

**Abstract** This article is concerned with women in the UK who continue to mobilize around the term 'lesbian' – that is, with women attending groups<sup>1</sup> targeted expressly at lesbians.<sup>2</sup> How do such women understand and negotiate their identities? What role does sex and sexuality play in their negotiations? And what can their negotiations tell us about the construction of identities more widely? In exploring these questions, the article highlights the ongoing policing of lesbian identities and behaviours in the 1990s, and draws attention to the continued deployment of oppositional lesbian identities alongside newer post-lesbian forms.

**Keywords** boundaries, community policing, contemporary sexual politics, lesbian identities, sexual labels

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## 'Lesbian' in a Post-Lesbian World? Policing Identity, Sex and Image

### Introduction

Historically, it has been argued that the regulation and control of lesbian sex and sexuality has been achieved first, through discursive practices which deny the possibility or existence of lesbian sexualities, such as the denial of lesbian history or the suppression of evidence of eroticism between women; and second, through discursive processes which denigrate lesbian sexualities, such as the construction of lesbians as dangerous or abnormal (see, for example, Sheridan, 1980; Kitzinger, 1987; Richardson, 1992; Wilton, 1995; Shildrick, 1997). Relatively little attention has been paid, however, to the discursive construction, regulation and policing of lesbian sex and sexuality within the lesbian community.<sup>3</sup> Yet, as the lesbian 'sex wars' (Wilton, 1995; Healey, 1996) of the 1970s and 1980s (which focused on contested meanings of lesbian penetrative and SM sex), and the dental dam debates (Gorna, 1996; Farquhar, 1998) of the 1990s (which focused on contested meanings of cunnilingus) demonstrate, lesbians are actively

involved in the construction, and policing, of alternative sexual meanings.

Debates about the meaning of the category 'lesbian' within the UK lesbian community have fed into, and been fed by, wider concerns about identities. In the 1970s and 1980s, for example, concern within the community focused on competing understandings of lesbian authenticity: that is, of who counts as lesbian and why (see, for example, Whisman, 1993; Kahaleole Chang Hall, 1993; Wilton, 1995; Ashton, 1996; Healey, 1996). These debates raised questions about the distinctiveness, or otherwise, of lesbian identities and sexual behaviour, particularly in relation to heterosexual practice. In the 1990s, however, theoretical debates about the meaning of the category 'lesbian' have focused increasingly on the strategic necessity of keeping the category intact as a 'dyke to hold back the shifting sands of postmodernism' (Wilton, 1995: 39). These debates raise questions about whether or not the postmodern dissolution of lesbian identities can be read any differently from the erasure of lesbian identities which preceded it. Does, for example, the dissolution and incorporation of the category 'lesbian' within the category 'queer' represent a strategic step towards the dismantlement, or reproduction, of hegemonic sexual meanings and relations of power (Humphrey, 1999)? Has feminism achieved a climate in which women can be 'sexual in a manner utterly different in meaning from either pre-feminist or non-feminist versions demanded by phallogocentrically defined female heterosexuality' (Sonnet, 1999: 170)? Are we now free to interpret the reemergence of lesbian sexual practices such as 'butch-femme' behaviour or dildo use (Martin, 1992; Morgan, 1993; Ashton, 1996) in non-gendered terms (Creith, 1996; Adkins, 1997)? Have lesbian identities become redundant, or indeed counterproductive, to the dissolution of heteropatriarchal power?

Lesbian ambivalence on all of these points is not surprising. The hard-won nature of contemporary lesbian visibility, and the relatively precarious subject position which is arguably occupied by lesbians, as opposed to gay men, means that lesbians have more to lose than most in relinquishing a visible 'lesbian' position before it has fully emerged (Fuss, 1989: 98/99).

But if women are reluctant to abandon the position lesbian, how do they continue to negotiate this position in a climate where sexual identities are both proliferating and being broken down? What role does sex or sexuality play in their negotiations? And how is this expressed? And what implications do their negotiations have for the negotiation of sexual meanings more widely, both now and in the future?

In order to explore some of these questions, this article draws on data from a recent study of the discursive construction of lesbian sexual health (Farquhar, 1998). To readers immersed in postmodern debates about identities, some of these data may appear somewhat 'out of time'. Indeed, on reading some of the research transcripts, one lesbian colleague

remarked with some surprise 'Who ARE these women?'. It is therefore important to locate these data, both in terms of time and place.

