and that she told him she “didn’t want to sleep with him”, Kate “ended up” engaging in sexual activities which she did not desire. Refusing sex in addition to terminating the relationship apparently made her feel “so guilty” at being the cause of this man’s “upset” that she “just gave in".
The women in this study (just like those in other studies) are paralysed by a sense of responsibility for ‘taking care of’ men’s emotions. Sometimes, they say, they go along with sex as a result of worry about hurting men; other times they say no but feel “awful” or “guilty” about refusing. They are expected, and expect themselves, to take care of men’s emotions and avoid causing them hurt or distress. The management of men’s emotions is, then, portrayed as a crucial and integral part of the business of refusing sex. It is these very sentiments which, according to some of the psychological literature, make them especially vulnerable to sexual coercion (e.g. Muehlenhard et al., 1989; Warzak et al., 1995).

In this data then, women talk in ways which map on to the social scientific research on ‘emotion work’. In this section I have presented the sort of transparent reading of the data which is typical of existing research on emotion work as exemplified by the work of Duncombe and Marsden and of James. Such an analysis has several implications as I discuss in section 5.4.

5.3 Talk about ‘Emotion Work’:
A Constructed Reading

This alternative analysis treats the data not as transparent evidence in support of emotion work theory, but as constructed data, as a resource used by young women to account for their experiences, construct their identities and manage their reputations. As in the previous chapter, the question with which I am concerned from this perspective is not what ‘really happens’ in sexual negotiations (i.e. whether or not women actually provide emotion work), but rather, how young women talk about their own (and men’s) emotions, and what functions this talk serves in their collaborative constructions of what (hetero)sexual relationships are like. This approach then, does not treat the data as neutral descriptions benevolently supplied by women simply to further the researcher’s understanding of a situation: rather, women are treated as having specific investments in the sorts of descriptions they produce, such that talk about
'emotion work' functions to meet these concerns. This approach then, treats 'emotion work' not, as is the case in the emotion work literature, as an analyst resource (an analytical category used by social scientists to explain the behaviour of their participants) but as a participant resource (a resource used by participants themselves to explain and account for their own behaviours).

In seeking to explore women's use of 'emotion work' within a constructed reading of the data, we need to consider the particular interactional context within which these accounts were produced and occasioned. These young women are being asked (by me) to explain why, and in what circumstances, they do not refuse unwanted advances but instead engage in sexual activities that they do not desire. As Widdicombe notes, "Having sex (or indeed doing anything) when you don't want to is an accountable matter" (Widdicombe, 1995: 110), it is an unanticipated or untoward behaviour that requires some form of warrant or explanation (Scott and Lyman, 1968). In the course of this analysis I demonstrate how talk about 'emotion work' provides just such a warrant. I look first at the ways in which young women describe men as emotionally vulnerable and in need of emotion work, and I then move on to look at the functions of such an account for mitigating blame and fostering moral accountability, and for constructing identity.

One of the most striking features of young women's talk about 'emotion work' in relation to refusing sex is the way in which they portray men as emotionally vulnerable, full of self-doubt, and as in continual need of reassurance. This vulnerability is evident in the following extract from a discussion between Jill, Karen and the researcher:

Jill: But if you were in a relationship and you said no, then he could end up feeling 'Oh god', you know, 'what's going on?' [...] he could end up getting really upset about it, and you wouldn't really want that [...] If you had a boyfriend and you said no, then they would think things like -
Karen: 'Oh what's wrong with me? She should enjoy it'

Jill: Yeah, get worried, and think whether you were still interested or not

Karen: Yeah, so you'd have to be very careful -

Jill: - and then they might ask questions, and you might end up saying, 'Well there's nothing actually wrong' -

Hannah: 'I just don't feel like it, actually'

Jill: I think boys would find that very difficult

Karen: 'Don't you find me attractive?', and all this stuff and you think, 'No just...'

(Group 10)

Here (as in many of the other extracts presented in section 5.2), men are described as worrying about their sexual attractiveness, as vulnerable to being hurt by rejection, and as introspectively assessing their characters for potential flaws. It is this emotional vulnerability which necessitates ‘emotion work’. If men are known to react to sexual refusals with emotional pain and self-doubt, then this opens up the implication that by saying ‘no’ young women are deliberately inflicting pain. While the researcher (and much social scientific literature) asserts that not saying ‘no’ is the event which is accountable, these young women assert that it is, conversely, saying ‘no’, refusing sex which is the event which must be accounted for. Although one may be tempted to conclude that this ‘double bind’ puts women in an impossible position which constrains their sexual autonomy, these young women provide their own answer - excuses. Women construct excuses as a way to avoid unwanted sexual attention and to
“soften the blow” of sexual rejection (Judy, 4). Jill, Deb and Karen have a
discussion about the utility of different excuses which leads into their talk about
‘emotion work’:

Jill: but if you were in a relationship and you said no then
he could end up feeling ‘Oh god’ you know, ‘What’s
going on’. Whereas maybe if you talked ...

Karen: It’s more difficult in a relationship to say no

Jill: maybe if you talked about it and everything .. but he
could .. but if you didn’t want to - there’s no reason - not
for any reason, but if you just didn’t want to, and then
you said, he could end up getting really hurt about it. And
you wouldn’t really want that, so period would be a good
excuse

(Group 10)

In this extract Jill makes a distinction between having “no reason” to refuse sex -
“you just didn’t want to” is (apparently) not considered a good enough reason -
and providing an excuse - such as menstruation. The former would, according to
Jill, result in the man “getting really hurt”, while the latter would prevent such an
outcome. Using excuses may be a way of ‘framing’ the situation differently.

Cheshire Calhoun expands this idea and describes how emotion work may
involve “telling a story differently”: an angry father “just wants to get his project
finished without interruption.” (Calhoun, 1992: 120). By re-framing the situation
in this way the emotional sting is removed. Telling a male partner that you are
menstruating rather than that you just don’t feel like having sex may be a way of
‘telling a story differently’ so that he no longer has to feel hurt and rejected.

Emotion work, as these young women construct it, is about redefining the
situation, changing or altering the frame surrounding accountable actions, in
order to make negative emotional reactions (such as hurt and rejection)
untenable. Regardless of whether we, as researchers, can see the value of this approach and regardless of whether this strategy is actually used by women in their lived sexual relationships - or whether it is successful - there is clearly a benefit for women talking as though this kind of 'emotion work' is effective. Talk about emotion work also serves to construct issues around sexual refusal as morally accountable and as involving a difficult moral dilemma. As I pointed out at the beginning of this analysis, engaging in sexual activities when you do not want to is an accountable matter, but talk about emotion work serves to construct refusing sex as morally accountable. In so doing young women provide a warrant for not saying 'no' to sex which presents them not as incompetent communicators, or as docile easily manipulated emotional wrecks, but as morally responsible, emotionally strong individuals.

Talk about emotion work also provides a useful function for the women who use it by countering common assumptions about young women's emotional lives. In academic and professional writing, in the media, and in ordinary lay theory, young women are often presented as passive victims who engage in unwanted sex because they are coerced into it by young men who abuse their power; because they have been socialised to meet male needs at the expense of their own; because they are emotionally needy and crave love which they hope to find through sex; or because (as Duncombe and Marsden, 1993 suggest) they are suffering from "false consciousness" and "colluding" with their own oppression. Young women are often presented as lamentably ignorant about men and male sexuality, as easily persuadable, as 'carried away' by love and as obsessed with romance. These approaches share a characterisation of young women as victims. As Sue Widdicombe comments (in relation to discourses around youth subculture), ideas 'filter' into common usage to the young people to whom they refer, and they, in turn, attend to "what is generally known or assumed about their lives, their lifestyles and identities" (Widdicombe, 1995: 123). These women attend to what is generally known about their lives by presenting an alternative version of their emotional entanglements with men. These young women present themselves as 'knowing' about men, and as knowledgeable about the kind of emotional pressure which men attempt to exert. In several group
discussions young women talked somewhat derisively about men’s attempts to persuade women to engage in sexual activities. In the following extract, Sam is responding to the interviewer’s request for some examples of ‘bad reasons to have sex’:

Sam: Bad reason ... Because you’re pressured into it by your boyfriend, because you’re scared he’s going to dump you

Becky: Yeah, that’s probably one of the most common kinds of ones, isn’t it

Lynn: Or, ‘You would if you really loved me’, and ‘I do love you’

(Group, 5)

In this extract, then, Sam comments a boyfriend may threaten to “dump you” in response to a sexual refusal. Becky responds with a knowledgeable agreement, “Yeah, that’s probably one of the most common kinds of ones, isn’t it”, and Lynn’s contribution is constructed as an additional example of another ‘common kind’ of male pressure. The laughter that follows can be heard then, as an ironic commentary on the likely success of this tactic and implies that none of these young women would fall for so blatant a ‘line’. It is interesting that these ‘lines’ mirror almost exactly those which appear on Health Education Authority advertisements which encourages young women to think ‘carefully’ before deciding to have sexual intercourse. With a headline which reads ‘Only have sex because you really want to’ the advert looks like a ‘photo story’ and with each picture is a reason NOT to have sex including: ‘Not because he says he loves you’ and ‘Not because you think he’ll dump you if you don’t’.

This advert depicts young women as suggestable and as ‘falling for’ these ‘lines’. These girls present themselves as already knowing that these ‘lines’ are ‘lines’, in contrast to the innocent, easily led, easily manipulated young women to whom the advert is addressed. In the following example, Deb comes up with a list of typical ‘lines’ which men use to persuade women to have sex. The other group participants
display their ‘knowingness’ by interjecting their own examples into Deb’s list (Karen), and by providing ironic commentary (Jill):

Deb: But then you’ll often get these kind of ‘Oh, you’re a tease’ or ‘You led me on’. I mean, you don’t actually get it like that, but you know that’s what they mean: ‘Well if you didn’t want it you shouldn’t have flirted’

Karen: ‘led me on’

Deb: ‘that way.’ Exactly. So they put that on you and sometimes you feel, ‘Oh god, maybe I am a real tart or whatever, and I have led him on’, and that makes you feel really shitty

Jill: But that’s just their way of

Deb: - yeah -

Jill: - making you do something you don’t want to do

(Group 10)

They address the issue of (what analysts might call) sexual coercion by showing their awareness of the kinds of ‘lines’ men might use, while at the same time being able to provide some sort of translation for what they ‘really’ mean. Although the young women here are talking about their experience of sexual coercion, these men are constructed as rather clumsy and predictable caricatures who are clearly no real threat to these ‘sophisticated’ and ‘knowledgeable’ young women. I would like briefly to draw attention to two of the ways in which women achieve this appearance of knowledgeability (I return to discuss these in more detail in chapter six). Firstly, then, these women talk about (what are presented as) hypothetical rather than actual experiences. Jill, for example (see p. 231) does not talk as though she were discussing a particular occasion in which she did not want to have sex with her boyfriend, or give details or her actual thoughts or remembered conversation. Rather she (and others in this extract) talk about young men in general. The ‘he’ is never named and refers only to a
generic, putative or hypothetical boyfriend. Secondly, by ‘filling in the gaps’ in each other’s talk - in the way that, for example, Karen and Jill, added to and commented on Karen’s list of corny lines - the women corroborate each other’s talk. Both of these features of the talk (using generic terms and filling in the gaps) serve to build up consensual versions of what men are like. By talking about men in general the knowledge which they espouse is, by implication, available to anybody simply by virtue of knowing some men, any men. Their knowledge is not limited to specific men (e.g. of their own age, social class, etc.) or tied to particular individual males with whom they happen to be acquainted, rather what each of them knows about men is general knowledge about what men are like. By displaying high levels of apparent agreement about ‘what men are like’ (either by explicitly agreeing with what the previous speakers has said or by ‘filling in the gaps’) the construction of consensus serves to add credibility to what all the participants are saying by implying that it is shared rather than idiosyncratic knowledge. By implication, it is not what they know about men, but what everyone knows about men. Clearly then these young women both attend to, and dismiss, common knowledge about themselves, while simultaneously creating or constructing common knowledge about men - including their apparently rather feeble and predictable attempts at sexual coercion, as well as their emotional vulnerability.

In sum then, by describing experiences of unwanted sex in relation to what could be described as emotion work young women construct a vision of sexual negotiations as involving emotionally strong women, and emotionally vulnerable men. By characterising sexual refusal as a sexual rejection likely to cause pain and upset, women justify and account for their engagement in unwanted sex by portraying themselves as strong enough to have unwanted sex in order to protect the feelings of their emotionally weak male partners. This way of constructing sexual negotiations changes the focus from a context in which not saying ‘no’ is accountable to one where refusing unwanted sex, rather than acquiescing to it, is seen as accountable. In addition, by talking about sexual negotiations in this way young women can both attend to, and dismiss, common knowledge about young
women's status as emotionally vulnerable and easily manipulated. In short, young women use talk about emotion work to construct a shared, consensual version of men as emotional weaklings, whose feelings are easily hurt, and in turn, to construct themselves as active agents - knowledgeable about sexual relationships, able to negotiate their sexual refusals without hurting men based on informed choices. A constructed reading of the data serves to highlight the particular functions which talk about emotion work serves for young women themselves. Young women have certain investments in describing sexual encounters in particular ways. By describing them in terms of emotion work, young women present a very positive image of themselves. Whether or not women 'really' do emotion work when involved in actual sexual negotiations with young men (and whether this is knowable solely on the basis of self-report data), there is clearly a benefit for them in talking as if they do.

5.4 A Feminist Analysis? The Costs and Benefits of a Transparent versus Constructed Reading

Unlike miscommunication theory which, as I demonstrated in chapter four, has been heavily criticised by feminists, emotion work theory can be seen as pro-feminist in many of the claims that its researchers make. As noted earlier (see section 5.1) the provision of emotion work is seen as profoundly gendered. For many researchers in this area the value of exploring women's provision of emotional labour is that it makes visible aspects of women's work which have often remained 'hidden from history' (cf. Rowbothom, 1973). Women's role as the carers and nurturers of others has been central to feminist debates since the 1960s. In particular, the "invisible work" (cf. Daniels, 1987) involved in housework and in providing care for others have come under detailed scrutiny by feminist sociologists (e.g. Finch and Groves, 1980; Stacey, 1981; Graham, 1983). At a time when liberation was thought to hinge on paid employment and economic independence for women, the exploitation of women through their informal, privatised and unrewarded work in the home, which both restricted opportunities for paid employment outside of the home and was reinforced by
social policies which assumed women’s continued (free) provision of services, was seen as central to women’s oppression. The focus on the commercialization of women’s emotional labour reflects concerns that women’s invisible labour is now being exploited in the public, as well as private, sphere. Analysts emphasise that expectations of women on the job are gender based, the expectation that women will provide emotional labour ensures that women in paid employment “go beyond” the reasonable requirements of providing mental and physical labour (Wichroski, 1994: 36). Feminists have fought to redefine those aspects of women’s work which, because they are supposed to come “naturally” and because they are often unrewarded, remain unrecognised as work. The concept of ‘emotion work’ is popular with feminist social scientists in part because it names as work behaviours which, whether performed in the private or in the public sphere, are typically invisible and unrecognised as work. According to Cheshire Calhoun the concept of emotional work is attractive to feminists because it names “work women do and are expected to do, especially in managing the domestic household.” (1992: 118). Such a task is necessary when we consider the myriad of ways in which women are made invisible within mainstream social science (see section 1.1.1). Making women’s emotion work visible is often an explicit aim of those conducting research in this area (e.g. Wichroski, 1994; Rogers, 1995).

In addition to the exploitation of women through invisible or taken-for-granted labour, emotion work has also been identified as detrimental to women’s well-being. Emotion work in the labour market is described as resulting in ‘emotive dissonance’ (Hochschild, 1983a), such that workers are unable to distinguish between their ‘true’ emotions and those that have been artificially created for a wage. Terms like “alienation”, “inauthenticity” and “self-estrangement” are common place in the literature (e.g. Rogers, 1995; Tolich, 1993). In the sphere of personal relationships this concern is paralleled by the concept of “marital burnout” (Wharton and Erickson, 1995). Emotion work is described as a ‘pressure’ and ‘constraint’ which “locks” women into behaving in ways which may be “against their own best interests” (Zajdow, 1995: 545). Emotion work
has been directly implicated in women’s acceptance not only of unwanted sexual activity (Duncombe and Marsden, 1996) but also explicit physical abuse and violence (Zajdow, 1995). Additionally, the concept of ‘emotion work’ is described as “the last and most obstinate manifestation and frontier of gender inequality” (Duncombe and Marsden, 1995b: 161). These studies then, attempt to challenge the idea that women’s caring is natural, the idea that women are emotional carers, and replace it with the idea that emotional caring is something which women do. They also hope to emphasise the ways in which women are exploited and abused through emotion work. As such a transparent reading of the focus group data which supports emotion work theory is not problematic in the same way that a transparent reading of data supporting miscommunication theory was in the last chapter.

