

Abstract The current work on the sociology of the body has shown it to be a key site of both the production of meaning and of regulation. There has however been little attention given to particular 'body parts'. The research presented here suggests that mouths are particularly symbolic and that our oral hygiene habits are not just disciplinary techniques, but are one way in which our particular sexual and gender identities are constituted. This article, drawing on a series of in-depth interviews with lesbians and heterosexual men and women, explores how our 'mouthrules', that is, what we do and more particularly don't do, with our mouths, construct, through the notion of intimacy, the contours of sexuality and gender. Differences are apparent between the groups. Developing Douglas's (1966) theory of 'grid' and 'group', it is suggested that adherence to mouthrules takes place along two axes: the level of personal 'strictness' with which rules are applied (grid) and the rigidity of the gender/sex boundaries within which mouthrules are organized (group). The conclusion is drawn that, through the performance of these apparently trivial aspects of daily life we are performing aspects of our gender and sexual identities.

Keywords gender, heterosexuality, identity, lesbians, mouths

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Mouthrules and the Construction of Sexual Identities

Introduction

This article considers the place of 'mouths' in the construction of sexual identity. It suggests that what we do or, more importantly, don't do with our mouths produces the categories of 'intimate others' and of 'strangers' in our lives, as well as positioning those relationships which are more ambivalent. It further proposes that rules about the mouth are culturally universal but the specific content of these rules differs according to social group.

The findings in this article are drawn from interviews with lesbians and with heterosexual women and men and consider the differences and similarities between these groups in their 'mouthrules'.

It is suggested that heterosexual men and women will signify gender differences through their mouthrules and that this is one practice by which heterosexuality is constructed. Lesbians are therefore left with the task of producing an 'anti-heterosexuality', that is mouthrules which will signify their 'otherness' both from 'men' and from 'heterosexual women'. 'Mouthrules' are discursive practices or technologies by which gender/sexual identities are produced. One conclusion is that all are produced in relation to the category 'heterosexual men', i.e. heterosexual masculinity constitutes the hegemonic 'norm' (Connell, 1987; Hearn and Morgan, 1990; Zita, 1998).

It is also argued that 'intimacy' is the concept for producing these identities which relate to the particularity of the 'mouth' as body part.

The body and the production of sexual and gender identities

There is a wealth of sociological, psychoanalytic and philosophical literature that addresses the relationships between body and society, body and gender and between bodies, genders and sexual identity that can be summarized only briefly here. Following Foucault, there are many texts that address the primacy of the body as a site of regulation (Turner, 1984; Shilling, 1993). Nettleton (1991) analyses the ways in which 'the mouth' is produced as an object of disciplinary power, but stands alone in interrogating 'the mouth' as socially constructed. Other work takes 'the body' as a key site for both the production and regulation of 'gender' (e.g. Butler, 1990a; Zita, 1998), and of 'sexual' identities (e.g. Weeks, 1985, 1986). None specifically address 'mouths' as a particular aspect of 'the body' in this regard.

There is also an extensive literature on the social construction of sexuality. This has been in relation to 'homosexuality' (more specifically gay men, e.g. Weeks, 1977, 1981, 1985, 1986, 1991, 1995); 'lesbianism' (e.g. Kitzinger, 1987; McIntosh, 1998/1966; Zita, 1998); and in the theorizing of heterosexuality (Kitzinger and Wilkinson, 1993; Richardson, 1996).

There has also been a plethora of writing and theorizing about 'gender' from feminist (often lesbian) perspectives (e.g. Fuss, 1989; Butler, 1990a; Wittig, 1992/1981) and by male academics problematizing masculinity (Connell, 1987; Hearn and Morgan, 1990). There is also a great deal of literature that addresses the production of gender and sexualities from a

psychoanalytic perspective in which some attention is given to the links between food, eating and sex or sexual identity (see discussion in Kear, 1997).