The study was carried out in 1994/5, when debates about Queer were clearly in the public domain. The data were produced through focus group discussions, carried out with existing<sup>4</sup> lesbian and lesbian/bisexual community groups identified through listings in the lesbian and gay press, supplemented by individual interviews.<sup>5</sup>

Overall, the views expressed in the research, particularly in relation to new 'transgressive' sexual identities or ways of being, were remarkably consistent across ages<sup>6</sup> and geographical areas.<sup>7</sup> Thus, while this account is grounded in the experiences of a specific group of women (those attending urban 'lesbian' groups),<sup>8</sup> I believe that it provides important insights into the negotiation of lesbian identities more widely, and that the tensions highlighted between the proliferation, fragmentation and dissolution of lesbian identities are likely to have resonance for lesbians living elsewhere.

## Who are 'we'? Defining lesbian identities

One of the ways in which subjective meanings of lesbian identities may be revealed is in the use of terms such as 'we' and 'us'. Who, for example, are lesbians referring to when they talk about 'we'? What forms of discourse and subject positionings are being invoked?

Discussions between lesbians suggest that the lesbian 'we' of the 1990s has been constructed within, and reconstructs, three kinds of boundaries: boundaries between heterosexuality and non-heterosexuality; between the lesbian as subject and lesbian as object; and between competing lesbian subject positionings.

### *We're not heterosexual*

The terms 'we' and 'us' were often used inclusively in lesbian discussions to embrace all female non-heterosexuals within a common identity, and erase lesbian diversity and difference (either in terms of competing identifications such as 'gay', 'dyke' or 'queer', or in terms of sexual behaviour). Thus, despite the apparent shift away from concerns about the boundaries of the category 'lesbian' and about lesbian authenticity in the 1990s, it appears that lesbian identities continue to be organized in opposition to hegemonic heterosexuality, and as a form of resistance to the policing of non-conformity.

The construction of identities in terms of what people are *not* (in this case, not heterosexual) has been described as an attempt to consolidate ground that feels threatened (Kahaleole Chang Hall, 1993: 222), and a reflection of a shared sense of being 'other' within the dominant culture

(Stein, 1993: xvi). Certainly, this use of 'we' is often productive of, or found within, personal narratives of being positioned as 'other' and less on the grounds of non-heterosexuality (for example, in sexual health care: Farquhar, 1998).

Despite accounts of the flexibility and fluidity of 'new' lesbians (Whisman, 1993), 'post-lesbianism' (Ashton, 1996) and the 'postmodern' lesbian (Creith, 1996), many lesbians remain resistant to sexual forms which challenge binary notions of sexuality, continuing to construct lesbian as different from its heterosexual 'other' in terms of both behaviour and values. To quote Whisman '... the boundary between lesbians and straight women may be permeable, but we usually know when we've crossed it' (Whisman, 1993: 58). As elaborated in greater detail below, discussions of lesbian sex with men, penetrative sex, 'safer' sex, violence between women, or sado-masochistic (SM) sex, all signalled the continued salience of notions of what it means to be heterosexual, and what constitutes heterosexual behaviour, to negotiations of what it means to be 'lesbian'.

Contrasting reactions to lesbian sex with men, as opposed to bisexuality, also underline the importance of the meanings attributed to particular forms of sexual practice, rather than the practices themselves, in the construction of subjectivities and identities (see also Heaphy et al., 1998). So although the fact that some lesbians have sex with men appeared for the large part to be acknowledged in lesbian discussions (particularly when located in the past) but ignored, the notion of a bisexual identity was widely resisted. Youth groups appeared just as resistant to notions of bisexuality as older lesbian networks, and few women chose to describe themselves in bisexual terms, even on anonymous profile forms.<sup>9</sup>

\* ... But you worry because, that the community still doesn't accept bi-sexuals. So you think, 'I can't come out, as being bi-sexual, because there's gonna be a big bunch of people who're not gonna speak to me'. And like your friends'll say, 'Oh no, I don't quite understand that'. There's all the issues surrounding that. And I've got ... it's disgusting that people don't accept bi-sexuals, but it's a fact of life, you know, all the same.

\* Unfortunately. (*Focus Group: I*)

Even expressions of support for bisexuals tended to be framed in essentialist, rather than postmodern terms:

\* ... you know a person can't help being bisexual, you can't really, you know I don't think there's anything wrong with it [...]. I don't want to condemn people for it because some people probably are truly bisexual you know. (*Community Interview: B*)

Lesbians' use of the term 'queer' also signalled their ambivalent investment in the hetero-homosexual binary system, and unease or resistance towards more fluid notions of sexuality. Although Queer has been described as 'the label of the 1990s' (Ainley, 1995: 104), again few women used this term to describe their own sexuality, usually using it in combination with other labels, such as 'queer dyke'. Such composite labels which reject, yet claim, a position on the hetero-homosexual divide, illustrate the tension set up by the desire to both assert, yet dissolve, the position 'lesbian'; or, as Whisman puts it, the need to 'build boundaries around ourselves, and, at the same time, smash them' (Whisman, 1993: 60).