The implications of a transparent reading of the emotion work data are very different. First, from this (transparent) perspective it is possible to argue, as other studies have argued, that women do indeed engage in emotional labour. They monitor and assess the feelings of others, and moderate their own emotions in order to ensure the proper emotions in others. In other words, this approach allows the researcher to make strong statements about the existence of emotion work, its unequal distribution along gendered lines, and its constraining effects on women’s sexual negotiations. Second, it could be argued, as it has been argued in other studies, that the required provision of emotion work is implicated in women’s oppression - women must subjugate their own feelings of disinterest in, or distaste for, sex to those of their male partners, engaging in sex because he wants to rather than satisfy their own sexual desires. Or, alternatively, the emotional costs (of guilt, distress etc.) of prioritising their own feelings by refusing unwanted sex, are understood to outweigh the emotional costs of suppressing such feelings. Such processes, it could be argued, lead to alienation from their own feelings of desire such that women are unable to distinguish their own ‘authentic’ sexual feelings from those feelings which are artificially created to please their partners. In this way the potential for the development of an autonomous sexuality are severely constrained. However, although this approach allows the researcher to make strong claims about women’s oppression it does
have some drawbacks. In particular it obscures the ways in which young women work hard to present themselves as assertive and capable young women. This approach to data analysis presents women as victims of a patriarchal social system which insists that they nurture and provide emotional care for men.

Conversely, from an alternative (constructed) perspective talk about doing ‘emotion work’ may offer women a legitimate and socially acceptable language for explaining and justifying their actions, and for presenting themselves in a favourable light. Young women present themselves as emotionally literate, in control and powerful, while men are emotionally needy and highly predictable. It is not too difficult to see that young women might prefer this version of sexual negotiation to the version offered by assertiveness training classes and date rape prevention programmes which have been accused of presenting women as emotionally needy dupes or victims, and men as all powerful aggressors (e.g. Roiphe, 1993). ‘Emotion work’ talk may enable a woman to present herself as engaging in (what an analyst might call) ‘unwanted sex’ as a chosen act of emotional generosity on her part, rather than manipulation on his. I suggest that women’s talk about ‘emotion work’ cannot be adequately addressed if we assume that research participants are earnestly trying to relate, in a neutral and disinterested way, the experiences of their lives. It is clear that women have specific investments in talking about the doing of ‘emotion work’ and that ‘emotion work’ is used as a participant resource in self-presentation and to achieve interactional goals. Considering emotion work as a participant resource, and treating the data as constructed rather than transparent, involves a completely different image of what young women are like. While a transparent reading of women’s emotion work represents them as passive victims of men’s coercive strategies, a constructed reading shows how young women represent themselves as wily sexual negotiators, able to handle ‘tricky’ situations in a mature and confident fashion.
5.5 Summary and Conclusions

In this chapter I have demonstrated how emotion work theory is a useful conceptual tool for explaining young women’s accounts of sexual negotiation, as such this chapter makes a positive contribution to the growing body of literature which looks at emotion work in personal relationships. This chapter expands the debate about the relative value of transparent and constructed reading of qualitative data presented so far. I argued that the majority of the existing literature on emotion work relies on a transparent reading of qualitative data and demonstrate this in detail with the aid of two emblematic cases. A transparent reading of my own data demonstrated the ‘ordinariness’ of the data and the claims that can be made about the data using such an approach. This may include claims about the gendered nature of emotion work, and the victimization of young women by a patriarchal society which insists that they subjugate their own emotional needs to those of others. In contrast to this transparent reading, I then presented a constructed reading of my data which starts from the assumption that women have certain investments in the ways in which they describe their lives and looks at the functions which talking about sexual refusals in terms of emotion work serves for the women themselves (rather than for patriarchy). In Chapter Four I introduced the idea that the ways in which participants describe events serves certain functions. I build on this in this chapter by examining the functions for young women of describing sexual negotiations in terms of emotion work. I expanded on the social constructionist notion of ‘function’ introduced in Chapter Four by linking it more closely to the interactional context in which the talk is being produced, in other words, looking at what function talk about emotion work serves for these women, at this time and in response to this particular question. This chapter also introduced the idea that participants have certain investments in the ways in which they describe events and feelings. In other words, it matters to them whether they are seen as emotional dupes or as providing emotion work to protect weak male partners. I also introduce the distinction between emotion work as an analyst resource (a way for analysts to explain behaviour) and emotion work as a participant resource (a way for women
themselves to explain behaviour). This chapter, then, presented two different ways of analysing the same data, each of which has particular costs and benefits for the feminist researcher. The first (transparent) reading allows the researcher to make strong claims about the gendered and exploitative nature of emotion work in sexual relationships but presents young women as victims and as cultural dupes. The second (constructed reading) says little about whether or not women actually perform emotion work in sexual relationships, but it does help explain why women might talk about their role in sexual relationships as about protecting men's feelings in a way which allows them to present themselves as strong and capable sexual agents.
Chapter Six

Sexual Scripts and Refusing Sex

“You Can’t Say ‘No’ Because You’ve Gone Too Far”
In talking about their sexual negotiations with young men, young women talk as if sexual behaviours follow routine patterns which are recognised both by themselves and by their male partners. They talk about different ‘stages’ in sexual activity and about one stage progressing inevitably to the next. Psychologists have called these patterns ‘sexual scripts’. Women also report that these patterns and the expectations contained within them influence their ability to refuse sexual activities. In Chapter One (section 1.3.3) I demonstrated how psychologists (and feminists) have used the notion of sexual scripts to account for the prevalence of rape and the ways in which men ignore women’s sexual refusals. In this chapter, I first review the literature on sexual script theory in more detail indicating the ways in which it is either social constructionist or essentialist in relation to the key three features (e.g. the origin of social phenomenon, language of scientific discovery and methodology) which I identified in Chapter One. Then (as in previous chapters) I present both a transparent reading of the data which treats scripts as pre-existing cognitive structures which can be accessed through talk (i.e. using a model of participant as psychological subject), and a constructed reading which treats the data as talk as if sexual activities are scripted or ‘script formulations’ (Edwards, 1994; 1997).

### 6.1 Sexual Script Theory

According to psychologists all behaviour (not just sexual behaviour) is scripted (Schank and Abelson, 1977; Abelson, 1981). Scripts are described as mental representations of everyday objects, they include “stereotyped events” and the sequence in which these events occur (Abelson, 1981: 715). Scripts are brought into play when an individual encounters a recognisable event and then anticipates the events which are likely to follow. In this way scripts apparently allow us to simplify information and to fill in gaps in our knowledge. Abelson gives the following example to illustrate this:

> John was feeling very hungry as he entered the restaurant.  
> he settled himself at a table and noticed that the waiter
was nearby. Suddenly, however, he realized that he'd forgotten his reading glasses (Abelson, 1981: 715).

According to script theory, people make sense of this by drawing upon their scripted knowledge about what usually happens in restaurants. The significance of the lost glasses lies in John's implied difficulty in reading the menu, since no mention of a menu has been made people use their scripted knowledge to fill in the gaps. Script theory has been used in many different areas of psychology (e.g. developmental, organisational, and legal psychology) and has been applied to many different aspects of human behaviour including: looking at children's scripts for familiar events (such as going grocery shopping or to the beach) and how these scripts can be used to develop plans to prevent mishaps (Hudson et al., 1995); sex typing in children's scripts (Levy and Fivush, 1993); behaviour in the workplace (Gioia et al., 1989); and for investigating memory in eye-witness testimony (Holst and Pezdek, 1992).

The idea that sexual behaviour is scripted and the development of sexual script theory is usually attributed to John Gagnon and William Simon in their 1973 book *Sexual Conduct* (e.g. by Laws and Schwartz, 1977; Luria and Rose, 1979; Thorne and Luria, 1986; Edgar and Fitzpatrick, 1993; Moore and Rosenthal, 1993; Rose and Frieze, 1993). Gagnon and Simon's approach has been variously described as 'sociological' (Edgar and Fitzpatrick, 1993) or as offering a 'social perspective' on sex research (Laws and Schwartz, 1977) and as an 'interactionist sociological' approach (Evans, 1993). Gagnon and Simon describe scripts as "blueprints" for sexual behaviour:

- Scripts are like the plans people have in their heads for what they are doing and what they are going to do ... the who’s, what’s, where’s, when’s and why’s for given types of activity ... [w]e use scripts to choose courses of action, to check our behaviour against our plans, and to recall
prior concrete steps in our behaviour through thinking about the elements in our script (Gagnon, 1977: 6).

The concept of a ‘script’ is drawn from a dramaturgical metaphor: just as theatrical actors have to learn a script which tells them where to stand, what to say, who to, and what to do: so sexual actors have to learn a sexual script which tells them what to do sexually, with whom, at what time and in what place. According to script theory, scripts are a device for guiding action, they tell us what ‘counts’ as sex, how to recognise sexual situations, and what to do in sexual encounters. Script theory represents a radical departure from mainstream sexology and sexuality research which has traditionally depicted sexuality as dictated by biological drives. Script theory problematises the link between physical activities and the meaning attributed to such behaviours - i.e. the link between the biological and the social. Script theory contests the idea that some behaviours are inherently sexual and that the meaning of sexuality can simply be ‘read off’ from bodily activities. It is this assumption which informs Freud’s controversial claims about childhood sexuality. Freud’s evidence for sexuality in childhood stems from observations of children engaged in genital play. Studies of infants and children have shown that they do have a tendency to play with their genitals and Gagnon and Simon do not dispute this, rather they disagree with Freud on the meaning of this behaviour. “The observation of children in what appears to be sexual activity from the point of view of adults”, argue Gagnon and Simon “fails to account seriously for the differences between adults scripts and motives and those of children” (1973: 41). Although children can and do play with their own and others’ genitals, and may experience arousal and even orgasm, Gagnon and Simon argue that this cannot be understood as sexual. What is important, according to these researchers, is not the actual activities in which the child engages, but the meaning attributed to these behaviours. Commenting on infant masturbation they say:

For the infant touching his penis, the activity cannot be sexual in the same sense as adult masturbation but is
merely a diffusely pleasurable experience. Only through maturation and learning these adult labels for his experience can the child come to masturbate in the adult sense of that word (Gagnon and Simon, 1973:14).

According to Gagnon and Simon, there is nothing inherently sexual about any physical activities; what is important is not the behaviour itself but the meaning given to that behaviour. These meanings, and the scripts which give behaviour meaning, have to be learned. Sexual behaviour and sexual arousal are not possible, they argue, without this learning process:

The capacity for sexual arousal itself (including physical tumescence) depends on the presence of culturally appropriate eliciting stimuli composed of persons, motives and activities ... [the] combination of various periods of development into the articulate behavioural sequence that leads to orgasms is not fated or ordained at any level; it is neither fixed by nature or by the organs themselves. The very experience of sexual excitement is a learned process and it is only our insistence on the myth of naturalness that hides these components from us (Gagnon and Simon, 1973: 9).

In other words, although there is a widespread cultural assumption that sexual arousal is spontaneous and natural, in fact, they argue, it is a learned process. People learn to feel excitement only when with the ‘right’ person, in the ‘right’ place with the ‘right’ motives. For example, we may observe someone undressing, a behaviour that may be linked to sexual arousal, but if this person is the ‘wrong’ sex, is situated in a changing room, and is about to go swimming we are less likely to become aroused than if they are a sexual partner, who is in our bedroom and with whom we want sexual contact. The scripts we learn tell us who is an appropriate sexual partner, where to have sex, and with what motives.
In short, script theory proposes that sexual behaviour is guided by social rather than biological concerns, is learnt rather than innate, that meanings associated with behaviours are more important than the behaviours themselves, and that sexual behaviours can be understood not in relation to the individual but in relation to the social context.

Sexual script theory, then, contrasts sharply with essentialist theories of sexuality, particularly in relation to its conceptualisation of the origin of social phenomenon. According to Jeffrey Weeks, essentialist theories of sexuality assume that sex is:

... a driving, instinctual force, whose characteristics are built into the biology of the human animal, which shapes human institutions and whose will must force its way out, either in the form of direct sexual expression or, if blocked, in the form of perversion or neuroses (Weeks, 1981: 2).

Against this, script theory argues that sexuality is learned and that "nothing is intrinsically sexual or rather that anything can be sexualised" (Weeks, 1981: 3). In her book *Sex Surveyed*, Liz Stanley describes script theory as "highly influential" and a "classic critique of 'drive reductionist' ways of thinking" (Stanley, 1995: x), while Evans praises its "uncompromising anti-essentialism" (Evans, 1993: 28). At the time Gagnon and Simon were writing their key text *Sexual Conduct*, script theory was not offered as an explicitly social constructionist approach - indeed this approach was barely articulated or named as such. However, since then other writers drawing on script theory have explicitly defined it as social constructionist. For example, Judith Laws and Pepper Schwartz describe their approach to theorising female sexuality, saying: "In applying the idea of social construction to the area of sexuality, we are saying that sexuality is scripted" (Laws and Schwartz, 1977: 6). More recently, John Gagnon himself claims that script theory "anticipated the emerging social
constructionist and postmodern tradition in the social and behavioural sciences” (Gagnon, 1990: 3).

6.2 Sexual Scripts and Refusing Sex: A Transparent Reading

Since the early exposition of this theory by Gagnon and Simon, the notion of scripting has been used to explain many different aspects of sexuality including: dating (Frieze, 1989; Rose and Frieze, 1993); sex therapy (McCormick, 1987; Gagnon, 1990); sexual harassment (Popovich et al., 1995); condom (non)use (De Bro, Campbell and Peplau, 1994; Maticka-Tyndale, 1991; Abraham and Sheeran, 1994; Holland et al., 1990); and extramarital sexuality (Spanier and Margolis, 1983; Thompson, 1983). In addition, and of most relevance here, sexual scripts have also been used to explain instances of rape. As I outlined in Chapter One (section 1.3.3), script theorists argue that men and women are scripted to behave in very different ways when it comes to sexual relationships. Notably, women are expected to restrict or say ‘no’ to sexual activities while men are expected to initiate or say ‘yes’ to sexual activities (McCormick 1979; LaPlante, McCormick and Brannigan, 1980; Green and Sandos, 1983; Grauholtz and Serpe, 1985; O’Sullivan and Byers, 1992). The women in this study also talk about men as the initiators of sexual activity and women as the restrictors. They describe men as unlikely ever to refuse sex. According to Karen (10) “boys always feel like it [having sex]”, and while girls are more likely to say ‘no’ “boys will get turned on and just want to do it whether or not they felt like it before”. She says that “it’s very unlikely” for a boy to refuse sex, and adds “in fact I’ve never heard of it in my life”. Jan and Rose agree:

*Jan: blokes our age don’t say no

Rose: yeah exactly

Hannah: what .. ever ever?
Jan: well hardly ever, they're all on the pull for .. well they're on the pull for sex

(£roup 8)

This same group later explain that men have a “higher libido”, that they have “more sex drive” than women so that “it’s more rare” for a guy to say ‘no’. In this respect, then, the young women in this study are no different from those who participated in the research cited in chapter one. They express similar views about the roles of men and women in sexual encounters. As I also noted in chapter one Stevi Jackson (1978) has argued that this adversarial notion of sexual relations creates a context for rape, and others have argued that men are socialised to ignore a woman’s ‘no’ assuming that it is part of a script. Men expect women to say ‘no’ but are also expected to continue on the assumption that sooner or later she will say ‘yes’. In the following section I demonstrate how a transparent reading of my data could be used to contribute to the literature on sexual scripts and sexual coercion by highlighting the ways in which women’s ‘no’s are scripted in particular ways. I look at the ways in which women’s ‘no’s are expected only at particular times, and in relation to particular sexual activities, and I explore the ways in which these expectations constrain women’s ability to refuse unwanted sexual activities.

When young women talk about (hetero)sexual activities they describe how sexual encounters follow routine, easily identifiable, patterns. There is talk of ‘stages’ of sexual activity (e.g. Liz, 6). The women in this research talk about starting with ‘snogging’, or “kissing and hugging” (Karen, 10); going, or not going, “further” (Zoe, 9); of activities being “in the middle” (Jane, 9) or “half way through” (Liz, 6); and “all the way to sex” (Karen, 10). Indeed Liz provides an almost perfect ‘textbook’ description of the scriptedness of sexual activities:

... in between the kissing stages blah-de-blah you've had the touchy feely bit and (laughing - its true) and then you
had the heavy petting bit and all that palaver and then the sex

(Liz, 6)

This highlights the idea that sexual activities happen in progressive stages with a distinct start, middle and end. Sexual activities are not just ranked in terms of the order in which they occur, they are also ranked in order of importance with the most “important” activities coming last in the scripted sequence. Jill, for example, indicates that although sexual intercourse is seen by most people as “the actual bit” as “something special”, she considers anything “more than kissing” to be very intimate (Jill, 10). Karen recognises that some people, she indicates that she means people from different cultural or religious backgrounds, might place a high importance on French kissing, in her culture “you wouldn’t think anything of it” (10). Rachel describes how penetrative sex is like an invasion whereas ‘foreplay’ can be seen as not so important - “nothing major” - because it doesn’t involve “changing anything” or losing your virginity (11).