Much of this work addresses the production of categories of gender and sexual identity through various discursive practices, for example film (de Lauretis, 1987), food and eating (as mentioned above) and schooling (Epstein, 1994). As Butler argues, identity is produced as internal and essential by our everyday actions:

In other words, acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this on the surface of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organising principle of identity as a cause. Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are performative in the sense that the essence of identity that they otherwise purport to express becomes a fabrication manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. (Butler, 1990b: 336)

This article attempts to take this conceptualization further and to argue that what we do with our mouths, our ‘mouthrules’, are discursive practices producing particular gender and sexual identities. The idea of a body ‘standing for’ a social group is developed in anthropological theory (e.g. Douglas, 1966). In this view the conduct of bodies corresponds to the conduct of the society. Therefore bodies and, I would argue, body parts become aspects of material culture. This article attempts to create a link between these two theoretical perspectives. Other areas of sociology have identified the way bodies are produced through civilizing (Mauss, 1973/1934; Elias, 1982/1939; Bordieu, 1984; Falk, 1994). However, again, none specifically addresses the relationship between ‘technologies of the mouth’, or its discursive practices, some of which I have elaborated here as ‘mouthrules’, and the discursive production of gender and sexual identity. In trying to do so, this article depends on many of the analytic insights outlined in the literature acknowledged above and also on the anthropological literature which informs the debates about bodies and boundaries, pollution and taboo.

The mouth as a boundary

The mouth holds a peculiarly symbolic position, being the space through which things pass both into and out of the body. This is perhaps clearest in relation to ‘food’ and ‘eating’ (e.g. Mennell, 1991; Murcott, 1993; Lupton, 1996). As Falk (1994: 14 quoted in Lupton 1996: 18) argues, the mouth is the most closely guarded ‘sensory opening’ in the body because it is integral to both the intake of food and the outflux of speech. He conceptualizes the mouth as a ‘vestibule’ into which food (socially

sanctioned as edible by dietary rules) is taken and then tasted (and at which point it is incorporated, irreversibly, into oneself).

Mary Douglas in both *Natural Symbols* (1996/1971) and *Purity and Danger* (1966) theorized the practices of the self in relation to food and to 'hygiene' as symbolic of the group and private ritual behaviours as marking public boundaries. The rules and rituals which surround the mouth and teeth are therefore likely to be important (performative, in Butler's terms) markers of 'self' in terms of gender, age and, as I will argue here, sexual, identity, when that identity has a marginalized position. Mary Douglas (1966) argues that purity and danger are linked to the symbolic and ritual ways that we classify our experience of the world. As a result the boundaries constructed come to be seen as reflecting rather than as constructing a 'natural order'. She suggests that if we examine pollution and contagion beliefs we find that the kinds of contact thought of as being 'dangerous' carry a symbolic load. The mouth and teeth, like other 'openings' in the body, are likely to be considered particularly risky as this is the place where inside meets outside, self (body) meets other, and this potential risk can be managed through social sanction or taboo. Therefore the rules and rituals that surround the mouth, that is, the technologies of the mouth (and other body 'openings'), are likely to be particularly important for the production of our social selves.

Finally, some sociological attention has been paid to the emotional body (Hochschild, 1983; Bendelow and Williams, 1996) and to theorizing 'love' and 'intimacy' (Giddens, 1992). Giddens proposes that modernity has brought with it a transformation within 'marriage' and personal lives. The 'modern relationship' in his thesis is no longer a solely economic arrangement but depends on the construction of a shared closeness, that is intimacy. This article suggests that these categories of partners and lovers, family, friends and strangers are produced in part by our mouthrules. Further, developing the grid/group model of Mary Douglas (1996/1971), it suggests that through our mouthrules we position ourselves along two axes: 'group' (degree of inclusivity) and 'grid' (degree of strictness of adherence to rules). What follows is an attempt to sketch out a framework for this.

The research

The author interviewed a 'network' sample of lesbians and heterosexual women (five from each group) who were known to her. A sample of (five) heterosexual men were interviewed by a heterosexual man.¹ Interviews were semi-structured covering aspects of oral hygiene beliefs and practices; ideas about the mouth as a boundary; ritual practices; and views on the

mouth as an aspect of identity. The tapes were transcribed and analysed using qualitative software. Gay men are most obviously missing from the sample, although other 'social divisions' could be researched, including those identifying as transgendered. Therefore findings from this research should be treated as preliminary, as further studies which could explore other 'positionings' are indicated.