### *We're not perverse*

Historically, normative religious and biomedical discourses have been used to label the lesbian object as perverse; and negative labels ascribed by others have been used to 'contain and dismiss', and as a way of 'belittling that which is feared' (Ainley, 1995: 97). The contemporary proliferation of 'self-mocking', 'ironic' labels or 'labels of acceptance' (such as 'lipstick lesbian' and 'designer dyke') within the community has been taken as an indication of how far lesbians have moved on from the need to reclaim these labels of abuse (Ainley, 1995: 99/100).

However, the continuing tendency to construct certain labels in negative, rather than ironic, terms suggests that, for some lesbians at least, this process of reclamation is far from complete. For example, the term 'queer' was rarely used in lesbian discussions in its 'new' transgressive sense, rather than as an example of a negative label applied (mainly) to gay men; and few, if any, terms were seen as sufficiently reclaimed to be used unproblematically outside the non-heterosexual community:

\* Oh yeah, I mean, it's like I mean, like Black people call themselves nigger, and I call myself a dyke, but nobody else must use that. I've really no idea why some heterosexuals think because they've heard me use it, and they can. Even, you know, trendy, liberal heterosexuals, that's a no-go, they can't. I think some words are less reclaimed than others, and can only be reclaimed by some people. (*Focus Group: 2*)

The discursive opposition of 'us', 'we' and 'ourselves' with 'they' in the following extracts also illustrates lesbians' continued need to reject or reclaim negative labels:

\* [. . .] I suppose 'homosexual', I'm what's science . . .

\* I don't really like homosexual.

\* . . . it makes me think of science, it makes me think of scientists, you know, inspecting my genitals, inspecting my brains, anatomising us, and . . . it's what scientists do in laboratories, just label us, and look for the homosexual brain in that . . . so I have quite negative associations with that. It's a label that's been done to us, not one we've created. (*Focus Group: 2*)

The rejection or reclamation of negative labels through ‘reverse discourse’ (Foucault, 1978) has been described as an important strategy of resistance to hegemonic heterosexuality (Wilton, 1995), and personal narratives of the process of reclamation and resistance remain quite common. For example:

\* . . . I mean in the beginning when I first sort of came out, like, I called myself a lesbian. I wouldn’t call myself a dyke. Because I thought, well, you know, that’s really offensive. But then, I just figure now if you reclaim all those words that people, straights are going to use against us, then they can’t say it to us. They can’t offend, if someone calls me a dyke, I go ‘yeah, thanks’. And it’s not like, ‘Oh my God, she’s called me a dyke’ or something. I just reclaim those words and I just don’t find any of them offensive any more.

\* Right. So. You can turn it round, you know. (*Focus Group: 4*)

As Ainley says, ‘having a language to describe yourself means you exist’ (Ainley, 1995: 96), and claiming a position as a sexual subject, as opposed to being labelled as a (perverse) sexual object, is an important form of sexual agency (Patton, 1985). For many lesbians, reclaiming, or rescuing, lesbianism from its positioning as a perversion may continue to play an important part in the negotiation of positive self-esteem:

\* Dyke is a more powerful word, because we named ourselves that.

\* It’s in your face. ‘I’m a dyke’, it’s really in your face. (*Focus Group: 4*)

Efforts to reclaim lesbianism in positive terms appeared to focus mainly, though not exclusively, on the reclamation of lesbian identities rather than behaviours. This is not surprising. As the following extract demonstrates, drawing attention to the behavioural overlap between non-heterosexuality and heterosexuality, and to the arbitrary and contingent attribution of deviance or normality to identical behaviours in different contexts,<sup>10</sup> serves to undermine the discursive construction of lesbian behaviour as ‘other’ and perverse:

\* . . . But one thing I can’t understand, is like a lot of women, like a few of my friends are perhaps to a certain extent repulsed by the fact that I’m gay, because they can’t imagine one woman doing things to another woman. And then I wonder, well, how do their husbands and partners feel, you know, doing the same things to them, that we would do. Like oral sex for example. Like, one of my friends was, ah, sort of disgusted when she found out that I indulge in oral sex, and I said, ‘Well how does your husband feel about doing it to you?’, d’you know what I mean. ‘Why is that acceptable to you and it’s not acceptable for me to do it?’

\* And? What did she say?

\* Oh she couldn’t give me an answer obviously, you know, she just, ‘Oh it doesn’t seem right’. But I mean, I think things like that ought to be challenged, you know, when people are so er, sort of, aggressive. (*Focus Group: 2*)

On the other hand, challenging the 'otherness' of lesbian behaviour destabilizes binary notions of sexual difference, and potentially weakens lesbian identity claims. Privileging the discourse of identity and subjectivity over the discourse of behaviour enables lesbians to resist dominant heterosexist, normative biomedical discourse without abandoning the distinctiveness of a lesbian position.

