The recent interest in the relationship between the body and society in sociology has developed alongside an increased scrutiny of the construction and impact of social policies in many areas of health and social care. These developments have opened up the possibility of critically re-examining debates about the nature of subjectivity, while also attempting to reach an understanding of the ways in which state institutions actively intervene to shape and discipline our bodily practices and sense of self.

The advent of HIV and AIDS ushered in a new visibility for the bodies and sexual practices of those infected with the virus or deemed to be ‘at risk’ (Fitzpatrick et al., 1992; Watney, 1989). During the 1980s and early 1990s a great deal of interest was stimulated around the discourses of AIDS prevention and health education as different moral agendas collided (Treichler, 1987; Weeks, 1989). In particular, the ‘gay community’ resisted the intrusive threat of heterosexist policy interventions that tried to re-construct gay sexuality to the point of non-existence (Davies and Project SIGMA 1992).

More recently criticism within sociological analyses has focused on rationalistic and behavioural approaches to HIV/AIDS intervention strategies which produced restrictive definitions of ‘safer sex’ (Hart et al., 1992; Donovan et al., 1994; Boulton et al., 1995; Kippax, 1996). These criticisms allow the opportunity to draw on the more abstract debates within the sociology of the body and emotions (Burkitt, 1997; Williams and Bendelow, 1996), and to examine the deep physical, sexual and emotional significance of sexuality for gay men in the context of developing more appropriate and effective HIV/AIDS prevention strategies (Ames et al., 1995; Boulton et al., 1995; Parnell, 1996).
I will begin this chapter by briefly examining Foucault’s theory of the relationship between discourses, subjectivity and the body, and then by discussing whether such a perspective leaves sufficient room for the body and emotions in terms of resistances to power that it identifies. Following similar criticisms of Foucault’s deconstructive methodological approach, I then go on to outline the nature of my own discursive analysis of the gay community’s response to HIV/AIDS discourses through the medium of the gay press. I argue that there is by no means one definitive meaning of ‘safer sex’, and that the gay community and gay press have acted to continually negotiate the meanings of ‘risk’ and ‘safety’ in changing medical, social and political circumstances. In fact these circumstances have provided the context for a recent transition in discourses around ‘safer sex’ and the way in which the ‘gay community’ has responded. During the late 1980s there was a shift from the repressive and puritanical discourses of the ‘moral right’, towards a more subtle ‘rationalistic’ disciplinary discourse in the 1990s concerned with public health and social efficiency. While the latter discourse may initially have appeared more positive, I suggest that the last decade has seen the development of a more critical, ‘embodied’ discourse that resulted from the lived experience of gay men in their sexual lives. It is this new discourse that has resisted both the repressive and rationalistic discourses that preceded it. Consequently, in terms of HIV/AIDS prevention, I argue that the most effective and appropriate strategies will be those that take account of this embodied discourse, that actively involve gay men, and that take account of the deep emotional and sexual significance of gay men’s sexual practices in their everyday lives.

**DISCOURSE, SUBJECTIVITY AND THE BODY**

Generally speaking, most sociologists agree that our experiences of subjectivity and the body are socially constructed (e.g. Synnott, 1992). There are, however, differences in emphasis: firstly, in terms of the extent to which the body is either an active recipient of social processes, or simply inscribed by them (e.g. Crossley, 1996); secondly, in terms of the extent to which bodily experience is constituted within discourses (e.g. Jackson, 1993), represents some degree of physical and emotional resistance to discourse (e.g. Craib, 1995), or becomes visible only in the act of physical and embodied expression of discourses (e.g. Burkitt, 1997). The relevance of these debates is that