My position as both researcher and friend to the female interviewees should also be addressed (Finch, 1984). Clearly, knowing interviewees personally as friends is not the usual basis for research, but a number of points pertain. First, the sample was intended as a theoretical sample as this was an exploratory project. Second, when interviewing is potentially sensitive, it is easier to recruit participants that are known to the interviewer as trust and moral integrity are, hopefully, implicit to the relationship (e.g. Dunne, 1997). The heterosexual women were also all known to the author/interviewer and had previously had reciprocal conversations with the author/interviewer about personal lives and problems. In all instances I felt that this facilitated the interview. The men were also known to their interviewer, albeit not as close friends.

The parts of the interviews analysed here are those where participants discussed how they felt about sharing their toothbrush; how 'private' they felt cleaning their teeth to be; and what parts of other people's bodies they would consider putting in their mouths. Quotations from the interviews use the identifiers 'Hm' for heterosexual men; 'Hw' for heterosexual women; 'Lw' for lesbian women; and the interviewers' initials, JC and NT.

Toothbrushes

Everyone saw toothbrushes as private, personal things. However the boundaries of 'private and personal' were not the same for everyone. Participants were asked with whom they would share a toothbrush. Heterosexual men were in general as horrified as lesbian women at the prospect of someone 'unknown' using their toothbrush – 'A total stranger – good god no!' (Hm 5). This man went on to liken it to 'wearing a complete stranger's soiled underwear', which implies that wearing the soiled underwear of someone you knew might be countenanced; 'knowing' does seem to be a key issue here. Dirt is not quite as defiling when you know where it has come from. Indeed, in response to other questions participants cited 'not knowing where it's been' as reason for not having something in their mouth.

The only person universally acceptable to share a toothbrush with was a current sexual partner and this was true for all participants. There were differences however even within this general rule. The heterosexual

women were less 'fussy' and more likely to share a toothbrush with a partner and with their children (even if this was not reciprocated):

NT: Would you lend your toothbrush to anybody?

Hw1: To Simon [partner], Oliver [younger son]. Edward [older son] would be reluctant'.

Or with close friends and family:

NT: So would you lend your toothbrush to your sister if she were staying with you?

Hw4: Oh yeah . . .

NT: and to her partner [a woman]?

Hw4: Yes, and my brother, mother, father, nephew.

Characteristic of these women was the definition of themselves in relation to others. They wouldn't mind lending their toothbrush (to a lover, family member, houseguest or close girlfriend), but they felt others may not want to borrow it, to the extent that this defined the relationship: 'if they were happy to share with me that would probably indicate the kind of relationship we had' (Hw3). This indicates a very permeable boundary between self and world, with the 'in group' pretty much defining themselves. This contrasts markedly with the other two groups and perhaps indicates the first 'rule', the degree of permeability between self and world is one way of constructing a sexual identity.

There was one exception to this, a heterosexual woman who said that although she would lend a toothbrush if necessary she would 'chuck it away afterward or tell them to keep it, even someone I was sexually intimate with' (Hw 2). Indeed this woman often had 'stricter' boundaries than either the other heterosexual women or the lesbians. The concept of 'intimacy' (as defined by Giddens, 1992) and her particular gender politics might explain this difference in 'grid' position. This woman was not in a sexual relationship with anyone at the time of interview. Although identifying as heterosexual she did not expect a relationship with a man to have the potential to be what Giddens termed the 'pure relationship' (where things between partners are equal). She therefore only expects to have transient relationships that do not attempt to be anything other than sexual. The idea of sharing anything that would imply an emotionally close or domestic (i.e. intimate) relationship with a man was anathema. Whereas the lesbian women were clearer that current, and in many cases ex, lovers were okay:

I'd certainly lend it to Pat, I'd probably lend it to any of my ex-lovers, just on the basis of why not? (Lw3).

One person (Lw4) constantly referred to her ex-partner [Debbie] as someone she continued to include in her 'inner circle' along with her current partner of seven years [Helen]:

I wouldn't like even Helen or Debbie to use my toothbrush, I wouldn't like anyone else to use it.