*And we're not all the same*

Lesbian sexual labels can be seen as both productive of, and a product of, sexual and political difference within lesbian communities. Historically, 'gay women' have been discursively associated with the closet, with traditional butch-femme roles, and with assimilation into heterosexual society; 'lesbians' with lesbian feminism, lesbian separatism and 'political' lesbianism; and 'dykes' with transgressing (and 'queers' with parodying or playing with) both gender and sexuality (see, for example, discussions in Ainley, 1995; Wilton, 1995; Ashton, 1996). Different labels have come to be seen as representing different understandings of the 'ideal' lesbian, of her positioning in relation to the homo/heterosexual and female/male binary matrix, and her strategic role in the development of new sexual meanings. At the same time, new labels continue to emerge, and it has been argued that many of these (such as 'designer dyke' and 'lipstick lesbian') should not be interpreted in sexual terms, since the 'post-lesbian' no longer defines herself by her sexuality (Ashton, 1996: 158/9).

Clearly, the link between sexual labels and sexual subjectivity is not straightforward; and the perceived pressure to adopt a sexual label – particularly for women attending, and talking within the context of, 'lesbian' community groups – may sometimes mask more fluid understandings of the construction and meaning of sexuality and sexual identity. The following extract illustrates the potential dissonance between public identifications and personal, subjective understandings:

\* Labels used to be really, really important for me. Now I feel as though they feel more like a straightjacket. Especially sexual labels. 'Cos it's as though all you are is sex. And that . . . you know, I really object to that. [. . .] So there's a huge amount of pressure for me to have to find a label, so I sort of say, 'OK, I'll take the label "bisexual"' because I need to have something, so I can start identifying with others, so I can get support and deal with it, and it's like rather than a sense of me needing to, for myself identifying . . . others taking that label for you. It actually made me quite angry, thinking of it . . . (*Focus Group: 3*)

Overall, limited reference was made in discussion to new sexual terms such as 'lipstick lesbian' or 'designer dyke' (see below). However, the employment of older sexual labels, such as 'dyke', 'queer' or 'gay', reflected the continued negotiation of competing lesbian positionings

within a binary matrix formed at the intersection of gender and sexuality. For example:

- \* I don't know, 'dyke' to me conjures up something that's very sort of butch and rough, and . . . don't know, certainly I wouldn't call myself . . .
- \* No. I think it's quite attractive.
- \* . . . whereas I mean, I think there's a difference between calling someone lesbian and calling someone gay. I think gay's a much sort of softer term, er, for some reason. Maybe it's because there's different definitions of gay, like gay as happy, d'you know what I mean? Er. Whereas if you say . . .
- \* Dyke is a brick wall, you mean? [group laughter]
- \* Well, very objective! But if you say you're a lesbian, then you're definitely saying you're a lesbian, whereas if you say you're gay, I don't know, just for me, it's a bit more softer, it's a bit, people can interpret it differently. (*Focus Group: 2*)

Certainly, the identity label 'dyke' was widely interpreted as implying masculinity. However, while some lesbians rejected the label on these grounds, because it threatened their identity as 'female' by denying the possibility of the femininity of lesbians, others embraced this label (and also the label 'SM dyke') because it offered them the opportunity to assert 'male' agency and to resist traditional gender stereotypes. Both responses, however, serve to perpetuate gendered notions of lesbian identity (i.e. of lesbian femininity and lesbian masculinity), rather than to undermine or erase binary notions of gender. Similar examples can be given with reference to other identity labels. For example, the label 'gay' was both embraced because it was less 'masculine' than dyke (an example of the use of gendered discourse to assert lesbian femininity), and rejected because it erased gender (the use of gendered discourse to assert lesbian difference from gay men). These accounts provide little evidence of lesbian sexuality beginning to float free from hegemonic gendered meanings.

Furthermore, in this study lesbians' expressed affinity with heterosexual women, rather than with gay men, in matters relating to sexual health (Farquhar, 1998) undermines the contention that gender opposition is likely to disappear as lesbians ally themselves *with* gay men, and both groups locate themselves 'exclusively in opposition to the category of heterosexual' (Whisman, 1993: 56, quoting Charles Fernandez). Rather, lesbians' gendered positionings, and their expressed affinity with heterosexual women, point to the continued centrality of gender in the negotiation and construction of lesbian identities and subjective experience.

## What can 'we' do? Policing and defending lesbian behaviour

Despite the increasing precariousness of discrete identity positions in the late modern world, the concept of the 'authentic' lesbian still persists; and

while the rules concerning who's a 'real' lesbian may have changed over time, it seems that the 'desire to judge' remains constant (Kahaleole Chang Hall, 1993: 222). Three forms of judgement appear to play a key role in the negotiation of lesbian subjectivity: judgements about what constitutes appropriate lesbian sex, appropriate lesbian talk about sex and appropriate lesbian sexual politics.