The women in this study are by no means unusual when they describe their sexual experiences in this way. The idea that sexual behaviours are scripted to occur in a certain sequence is an aspect of Gagnon and Simon’s theory which, according to Luria and Rose (1979) is best supported by empirical evidence. As Gagnon and Simon put it:

The script for the physical elements of this relationship [a sexual one] is apparent to all who participate in it. First there is kissing, then tongue kissing, then touching of the breasts through the clothing (perhaps here a break in sequence), touching of the breasts under the clothing or the genitals through the skirt or outside the underwear, then finally the genital contact with either a branch to mouth-genital contact (in some few circumstances) to
coitus. Most frequently culmination is in coitus. (Gagnon and Simon, 1973: 75-6)

Empirical research supports their claims (e.g. Brady and Levitt, 1965; Bentler, 1968; Sorenson, 1972; Vener et al., 1972; Mahoney, 1980). In one study, for example, students were asked to sort a deck of cards, each of which had a description of a sexual/dating activity on the reverse, into the order which they would expect them to occur in a one night stand (Edgar and Fitzpatrick, 1993). These cards include activities in a public place such as ‘He greets and introduces himself’, ‘He sits very close to her’, ‘She agrees to go someplace’, and activities in a private place such as ‘He initiates nonintimate touching’, ‘She undresses him’, and ‘He indirectly suggests they have sex’. The authors found a very clear consensus both about the kinds of activities which are expected on a one night stand and the order in which these activities are expected to occur. Focusing more specifically on trying to establish the order of specific sexual activities, Geer and Broussard (1990) gave their participants paired sentences describing sexual activities and asked them to indicate which of the two activities would come before the other in a typical sexual encounter. These sentences described more explicitly sexual activities than in Edgar and Fitzpatrick’s study, including for example: ‘He feels her vaginal lips through her panties’; ‘She kisses his penis’; and ‘They kiss each other on the lips’. Participants were then asked to indicate which of the two activities comes before the other in a typical sexual encounter. The authors found that the specific acts involved in coitus follow a systematic and identifiable pattern, and concluded that:

... we now have solid empirical evidence that the sequence of behaviors that make up coitus fulfils one of the general criteria used in scripting models ... The coital pattern follows a predictable sequence across individuals (Geer and Broussard, 1990: 669)
Interestingly, it appears that this sequence applies to only young, white, heterosexual men and women. Research comparing Black and White adolescents found that for Black teenagers the pre-coital sequence was less predictable and often they engaged only in ‘necking’ (i.e. without light or heavy petting) before intercourse (Smith and Udry, 1985). These two studies are typical of those in this area, and although I discussed how script theory is social constructionist in relation to how it conceptualises the origin of social phenomenon (i.e. sexual behaviour is culturally defined and learned) these two studies show how script theory is essentialist in the methods it uses and the use to which these methods are put. In other words, script theory uses tests, scales and experiments to ‘uncover’, ‘reveal’ or ‘discover’ the ‘truth’ about sexual scripts. Scripts are seen as pre-existing entities which can be brought to light through research. Script theory, then, uses the rhetoric of scientific discovery.

In sum, then, the young white women in this study (like those in other studies) report that sexual activities are expected to occur in a particular sequence. In other words, sexual activities are scripted and these women are able recognise and articulate this script. This research could be used to provide further evidence in support of script theory. Unlike the existing research which relies on explicitly asking people to generate scripts, this research could represent a significant development because it demonstrates that people conceptualise sexual behaviour as scripted without being prompted to do so by a researcher.

Having demonstrated that women conceptualise sexual activities as occurring in a particular sequence I now go on to show how it is possible to analyse my data using script theory and a transparent reading. Such a reading of the data can be used to make important contributions to the literature around sexual coercion and around women’s sexual refusals in particular. I look first at the ways in which the sequence of sexual activities includes both legitimate and illegitimate points at which to say ‘no’, and then at the ways in which there is a point at which women have gone “too far” into the sequence and forfeit the right to say ‘no’.
6.2.1 Legitimate and Illegitimate Times to Say ‘No’

If sexual activities are expected to occur in a particular sequential order because of the meanings related to them (i.e. intimacy and relationship status) then this would imply that activities which occur ‘out of sequence’ would be subject to sanction. As I have already noted empirical data on the traditional (hetero)sexual script suggests that women are expected to resist sexual advances, and, indeed, women do report using strategies to restrict sexual intercourse more than they use strategies to initiate it (LaPlante et al., 1980; McCormick, 1979; McCormick et al., 1984). What this research doesn’t address is at what point in the sexual sequence women are expected to restrict, refuse, or say ‘no’ to sexual activities. There is little discussion in the sexual scripts literature about where in the coital sequence saying ‘no’, either to intercourse or to any other sexual activity, could or should come. However, among the women who participated in this research there is some consensus around the idea that there is a ‘right’ time to say ‘no’ and that there are also times where saying ‘no’ simply isn’t possible. It would perhaps be common sense to assume that those activities which are considered to be most important and most intimate, such as sexual intercourse, would be the most difficult to refuse (as there may be more at stake), while those activities which are considered to be less important or intimate, such as kissing or ‘petting’, would (because of their more trivial nature) be easier to refuse. However, the young women in this study suggest otherwise; Rachel (11) comments that “it’s probably harder to say no to foreplay than sex”, and Pam indicates that “it’s definitely easier if they want a shag than if they just want to feel you up” (9). They explain this in relation to men’s expectations and men’s understanding of the scripting of sexual activity. Young women say that men expect rejection at certain points in a sexual encounter, for example Jane says:

I don't know I think with sex and snogging they are the two moments when the bloke is most prepared to be turned away
This may be because ‘snogging’ is seen as the initial point of contact, the point at which the man finds out if his feelings are reciprocated, while sexual intercourse, because it is defined as ‘real sex’ and imbued with symbolic significance may also make rejection more likely. Young women, as script theory would predict, are able to anticipate men’s reactions and to recognise that ‘no’s at certain points in the sequence are expected (and perhaps more readily accepted) by men. Saying ‘no’ at these points is legitimate. As Rachel states saying ‘no’ to sexual intercourse is “more understandable to the man” because this is an “invasion”;
‘other’ activities, precisely because they are seen as less important (“you’re not doing anything wrong”, “nothing major”), are more difficult to refuse. As well being seen as less important activities other than ‘snogging’ and sexual intercourse, refusing ‘other’ activities may be more difficult to excuse. According to Deb there’s “less of an excuse” for refusing oral sex because, she explains, “it’s not such a big thing so you can’t really say "oh I'm not ready for this" (10). As I demonstrated in chapter three (section 3.3.2) women often use excuses as a way of refusing sex, if there is no good excuse then they may not feel that they have a right to say ‘no’.

What is also implied in both Rachel’s and in Jane’s comments about men anticipating rejection is that there are times when men do not expect to be stopped and are not prepared to be ‘turned away’. This is made more explicit in the following extract between Jane and Pam:

Jane: whereas in the middle ... kind of all the other stuff ... a bloke kind of ... I don’t think they really expect to be kind of stopped [Laughter], do you know what I mean? And in a way ... In a way that’s quite tricky, because they’re not really expecting ...

Pam: It’s sort of a bumper pack - a snog and a ...
Chapter Six: Sexual Scripts and Refusing Sex

Jane: It's kind of ... it just follows on

Pam: That's kind of what most people think anyway

(Group 9)

Saying 'no' to 'other activities' occurring in the 'middle' stage is more difficult because men do not expect to be stopped at this stage. As well as illustrating the idea that there are times when men don't expect rejection, this extract also demonstrates how sexual activities are seen as following some kind of natural progression which culminates in intercourse. The problem is that once entered this sequence is seen as a 'bumper pack' and culmination in intercourse is expected to be inevitable. Women are not given the opportunity to say 'no' and there is no legitimate point at which to do so. The following extract of conversation between Jill, Deb and Karen further exemplifies this 'bumper pack' approach to sexual encounters:

Jill: [saying no] gets more difficult as the things are considered less far, if you know what I mean, because -

Deb: Well it's not like you don't... if you are... I don't know, you don't really feel like you have to ask permission to, whereas sex ...

Karen: Yeah, it's naturally assumed

Deb: -Yeah, yeah, it's just like carry on

Karen: Yeah, you go really ...

Deb: and then you go more and more into it
Karen: It's like a natural progression

Jill: And then if you pull their hand away then,

Karen: I think a lot of blokes would be so surprised if you stopped them at things like that, [I] think a lot of people ... because they just naturally assume

(Group 10)

This extract illustrates many of the points I have been making. As activities are considered less important, as "less far", they become more difficult to refuse. Men do not, according to these young women, expect to be stopped at these activities, nor to have to "ask permission" to engage in them. Consent to one activity is automatically seen as consent to the next. As Karen bluntly puts it:

... you start off kissing and hugging and then you go further and further you know [...] and blokes might think 'oh well if she's doing that then she's going to do that, and I expect her to do that'

(Group, 10)

In other words, according to these young women, the idea that one thing leads to another can make it difficult to refuse unwanted sexual activities.

So, according to the women in this study the sexual sequence includes certain key points (such as 'snogging' and intercourse) at which refusing a sexual activity is easier and other points at which saying 'no' is more difficult. The arduousness or otherwise of saying 'no' is linked not to the particular act in itself, women say, but to the expectations of their male partners who anticipate sexual rejections at some points in the sexual sequence but not others. Such a view of sexual interactions may severely constrain a woman's ability to refuse unwanted sexual activities or to feel confident that her refusals will be effective.
6.2.2 Going Too Far: Forfeiting the Right to Say 'No'

I have demonstrated that young women talk about sexual encounters as following a particular set of 'stages' or a sequence, and that within this sequence they identify both legitimate and illegitimate times to say 'no'. In this section I draw attention to the ways in which women talk about the dangers of going "too far" into this sequence and of forfeiting the right to say 'no'. Although the notion of "going too far" was talked about a great deal and was seen as a dilemma by at least some of the young women, the point at which one could be said to have gone 'too far' was far from clear cut. For Liz (6), it is after kissing and somewhere between the "touchy feely bit" and "heavy petting". For others, such as Jill (10), "getting off with a guy" is "just a bit of fun" and is not going too far, while Zoe (9) argues that after 'snogging' saying 'no' "could get really difficult".

It is at the point of having gone 'too far' that the women talk about how they "can't" say 'no' rather than about saying 'no' as being more or less difficult. Sara and Liz demonstrate this subtle difference in the following extract:

Sara: it's not rude but it's the same sort of feeling it's like oh my god well I can't say no now can I

Liz: it's like you're at that late stage when it's just about to happen and you're thinking I don't want to do this but I can't say no it's gone too far [...] I should have said no I should have stopped him before and I can't stop him now because I'm half way through the swing of it all

(Group, 6)

That there are times when it is apparently unacceptable for young women to say 'no' to sex is supported by empirical research on sexual aggression and rape. In one study which exemplifies this kind of research, male and female students
were given scenarios of sexual situations in which the timing of ‘Diane’s’ protest was varied to occur at different points in an already assumed scripted sequence of sexual behaviours. Protest was timed at early, middle or late stages; early protest occurred immediately after a ‘French’ kiss, middle protest began when ‘Lee’ began to caress ‘Diane’ below the waist, and late protest was when both were undressed. The scene was consensual until protest was first introduced. They found that the longer ‘Diane’ waited to protest, the greater was her perceived desire for sex, such that, if Diane was naked before she began to protest she was perceived as desiring sex to an equal extent as Lee regardless of the amount of force he subsequently used. The authors conclude that this finding supports the rape myth that:

...if a woman goes too far, such as by removing all her clothing, a red flag is raised indicating to an observer that she desires sex, and the male’s behaviour is not likely to modify this perception (Shotland and Goodstein, 1983: 224).

In addition, ‘Diane’ was perceived as being more to blame if she waited until after she was undressed (a late protest) than if she made an early or middle protest, and Lee was perceived as being less violent.

This analysis, then, treats the data as transparent evidence for the existence of sexual scripts. Scripts are conceptualised as pre-existing - ‘out there’ - and accessible either by asking people directly through questionnaires (as is most common), or, less commonly, by looking at how individuals talk about sexual encounters in interviews or focus groups (as is the case here). This talk is taken as transparent evidence for the existence of scripts which women draw upon to make sense of their experiences and to guide their sexual decision-making and behaviour. That these current sexual scripts have unfavourable consequences for women is seen as simply unfortunate. From this perspective, then, scripts are an analyst resource for explaining participants’ actions.
6.3 Talk about ‘Sexual Scripts’:
A Constructed Reading

Instead of treating the focus group talk as transparent we can, as in the previous chapters, consider talk as constructed data. So, rather than treating talk as evidence for the existence of sexual scripts which govern ‘what really happens’ in sexual encounters between men and women, we can consider the descriptions of sexual encounters as following identifiable patterns as ‘script formulations’ (cf. Edwards, 1994 & 1995). Script formulations are “descriptions of actions and events that characterise them as having a recurring predictable, sequential pattern” (Edwards, 1995: 319). If young women’s descriptions of sexual encounters are not conceptualised as being tied to real-world events (as is the case in a transparent reading), the interesting question becomes why choose to describe events as scripted, and what functions does this serve? This section looks at the business being done and the functions it serves to talk as if sexual encounters are scripted, as if they follow easily identifiable, predictable patterns. Instead of assuming that people’s behaviour is guided by sexual scripts, and that snippets of these scripts can be seen in their talk, in this section I look at how people’s descriptions of events and actions characterise them as following a ordered and sequential pattern. Rather than seeing sexual scripts as a framework for understanding sexual experiences, I look at how talking about sexual encounters as scripted re-constructs experiences as orderly and predictable and as performing particular functions for the speakers involved. In so doing, I build on the distinction (introduced in the previous chapter) between sexual scripts as an analyst resource (an analytical category used by social scientists to make sense of behaviour) and sexual scripts as a participant resource used by research participants to achieve certain interactional goals. Rather than assuming that women are objectively and neutrally reporting on their experiences, I argue that women have certain investments in their talk. Women have something to gain or lose in their descriptions of sexual encounters. By attending to the particular context of the talk I demonstrate how women display “sensitivity to, and
reasoning about, the interactional consequences of the utterances so produced” (Wooffitt, 1992: 70). I explore the ways in which, by talking about sexual encounters as if they were scripted, women manage and negotiate ‘tricky’ interactional business. In particular I investigate the ways in which the ‘scriptedness’ of sexual activities serves to normalise actions, to construct identities (both of the speaker and others), and to deal with issues of accountability and blame.

I look first (in section 6.3.1) at the ways in which young women construct sexual activity as scripted and the features of their talk which can be identified as script formulations. I then move on to look at the functions that script formulations - talk about the recurring and predictable nature of sexual encounters - serves for the young women in this study. In particular I focus (in section 6.3.2) upon the ways in which script formulations are used to construct ambiguity about the timing of ‘no’, to construct saying ‘no’ as morally reprehensible (in section 6.3.3), and to construct sexual coercion as an ordinary event (in section 6.3.4).

### 6.3.1 Constructing Sexual Activity as Scripted

Rather than assuming that there are pre-existing scripts of which analysts can catch glimpses through talk, I would like to identify the features of talk which discursively construct sexual encounters as scripted (i.e. the script formulations). In other words, how talk is constructed in such a way to appear as if sexual encounters are scripted. I draw attention to six particular features of the focus group discussions: (i) reference to different ‘stages’ in sexual encounters; (ii) reference to the predictability of past, present and future events; (iii) the use of an ‘if ... then’ structure; (iv) explicit reference to consensus and to what ‘most people’ think; (v) participants finishing off each others’ sentences; and (vi) reference to generalised (rather than individualised) events. The first three of these six features (i.e. reference to different ‘stages’ in sexual encounters; reference to the predictability of past, present and future events; and the use of an ‘if ... then’ structure) construct sexual encounters as scripted by talking about
sexual encounters as sequentially ordered. Sexual encounters are described in such a way that they appear to occur in a clear order which is repeated in more or less the same format on many different occasions - i.e. as scripted. The last three features (i.e. explicit reference to consensus and to what ‘most people’ think, finishing off each others’ sentences, and reference to generalised rather than individualised events) allow women to construct sexual encounters as scripted by implying that they are drawing on shared knowledge or a consensus about what sexual encounters are like. Sexual encounters are described in such a way that they appear to be part of some shared knowledge about what ‘everyone knows’, about the ‘what’, ‘where’, ‘why’ and ‘when’ of such encounters. I do not mean to suggest here that this knowledge is actually shared, but rather to point to the ways in which shared knowledge is ‘worked up’ as shared, as something which participants treat as shared (cf. Edwards, 1997). I briefly outline each of these six features.