But she is confounded by Debbie who clearly does not share her boundaries. The interesting thing to note is that Debbie was in a long-term heterosexual relationship and perhaps for this reason it was proving difficult to find a consensus on how to operate the rules. This person also keeps several spare toothbrushes as a precaution against having to lend her toothbrush to anyone:

NT: If all your spare toothbrushes were out of reach and someone who was not Helen or Debbie had come to stay with you would you lend them your toothbrush?

Lw4: Yes but then I wouldn't have it back again would I, I'd probably put it in TCP if I had to use it again.

She is clearly unhappy about sharing her toothbrush but feels compelled to 'play along' with the notion that to be that 'strict' is unacceptably extreme:

Lw4: Debbie's always grabbing my toothbrush . . . she comes to my flat to stay and she just takes any one she can find and I shout at her if she's used it.

NT: What do you do with it? Do you use it again? Do you boil it?

Lw4: No I don't boil it, and I wouldn't throw it away, I'm not that bad.

In Mary Douglas' discussion of 'dirt' (1966) she suggests that our idea of dirt is compounded of two elements: care for hygiene and respect for conventions. She takes a 'rational' view of hygiene, noting that the rules of hygiene change in line with changes in knowledge. However it is the conventional side of dirt avoidance that serves to illustrate the point here as these rules can be set aside for the sake of friendship. There is something commendable about not being 'fussy': it suggests not putting on airs, or being snobbish. Douglas (1966: 7) cites an example from Thomas Hardy where farm labourers commend the shepherd who refused a clean mug for his cider as a 'nice unparticular man'. Indeed I would say that dirt avoidance, or the lack of it, constructs the level of the emotional relationship.

Similarly, referring to her partner's teenage daughter (whom she has known since a small child), Lw4 has to acknowledge that she would not be expected to 'mind' if the teenager had used her toothbrush by mistake: 'I wouldn't be surprised if, unbeknown to me . . . I'm not so paranoid that I'd have locked it up so that Laura can't get to it.'

To be thought 'paranoid' suggests that this reaction would be considered outside of the acceptable restrictions. It is perhaps an indication of the difficulty of not offending people by applying different (that is, less intimate) markers to the relationship than they would. In this case the child's mother might take the rejection of an 'intimate' relationship with her child as a reflection on the emotional intimacy of the adults' relationship.

How the 'intimacy' status of people shifts as relationships change is illustrated by Lw2. She would include 'very close friends' and ex-lovers among the people to whom she would lend her toothbrush. But she then qualifies these categories: 'well, ex-lovers who haven't slept with someone else yet' on the grounds that after that line has been crossed you will no longer know 'what's been in their mouths'. She is well aware that they had occupied the same status at the start of the relationship (i.e. you didn't know what had been in their mouth) but that 'you don't bother about this when you want to get close'. This suggests precisely that the status of the relationship as 'intimate' or otherwise can be produced by the way the mouthrules are applied. Therefore the second rule can be summarized as the way that the application of mouthrules (i.e. dirt avoidance or the lack of it) constructs categories of relationship.

For the heterosexual men, as for the lesbian women, the lending of toothbrushes was restricted to their female partners: 'Well if it was a girlfriend' (Hm5). In fact the heterosexual men were possibly less keen on that than the lesbians: 'er . . . no, no, I don't, actually I don't like the idea of that'.

Not everyone made the distinction, but for those that did, borrowing seemed to be possibly less problematic than lending toothbrushes: '. . . I've gone out and stayed round mates' houses and I've asked to borrow a toothbrush . . .' (Hm1). Again, this was sometimes complicated by the dance of politeness and obligation:

Erm, . . . yeah, it doesn't really bother me . . . I'd give it a good rinse like but I wouldn't mind borrowing a toothbrush . . . having said that, no, I wouldn't ask I would probably go without brushing my teeth for that one time . . . it's a bit of an imposition on the other person really . . . it might be a bit embarrassing for them to have to say 'I don't really want you to use my toothbrush', so I wouldn't ask . . .