### *How should lesbians have sex?*

It has been argued that the policing of lesbian sex and sexuality in the 1990s shifted away from a concern with what lesbians should *not* do with their bodies (for example anything which 'apes' heterosexuality), to a concern with what lesbians *should* be doing (having 'real' lesbian sex). Apparently, this 'real' lesbian sex is increasingly being defined, not in terms of practice or partners, but in terms of its intensity (i.e. the only sex worth having is the 'sweat-pouring-off-you' variety: Whisman, 1993: 58, quoting Susie Bright).

Moreover, as new identity labels have emerged, which emphasize lesbian image and embodiment rather than lesbian sex, it has been suggested that 'the battleground has shifted to the arena of iconography and aesthetics' (Ashton, 1996: 163). Lesbians are creating their own 'beauty norms', which vary across different lesbian sub-cultures (Myers et al., 1999: 25); and self-presentation (whether in line with a 'butch/femme' or an 'androgynous' aesthetic) has been increasingly implicated in a lesbian sense of belonging (Cogan and Erickson, 1999: 8).

Lesbian discussions suggest that, while some (particularly older) women may have vague concerns about 'political correctness about body image and all that stuff' (*Community Interview: D*), lesbians continue to be far more concerned with what lesbians should, or should not, be doing in bed than with body image and representation. Again, discussions appeared to reproduce, and police, traditionally gendered, binary constructions of sexuality, rather than newer 'transgressive' images of 'real' lesbian sex. In other words, judgements of the acceptability of different forms of lesbian sexual practice continue to depend on their placement on one side or another of the traditional homo-heterosexual binary divide, rather than on their potential to undermine that divide. For example, if SM sex was seen as representing negotiated consensual relationships inherent in non-heterosexuality, it was likely to be embraced. If, on the other hand, it was seen as reproducing inequalities of power inherent in heterosexuality, it was likely to be rejected. Such views are clearly informed by, and potentially reproductive of, the 'sex wars' of the 1970s and 1980s (for recent accounts, see Wilton, 1995; Ashton, 1996; Healey, 1996). Different sexual identity labels (such as 'gay' or 'SM dyke') appear to have become shorthands for competing behavioural practices, norms and taboos. In the

1990s, however, such shorthands appear to facilitate the policing, rather than the exploration, of lesbian sexual practice, and the reproduction, rather than deconstruction, of lesbian difference.

\* I'd appreciate a sort of more open discussion around it, in terms of I feel the more we know the more we empower ourselves. I don't have any clarity on it as such. I'd just, I'd like to know things that I shouldn't be doing. Like, answer the question 'Well, *why not* penetration?', and I don't, I still don't know, you know.

\*CF Yeah, right.

\* But I haven't made that, yeah, no . . . sort of, I haven't asked. But it's quite difficult just to ask, you know. (*Focus Group: 5*)

The continued policing of lesbian sexual behaviour within the lesbian community demonstrates the power of this particular form of policing over time. However, while the 'spectre of lesbian-feminist separatism' may still persist (Ashton, 1996: 169), its political thesis may have become lost or obscured. Instead of resolving debates about how and why different forms of lesbian sexual practice should be judged, the bitterness of the lesbian 'sex wars' appears to have silenced them. Fear of conflict, and the desire to maintain a sense of lesbian solidarity and sameness (however fragile), may have closed down opportunities for the (re)negotiation of lesbian sexual meanings.

### *What should lesbians talk about?*

Despite the proliferation of discourses concerned with sex, where, when and with whom we can speak about sex continues to be strictly defined and policed (Foucault, 1978: 18). Discussions about lesbian sex and sexuality are therefore negotiated within a complex web of group, community and societal norms and taboos on sexual talk (Farquhar with Das, 1999; Kitzinger and Farquhar, 1999.)<sup>11</sup>

Negotiations of sexual talk between lesbians suggest that norms and taboos on lesbian sexual talk reproduce gendered notions of the personal domain (for example, women's ease with emotional intimacy, men's ease with physical sex: Giddens, 1992; the discussion of love and emotion as 'female', the discussion of sexual practice as 'male': Holland et al., 1998). For example, when talking hesitantly about sexual practice, two women commented:

\* Yes, you see if it was a male gay meeting, I'm sure, I mean, I . . .

\* They would have no problems. (*Focus Group: 6*)

Lesbians' expressed reluctance to open up discussions of sex and sexuality with female friends, in case such openings are (mis)understood as a form of sexual advance, also suggests a complex interaction between gender and sexuality in the (policing of) sexual talk.