(i) As noted earlier (see section 6.2), participants talk as if there are easily identifiable ‘stages’ in sexual encounters; “an early stage” (Cath, 7), a “heavy petting stage” (Sara, 6), a “late stage” (Liz, 6). This reference to stages implies a sequential orderliness to sexual encounters: one stage comes before or after another; heavy petting comes before intercourse and “everything usually leads from French kissing” (Karen, 10). This presents sexual activities as following a set script with pre-set stages to follow. Sexual activities, then, are described as sequentially ordered.

(ii) The young women in these groups also make reference to past, present, and future events. Liz, for example, makes reference both to things which have happened before, and to things which she expects to happen again:

Liz: and they’re [men] going to think that I’m leading them on and blah-de-blah, and it’s not fair on them

Hannah: it’s not fair on them?
Liz: That's the sort of thing that I've had in the past, 'You gone too far now', blah-de-blah

(Group, 6)

By drawing a comparison between what men are going to do and what they have done in the past Liz implies a continual recycling of events where the same things happen over and over again and evoke the same responses. Rather than each event being described as spontaneous or different, sexual encounters are depicted as routine and predictable. A little later, in response to a question about what happens when you don't say 'no' to unwanted sexual activities, Liz says she would think:

Liz: ... why didn't I say something when you should have done, because you’ve sat there and all through it you’ve been thinking ‘I don’t want to do this, I should have said no, I should have stopped him before and I can’t stop him now because we’re half way through the swing of it all and I’m just so stupid. Next time I’m just going to sort it all out, but’ [...] but you never do, well you do but .. I don’t know, it is difficult

(Group, 6)

"Next time" suggests that these situations are recurrent. It is interesting that Liz states that even despite some good intentions to do things differently “you never do” which (although it is immediately repaired) implies some sort of inevitability to events. Again, then, sexual activities are seen as being orderly, predictable or scripted in nature, and as following a specific sequential order.

(iii) A further feature of young women’s talk is the use of an “if x ... then y” structure. Edwards (1997) notes that this use of the conditional ‘if’ implies that some kind of routine action which will inevitably follow. Given a particular
circumstance ‘then’ the following events will automatically follow: “if you turn round and say that ['no'] then they’ll think you’re a slapper” (Sara, 6); “if you start snogging them then they think that you really like them” (Zoe, 9). This gives the talk a sequential element. They are describing, then, what normally, usually, or routinely happens in sexual encounters, rather than an unusual, one-off, specific event. Descriptions of events as ‘scripted’ serve to normalise actions, to construct them as perfectly ordinary and as not requiring special explanation.

(iv) Young women make explicit reference to what ‘everyone knows’ about sexual encounters. This serves to construct a sense of consensus or shared knowledge. I demonstrate this with an extract of data in which Jane has been considering the question of when in (what analysts call) the sexual sequence is the best time to say ‘no’; she decides (as we have seen in the previous section) that ‘sex’ and ‘snogging’ are the times when “the bloke is most prepared to be turned away” while “in the middle” it can be “quite tricky”:

Pam: It’s a sort of bumper pack - a snog and a …

Jane: It’s kind of … it just follows on

Pam: That’s kind of what most people think anyway

(Group, 9)

Pam draws on ‘what most people think’ which implies that there is a general pool of knowledge about sexual activities which most people, including Pam, have access to. Pam is simply voicing what most people think and what most people, if asked, would say. Similarly, other young women describe what “usually”: (Karen, 10) or “often” (Deb, 10) happens, or things which guys will “obviously” try to do (Karen, 10). This feature of the talk constructs a sense of shared knowledge and consensus about sexual encounters.
(v) Young women also ‘fill in the gaps’ in each others’ talk and complete each others’ sentences. In the following extract, for example, Sara and Liz appear to be telling a very familiar story, a story so familiar that they can finish off each other’s sentences and fill in the next line of the story so that it appears continuous. Indeed if it were not for the fact that I have clearly indicated who is articulating which part of the story it could almost have been told by one person.

Sara: I think there is a lot of pressure when it boils down to it, because then you think, ‘oh maybe I shouldn't have, you know’

Liz: ‘- have led him on, maybe I shouldn't have touched them’

Sara: ‘maybe I shouldn't have gone upstairs with him or maybe’. Yeah, I think it is really difficult to say no (Group, 6)

By completing each others’ sentences these women implicitly construct consensus (cf. Edwards, 1997). By finishing off each others’ sentences it appears as if Sara and Liz are drawing on common knowledge about what happens in sexual encounters - as if they are reading the same script. In chapter five (see section 5.3) I argued that by ‘filling in the gaps’ women build up consensual versions of what men are like, in this case I argue that by ‘filling in the gaps’ young women build consensual versions of what sexual encounters and sexual refusals are like.

(vi) Finally, young women also construct consensus by reference to generalised (rather than individualised) events. They produce a generalised description of the pressures on young women in sexual negotiations rather than an account of a particular situation in which they themselves felt pressured. In chapter three (section 3.1) I drew attention to those times when these women talked about
(what were presented as) their own personal experiences of refusing sex. I noted at this time that the majority of the focus group discussions focused not on specific refusals but on generalised and hypothetical accounts of saying ‘no’. In chapter five (section 5.3) I noted that this feature of the talk might be useful to young women because it constructs a version of what ‘everybody’ knows about sexual encounters, which in turn, allows them to portray themselves as knowledgeable and competent sexual actors. In this chapter I demonstrate how, by drawing on generalised and hypothetical accounts of sexual encounters, these women portray sexual activities as scripted - as following routine and predictable patterns.

In this section, then, I have demonstrated the ways in which women describe sexual encounters as scripted, as following easily identifiable patterns. I have drawn attention to six particular features of talk which achieve this end including: referring to ‘stages’ in sexual encounters; referring to past, present and future events; using a ‘if ... then’ structure; referring to what ‘most people’ think; completing each others’ sentences; and describing generalised rather than individualised events. From a constructed reading of the data these features of the talk are best understood not as evidence for the existence of pre-determined sexual scripts, but rather as ‘script formulations’ - as linguistic devices which women use to present sexual encounters as scripted perform particular functions for the speakers involved.

6.3.2 Constructing Ambiguity

As noted earlier (see section 6.2.2), both the social scientific literature and young women themselves report that when women go ‘too far’ in the sexual sequence they forfeit the right to say ‘no’ to sex. However, as we have seen, exactly when one is said to have gone ‘too far’ is both ambiguous and subject to disagreement. Similarly, women also disagree about the ‘right’ time to say ‘no’ (see section
6.2.1). The timing of ‘no’, then, seems rather ambiguous. One explanation for this disagreement and confusion is that the timing of ‘no’ is ambiguous. Using a model of participant-as-informant these women could be seen as neutrally reflecting on how sexual encounters really operate. For young women who are trying to say ‘no’ effectively (i.e. in a way that avoids unwanted sex) ambiguity around the timing of ‘no’ can be extremely problematic. As we have seen, when a woman says ‘no’ at the ‘wrong’ time (i.e. ‘too late’) she may be seen as having led the man on and may ultimately be held responsible for her own rape (e.g. Muehlenhard and MacNaughton, 1988; Goodchilds et al., 1988; Quinn et al., 1991). There seems to be, then, few advantages for women of ambiguity and confusion around the appropriate timing of a sexual refusal. By contrast, for young men who wish to pursue their own sexual pleasures and to coerce their partners into sex, such ambiguity is extremely useful. Since any activity which men deem to be sexual (wearing a short skirt, getting into a car, kissing etc.) can be construed as an invitation for increased intimacy, any woman who fails to acquiesce to a man’s request (demand) for sex can be accused of ‘leading him on’, of having reneged on some agreement, or of having failed to live up to expectations. An alternative (constructed) reading of the data might look not at the advantages or disadvantages of ambiguity in the timing of sexual refusals, but at talk about ambiguity around saying ‘no’ and the functions which this serves for the women who formulate such descriptions. The function which ambiguity serves is understandable only in relation to what is at stake for young women in the way they describe sexual encounters. In other words rather than assuming that women are neutrally reporting on sexual events, this approach assumes that women have certain investments in producing descriptions of sexual encounters. What is at stake here is young women’s accountability for not saying ‘no’ to unwanted sex, or for finding saying ‘no’ difficult. There are a number of possible explanations which women could draw upon to account for the difficulty of saying ‘no’. Women could provide internalised explanations (i.e. saying ‘no’ is easy, but they find saying ‘no’ difficult because they are poor communicators or emotional labourers) or externalised explanations (i.e. they find saying ‘no’
difficult because saying ‘no’ *is* difficult). Women have certain *investments* in what type of explanation of their behaviour, identity, and actions are taken up.

To illustrate this I use as an example the discussion between Sara, Liz and myself, in which they agree that saying ‘no’ is difficult. I, as researcher, am pressing them to explain what exactly is difficult about saying ‘no’.

Sara: It’s not rude, but it’s that same sort of feeling, it’s like ‘Oh my God, well I can’t say no now can I

Liz: It’s like you’re at that late stage, when it’s just about to happen, and you’re thinking, ‘I don’t want to do this, but I can’t say no; it’s gone too far’

Hannah: So you can’t say it because you’ve gone too far?

Liz: And they’re going to think that I’m leading them on and blah-de-blah-de-blah, and it’s not fair on them

(Group 6)

Liz introduces the idea that saying ‘no’ “at that late stage” because “it’s gone too far” and a man will think “that I’m leading them on” (6). Sara and Liz are, then, working quite hard to formulate their explanation of the difficulty of saying ‘no’ as something which ‘everybody knows’. Using some of the script formulations I identified in the previous section they construct their account as one articulation of a stock of shared knowledge - a consensual picture of what sexual refusals are like.

At this point I question whether it is “easier to say no before you’ve started doing anything”. By coming up with such an easy and readily available ‘solution’ I make available a number of different implications: a) saying ‘no’ isn’t that difficult, women just have to say it earlier in the sexual sequence; and/or b) if
these women find it difficult then maybe that’s because they aren’t saying ‘no’ at the right time. Consequently my suggestion is ridiculed by Sara: “you can’t just turn round and say ‘would you like a drink?’ - ‘yes but I’m not going to have sex with you”. Sara’s rather far-fetched example is an ‘extreme case formulation’ (cf. Pomerantz, 1986) in which one dimension (in this case saying ‘no’ earlier) is taken to its limits. This example provides an effective warrant and legitimates Sara’s original claim that sexual refusals are difficult. This example, coupled with the work done to present their version as part of some shared knowledge serves to make my suggestion to look naïve or somehow disingenuous. This is exacerbated by the laughter, from all of us, which follows Sara’s example. A short while later Sara elaborates on the idea that if you say ‘no’ to sex before the invitation (expectation) of sex has been made explicit then men will “think you’re a right slapper” or will say “well I didn’t want to have sex with you anyway”. In effect, then, Sara constructs the difficulty of saying ‘no’ as a dilemma. According to Sara and Liz, it is hard to say ‘no’ when the invitation for sex has not yet explicitly arisen; but postponing the ‘no’ may mean going ‘too far’ to say ‘no’ at all. In what ways, then, does this talk about ambiguity and dilemmas function to meet the investments of Sara and Liz? One way to approach this is to consider the consequences of arguing that sexual refusals are clearly scripted. If sexual refusals were described as clearly and comprehensively scripted, then a) saying ‘no’ would be an expected and easily anticipated event that would be relatively easy rather than difficult, and b) having led someone on would be a clearly identifiable transgression of this script and would be an accountable action. Saying ‘no’ at the ‘wrong’ time would be attributable to causes internal to the individual (i.e. saying ‘no’ is easy therefore if Sara finds it difficult then there must be something wrong with her). Consider, for example, how different the conversation would be if, in response to my question “is it easier to say ‘no’ before you’ve started doing anything”, Sara had replied “oh gosh, I never thought of that; of course it is, I’ll do that next time”. Sara would have appeared naïve, inexperienced and unsophisticated. Talk about ambiguity in sexual refusals functions to present these women as possessing various attributes and as being particular kinds of people. Talk about ambiguity presents them as
aware of the difficulties involved in refusing sex, rather than as naively blundering through sexual encounters unaware of the delicacy of the interaction and the potential for getting it wrong. Ambiguity, then, is central to these women's accounting process. The timing of 'no' has to be loosely or ambiguously scripted to allow for the possibility of getting it wrong without being held accountable for the mistake (i.e. without actually being open to the accusation of being a slapper or leading men on). By emphasising the difficulty of getting it right, and the idea that there is no easy way to refuse sex, these women imply that this is not simply a problem for them as individuals but a general problem in all sexual encounters in which one partner desires (expects) a greater level of intimacy than the other. Such an account allows women to deal with issues of accountability and identity which are at stake in their accounts.

6.3.3 Constructing Saying 'No' and NOT Saying 'No' as Ordinary

As noted above, women have certain investments in accounting for sexual refusals in certain ways. As we have seen, one way to deal with issues of accountability and identity is to construct the timing of sexual refusals as ambiguous. Another way, and this is the one that is the focus of this section, is to construct one's own behaviour as normal, ordinary, and the sort of thing that everyone does. Scripted explanations are useful because they allow speakers to place their own individual actions within the larger framework of cultural norms (i.e. saying 'no' is difficult, women find saying 'no' difficult, it is always difficult, everyone finds it difficult and therefore they are just like everyone else). This is most clearly demonstrated in accounts in which women refer to consensus and what most people think. Earlier (section 6.3.1 iv), I illustrated this particular script formulation with a piece of talk from Pam and Jane in which they implied that most people conceptualise sexual encounters as a "bumper pack" of sexual activities which automatically follow on from one another. The reference to what "most people think" places Pam and Jane's version of events into a wider social context. It implies that their version is not just the opinion of two individuals but is a socially sanctioned, widely available, account shared by
many. This serves both to reinforce the credibility of their version, and to counter any possible accusation that they have got it wrong, or that their version is somehow unusual or different. Without this reference to “what most people think” Pam’s characterisation of sexual activities as a “bumper pack”, where one thing naturally leads to another, could be seen as accountable. If most people do not agree then perhaps there is something peculiar to Pam which makes her think this way. By implication Pam might be seen as the sort of promiscuous young woman for whom ‘snogging’ does automatically lead to sex. The reference to what “most people” think serves to undermine any such accusations which might tarnish her reputation or pose a threat to her identity. A further example, also from Pam, illustrates this more clearly. In response to a question about the ease or difficulty of saying ‘no’ to different types of sexual activities Pam says:

Pam: if it’s in a nightclub you can just snog them and walk off again [Laughter] I don’t do that all the time OK, but like most people do that

(Group, 9)

Pam attends to the accountability of this formulation, the implication that she is sexually ‘loose’ the sort of person who ‘loves them and leaves them’, both by indicating that this is not always her reaction, and by implying that this response is usual and predictable - it is what “most people” do. In this case, then, Pam’s method of refusing sexual activities by walking away is made ordinary (and therefore requiring no special explanation or account) by reference to what most people think, say or do.

But, just as script formulations can be useful for accounting for the ease of saying ‘no’ and for the particular method of sexual refusal used, so too can they be used to account for the difficulty of saying ‘no’ and for NOT saying ‘no’. In the rest of this section I look at the ways in which acquiescing to unwanted sexual activities can be made ordinary through script talk.
Rather than drawing on explicit references to what most people think, say, or do, script talk can also construct a sense of group consensus about the social norms governing sexual refusals. One way to account for the difficulty of saying ‘no’, then, is to put sexual refusals into a moral frame governed by ‘rules’ for appropriate moral behaviour. This moral frame is reflected in discussions about the ‘fairness’ of particular actions, whether certain courses of action are ‘right’ or ‘wrong’, whether you ‘should’ or ‘shouldn’t’ have done something, and whether you can or “can’t” do certain things. There are several indications that talk about saying ‘no’ has a moral frame. For example, Sara and Liz worry “.. maybe I shouldn’t have […] maybe I shouldn’t have gone upstairs with him” (Sara, 6), “.. maybe I shouldn’t have touched them” (Liz, 6). Here the implication is that Sara and Liz have done something accountable, something they shouldn’t have done, and that they are responsible for having got themselves into a tricky situation. Immediately though, Sara shifts the focus commenting that “I think it is really difficult to say no”. It is not that this rather general statement contrasts with the previous comments about her own activities. Rather than saying “I find it really difficult to say no”, which might imply a particular defect in her character, she implies that saying ‘no’ is ipso facto difficult. This time to explain why saying ‘no’ is difficult Sara and Liz draw on a moral framework:

Liz: it just doesn’t seem right to say no when you’re up there in the situation

Sara: it’s not rude, it’s not rude - it sounds awful to say this doesn’t it

Liz: I know

Sara: it’s not rude, but it’s that same sort of feeling, it’s like ‘oh my god I can’t say no now can I’

(Group, 6)
Sara and Liz problematise saying no. This contrasts with the social science literature which problematises not saying ‘no’. Saying ‘no’ is, according to Sara and Liz, “rude”, impolite or discourteous. You can’t say ‘no’, not because you are unable, but because it doesn’t seem right to say ‘no’. Here, not saying ‘no’, far from being reprehensible, is not only appropriate but required behaviour. Interestingly, this moral imperative comes into operation only at a particular (but unspecified) ‘stage’ in the sexual encounter: “I can’t say no now”, “at that late stage when it’s just about to happen”, “when you’re up there in the situation”. This is linked to the accusations of having lead someone on, of having gone too far to say ‘no’ (identified in section 6.2.2). The image of sexual encounters presented by these young women is one in which certain activities are expected to follow others, if I go upstairs with a man (or kiss him, or get in his car etc.), he will expect sexual intercourse; having made an implicit promise or commitment to do this, it is then not right for me to refuse. By putting sexual refusals in a moral frame women do not depict themselves as passive victims of manipulative men, but rather as acquiescing to unwanted sex because they are morally responsible people. In other words, script talk serves to make acquiescing to unwanted sex ordinary, expected, and proper.