Toothbrushes are clearly subject to rigorous monitoring. This appeared as 'natural' to the interviewees and many remarked on how they hadn't thought about these things before. The following quotes show how two of the interviewees conceptualized these rules as part of a higher order category. The first is from a man (Hm1) whose prime motivation is to conceal the fact that he wears a denture. However it serves a purpose for distinguishing between his 'inner' and 'outer' circles:

Hm1: . . . people that have stayed around my house they've asked to borrow a toothbrush and I've always given them the toothbrush that does the dentures [laughs] rather than my toothbrush y'know. I've said you can have the blue one but don't touch the yellow one, like purposely . . .

JC: So what is important is the relation between your brush and your real teeth . . . you wouldn't feel as comfortable lending that one to someone as you would the other one . . . which is something done outside of yourself . . .

Hm1: That's right yeah . . .

JC: So the inside of your mouth is very important in that sense?

Hm1: Yeah yeah . . .

Lw4 draws a very similar conclusion:

NT: Would you share flannels?

Lw4: At a pinch, yes, it's easier than sharing toothbrushes, it's much easier. I suppose it's because a toothbrush goes inside you and a flannel doesn't.

And there it is, a toothbrush goes inside you and that is a space reserved for intimates. It is this concept that governs toothbrush use; the third rule is the 'inside rule'. The inside rule has two dimensions: one relates to the degree of 'dirt' which may acceptably cross the inside/outside boundary (the degree of permeability between self and world) and the second the application of the 'dirt' rule to different categories of 'other' (dirt avoidance or lack of it). The 'inside rule' therefore produces the hierarchy of 'dirt', or the 'dirt differential'.² The application of this rule is apparent in many other things we do with our mouths. It is further illustrated here by considering the data relating to mouthrules surrounding cleaning your teeth and, more extremely, mouthrules surrounding oral sex.

Cleaning your teeth

The fact that mouths are 'intimate' spaces constructs cleaning your teeth as potentially private and personal. A key distinction that emerged from the data was in front of whom teeth could be cleaned. For the lesbians, this was a highly restricted category, consisting of lover and, at a push, children. Only one woman (Lw5) felt comfortable cleaning her teeth in front of a range of people, which she explained as being because it was a cleaning activity and any dirt was hidden by the toothpaste foam. For all the other lesbians it was not something to be done in even semi-public, as it was too personal and intimate. For one (Lw3), teeth cleaning was not particularly private, but only in so far that the rule applied to a very restricted group. Indeed routine cleaning practices were generally held to be private affairs, akin, I suppose, to not washing your 'dirty laundry' in public. This exchange nicely illustrates all these dimensions:

NT: what about [flossing in front of] your mother?

Lw3: Oh no. I wouldn't do anything in front of my mother I wouldn't clean my shoes in front of my mother.

NT: Father?

Lw3: No. I'm not on intimate terms with my parents.

Heterosexual women similarly limited their teeth-cleaning audience to household members, but were in general less concerned about it, and would for example allow the possibility of close friends. As one woman (Hw3) explained:

Well, anyone I knew well enough to be staying in the house really. It's not a particularly private thing, cleaning your teeth is it? It's a bit like brushing your hair.

The heterosexual men had the most fluid boundaries, regarding it almost as a bit of a daft question – why would anybody mind about that? For example:

JC: doesn't that bother you at all, a public display of teeth cleaning?

Hm3: I don't see any reason why it should bother me . . .

Oral sex

Needless to say this category was not raised until the interviews were quite far along, and it was raised as part of the enquiry into things you would or wouldn't put in your mouth and as a specific 'sub' question: 'what about other people's bodies?'

Women (heterosexual and lesbian) were generally willing to put all parts of the body of a sexual partner in their mouth. The heterosexual women specified this related only to lovers: 'If I wasn't in a sexual relationship I wouldn't put any bit of their body in my mouth' (Hw3) and 'unless it was someone I was having sex with' (Hw 1). There were however extensions to this boundary with, for example, the inclusion of children 'if they were injured' (Hw1) or even 'nieces and nephews' (Hw3). However, all the lesbians categorically stated that any part of a man's body would be taboo. Indeed often the first thing to be specified by the lesbians was the exclusion of men. For example, responses to the question: 'are there any parts of other people's bodies you wouldn't put in your mouth?' included 'women's bodies? No probably none. Not men.' (Lw3) and 'no part of a male' (Lw2).