\* I think perhaps I'm cautious who I talk to about those things because I, I might be under . . . misunderstood, you know. I wouldn't want the subject of sex to be brought up indirectly. Sometimes there's a danger you are raising the subject of sex, erm, because they want, because that might be an unconscious wish to, to raise sex again.

\* CF And to have a sexual relationship?

\* Yes, yes, and I think at the back I analyse things and I tend, I tend not to. [. . .] I think 'Well, will they, will they think that I'm raising it, because I want to take the relationship a step further?' or, or 'Is it because I just want to, am I being curious or nosy [whether], you know, they're different from me?' (*Community Interview: D*)

Furthermore, while women's discussions of difficult heterosexual relationships may promote a sense of solidarity located in gender, through the 'othering' of men, lesbians' discussions of difficult sexual relationships with women may undermine both lesbian solidarity and individual lesbian self-esteem. For example, while discussion of sexual abuse by men appeared to be relatively common among lesbians, discussion of sexual violence between women was relatively taboo (see also Taylor and Chandler, 1995). The silencing of debates about violence in lesbian relationships suggests a high level of lesbian investment in maintaining idealized constructions of the 'pure' lesbian relationship (Giddens, 1992). The desire to maintain a positive image of lesbianism, and to minimize dissonance between disseminated ideals and lived realities, may lead lesbians, like heterosexual women (Jamieson, 1999: 485), to disguise relationships which fail to meet this ideal.

This is not to say that lesbian discussions were devoid of explicit sexual talk. Rather, most lesbians welcomed the opportunity to open up topics which were felt to be taboo elsewhere (Kitzinger and Farquhar, 1999). Nevertheless, a number of strategies for steering explicit, or contentious, sexual discussions on to more comfortable ground (such as jokes) were used or described, suggesting that the transgression of community norms on lesbian sexual talk remains a potentially uncomfortable act. Despite a reported increase in explicit discussion of lesbian sex (Whisman, 1993), some lesbians resist, rather than welcome, these shifts, interpreting them as the 'masculinization' of lesbian language and attitudes rather than the successful dissolution of gendered meanings or ways of being.

\* You see I think a lot of the women feel very alienated by the language of gay men. And maybe male sexuality really. I mean. This whole thing. The whole fucking, sucking, casual sex kind of thing seems to me to be very far away from the experience of a lot of women. (*Provider Interview: B*)

Finally, discussions of sexual practice between lesbians are also negotiated within the context of competing sub-cultural norms and taboos on

'lesbian' behaviour. The fear of being judged by other lesbians as different, deviant or immoral on the basis of contested sexual practices (for example SM sex), had deterred many lesbians from being open in the community about the detail of their intimate lives. The impact of cultural and sub-cultural taboos on lesbian discussions of sex and sexuality was summed up by one woman who said, 'In my experience, lesbians can organize a conference on lesbian sex and not actually talk about practice'! Overall, the self-policing of lesbian sexual talk serves to perpetuate hegemonic sexual meanings, not only within the lesbian community but also within wider society. By limiting lesbian opportunities for exploring and reconstructing the meaning of lesbian sex and sexuality, such policing also limits the incorporation of emergent sexual meanings into wider society.

### *What should lesbians hope for?*

The process of defining, and policing, lesbian positionings is not just about sexual practice, or even iconography. Rather, 'it haunts our discussions of political strategies' (Whisman, 1993: 49). While the position 'lesbian' is undoubtedly a resistant position, definitions of what needs to be resisted and why vary across and within time and place. Lesbian hopes and ideals have been framed within competing discourses, and embodied in a range of political movements: for example, the Gay Liberation Front (liberation), Stonewall (equality), radical lesbianism (the triumph of lesbian values), or the Lesbian Avengers (the assertion of lesbian power).

The media has been widely implicated in the (re)production of personal and political divisions within the lesbian community. Different forms of discourse have been used to favour certain lesbian positionings (Ashton, 1996: 167), counterposing, for example, 'lipstick lesbians (news: young, attractive, fashionable, employed) and lesbian feminists (not news: older, ugly, dowdy, angry, poor)' (Ainley, 1995: 97). The (heterosexual) media's current love affair with lesbian chic, rather than with Queer, suggests a failure to appreciate the irony of designer dykes or lipstick lesbians (Ashton, 1996: 172), and highlights the potential for lesbian parodic roles to be lost on a heterosexual audience (Mills and White, 1997). Media fascination with chic may owe more to 'media neuroses about AIDS' (Ainley, 1995: 100), and the subsequent taboos (and even boredom: Ashton, 1996: 159) surrounding the depiction of gay male and heterosexual identities, than to changing attitudes towards lesbian sexuality; and post-lesbian visibility may reflect the commodification of lesbian sexuality, rather than the achievement of lesbian political aims (Cottingham, 1996; Richardson, 1998).