6.3.4 Constructing Sexual Coercion as Ordinary

One of the most interesting features of this talk is the ways in which young women describe the behaviour of young men, and in particular, what young men are likely to say. Often this is done in the form of ‘reported speech’ (Holt, 1996), or ‘active voicing’ (Wooffitt, 1992), where speakers report dialogue with others - the words they use and the things they say. This may be marked by intonation or more explicitly through a preface such as “she said” (cf. Potter, 1996; Holt, 1996). There are many examples of this in my data: “that’s the sort of thing I’ve had in the past ‘you’ve gone too far’” (Liz, 6), or “that’s what I said to my present boyfriend ‘I’m not having sex with you’” (Liz, 6), and this joint construction from Cath and Helen:
Cath: You can’t assume, especially with the male ego, because they’ll just say to you -

Helen: ‘Well, I didn’t want to in the first place’

Cath: Because I was at this party and these blokes were just talking to us and they were complete Kevins, and one bloke said to me ‘Do you want to dance’, so I said ‘no’, and he said to me ‘Well nor do I’ and walked off

(Group, 7)

In all of these extracts young women are apparently reporting the words of young men. If, as in the previous analysis, I were treating the data as transparent, I might assume that these extracts relate (in more or less accurate detail) to actual conversations between these young women and their boyfriends. However, following Wooffitt I would argue that “it is more useful to begin with the assumption that the speakers are designing certain utterances to be heard as if they were said at the time” (Wooffitt, 1992: 161). Indeed, often these utterances cannot be tied to a specific conversation. Deb illustrates this when she says “you’ll often get these ‘Oh you’re a tease’ or ‘You led me on’ […] ‘Well if you didn’t want it you shouldn’t have flirted’ (Deb, 10). Here, rather than tagging the reported speech to a particular person, Deb says “you’ll often get these…” which implies that it is unlikely to be an actual quote but is “taken to be emblematic, as the kind of thing that they would have said” (Potter, 1996: 161). Young women also impute motives and psychological states (as well as actual words) to young men, they talk about what young men think, feel, expect and want: “they’re a bit on edge as to whether they think it’s going to work or not” and “if you start snogging them then they think that you like them” (Zoe, 9) “I think with sex and snogging they are the two moments when blokes are most prepared to be turned away” (Jane, 9), “they’re going to think that I’m leading them on” (Liz, 6), “They haven’t got the impression that you want anything” (Pam, 9), “I think a lot of blokes would be very surprised if you stopped them at things like that [...]
because they just naturally assume...” (Karen, 10). Moreover, speakers directly report other peoples’ thoughts (Holt, 1996), as demonstrated by Karen - “blokes might think ‘oh well if she’s doing that then she’s going to do that and I expect her to do that” (10). Karen’s comment cannot be based on actual knowledge but instead is constructed as a specific instance of a more general pattern of behaviour. This general pattern is constructed as shared knowledge using non-specific plurals such as ‘they’ and ‘blokes’. This indicates a general experience something that all men, any man, would say, think, feel and do rather than particular knowledge of a specific man. It presents a kind of collective or general response, a response which all men can be expected to have. In other words men’s responses to being told ‘no’ are routine, predictable and scripted. The scripted nature of this talk is further evidenced in the following passage in which Liz constructs the reactions of men to women’s actions as so predictable that it is not necessary to explicitly explicate them:

Liz: It’s like you’re at that late stage, when it’s just about to happen, and you’re thinking ‘I don’t want to do this, but I can’t say no; it’s gone too far’

Hannah: So you can’t say it because you’ve gone too far?

Liz: And they’re going to think that I’m leading them on and blah-de-blah-de-blah, and it’s not fair on them

Hannah: It’s not fair on them?

Liz: That’s the sort of thing that I’ve had in the past, ‘You’ve gone too far now’, blah-de-blah

(Group, 6)

Men’s reactions then, are boringly predictable and hardly worth fully articulating. What is interesting is that many of these reactions which the young
women reportedly expect involve some kind of explicit accusation - ‘You’ve
gone too far’, ‘You’ve led me on’, ‘You’re a tease’. As noted earlier (section
6.3.2), from a perspective of transparent analysis the advantages for men of this
construction may include being able to accuse women of having led them on and
pressurising them to have sex. The vagueness and ambiguity which makes
pinpointing the point at which one is said to have gone ‘too far’ serve to make
this accusation unavoidable for women. However, if we look more closely at the
intricate detail of the interaction (using the above example from Sara and Liz) we
can see how these young women attempt to manage such accusations and the
advantages for women of formulating their description of events in this way.
Firstly, by describing these accusations in the form of reported speech (either
direct or indirect) Sara and Liz are able to make their reporting of such
accusations appear more neutral. They avoid giving their own opinions directly,
but instead report someone else’s, leaving the listener free to make up their own
minds about the appropriateness of the comment (cf. Wooffitt, 1992). Sara and
Liz remain non-committal about whether the accusation is justified or not, about
whether their actions do or don’t meet the criteria of having ‘gone too far’. But,
by describing men’s accusatory reaction as routine and predictable (i.e. scripted),
Sara and Liz subvert the potency of the accusation of having led someone on at
the same time as they formulate it. If the accusation of having ‘gone too far’ and
‘led someone on’ is a predictable and anticipated feature of sexual encounters
with men then the accusation is undermined as not being a genuine complaint of
any particular man upset by the actions of his girlfriend, but rather as being a
stereotypical accusation that all men will routinely make regardless of the
individual actions of women, and regardless of when exactly she says ‘no’ to sex.
Woman cannot then be faulted for not knowing when to say ‘no’. There is never
a ‘right time’ to say ‘no’. Women’s ‘no’s will always be open to the accusation
of coming too late, when sexual activity has gone too far. This is stated more
explicitly in the following extract between Jill, Deb and Karen:

Deb: But then you'll often get these kind of, ‘Oh you're a tease’, or ‘you led me on’. I mean, you don't actually get
it like that, but you know, that's what they mean. 'Well, if you didn't want it, you shouldn't have kind of flirted,'

Karen: ' - led me on -

Deb: - that way’. Exactly. So they put that on to you, and sometimes you feel, ‘Oh god, maybe I'm a real tart or whatever, and I have lead him on’, and that makes you feel really shitty and

Jill: But that's just their way of -

Deb: - yeah -

Jill: - making you do something you don't want to

(Group, 10)

The accusation of having 'led someone on' is described as scripted, expected and as being (for this very reason) not a genuine complaint, but as a rhetorical device used by men to coerce women into engaging in unwanted sexual activity. According to Deb, Jill and Karen, men will use this device regardless of what a woman says or does, and therefore she cannot really be blamed if her actions lead to such an accusation. The taken-for-granted, predictable and expected nature of male sexual coercion is entirely necessary for their account to work. Just as script formulations (cf. Edwards, 1994) can serve to normalise the actions of the speaker herself, they can also be used to normalise the actions of others. Here, scripts serve to normalise the sexually coercive behaviour of men as expected, as requiring no special explanation, and as warranting no complaint or attention. In addition, by describing the reactions of young men as scripted, as routine and predictable, these young women construct themselves as knowledgeable sexual actors, as able to easily identify and negotiate the manipulative strategies of young men.
So, rather than treating talk about sexual scripts as evidence for the pre-existence of such scripts this approaches looks at the ways in which script formulations construct sexual encounters as following recurrent, predictable patterns. As I have demonstrated this approach assumes that women have certain investments in describing sexual encounters as scripted, and script talk functions to protect these investments. Script formulations allow the women who use them to negotiate issues of accountability and identity by constructing their own opinions and actions in the context of wider social norms and social expectations.

6.4 A Feminist Analysis? The Costs and Benefits of a Transparent versus Constructed Reading

The contrastive readings of the data on sexual scripts presented above (just like the readings of miscommunication and emotion work data) have very different implications for those conducting feminist research.

In the first (transparent) reading, women’s talk about sexual encounters is seen as providing evidence for the existence of sexual scripts which guide sexual behaviour. Women’s talk, then, is seen as revealing the detail of these scripts. What we find is that while sexual encounters are very clearly scripted the timing of sexual refusals is very ambiguous and confusing. Such an approach has many advantages for the feminist researcher. Rather than relying on women-blaming explanations of rape which, for example, claim that women have difficulty saying ‘no’ because they are under-confident or because they do not possess the appropriate communication skills (see for example the literature reviewed in Chapter Four section 4.1), script theory argues that rape is the result of the social organisation of sexual and gender relationships. Script theory looks not to individual pathology to explain rape, but rather to social causes. This attention to social context is congruent with feminist prescriptions for ‘good’ psychological theory, and with radical feminist explanations of rape (Brownmiller, 1975;
MacKinnon, 1987). Script theory is a more politicised account of rape than (for example) miscommunication theory because it does not argue that women cannot say ‘no’, but rather that even when women do say ‘no’ their ‘no’s are over ruled. It is not that the man fails to understand ‘no’, but that social norms dictate that he is permitted to override her refusal and to rape her.

Using a transparent analysis which supports script theory the feminist researcher is able to make strong claims about the social organisation of sexual behaviour. This might include claims that sexual scripts are male defined, to meet male needs. For example, the idea of ‘stages’ which lead progressively and inevitably to intercourse ignores and obscures the myriad of ways in which women experience sexual pleasure without intercourse. Feminists have criticised the phallocentric definitions of sexuality which hinder women’s sexual pleasure, have challenged the centrality of penetrative sex and have exposed the ‘myth of the vaginal orgasm’ (Koedt, 1972). A transparent reading of my data adds to this sustained critique by arguing that the timing of sexual refusals is scripted to meet male needs. In other words, although women are held responsible for refusing sex (e.g. Zimmerman et al., 1995), sexual behaviours are scripted in such a way so as to make saying ‘no’ extremely difficult. While the sequence of sexual activities appears to be very clearly scripted (i.e. from kissing, to light petting, to heavy petting, to intercourse) - a finding confirmed by other social scientific research - the place of sexual refusals in this sequence is far from clear. There is some agreement among these women that there is a ‘right’ time to say ‘no’, but there is considerable ambiguity about when exactly the ‘right’ time is. From a transparent analysis this ambiguity could be interpreted as serving the interests of men, and more specifically those men who wish to ‘persuade’ or coerce their partners into unwanted sex. For example, the women in this study identify both legitimate and illegitimate times to say ‘no’. Legitimate sexual refusals, they argue, occur when men are expecting a rejection or refusal, refusals are illegitimate, then, when they are unexpected. So, according to these women, it is men who dictate whether or not a refusal is legitimate. This ambiguity about the timing of ‘no’ and the cut off point between legitimate and
illegitimate sexual refusals is implicated in women’s experience of unwanted sex and rape. Evidence from both this and other research suggests that when a woman consents to any form of sexual activity a man can argue that she was ‘leading him on’ - leading him to expect that further intimacy will be forthcoming. Indeed, even if a woman consents to activities which are not explicitly sexual (such as having dinner paid for etc.) both men and women agree that she has implicitly agreed to something more. The greater the sexual intimacy between the couple the greater the risk that the woman will be seen as ‘leading the man on’ and both men and women agree that when a man has been ‘led on’ he is justified in raping the woman (e.g. Muehlenhard and MacNaughton, 1988; Goodchilds et al., 1988; Quinn et al., 1991). This may explain why the legal profession places great importance on establishing the prior intimacy of rapist and victim in rape trials. The problem is that women simply do not know whether by consenting to a kiss they are forfeiting the right to say ‘no’ to unwanted sex. So, while ambiguity around the timing of ‘no’ may be advantageous for men, it has very serious repercussions for women.

Feminists have challenged this ‘bumper pack’ approach to sexual encounters in which consent to one sexual activity is taken as implicit consent to a whole range of other activities. A transparent analysis of the data has very clear implications for feminist activism. If the problem is that sexual scripts, and the timing of saying ‘no’ within these scripts, are poorly defined, then the answer is to clearly define issues of consent. Strategies have ranged from asserting that women have the right to say ‘no’ at any stage of an interaction to challenging men to seek explicit consent from women. This latter approach is adopted in the much maligned sexual offences policy produced by Antioch College. According to Debbie Cameron (1994) the code, because it states that explicit consent should be acquired for every sexual act, undermines the idea that one thing ‘naturally’ leads to another and that consenting to a kiss means implying yes to anything else. The code also gives women the explicit opportunity to refuse sexual activities, in a way which indicates that this is an appropriate time to refuse. Attempts to alter sexual scripts have also been suggested by those concerned...
with unsafe sex and the promotion of condom use (e.g. Maticka-Tyndale, 1991, Abraham and Sheeran, 1994).

However, clearly defined scripts are not always the answer. The script for a ‘typical rape’ is clearly defined as one where the rape occurs outdoors, at night, between strangers, where the rapist is male and is often described as unattractive, angry, aggressive, or as socially or mentally unfit (Ryan, 1988). But, according to Kahn, Mathie and Torgler (1994), if women have a clear idea about what a ‘typical’ rape is like (i.e. a stranger or ‘blitz’ rape) then they will be less likely to label their own experiences of non-consensual sex as rape if they do not match this script, if, for example, they are raped by an acquaintance (see also Popvitch et al. 1995, for similar conclusions in relation to sexual harassment). According to these researchers women are unable to recognise or acknowledge their abuse because their experiences do not match their definition of rape. The problem in relation to this research is that sexual coercion is scripted as such a pervasive feature of ‘ordinary’ heterosexual activity that it is not recognisable to these young women as something extra-ordinary, or recognisable as coercion. In this way a transparent reading of the data which characterises the timing of ‘no’ as ambiguous, puts sexual coercion firmly into ‘ordinary’ heterosexual relationships, and builds on a tradition in feminist research for making links between sexual violence and ‘normal’ heterosexual activity (Kelly, 1987; Stanko, 1985; Cameron and Frazer, 1987).

However, there are also disadvantages to adopting this approach. By focusing on poorly defined scripts as an explanation for rape this approach depoliticises rape (in much the same way as miscommunication theory) by failing to hold men responsible for rape. Men are not held responsible for coercing women into unwanted sex, rather both men and women are the victims of poorly defined scripts which fail to make sufficiently clear when sexual refusals are expected to occur. Moreover, at least some of the research which I cite implicitly suggests that women are to blame. For example, the research conducted by Shotland and Goodstein (1983) in which participants had to rate how much ‘Diane’ wanted to
have sex when she protested at an early, middle or late stage, implies that if only ‘Diane’ had said ‘no’ earlier then rape could be avoided.

In addition, much like the transparent analyses presented in the previous chapters, a transparent reading of the data on sexual scripts depicts young women as victims. A transparent analysis, sees women as caught between a rock and a hard place, unable to say ‘no’ too early for fear of looking gauche or naïve, and unable to say ‘no’ too late for fear of accusations of having led the man on. Women are portrayed as passive, hesitant and easily manipulated. Some have argued that men may be more adept at learning the sexual scripts of women than women are of men. Moore and Rosenthal (1993), commenting on the idea that women are scripted to have sexual relationship for love while men have sexual relationships for pleasure, claim that “The pleas, ‘If you really loved me, you would have sex with me’ or ‘You wouldn’t make me suffer in this way’, suggest that some young men are well attuned to the female sexual script, with the male script allowing for the exploitation of young girls’ own needs” (p. 85, emphasis added). Women are seen as the victims of sexual scripts, who are manipulated and exploited by men who understand scripts better.

An alternative, constructed, analysis of the data has rather different implications. Whether or not there really are scripts (and whether this is ever knowable through talk) script talk has important implications for the feminist researcher. A transparent analysis treats script talk as an analyst resource, as a framework for understanding sexual experiences. By contrast a constructed analysis treats script talk as a participant resource to achieve certain interactional goals. Rather than assuming that women are objectively and neutrally reporting on their experiences a constructed analysis, as I have shown, demonstrates that women have certain investments in the way that they talk about sexual encounters. By failing to acknowledge these investments a transparent analysis misses crucial information.