Otherwise all parts of women were acceptable. There were however conceptual differences between the heterosexual women and the lesbians, which are encapsulated in the following extract from a lesbian woman:

I think it is very hard to talk about oral sex with men in isolation from having sex with and relationships with men . . . I suppose it's about doing it with them

because you think that's what they want and with women it's because it's what you want as well . . . (Lw4)

There were also differences between all the women and the heterosexual men particularly in relation to anuses. For the women, anuses presented much less of a problem; the significant boundary was not the place but its cleanliness – 'as long as it was clean'.

For the heterosexual men most body parts – ears, toes, breasts, fingers, tongue – were acceptable provided they met two criteria: one, similarly, of being 'clean':

JC: What about things like toes . . . would you lick and suck toes?

Hm3: Yes . . .

JC: That wouldn't bother you at all?

Hm3: It would bother me if they'd been wearing the same socks for a week . . .

and second of belonging to a current sexual partner:

JC: What about something like somebody's toe, would you suck a toe?

Hm5: Hers . . . yeah but nobody else's . . .

All the men felt vaginas to be within bounds:

JC: What about things like genitalia?

Hm2: Certainly yeah . . .

JC: Do you enjoy doing that? Does it bother you in any way?

Hm2: No I enjoy it.

This also illustrates the symbolic significance of the inside/outside boundary of the body. Four out of the five men would not contemplate touching their girlfriend's /wife's anus with their mouths, as it was regarded as 'dirty' 'because of what comes out there'. Following Douglas's (1966) twofold classification of dirt avoidance as 'care for hygiene' and 'respect for convention', in these men's accounts the anus was rendered 'out of bounds' by (rational) rules of hygiene:

JC: . . . Within the sexual relations you have with your wife? . . . Are there any parts of the body you wouldn't put in your mouth?

Hm3: I would avoid the anal passage . . .

JC: Why would you avoid that?

Hm3: Because er . . . the colon is loaded with bacteria and er I don't think I need any other reason. I mean I don't want to get any of the bacteria in my mouth . . .

and by the conventions of dirt avoidance:

JC: So that [licking anus] is one thing you wouldn't do with your girlfriend?

Hm5: Probably not. I don't think I've ever tried it. I wouldn't do it for the simple reason that it's . . . well I wouldn't say it's clean . . .

Only one man (Hm4) felt it would be okay providing the two criteria of 'clean' and sexual partner were met, and he was careful to establish that what he would put in his mouth – in terms of other people's bodies – would depend on the sex of the body:

JC: Is there any part of somebody's body that you wouldn't like to put in your mouth?

Hm7: Nnnnn . . . it depends on that person's personal hygiene at that moment in time I would think . . . and the sex of that person as well . . .

In contrast again, the vagina was 'clean' despite the proximity of 'bodily waste':

JC: But then surely urine comes from genitalia?

Hm5: By definition urine's more sterile than water anyway . . . it's not necessarily a bad thing . . . people drink urine . . .

So, the rules for oral/genital contact are those of cleanliness and of sexual intimacy. Indeed, the one defines the other as cleanliness can only apply to an intimate, but not all (parts of) intimates are clean.

The 'inside rule' and the construction of sexual identity

The most important distinction is between 'inside' and 'outside'. Crossing this boundary is symbolically polluting, 'dirt' is produced when these boundaries are crossed (e.g. Armstrong, 1993). Indeed the 'inside rule' is central to the construction of different sexual identities. This is vividly illustrated by attitudes towards the anus. It is particularly apparent in the way that the heterosexual men's mouthrules quite specifically prohibited the proximity of mouths to anuses because of 'what comes out of them':

Hm1: Well . . . the fact that you shit out your backside and the idea that that area is now connected with your mouth . . . one thing goes in and the other thing comes out and the idea of connecting the two nah . . . it doesn't appeal to me . . .