'New' or 'post' lesbians have been accused of having 'no politics'. Yet the reported death of lesbian politics may be premature. Rather, lesbian politics in the 1990s need to be understood in different terms: as 'different

politics, framed by a different society in a different moment in time' (Healey, 1996: 10). Lesbian responses to, and perceptions of, 'new' transgressive forms of sexual expression (such as bisexuality, Queer and lesbian chic) provide important insights into competing judgements about 'effective' sexual politics in the 1990s, and the extent to which lesbians feel their political aims have yet to be achieved.

Lesbians are clearly conscious of the heightened visibility of lesbians in the media (for example, 'Cos it's on the soaps. So it's alright. [Laughter]' [*Focus Group: I*]), and of specific 'queer' personalities such as Della Grace. Some (particularly older) women seem to view the emergence of post-lesbian identities as a sign that sex between women is being reconstructed in non-identity, non-resistant, and non-strategic, terms:

\* And I think there's a big divide between 'true blue lesbians' and 'women who have sex with women'. And I think that's very much more the younger generation who don't have a political agenda as lesbians, they have a sexual agenda, a social agenda maybe. You know, what clubs they go to, who they hang out with. But not a political agenda, generally. (*Provider Interview: C*)

However, while older lesbians saw Queer as 'adolescent', and younger ones as 'in your face', both age groups appeared equally sceptical about its impact.

Many lesbians were at pains to distinguish between 'bi-curiosity' and lesbianism, seeing the former as antithetical to the reconstruction of social attitudes. Despite its visibility, lesbian chic was seen as less threatening to the heterosexual hegemony than Queer.

\* Because if you go – I'm just quoting 'Freedom' because that's where I went beforehand – and you see the little girls, and they do all look about 17, 18, and they're so feminine. [. . .] It's quite safe for them. Because you walk on the street and you're not identifiable. [. . .] Yet Della Grace is walking on the street with a beard. [. . .] And that's like, in your face. [. . .]. That's two extremes – I can't see a middle ground just yet. I'll be interested to see what that middle ground is. (*Provider Interview: E*)

However, both 'extremes' tended to be seen as equally inappropriate strategies for the achievement of lesbian political aims. On the one hand, recognition of the positive challenge posed by Queer was tempered by a recognition of its potential to engender disgust and entrenchment (seen as counterproductive to social change). On the other, the increased visibility, and apparent acceptability, of sex between 'chic' women was more often seen as reproducing, rather than transcending, the erasure of 'real' lesbians.

'New' forms of lesbian sexual expression and sexual needs were also liable to be seen as evidence of the commodification of lesbian sex and sexuality, rather than of lesbian sexual liberation. As one woman said:

\* . . . now there's a lesbian sex industry. Now there are lesbian-sex entrepreneurs. And lesbian pimps and lesbian entrepreneurs that make consumer items, because they . . . I think it's a market which has been created with the help of lesbian sex therapists, and using the sexualogical idea of lesbianism, that it's something that we're born with, that we can't change, and that, and that this NEED in us, this desire has been created, particularly in the last years, like lesbian pornography and things . . . (*Focus Group: 6*)

Attempts to redefine the use of sex toys as an expression of lesbian sexual agency, and the lesbian project as the pursuit of 'real' lesbian sex, were seen as a marketing ploy rather than a serious political strategy. Expressions of resistance to the commodification of desire, and to the appropriation of notions of lesbian authenticity for the marketization of lesbian sex, were used to assert an alternative 'real' lesbian position (i.e. 'real' lesbians as those whose desire cannot be manipulated).

## Conclusion

In this article, I have drawn on discussions between women attending lesbian community groups to explore the negotiation of lesbian identities in the 1990s, and to illustrate some of the ways in which lesbian sex, sexuality and politics continue to be policed and regulated within, as well as outside, the UK lesbian community.

What, then, can these discussions tell us about lesbian identities in the 1990s? First, they serve to illustrate the socially constructed, rather than essential, nature of sexuality and of sexual identities. Despite the undoubted appeal, and strategic value (Fuss, 1989), of the essentialist story for a number of lesbians (and the frequent deployment of an essentialist, binary model of sexuality by sexual health care providers: Farquhar, 1998), the lesbians cited in this article were clearly involved in the ongoing working out, and negotiation, of competing sexual positionings. Interactions between lesbians provide a graphic illustration of the processes involved in the construction, rather than discovery, of competing lesbian identities. And as Brooks (1997) points out, it is this high level of investment in defining and defending the boundaries of the category 'lesbian' which demonstrates and produces its inherent instability.