It misses, for example, the work that women do to present themselves as competent sexual actors. Women portray themselves not as gullible, naive and
Chapter Six: Sexual Scripts and Refusing Sex

ignorant about sexual interactions, but as knowledgeable about the routines and patterns of sexual behaviour - knowledgeable enough to be able to anticipate men's coercion and to guard against it. As I have demonstrated, script talk allows young women to normalise their own behaviour (including acquiescing to unwanted sex) and to present their own responses as the sort of thing which anyone would do when faced with the same situation. It is therefore not surprising that (some) women are resistant to the kinds of innovations which attempt to alter and clarify scripts (such as Antioch rules) which perhaps suggest that they are naïve and incompetent sexual actors who need rules and regulation to guide their behaviour because they are incapable of handling men. Attempts by feminists to alter current sexual scripts must take into account the investments women have in talking about sexual activities as scripted and the investments they have in maintaining the status quo.

6.5 Summary and Conclusions

In this chapter I have explored the ways in which sexual script theory provides useful conceptual tools for explaining young women's accounts of sexual negotiation. As such this chapter makes a positive contribution to the growing body of literature which looks at how sexual encounters are organised. In particular, I expanded and developed the current literature on sexual scripts which argues that women are more likely to refuse sex than men by looking at the timing of sexual refusals in a sexual encounter. Paralleling the previous chapters, I examined both a transparent and constructed analysis of the data. In this chapter I paid particular attention to providing a more detailed transparent analysis in which the contribution which such an analysis makes to the literature is clearly mapped out. I have developed the distinction (introduced in Chapter Five) between talk as an analyst resource for explaining behaviour, and talk as a participant resource for accounting for behaviour. In the transparent analysis, then, women's talk about legitimate and illegitimate times to say 'no', and about going too far and forfeiting the right to say 'no' is seen as evidence of male defined scripts which disadvantage women. By contrast, a constructed analysis
which treats women's talk about scripted sexual encounters as attending to issues of blame and accountability, sees script talk as serving useful functions for the women who use it. The costs and benefits of both of these approaches for feminists are discussed in relation to issues of victimhood and agency, and in relation to activism.
Chapter Seven

Looking Back, Looking Forward
The initial impetus for this thesis and the research upon which it is founded was a television programme - the name of which I can no longer remember. The presenters were bemoaning the ways in which young women appeared unable to say ‘no’ to sex. It was not clear (or at least I can no longer recall) whether this was in relation to wanted or ‘unwanted sex’; indeed the implication was that this question was of only peripheral interest - what was more important was that young women were supposed to say ‘no’. The tone of the programme was not accusatory but patronisingly sympathetic: young women were not refusing to say ‘no’; rather they couldn’t say ‘no’. Young women were portrayed as mindless dupes, who were unable to control their own destinies; they were pitiful creatures, easily manipulated, easily taken advantage of, unworldly and unwise. “How ridiculous!”, I remember thinking at the time, “of course heterosexual women know how to say ‘no’ to sex with men; we do it all the time”. Angered by what I considered to be the gross misrepresentation of young women promulgated by this programme, the idea for this thesis was born. It has come a long way since then, and in this chapter I want to reflect upon the ways in which I think this research has contributed to feminist psychology, and to make some suggestions for future developments in feminist work.

In chapter one I argued that this thesis would make three major contributions to feminist psychology: (i) by re-placing women (and more specifically young women) within psychology; (ii) by contributing to the literature on young women’s sexual negotiations; and (iii) by contributing to epistemological debates about the relative merits of essentialism and social constructionism. Moreover, this thesis also makes important contributions to (vi) discussions of feminist method and (v) to discussions of researching and representing ‘Others’ in feminist psychology. In this final chapter I reflect on the nature of the contributions made in these five areas. I conclude by looking back on the strengths and limitations of the research, and by looking forward at how to take forward both research on young women, power, and sexuality, and feminist psychology more generally.
7.1 Re-Placing Young Women in Psychology

In chapter one I reviewed the literature on feminist psychology, and briefly outlined the three key aspects of the feminist critique of mainstream psychology: (i) making women invisible, (ii) taking male experience as the norm, and (iii) pathologising women. Feminist research strives to avoid the androcentrism of 'malestream' research by producing research which is centred in the lives of women.

I observed in Chapter One (section 1.2) how young women have been noticeably absent in both mainstream psychology and (until recently) in feminist psychology. By contrast, this thesis places young women centre-stage. This research takes as one of its basic assumptions the idea that women’s lives are worthy of study in their own right. For this reason, the sample used in this study consisted entirely of women, and the aim of the research was to investigate young women’s talk about sexual negotiation and saying ‘no’ to sex. I do not, therefore, present a comparison of men and women’s sexual refusals. In addition, I have attempted to re-place young women in psychology by giving detailed attention to three social scientific theories which could be (and have been) used to explain women’s experience of unwanted sex (I will return to this point in the following section). These theories have typically spoken about young women (when young women are addressed at all) without including the voices of young women themselves. What this thesis does, then, is to take women’s views as central. This thesis represents young women, in their own words, as they talk about issues around sexual negotiation.

This thesis reports research which takes female, not male, experience as the norm, and theories which do take male experience as the norm are challenged. For example, women are not judged in terms of how well they make themselves understood to men, or on how well men are able to interpret their refusals. Rather, women’s sexual refusals are investigated in relation to what these refusals mean for women themselves. Similarly, women’s emotional
(over)investment in sexual relationships is not compared to men’s (under)investment, rather women’s talk about emotional investment is seen as serving particular functions for the women themselves.

Women’s experiences are not regarded as pathological. In other words, women are not accused of failing to make their refusals clear, nor are they accused of mindlessly adhering to sexual scripts which disadvantage them. I am not suggesting that young women are unable to say ‘no’ because of individual personal shortcomings nor do I position them as passive victims, silenced by patriarchy.

7.2 Young Women and Sexual Negotiation

Young women’s sexual refusals are at the heart both of right wing and religious campaigns to curb and control sexuality, and are central to feminist campaigns for sexual freedom. While public health messages implore young women to ‘Just Say No’ to premarital or teenage sex, the feminist ‘No Means No’ campaign tries to ensure that women’s ‘no’s are not ignored or disregarded. Women’s sexual refusals are central to rape cases tried in court, and to academic research on sexual assault. In this thesis, I have made the negotiation of sexual refusals an explicit focus of my research and as such have brought to the fore an important feminist issue. By focusing on saying ‘no’ to sex, rather than explicitly on sexual violence or coercion, this thesis makes an important contribution to the blurred borderlands between coercive and ‘ordinary’ heterosexual sex. Although the women who participated in this research did talk about their own personal experiences of refusing sex, and, in several cases, of having their refusals overruled and of being raped, the majority of talk was concerned with more mundane refusals. It is in this non-threatening, impersonal, talk that the intricacies and pervasiveness of sexual coercion, and the normalisation of coercion, become apparent.
This thesis makes four key contributions to the literature around young women’s sexual negotiations and sexual refusals: in relation to (i) identity/reputation, (ii) miscommunication, (iii) emotion work, and (iv) sexual scripts.

Feminists (e.g. Lees, 1986 & 1993) have previously pointed out that sexual reputation is a mechanism for the control of women’s sexuality - women must be simultaneously sexually attractive and yet sexually unavailable. This thesis has contributed to that literature by linking work on reputation to issues around saying ‘no’. In chapter three (section 3.3.1) I presented a (transparent) analysis of how ‘sexual reputation’ functions to constrain young women in their sexual negotiations. Feminists have documented the ways in which young women tread a fine line between being seen as sexually attractive and yet sexually unavailable, between being seen as a ‘slag’ or as a ‘drag’. This thesis builds upon and develops this feminist literature when in chapter three (section 3.3.1) I discussed the ways in which women describe concern about sexual reputation as influencing their ability to say ‘no’ to unwanted sex. These young women describe how girls who don’t say ‘no’ are seen as ‘slags’ while those who do say ‘no’ are seen as ‘tight’ or ‘frigid’. While most of the feminist literature emphasises the ways in which the label ‘slag’ serves to constrain the development of an autonomous and active female sexuality, very few studies focus on the importance for young women’s sexuality of being labelled a ‘drag’. It is to this aspect of sexual reputation that I paid particular attention. The embarrassment of refusing sex, women argue, may be more painful than acquiescing to unwanted sex.

In Chapter Four I gave detailed consideration to sexual miscommunication theory, which, as I outlined in chapter one (section 1.3.1.) has been widely used to explain instances of date rape and ‘unwanted sex’. I assessed the utility of this theory for explaining my own data on young women’s talk about sexual refusals. This chapter contributes to the literature on sexual miscommunication by demonstrating how women themselves use a lay version of miscommunication theory to explain their experiences.
In Chapter Five, I gave detailed consideration to emotion work theory. In chapter one (section 1.3.2) I noted that social science researchers often portray young women’s emotional investments in sexual relationships as constraining their ability to refuse ‘unwanted’ sex. This thesis makes an important contribution to this literature by explicitly linking emotion work theory to sexual negotiation. I explore the ways in which emotion work theory could provide a common theoretical base with which to link the many disparate studies which look at the interplay between emotional investments and sexual refusals.

In Chapter Six I gave detailed consideration to sexual script theory, and provide a powerful analysis of the timing of refusals within sexual scripts. At present there is no analysis of this kind in the literature. Although there is some consensus within the literature that saying ‘no’ is scripted as women’s responsibility, there is little on exactly how or why or when women are expected to say ‘no’. In addition, much of the current literature on sexual scripts relies on people’s self report responses to pre-coded questions. The value of this thesis is that it demonstrates that (some) women talk about sexual activities as scripted even when not prompted to do so by the researcher.

In sum, I have explored in detail four literatures on sexual negotiation, and have investigated their utility for explaining my own data on young women’s talk about refusing sex. I have shown that each of these theories provides valuable insight into my data, but also that a careful examination of young women’s talk provides challenges to and contributes to the development of each of these theories.

7.3 Epistemological Debates:

Essentialism and Social Constructionism

The vast majority of both feminist and non-feminist work in psychology and sociology, as I have demonstrated, relies on essentialist (transparent) readings of
data. I have explored and illustrated the differences between essentialist (transparent) and constructed readings of my data, and have discussed some key advantages, for feminists, of constructed readings. This thesis, then, represents part of a growing body of feminist literature which adopts a social constructionist approach to data analysis (see, for example, the contributions to *Feminism and Discourse*, Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 1995). I have argued that perhaps essentialism and social constructionism are best understood as a continuum rather than as opposing poles. Theories can be more (i.e. script theory) or less (i.e. miscommunication theory) social constructionist. For example, some of the emotion work literature, and most of the sexual script literature, is grounded in social constructionism when it comes to articulating the origins or location of social phenomena, but remains steadfastly essentialist in its approach to data analysis. Indeed most discussions of the relative merits of essentialism and social constructionism have been at the level of ontology, and have rarely (with the exception of those interested in discourse analysis) been at the methodological level. Often when methodological issues are discussed they are conflated with the difference between qualitative and quantitative methods. The value of this thesis is that it provides an exploration of essentialism and social constructionism in relation to the analysis of qualitative data (see also Kitzinger and Powell, 1995 for a discussion of essentialist and social constructionist readings of story completion data). I have discussed the implications of taking what women say in research settings as transparent evidence of real world events or of psychological phenomenon, and the implications of treating what women say in research settings as talk produced in a particular interactional setting in order to serve particular interactional functions. As I have demonstrated, each of these approaches has costs and benefits, and both of these approaches are potentially useful.

Transparent (essentialist) analyses do have certain benefits for feminists. They tap into women’s own understanding of the nature of sexual experience. They follow feminist advice to ‘take women seriously’ and to allow women to be the ‘experts on their own lives’. By giving scientific legitimacy to the ways in which
women themselves understand and explain their experiences, transparent readings of qualitative data ‘validate women’s reality’. This approach ‘gives voice’ to women’s experience, allowing them to explain difficult sexual situations in their own terms using their own language. Women’s own explanations, their own understanding of their experience are seen as primary. Transparent analysis maps closely onto women’s own analysis of their experiences. But perhaps the greatest advantage of transparent readings of qualitative data, is that they allow researchers to make strong claims about the nature of social reality, and - crucially for feminist research - they allow researchers to make strong claims about how to effect social change.

Because a transparent analysis allows researchers to go beyond talk, and to make claims about social reality (i.e. using a model of participant-as-informant), or about how women see social reality (i.e. using a model of participant-as-psychological-subject), it allows researchers to make strong recommendations for social change. For example, a transparent analysis allows researchers to take women’s talk about misunderstandings and communication difficulties as supportive evidence for miscommunication theory, and hence to make concrete interventions in, for example, date rape education and assertiveness training programs. Similarly, a transparent analysis of talk about ‘emotion work’ leads to the possibility of counselling women to put their own needs first, and a transparent analysis of talk about ‘sexual scripts’ allows feminists to call for the interruption or redefinition of current sexual scripts. Transparent analyses, then, offer easy and immediately implemented programs, and clear cut solutions to the problem of date rape and ‘unwanted sex’.

By contrast, programs for eliminating date rape are not immediately available from constructed readings of the data, and this is clearly a crucial omission for feminist activism. But the crucial contribution of the constructionist approach is that it draws attention to some of the reasons why the young women who are the recipients of such programs might be reluctant to act upon the advice and training they are given. In order to understand and alter heterosexual interaction
which oppresses women, it is crucial to examine the ways in which ordinary women (and men) explain and account for their sexual behaviours. Attempts by feminists to alter the ways in which ordinary women talk about their sexual experiences may be relatively unsuccessful if feminists do not take into account the functions that current discourses serve for the women who use them. For example, feminist attempts to replace miscommunication with the politicised term 'rape' fails to address the advantages the term miscommunication might serve for women who wish to obscure or minimise the sexual violence they face from partners. Feminists cannot hope to encourage women to adopt different ways of talking about their experiences without attending to the costs for women of adopting such an approach.

A second key argument of this thesis has been that one important cost of adopting a transparent analysis is that it very often presents young women as victims. Women are portrayed as naïve and innocent; they are manipulated and controlled by men who seduce and impregnate them while they themselves have little idea what is going on. This so-called 'victim feminism' has come under recent attack from some feminists (e.g. Roiphe, 1993; Wolf, 1993) and contrasts sharply with the image which most young women present of themselves as active agents free to make their own informed choices. It is this latter image which is apparent in constructed analyses. I have shown how the young women in this research work hard to ensure that I, as a researcher, do not pathologise them. As feminists we should recognise the work that women do in their talk rather than simply reiterating pathologising images or referring vaguely to young women's resistance. This is not to deny that women may be victimised but rather to warn against presenting women only and always as victims, and basing activism and pragmatic suggestions for change on such an assumption. Feminists have been struggling with issues about how to represent other women in ways which recognise oppression and victimization in a way which does not present women as victims or as gullible cultural dupes (Kitzinger and Thomas, 1995; Davis, 1995), and my analyses in this research expands and develops ways of thinking about this victimhood/agency dilemma.
In sum, I would argue that data can be interpreted in many different ways and, with many different feminisms, there is no 'right' analysis. The debate among feminists about the relative merits of essentialism and social constructionism has been fierce - with the accusation of essentialism often being used as a term of abuse. According to Richardson (1996) and Lienert (1996) when feminists accuse each other being essentialist they accuse each other of being theoretically unsophisticated, naive, misguided, stereotypical or out-dated. Social constructionists, on the other hand, are accused of belittling social and political inequalities by suggesting that they are social artifacts which must, as a consequence, be more easily altered than biological inequalities. By giving careful consideration to the political implications of adopting an essentialist or a social constructionist approach to qualitative data analysis, I hope to have made some useful contributions to this rather heated debate. In discussing the costs and benefits of different epistemological approaches to data analysis I have also attempted to make visible the process of 'coming to conclusions' (Holland and Ramazanoglu, 1994), the processes by which I as researcher made decisions and compromises in reaching analytic assessments. The role of the researcher is never simply that of 'bearing witness'; the researcher is always interpreting, always selecting, and always making her own sense of what is said.

7.4 Focus Groups and Feminist Method

As a feminist and a social constructionist I chose to use focus groups in studying young women’s accounts of saying ‘no’ for two reasons. First I wanted to explore the potential of focus groups as a feminist method, and second I was interested in using a qualitative method which incorporated interaction between participants as well as interaction between the researcher and the researched. Unlike most other feminist researchers, who use focus groups unquestioningly and who provide no rationale for their choice of method, I have explicitly addressed the ways in which focus groups have the potential to be used as a feminist method.
As I noted in Chapter Two (section 2.2), interaction between participants is one of the hallmarks of the focus group method (Morgan, 1988). Despite this few researchers quote extracts of data in which group members interact with each other or, on the few occasions when they do, they do not analyse this interaction (Kitzinger, J. 1994; Wilkinson, 1998). In this thesis, the interaction between participants has assumed a central role in the analysis. One of the values of a constructed reading of focus group data is that it draws attention to interaction between group members. By focusing on qualitative data as talk, rather than as a route either to reality or to psychological processes beyond the talk, the analyst is forced to consider the ways in which participants respond to each other and build responses together.