But what constitutes 'inside' and 'outside' is a marker of people's group identity as well as their position within it (grid). The quote above shows the vagina is understood by these men as being on the 'outside', whereas in contrast, the anus is 'too far in'. Thus the anus is associated with dirt (the archetypal form of dirt, excrement) and the vagina (of a known woman at least) with 'sterile' fluids that pose no threat to the boundaries of self. This 'disgust and abjection' towards the anus invokes Zita's re-definition of homophobia as 'straight repulsion'.

I recall a relative who once shared his personal view with me that the thought of two men kissing was beyond vomit. This statement stuck with me, mainly because of its forthright honesty and visceral discontent, and because of what it implies: a body at risk, unable to find a mechanism strong enough to eject the intrusions of this particular 'otherness'. The subject reacts with an unbearable bodily feeling ('beyond vomit') that seeks a border between 'self' and 'not self', between inner and outer . . . I surmise that straight repulsion is not an irrational fear but a viscerally cogent response inhering within hegemonically constructed genders that foster social relations of oppression. (Zita, 1998: 37)

Thus the defining act of sexual subjectivity is the 'consumption' of the genitals of a sexual partner (again invoking the abject horror of incorporation along with the clear allusion to 'food'). The data presented show it to occur in three different spheres: one, heterosexual men who cannot define an anus as sexual, indeed in whom this thought provokes a viscerally cogent response; two, lesbian women for whom sexual contact with men would be defiling, unthinkable (in most cases), but in whom it did not engender the same reaction of repulsion; and three, heterosexual women for whom meanings are derived as a response to others.

This extreme example serves to illustrate the differences produced by the 'inside rule' in other contexts. The 'inside rule' clearly illustrates the place of the mouth as a significant body part and shows that what and who is allowed 'inside' it is symbolic in this case of gender/sex identities. To allow something 'inside' is to allow it 'emotional closeness', to accord it the status of intimacy, which enables the 'rules' to be relaxed. To keep it at an emotional and social distance, i.e. 'outside' yourself, it has to be constructed as 'dirt'. 'Dirt', therefore, as Mary Douglas put it nearly four decades ago, is only matter out of place. What constitutes 'dirt' in the case of mouthrules is a consequence of one's gender/sexuality positioning. This argument could be further illustrated by endless examples from the data – for example, the rules governing the sharing of forks or drinks follow broadly the same pattern as the 'toothbrush' rules. Routine hygiene practices and the place of the mouth within them are also constitutive of a gender/sexual identity, and mouths and teeth, as part of 'appearance', are significant in defining the boundaries between self and world.

Constructing mouthrules

There is then a distinct set of practices that constitute 'mouthrules'. These, among other things, produce categories of intimacy, i.e. self, lover, partner, child, friend, parent, stranger. These relations (at all levels: kin, sexual, conceptual) are the way in which we organize our selves into a coherent sexual identity. I would also suggest that these 'rules' follow two axes. These axes mirror the 'grid/group' classification of Douglas

(1996/1971), where 'group' indicates boundaries between differing socially organized people and grid the hierarchical ordering of members, through rules, across groups. Zita summarizes this framework thus:

A 'group' refers to an association of people who experience a strong allegiance to the social whole to which they belong. 'Grid' refers to . . . an interlacing formal structure that relates one person to another as an aggregate of people held together by compliance to the rules . . . The rules, rather than a sense of belonging, hold this aggregate of individuals in relation to one another. (Zita, 1998: 49)

She uses this conceptualization to make sense of 'straight repulsion', which she sees as a product of a society which privileges 'individual rights' over group loyalties. Thus the increasing pressure for a socially inclusive civic society (i.e. grid-based) has led to 'a homophobic backlash . . . perhaps best understood as a phenomenon located in a conflict between grid- and group-based masculinity constructions . . .' (p. 51). This, she concludes, leads to a 'heteromale retreat into group formation, remarking the borders of manhood as not female, not feminine, not homosexual, and 'not any in my family' (p. 52).

The conceptualization of group coherence and its place in the construction of sexuality offers insights for mouthrules. However mouthrules data suggest that the grid-based allegiances do not so easily traverse group boundaries. Rather, 'grid' in this instance refers to the degree of 'strictness' with which group rules are applied and correspondingly positions an individual within the group.

