Stand by Your Man? Telling Heterosexual Stories

I thought, from the impression that I got from other women, that what my marriage was like was probably what marriage was like, and there wasn’t much out there that was that much better than that. And that made me quite cynical, because it disappointed me. But I thought, on well, I suppose that’s what life is like. You have to grit your teeth and get on with it. And I had been deluded by reading too much literature into thinking that it’s possible to have a rich, fulfilling companionate marriage that is actually exciting, and sexually exciting and all the rest of it.

(Kate 47)

Heterosexuality occupies a strange position in the scholarship of the erotic. As the norm against which deviant sexual behaviours and identities are measured, it has been (until recently) both unmarked and unproblematised. Nevertheless, precisely because of its unmarked, unproblematised status, it comes to stand for any and all sex and sexualities which are not specifically identified as non-normative. For example, most of what passes for feminist writing on ‘sex’, ‘families’ or ‘relationships’ is no such thing. Rather, it is feminist writing on heterosex, on heterosexual families and on women’s relationships with men. This is a perversely anomalous situation; that form of sexuality most commonly subject to scholarly scrutiny is studied without being named for what it is. There have been recent developments in psychology, queer studies and feminism whereby the study of heterosexuality qua heterosexuality seems at least to have begun (Segal 1992, Wilkinson and Kitzinger 1993, Richardson 1996). However, this literature remains sparse, and it continues to be the case that heterosexuality remains unnamed as such in much of what is written about it.
This is, of course, a product of the hegemonic status of hetero-relations. Indeed, it offers a clear demonstration of the way in which heterosexism utterly saturates both academic and lay discourse. Just as the hegemony of gender-normativity mandates that 'doctor' means 'man' and 'nurse' means 'woman' unless qualified ('lady doctor', 'male nurse'), so the hegemony of erotic norms means that 'sex' means 'heterosex' unless similarly qualified. Moreover, the embeddedness of gender in the erotic and vice versa produces heteronormativity as simultaneously presiding over gender and the sexual.

The relationship between hetero- and homo-sexuality for women contains an additional problematic, in that feminist critiques have positioned heterosexuality as contributing in important ways to the maintenance of male supremacy and the structuration of patriarchal gender relations (Abbott and Love 1972, Onlywomen Press 1981, Wittig 1981, Kitzinger 1987, Jeffreys 1990). Although logically sound, this strand of feminist political theory historically led to mutual hostility and suspicion between lesbian and non-lesbian-identified activists in the women's movement and to an extraordinary degree of defensiveness on the part of avowedly heterosexual feminists (see essays in Wilkinson and Kitzinger 1993). Such debates are, of course, unlikely to have much impact on the majority of heterosexual women outwith the context of the feminist academy.

Given the foundational significance of heteronormativity to social and cultural regimes within the hegemonic bloc (and, of course, elsewhere), it is not possible to understand, describe or account for any aspect of lesbian experience without reference to the non-lesbian equivalent. As we have already seen in this study, for example, non-lesbian women are as likely to report gender-atypicality in childhood as are lesbians. Any research which takes as foundational the claim that tomboyishness is somehow associated with lesbianism must therefore pay equal attention to lesbian and non-lesbian women or be dismissed as flawed and baseless.

The complex picture of lesbian sexuality, identity and relationships which seems to be emerging from this study must, therefore, be set alongside its non-lesbian equivalent if it is going to be possible to make any claims whatsoever for 'lesbian', as opposed to 'female' experiences. Accordingly, a group of non-lesbian women was recruited and invited to take part in tape-recorded interviews; the tapes were transcribed and the transcripts analysed. Since this is a comparitor group, it is important to note here the extent to which different elements of the research process were similar and dissimilar for the two groups.