As noted in chapter two (section 2.3.1), focus groups are assumed to afford greater power to research participants simply because they outnumber the researcher (Morgan, 1988; Frey and Fontana, 1993). Consequently, the moderator/researcher has less control over the research process. For feminists who are encouraged to create ways of conducting non-hierarchical, non-exploitative research, focus groups may be an ideal method. Focus groups are valued by feminists because their open-ended approach and the relative lack of control by the researcher, allows participants to set their own agendas during the group discussions (e.g. Schlesinger et al., 1992; Espin, 1995; Norris et al., 1996). However, focus groups can do more than simply allow participants to assert their own agenda: they might also provide a forum for participants to disrupt or challenge the researcher's agenda. One example of this from my own research is the following extract of data in which I ask the group to provide examples of the kinds of excuses they would use to avoid unwanted sex:

Cath: Do you mean like really naff excuses?

Hannah: Well, anything that you would use.
Cath: That would be things like 'I'm on my period' and things like that

Lara: But, I mean ....

Cath: - but it depends how far you've got because that can go completely ...

Helen: No, but ..., but that just gives you a few day respite doesn't it - and then I think after a few days you'd just feel so shitty that you had to rely on that

Lara: That's horrible, why should you have to lie on an issue that is just perfectly right and you feel strongly about, why do you have to come up with excuses

Cath: That's right

Lara: I mean, I would much rather, it would just be so nice just to be able to say no, for no particular reason. I don't really know, I haven't felt the need to think about it, I just don't particularly fancy it.

Helen: I just don't feel like it at the moment

Lara: Wouldn't that be nice!

(Group 7)

In this extract, then, I unproblematically introduce the idea of providing excuses as a way of avoiding sex. But, although these three young women are able to generate such excuses, they challenge the idea that this is an appropriate question for me to ask, and that giving an excuse is an appropriate action to take. Of
course, participants in one-to-one interviews may also challenge researchers' agendas, but this process may be facilitated in a focus groups where group members can support each other and collectively question the researcher's focus. So, although in this case it is Lara who initially objects to my agenda she is supported by both Cath who agrees "That's right" and Helen who reformulates what Lara says as "I just don't feel like it at the moment".

Similarly, the group can collectively resist the researcher’s attempts to challenge their views and present her own. In the following example, I am trying to challenge their views on the male sex drive, but Karen, Jill and Deb firmly and consistently reaffirm their views. My suggestion that men might fake orgasms is met by disbelief from the group:

Hannah: well, you know, guys get tired too, and -

Karen: - well they’re more active -

Jill: - they’ve got higher libido

Deb: say that again

Jill - more sex drive than women and that’s like scientifically - or it could just be me talking crap - but I have heard reports of it’s a mental thing that guys have a higher sex drive than women

Hannah: But surely there must be times when

Karen: Yeah, but in general

Jill: it’s [faking] more rare for a guy

(Group 10)
My own attempts to question or challenge their views are collectively resisted by the group, who support and agree with each other to dismiss my own assertions. Clearly, then, at least in this particular extract, I am not seen as an ‘expert’ on heterosexual sex, and indeed other ‘experts’ (i.e. science) are used to undermine what I am saying. In addition, participants also question or disagree with each other in ways which might be inappropriate coming from a researcher, as the following extract illustrates:

Hannah: Can you come up with any good or bad reasons [for having sex]

Sam: Bad reason ... Because you’re pressured into it by your boyfriend, because you’re scared he’s going to dump you

Becky: Yeah, that’s probably one of the most common ones, isn’t it

Lynn: Or, I really ... ‘You would if you loved me, and I do love you’, ha ha

Sam: Yeah, if you’re in a relationship where you really like the guy and you don’t want to split up with him then you might ..

Lucy - but what are you doing really liking the guy if he’s going to behave like that

(Group 5)

Lucy forcefully challenges Sam’s reasons for having sex in a way which might not be acceptable from a researcher. The power to ask questions, both of each
other and of the researcher, in a context in which disagreements have been licensed (see section 2.5.3 ii on ground rules), is an important way of mediating the researcher's control.

7.5 Insider Research: Similarities and Differences

Feminists have been discussing the problems inherent in conducting research with, and in subsequently representing, 'Others'. This is most clearly exemplified in discussions about men researching women, and white women studying black women (Carby, 1982; Collins, 1990), and has recently been extended to include a wide range of different Others (Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 1996). Many of the contributors to Wilkinson and Kitzinger's book *Representing the Other* struggle with "questions of overlapping categories and shifting identities" in trying to establish the ways in which they are both similar to and different from those they study (Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 1996: 24), and questions of sameness and difference are relevant, too, in my own research. Like my research participants I am white, heterosexual and a young women (although no longer a teenager). We may share certain aspects of class, but certainly differ in our level of education. I am the researcher and they are the researched. We are sometimes similar and sometimes different on these dimensions, and, I suspect, on many more of which I am not aware. The question though, is whether, and in what ways, these similarities and differences matter. As Diana Reay (1996: 444) points out:

> A researcher can state that they are a white, middle class, heterosexual, male within their text but reflexivity requires much more than that - it is about an honest exploration of whether any or all of these aspects of self-identity lead to bias.

While I am uncomfortable with the choice of the word 'bias' (which implies that if we could be rid of these biases we would see the 'truth'), reflexivity certainly involves more than simply stating those aspects of one's identity which one feels
are most relevant to the topic under investigation. After all, how do we know which aspects of our identity, which similarities and which differences, make a difference to our research?

While feminists (e.g. Edwards, 1996) have been quick to point out the ways in which they see themselves as similar or different from their participants, less consideration has been given to the ways in which participants may view researchers as similar or different. Researchers' views of themselves and their own similarities and differences with the researched may or may not map onto the views of the researched. For example, Ang-Lygate (1996: 53), says that as a Chinese woman interviewing Chinese women it would be "methodologically misleading for me to assume that I 'belonged' simply because I myself am Chinese": this would, she says, mean privileging a racialized identity over any other aspects of her identity. But although the author herself feels uncomfortable about this, it is her status as a Chinese woman which gives her right of access to a group of Hong Kong Chinese women:

I made initial contact with the leader of the group by telephone, but to my initial dismay, she was reluctant to let me attend their meetings. However, when I realized that because she could not see me over the telephone line, she had assumed from my Anglicized first name and my local Scottish accent that I was Caucasian, I specifically declared myself to be Chinese and her subsequent response to me changed dramatically. 'Oh! If you are Chinese, you are most welcome. I look forward to seeing you next Tuesday' (Ang-Lygate, 1996: 54).

Although the author was uncomfortable about privileging her shared status as Chinese as a basis for shared experience and similarity, we can perhaps infer from her participant's response that they privileged her Chinese status in this way. The two examples (from Ang-Lygate and from Edwards) indicate how
participants can actively position researchers as the same as or as different from themselves. Some researchers report being positioned as 'Other', not through being denied or granted access, but through things that participants say. Song and Parker both found that participants assumed both similarities and differences based on what on what they knew about the researcher's cultural identity (Song and Parker, 1995). In his interviews with young Chinese people David Parker found that those who strongly identified as Chinese “often did so in contrast to me” they were also, he reports, keen to establish the extent of his own Chinese identity by asking questions such as ‘how Chinese are you?’, ‘can you speak Chinese?’, or ‘was it your father or mother who’s Chinese?’ (p. 244 & 245). As a social constructionist it is these aspects of insider/outsider research which particularly interest me. I am keen to explore the ways in which similarities and differences are ‘worked up’ during the research and ‘made relevant’ rather than simply assuming that they are already relevant.

One answer is to look at how differences and similarities are ‘worked up’ or made relevant within the talk itself. I do not mean to suggest that this should replace other ways of thinking about representing ‘Others’ or about differences and similarities in research, but that it may provide a useful way of thinking about some of these issues. Issues of similarity and difference were very muted in my own research, partly I think, because our similarities remained unproblematised and invisible. Other researchers have commented on the problems inherent in a lack of critical distance from one’s participants. Diane Reay talks about the “dangers of proximity rather than distance” (Reay, 1996: 65), while Tracey Hurd and Alice McIntyre (1996: 78) warn against the ‘seduction of sameness’. Looking back over the transcripts of my data I have tried to identify the ways in which similarity is worked up in the group discussions as a way of approaching the issue of insider research slightly differently.

One of the ways in which similarity is worked up, albeit very subtly, in the group discussions is through shared knowledge. In chapter six (section 6.3.1) I
demonstrated how shared knowledge or consensus is constructed between research participants by ‘filling in the gaps’ in each others’ talk (Edwards, 1997). This is also a feature of my own interactions with group members. In the following example, I suggest words/phrases to illustrate the previous speaker’s point:

Jan: in fact this happened to me just the other week [...] he just wouldn’t get out of my car and that was a nightmare so I physically -

Hannah: - ejected him -

Jan: physically. But no, it was awful he just would not take no for an answer

(Group 8)

Similarly, I fill in the gaps in the following extract in which Pam is talking about how to negotiate sexual pleasure and tell a male partner that something is nice:

Pam: yeah, you’d make some kind of noise without having to say anything wouldn’t you, you kind of giggle or something

Hannah: a moan or a groan

Pam: you wouldn’t actually - yeah, because the blokes are exactly the same, they do exactly the same, they don’t go ‘oh, I like that’, they wouldn’t do anything like that

(Group 9)

In both of these extracts, then, I provide an illustration of both participants and researcher working up knowledge as shared. By providing appropriate examples
(which are shown to be appropriate because they remain unchallenged) it appears as if both I and the participant are drawing on shared knowledge. Again, I do not mean to suggest that this knowledge is actually shared but rather that it is treated as shared. This is demonstrated again in the following extract in which I am talking to Karen:

Karen: I must admit before I left the school it was something that I did want to do [have sex] because there was so much hype about it, I did want to see what it was like. But I still wouldn’t have gone with anyone

Hannah: It’s curiosity isn’t it

Karen: yeah ...

(Group 10)

I could have responded to Karen’s point in a variety of different ways. I could, as textbooks recommend, have ‘reflected back’ what Karen was saying: ‘You wanted to see what it was like?’. Or, I could have clarified to check that I had understood her properly: ‘So, you were curious about sex?’. Both of these have a very different feel from ‘It’s curiosity, isn’t it’. It represents as shared knowledge about how it feels to be surrounded by ‘hype’ about sex. My suggestion “It’s curiosity, isn’t it” is accepted by Karen as an appropriate description of her feelings and both my suggestion and her “yeah” function to construct a shared understanding between us about what it is like to be curious about heterosexual sex because of the ‘hype’ about it. More than this, because the suggestion is in a generalized form “It’s curiosity, isn’t it” (rather than, say, ‘You were curious’ or ‘I’d be curious’) it appears to be factual, it’s not just what Karen and I would think in this situation, but what everyone would think. Similarly, in the following extract, Jill and I construct a shared version of why menstruating might be a good excuse for avoiding unwanted sex:
Jill: I think most people would just say they’ve got their period because that would stop the boy from blaming you

Hannah: Yeah, ‘I would really like to but unfortunately’

Jill: yeah and it stops them from undoing the trousers in the first place so, you know..

Hannah: It certainly helps!

[Laughter]

(Group 10)

In this example, I do two things. Again I give an illustration of a point which one member of the group has just made. Second, ‘It certainly helps!’, does some shared knowledge business: I ‘know’ that using the excuse ‘being on your period’ means that men will not hassle you for sex. I do not question but rather collude with this representation of men and perhaps also with their representation of menstruation as being a taboo time for sexual activity.

There are also times when I ‘do’ difference or explicitly indicate that knowledge is not shared - regardless of whether or not I do actually know what they mean I ‘play dumb’. Researchers sometimes cultivate an apparent naïveté about the lives of their participants, pretending to know less than they do so that participants will then expand fully on aspects of their lives in which the researcher is interested. Such a tactic was employed by Rebecca Horn (1996) when she interviewed police officers:

When researching the police I actively tried to cultivate an image of being harmless and unthreatening ... My attempts to be seen as naive and harmless were helped by my age (23), my gender, and my low status as a student ... I gave the impression that I knew very little, that I had
had little experience, and that I led a very sheltered life and so knew little about the world of offenders or the police. This impression was largely based on fact, but I was aware that I was exaggerating my naiveté. Male officers were often very keen to ‘impress’ or ‘shock’ me with their stories, and I received the co-operation I was seeking. (Horn, 1996: 43).

There are also some (rather fewer) occasions in the talk where issues of difference are made explicit. In the following extract, for example, Helen talks about an incident with a man who is ‘older’:

Helen: well, basically I met this person and he was quite a bit older than me and he did actually assume that I was older than I was and er .. when he said to me ‘Do you want to come back to my flat?’ it just frightened me so much. I mean, I was probably being really stupid and overreacting sort of thing [...] and he was 23 going on 24 and -

Hannah: - really old!

Helen: - and he was just - It’s really old for me!

Lara: He had wrinkles and everything

Helen: I’m sorry, I just think it’s really old ..

(Group 7)

It is I who draw attention to our difference in age in this extract. My ironic comment “really old!” which interrupts Karen, forcefully focuses attention on my own age as similar to the man in Karen’s story, and challenges her
categorisation of him as an “older man”. Karen, however, twice reaffirms that to her 23 or 24 is ‘really old’ and the difference in our own ages is, by implication, made relevant. The following extracts are all examples when age is made relevant in the talk. Interestingly, it is always me who makes a comment about age.

Hannah: If I brought you in here and said to you what do you think are the most important issues about sex for people your age what would you say?

(Group 8)

Hannah: so what about all the other stuff like oral sex and snogging and feeling up and .. I assume all these words are ..

All: yeah, yeah

Hannah: we used to call it copping off in my day, I don’t know whether that’s still

Pam: er no

Hannah: what do you call it when you’re getting off with someone then?

Jane: pull, pull

(Group 9)

In these extracts, then, there are explicit references to differences in age between the researcher and the researched. In addition, there are also references to differences in vocabulary. In the second extract for example, I use terms such as ‘snogging’ and ‘feeling up’ but rather than assuming that the meaning of these
terms is shared I explicitly ‘check out’ with participants that they know what I mean. There follows a discussion for the ‘correct’ terminology with an explicit searching out by me of the vocabulary used by young women. This implies that the language is not shared and that there may be differences between the participants and myself about the most appropriate way to describe sexual activities. This is also reflected in the following question directed by me to a different group:

Hannah: what about the idea of like - in your terms - if you’re not ready and you’re with someone who is, how do you get out of that situation ...

(Group 9)

By asking the group the question ‘in their terms’, I imply that their way of describing sexual situations is not the same kind of description that I would chose. Again this highlights a difference in our vocabulary.

The problem with this approach is that it misses attending to silence - to the things which are not talked about, to those silences which also signal similarity. An interesting paper by Michael Billig (1997) explores this idea in relation to Freud’s interpretation of his conversations with ‘Dora’. Billig points to the ‘silence’ about ‘race’ in Freud’s interpretation of Dora’s dreams. He argues that as both Freud and Dora are Jewish and living in Vienna in a climate of attempted assimilation into German culture and the subsequent climate of rejection from that culture, it is remarkable that Freud does not interpret Dora’s dreams in relation to the politics of ‘race’. Billig is able to highlight particular instances where ‘avoidance’ of race becomes visible within Freud’s writing. Of course, Billig is talking about Freud and Dora avoiding discussing racial oppression, in my own work, silence and avoidance is a function of unexamined race and class privilege. For example, the language used to talk about sexual partners is often purportedly gender neutral. The “they” to which these young women refer, is ‘men’. The assumption that “they” are male is an assumption which is not
challenged (either by myself or by other participants) in the groups themselves. Similarly, there are no direct references to ‘whiteness’ in the transcripts. There is nothing which I could point to and say ‘look this is where we are doing whiteness, or where whiteness is being worked up’. But, whiteness is significant in its absence. There is, in the silences within the discussions, the assumption that they are negotiating sexual relationships with male partners who are like them. There is, for example, no discussion of ‘cross-race’ relationships or relationships across religious boundaries. Such a discussion would not be inappropriate. Just as they discuss the ease/difficulty of saying ‘no’ to men who are older, or to boyfriends rather than strangers (see section 3.3.3) young women could, for example, discuss how saying ‘no’ is harder for white girls than for Asian girls because white girls are seen as sexually ‘loose’ or ‘easy’. Or, they could have discussed how, as a white girl, they find it more difficult to say ‘no’ to a Black man for fear that their actions will be interpreted as racist. In fact, in all of the group discussions there is only one occasion where racial or cultural differences become visible, and this is in a comment from Karen (9) who is talking about when is the appropriate time to say ‘no’:

... yeah, a lot of people see different levels depending on background and even religion and stuff, like so .. like, some people see like kissing - French kissing - as, like, a big thing, whereas if you’ve been brought up in a Western civilisation you wouldn’t think anything of it particularly. So, it depends on how much you’ve seen around you, how much is socially acceptable depending on where you draw the line and if you draw the line.