Therefore, on the 'group' axis, while the categories remain culturally universal, the content of these categories is specific to the particular group, and on the 'grid' axis the degree of strictness in operating these rules is varied, but only within the boundaries shared by the group. Thus 'stranger' was conceptualized as 'men' by lesbians, as people outside of the domestic space by heterosexual women and as anyone with whom they did not have a passing acquaintance by heterosexual men. This neatly parallels other social definitions: lesbians as 'not men'; heterosexual women as responsive and defined through the 'home'; and heterosexual men as instigators, operating in the world at large. Likewise 'family' for lesbians was more tightly drawn and their mouthrules more likely to place parents and siblings outside the circle of intimates. However, boundaries between self and lover/partner, even ex-lover, were more fluid than in either heterosexual group. In the production of particularly lesbian identities it appears that group boundaries are more rigid and that lesbians construct themselves as 'not men' and 'not heterosexual' by their specific relations to their own mouths and to other women's mouths.

Heterosexual women do not define themselves as 'not men' and 'not

lesbians' but are constructed as this by their interactions with others. They have the most inclusive and least clearly defined group boundaries: all family and close friends were likely to be included, as well as anyone who could be considered a member of the household on however temporary a basis. Most striking about the way the heterosexual women talked about their mouthrules was the way that they were externally defined. The heterosexual women were usually quite happy to have their toothbrush used by others, to clean their teeth in front of other people and to put all parts of lovers' bodies in their mouth, if that was what the other people wanted. In these relationships the degree of intimacy was defined by the other and then reciprocated.

There are quite different rules and boundaries among heterosexual men. They are not waiting to be defined by the other but are doing the defining. For example, they were happy to borrow but less keen to lend and had some of the strongest reactions to sharing their toothbrush. Indeed, as Kear (1997) argues in 'Eating the other: an analysis of the signifying relationship between food and sex', heteromascularity's fantasy/ fear is of incorporation, the resolution being when: 'men are [reinstated as] the eaters, women the eaten' (p. 271). This relationship is also played out in the operation of their 'mouthrules'. Heterosexual men construct themselves as 'not women' (and also, therefore, not gay) by revulsion towards the anus and by having the least strictness within the group in terms of personal rules (grid). But although group boundaries are wide, the first rule – the degree of permeability between self and world, i.e. between the inside and the outside of the group – is applied quite rigidly.

Conclusion

It seems that the 'rules' which govern what we do with our mouths, for example, what we will or will not put in them, are central to the production of particular gender and sexual identities. This article identifies some of these which might be summarized as:

1. The degree of permeability between self and world is one way of constructing a sexual identity.
2. Dirt avoidance, or the lack of it, constructs the level of the emotional relationship.
3. The manner in which mouthrules are applied constructs different categories of relationship.
4. The 'inside rule'. Space classified as 'inside' you is a space where intimacy is produced.

How we are positioned in relation to these rules seems to run along two axes, which can be summarized as the strictness of personal rules (grid)

versus the inclusiveness of group boundaries (group). A range of positions may pertain in both domains. 'Strictness' (grid) may vary in relation to the extent to which 'world' poses a threat to 'self'. Thus some lesbian women are less 'strict' than others in terms of the application of mouthrules within the group, for example in front of whom you would clean your teeth. Group boundaries are where a shared set of mouthrules apply, for example, 'not men' for the lesbians or 'anyone in the house' for the heterosexual women. These variances however cannot transcend the group boundaries without calling into question your sexual identity.

There are several other potential lines of enquiry which suggest themselves. Further analysis of the current data could develop ideas about 'food' and 'consumption' in relation to sex and identity, and about the relationship between 'mouthrules', 'ritual pollution' and the production of intimacy – 'kissing' seems particularly symbolically loaded. A larger and more varied sample would elaborate and extend the ideas suggested here and data from a sample of gay men would present a welcome opportunity to test the theory.

Thus it would seem that, although apparently mundane and trivial aspects of our daily routine, activities such as tooth-brushing can generate theoretical insights about the array of complex social and personal rules which position us. Since gender and sexual identity are produced through the articulation of these mouthrules, we might suppose that these and other mouthrules would construct other socially significant boundaries.

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