Second, lesbian discussions draw attention to the policing of lesbian sex and sexuality within, as well as outside, the community of women who identify as 'lesbian'; and the extent to which this policing renders lesbians of diverse ages complicit in the reproduction of hegemonic binary discourse. The policing of lesbian sexuality and sexual talk emerges as an important factor which limits the exploration of new sexual meanings, and their incorporation into wider society.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, lesbian accounts highlight the

continued deployment of oppositional lesbian identities alongside newer post-lesbian forms. This coexistence of diverse lesbian identities, and experiences, in the 1990s forces us to recognize the potential disjunction between academic accounts of the creation of new sexual meanings, and the incorporation of these new meanings into everyday lives. New 'alternative' ways of being are neither universally evident, nor universally embraced. This recognition is important. For as Ashton says:

There is much to be said for a strategy – any strategy – that gains ground for lesbians in the mainstream. We just have to be careful that, as post-lesbians, we don't start believing our own press and think we've arrived when some of us haven't even set off. (Ashton, 1996: 173)

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### *Notes*

1. Advertised groups for lesbians/bisexual women in the UK are commonly organized around shared interests (such as sports/leisure pursuits) or background factors (such as age or ethnicity), enabling women to explore these in a non-heterosexist environment.
2. The term 'lesbian' is used throughout this article as a convenient shorthand to denote women attending such groups. However, it should be read at all times as appearing implicitly in quotes, denoting the diversity and fluidity of subjective positionings contained within it.
3. While recognizing the lack of a single, unified lesbian 'community', the term is used here to denote those informal and formal networks which serve to connect women who sexually relate solely or primarily to women.
4. Of 48 advertised lesbian and lesbian/bisexual groups contacted in Scotland and England, nearly half (21) responded positively. Fifteen focus group discussions were held, with a total of 143 participants. Five groups were social/discussion groups, with an open, fluctuating membership. The other nine were targeted at particular sections of the lesbian community (for example, lesbian mothers; Irish lesbians).
5. Interviews were held in London with a purposive sample of 16 lesbian/bisexual community members, half of whom were also sexual health service providers.
6. Focus group participants ranged in age from 16 to 64, interviewees from 18 to 74.
7. Discussion venues were organized by the groups themselves, and were located in six cities, three in Scotland (six discussion groups) and three in

- England (nine discussion groups). Although each group was based in an urban centre, some drew members from surrounding rural areas.
8. The biased nature of the sample in terms of 'race' highlights the relatively non-integrated nature of lesbian 'community' groups (see Mason-John, 1995). Ten discussion groups were exclusively White. Only seven group members (5 per cent) described themselves as Black (five as 'Black British' and two as 'Black Other'), and three (2 per cent) as 'Other', compared with 133 (93 per cent) as White (98 as 'White British', 15 'White Irish', 17 'White European' and 3 'White Other'). None identified as Asian. Of the 16 interviewees, 13 described themselves as White (of British or European origin), one as Scottish born Indian, one as St. Lucian and one as Indian-Jewish. For further details and discussion, see Farquhar (1998).
  9. These forms were completed after each group discussion. Most group members (73 per cent) selected only one sexual label, the most common choice being 'lesbian' (57 per cent), followed by 'dyke' or 'gay' (5 per cent each), 'bisexual' (3 per cent), 'queer' (1 per cent) or 'heterosexual' (one participant). The remainder chose combinations of up to five terms – the most common combination being 'lesbian/dyke' (14 per cent), followed by 'lesbian/dyke/gay' (3 per cent). Only one woman declined to label herself in sexual terms.
  10. Although data on women's sexual practices in the UK are scarce, there appears to be considerable overlap between the sexual behaviour of women who identify as lesbian and women who identify as heterosexual. For example, the national survey of sexual attitudes and lifestyles (Wellings et al., 1994) reports that 95.8 per cent of women who report having had a female sexual partner in their lifetime have also had a male sexual partner, and 44.6 per cent have had a male sexual partner in the last year. Details of sexual practices between women are rarely reported. The national survey only documents oral sex between women (active or passive) and 'any other form of sex with a woman that involved genital contact'. It provides no detail of these 'other forms of sex', but assumes them to be 'non-penetrative'. However, sexual behaviour surveys in the US, and more recently in the UK (Creith, 1996; Farquhar et al., in preparation) document a wide range of sexual activities between women, many of which are penetrative (for example, penetration with fingers, fist, dildo, sex toys etc.). The construction of lesbian sex as distinctly 'other', and as clearly differentiated from heterosexual practice, can be seen as (re)produced by research framed within particular forms of discourse, rather than a reflection of 'reality'.
  11. Again, for a fuller discussion of focus group dynamics, and of the role of the researcher in the production of these data, see Farquhar (1998).

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