In response, Jill immediately agrees that “people from other backgrounds” would interpret behaviours in different ways. It is only here, in these fragments of conversation, is there any acknowledgement that sexual negotiations with ‘Others’ may be problematic or different. For the most part, these differences remain comfortably unexplored.
This approach, then, suggests a careful and attentive focus on the details of talk to examine the ways in which similarities and differences are worked up or made relevant in the talk. Such an approach may provide one way of trying to gauge on which dimensions differences and similarities make a difference to the research we conduct, and provides concrete examples of the process of 'Othering'. This approach also allows the researcher to be reflexive in thinking about her own position in the research, and about how researchers, as well as the researched, construct sameness and difference. In reflecting on my identity in relation to my participants, I have tried to subject my own comments to the same sort of analysis which I have performed on participants’ talk.

In sum, I have contributed to the research literature on focus groups by considering the ways in which interaction between group members, the hallmark of focus group research, can form an integral part of analysis. I have also developed feminist discussions on research methods by exploring the potential of focus groups as a feminist method, especially in relation to the issue of power differences between the researcher and researched, and to the issue of context stripping. I have also made some tentative suggestions for a different approach to feminist debates on insider/outsider research.

7.6 Looking Back, Looking Forward

I started this research with the idea that young women are misrepresented as passive and weak in both the popular media and in the social scientific literature. Nowhere is this damning portrayal more apparent than in accounts of young women's sexual refusals. According to the literature, young women are unable to say 'no' either because they lack the necessary communication skills, or because they are emotionally dependent on their partners. This is despite evidence which suggests that young women are expected to say 'no'. In contrast to this I thought that young women would be able to say 'no' loudly, proudly and with confidence - and they do.
Unlike the shy, easily startled, hesitant, young women portrayed in the media, I wanted to show that young women are confident and assertive. What I found was that young women talk about their sexual experiences in a whole range of different ways: saying 'no' is easy and yet difficult; they can say 'no' but other girls can't; sometimes they do say 'no', sometimes they don't say 'no'; saying 'no' is easy with some boys and not with others; saying 'no' can damage your reputation but so can not saying 'no', and so on. Either young women don't know whether they are coming or going and are a mass of contradictions, or something more interesting is going on. Researchers who are trying to establish the 'truth' about what young women 'really' think would be flummoxed by this kind of 'messy' data. For me, this highlights the inadequacy of treating young women's accounts as transparent data.

I think, at this point, that it is also appropriate to highlight some of the limitations of this research. Feminists have welcomed those research methods (usually qualitative) which 'give voice' to women's experience and which allow women to explain their lives in their own terms (Du Bois, 1983; Reinharz, 1992). Certainly qualitative methods, including focus groups, allow women to talk about their lives, but focus groups also 'give voice' in a slightly different way. As Michelle Fine comments, feminists have "ignored, indeed misrepresented, how well young women talk as subjects, passionate about and relishing their capacities to move between nexus of power and powerlessness" (Fine, 1992: 178, emphasis in original). The focus groups I conducted are an ideal space in which to hear young women talk, loudly and with laughter, about their lives. The teasing, joking, laughing, sarcasm, passion, confusion, the silences and the hesitancy, are all made visible in focus group research. Although I hope that my analysis has gone some way towards capturing these aspects of young women's talk, I fear that often these very features of focus group interaction, which make the groups such a delight to be part of, are missed. I described (in section 2.2.2.), how researchers have to make decisions when it comes to transcribing and recording their data, in this research I chose to transcribe the tape-recordings
verbatim, but I now feel that these transcripts do not always capture the tone of the discussions. The tone of voice in which comments are made, the speed of the delivery, the laughter are very difficult both to record in a transcript and relay to the reader. However, it is in these details that we might be able to hear these young women's voices ring out. I would urge researchers in future research to attend to these aspects of 'girl talk' which often remain invisible.

Although I have demonstrated (in section 7.4) the ways in which the power and control of the moderator is limited in focus group research, and although I have claimed that this makes it an ideal choice of method for feminists, it would be misleading to suggest that consequently this research is non-hierarchical. Although in conducting research with a group rather than one-to-one I lose some elements of control during the data collection stage, I retain control over many other aspects of the research process including the initial choice of topic, transcription, choice of data extracts, analysis etc. In many ways, and to my regret, this has been a piece of 'hit and run' research. Out of necessity (theirs not mine) I spent only a short time with the young women while I was collecting the data and have not had the opportunity to contact them again regarding the research. I would very much have liked the opportunity to 'give back' my analyses to the women who took part, not to gain "a 'bumper sticker' to trumpet the authenticity of the research" (Coyle, 1996: 74), but in order to have some response to the two different analyses of their talk which I present. Exploring our disagreements and reactions would be another stage of analysis or reflection. Of course, this would mean a considerably greater commitment of time and effort both from myself and my participants. Such a commitment would have to be agreed in advance and would represent quite a different kind of research project. In addition, this research is not really for women in any straightforward sense. It is not for either the young women who took part in the research, or for women more generally, who are looking for advice and guidance about how to make refusing sex easier. There are no policy recommendations or easily implemented solutions to arise from this research. Rather, this thesis represents my journey through psychology, through feminism and through questions of epistemology,
and although it makes important contributions to feminist theory it has no direct implications for women’s lives.

It is also important to note that the research is limited to a fairly small and fairly homogenous group of women. This thesis looked only at heterosexual women saying ‘no’ to sex with men, only at young white women, and only at young women who are in the position of considering staying on for higher education at a university. So although the thesis is rich in depth, it is limited in scope to that particular group of people. While I am sure that the things which these women talk about will resonate with some women, I am just as sure that they will not speak to or for all women. I have tried (in section 7.5) to show the ways in which our similarities have obscured or precluded the necessity to speak about certain aspects of sexual relationships. These are privileged silences which relate to privileged aspects of our identities which afford us greater social power (i.e. white, heterosexual, middle class). While heterosexuality is critically examined within this thesis, other dimensions of power remain unchallenged both at the time and in the analysis.

Despite these limitations, this thesis makes important contributions to feminist psychology and opens up important questions for feminist researchers. In particular, on an epistemological level, this thesis highlights the limitations of a constructed approach to data analysis for feminist activism. While the researcher who conducts a transparent analysis can make strong claims about the nature of social reality and how to change it, the researcher who conducts a constructed analysis is left with no firm ground on which to build intervention programs and the like. However, I have also demonstrated how constructed analyses which reveal important information about the investments that young women have in describing their sexual experiences in certain ways and how these investments may undermine or curtail feminist activism. While feminists have called for social change and have called for social constructionist ideas to be related to social change (e.g. Crawford, 1995) there is little sense of what such a relationship would look like. A social constructionist approach provides
important insights into the limitations of existing approaches to social change but what we need to do now is to consider how this knowledge might usefully be implemented into alternative programs for changes. For example, in *Mapping the Language of Racism* (1992), Margaret Wetherell and Jonathan Potter use discourse analysis to demonstrate the limitations of anti-racism, and suggest that such an approach might point to new ways of moving forward:

> an important part of anti-racist practice is identifying the forms [racist] legitimation takes, and charting also the fragmented and dilemmatic nature of everyday discourse, because it is at those points of fracture and contradiction that there is scope for change and the redirection of argument.

While I agree wholeheartedly with this, I would also point out that (like my own research see, for example, Kitzinger and Frith, forthcoming), they do not go far enough - what kinds of change and in what direction are we to move?

In addition to raising questions about feminist activism, this thesis also raises questions about how to address women’s victimization without presenting them as victims. Debates about victimhood and agency have been key feminist concerns both within and beyond this thesis. Often feminists start from the assumption that women are victims and when data start to get problematic, when women do not talk about themselves as victims, feminists address the ways in which women resist oppression, or the ways in which their oppression is obscured. The approach of this thesis has been to investigate those times when young women can be seen as talking about things which oppress them (i.e. miscommunication, emotion work) and then to look at how in talking about these very things, they present themselves as powerful and in control, as knowledgeable and sophisticated sexual actors. One way of approaching this which would build on the contributions of this research is to look at those times
when women present themselves as powerful and talk about their own power. An ideal place to start such an investigation would be the phenomenon of GirlPower. Celia Kitzinger has noted both the absence of overt discussions of power in psychology and also the naiveté of such discussions when they do arise. She argues that feminists need to "locate the different discourses in which power-talk is embedded, to examine the rhetorical functions of different conceptualizations of power, and their sociopolitical implications and effects" (Kitzinger, 1991: 114). Talk about GirlPower would seem an ideal place to begin just such an investigation.

The phenomenon of GirlPower is interesting because not only it is about girls being powerful (unusual in itself) but also because it has been hailed as the nineties version of feminism. There is a concern that feminism is dying, losing impetus, becoming unfashionable, and that young women are moving into a postfeminist era. This has led to "sporadic soul searching" about why feminism no longer appeals to young women (Innes, 1995: 260). Young women apparently see feminism as largely redundant, and although they may espouse feminist views (known as the 'I'm not a feminist but ...' syndrome), they see feminists as women with "extreme views" and as "anti-men" (Sharpe, 1994: 286, see also Morgan, 1995; Spender, 1993). A recent edition of the (now defunct) British feminist magazine Everywoman (1995) asked 'Is feminism dead?'. By contrast, GirlPower is alive and kicking. GirlPower is a high powered, pouting, in your face reaction to so-called anti-sex eighties feminism. What it offers, according to journalist Kathy Acker, is a vision of young women who are "sexually curious, certainly pro-sex" and who "do not feel that they are stupid or that they should not be heard because they did not attend the right universities" (Acker, 1997). GirlPower also marks a fierce rejection of a key aspect of feminist politics which characterised the 1970's and 1980s - the critique of the 'beauty myth'. Instead, tight tops, wonder bras, short skirts, eyeliner, lipstick, and 'inadvertent' flashes of underwear are the hallmark of GirlPower. For the most part, feminists seem to be at a loss as to know what to do with this new noise from young women. They appear to be torn between, on the one hand, celebrating young women for being
“cooler and wiser” (Bea Campbell, quoted in Innes, 1995), for their “confidence and sassiness” (Usha Brown, quoted in Innes, 1995), and, on the other, expressing disappointment at young women’s naïve assumptions of equality and failure to challenge oppressive practices. There is an admission that (older) feminists ‘Just Don’t Understand’ (cf. Tannen, 1990) the new generation of ‘feminist’ thought. As Michelle Fine and Pat Macpherson say reflecting on their research with four young women:

... we began to recognise how old we were, how dated the academic literatures were, how powerful feminism had been in shaping their lives and the meanings they made of them, and yet how inadequately their feminism dealt with key issues of identity and peer relations. (Macpherson and Fine, 1992: 175).

These authors report being faced with the inadequacy of their own feminism in comprehending the issues with which these young women grapple, coupled with their own incredulity that these young women “could call themselves feminist” (1992: 175). In this thesis I have argued that there are many different feminisms as well as many different kinds of feminist analysis. An examination of GirlPower as a form of feminism would develop this idea by considering what (if any) aspects of GirlPower are beneficial to feminism and what are the costs of adopting GirlPower as a form of feminism. I have argued elsewhere (Frith, 1994) that feminism is losing its appeal to young women; by rejecting the hugely popular appeal of GirlPower we may risk alienating young women further. This does not mean that we should adopt uncritically a media-induced fad, but rather that we should take seriously the appeal that GirlPower holds for young women and explore whether a greater understanding of GirlPower could inform feminist theory and activism.

It only remains, then, for me to draw to a close to what has been an exhilarating and eye-opening adventure through young women’s accounts of sexual refusal.
From the time when I responded with such affront to the patronising television programme with which I opened this chapter, I have journeyed through different theories which I have found both useful and frustrating; through different epistemologies which have opened new paths through the data while simultaneously closing others; and through different feminisms which have caused me continually to question the utility of the analyses I produce. It is armed with this new knowledge, gained from battling with competing theories, epistemologies and feminisms, that I am ready to embark on new journeys and new adventures.
References


References


References


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References


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Appendices
Appendix One
Sample Consent Form

I ________________________(NAME) BEING OVER SIXTEEN YEARS OLD, VOLUNTARILY AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH PROJECT PROPOSED BY HANNAH FRITH IN ORDER TO INVESTIGATE ISSUES OF COMMUNICATION AROUND SEXUALITY. SPECIFICALLY THIS INVOLVES WATCHING PART OF A SEX EDUCATION VIDEO THAT WAS PROPOSED FOR USE IN SCHOOLS. PARTICIPATION WILL TAKE _____ (TIME) TO COMPLETE.

THE VIDEO DEALS WITH SEXUAL ISSUES AND MAY CAUSE EMBARRASSMENT OR DISCOMFORT.

I ACKNOWLEDGE THAT HANNAH FRITH HAS EXPLAINED THE TASK FULLY, AND HAS GIVEN FULL INFORMATION ABOUT HOW THE DATA WILL BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL. I HAVE BEEN INFORMED THAT I CAN WITHDRAW FROM THE RESEARCH AT ANY TIME WITHOUT PREJUDICE OR PENALTY. I UNDERSTAND THAT I AM FREE TO ASK ANY QUESTIONS ABOUT PARTICIPATION WHICH WILL BE ANSWERED IN FULL.

SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT: ________________________________

SIGNATURE OF RESEARCHER: ________________________________
Appendix Two
The Focus Group Participants

Group One: Seven participants - Charlotte, Tina, Sarah, Michelle, Linda, Kate and Sharon. These women were all undergraduates with the exception of one who was a postgraduate. The women all volunteered to take part in a discussion about ‘Saying “no” to Sex’ over pizza in the author’s own home.

Group Two: This is the second meeting of some of the participants of group one (the women requested a second meeting). This time there were five participants - Michelle, Sharon, Sarah, Tina, Linda. In order to focus the discussion on saying ‘no’ the author used a ‘Story Completion’ technique to stimulate discussion (see Chapter Two for more details).

Group Three: This is the third meeting of the initial group. However, only three of the original participants were involved - Sharon, Linda and Tina. After limited success with the story completion task, the author used ‘Memory Work’ technique to elicit discussion (again see Chapter Three for details).

Group Four: This groups consists of seven volunteers whose ages ranged from between 18-24 approximately - Lisa, Carla, Mary, Sue, Carol, Judy and Maggie. These women were brought together using snowball sampling, some of them were undergraduates while others were recent graduates. The story completion technique was used to elicit discussion.

Group Five: This is a group of four women aged between 16-18 who were recruited via a sixth form conference held at Loughborough University - Lucy, Sam, Lynn, and Becky. The participants were shown a short clip of a sex education video and a semi-structured focus group schedule was used to stimulate discussion.

Group Six: This is a group of two women aged 16-18 who were recruited via a sixth form conference held at Loughborough University - Sara and Liz. The participants were shown a short clip of a sex education video and a semi-structured focus group schedule was used to stimulate discussion.

Group Seven: This is a group of three young women aged 16-18 who were recruited via a sixth form conference held at Loughborough University - Lara, Cath and Helen. The participants were shown a short clip of a sex education video and a semi-structured focus group schedule was used to stimulate discussion.

Group Eight: This is a group of two women aged 16-18 who were recruited via a sixth form conference held at Loughborough University - Jan and Rose. The participants were shown a short clip of a sex education video and a semi-structured focus group schedule was used to stimulate discussion.
Group Nine: This is a group of three young women aged 16-18 who were recruited via a sixth form conference held at Loughborough University - Pam, Zoe and Rose. The participants were shown a short clip of a sex education video and a semi-structured focus group schedule was used to stimulate discussion.

Group Ten: This is a group of three young women aged 16-18 who were recruited via a sixth form conference held at Loughborough University - Deb, Karen and Jill. The participants were shown a short clip of a sex education video and a semi-structured focus group schedule was used to stimulate discussion.

Group Eleven: This is a group of three young women aged 16-18 who were recruited via a sixth form conference held at Loughborough University - Rachel, Ros and Wendy. The participants were shown a short clip of a sex education video and a semi-structured focus group schedule was used to stimulate discussion.

Group Twelve: This is a group of seven young women aged 16-18 who were recruited via a sixth form conference held at Loughborough University - Sophie, Kim, Jan, Diane, Kylie, Mel and Cheryl. The participants were shown a short clip of a sex education video and a semi-structured focus group schedule was used to stimulate discussion.

Group Thirteen: This is a group of three women undergraduates recruited via a snowball sample - Megan, Tara, Pat and Ellen.

Group Fourteen: This is a group of three female undergraduates recruited via a snowball sample - Natalie, Janet and Susie.

Group Fifteen: This is a group of ten female undergraduates recruited via a snowball sample - Kathy, Ashley, Caroline, Barbara, Alison, Tanya, Paula, Vicki, Kirsty, and Louise.