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Going ‘Back to Basics’: Moral Panics about Heterosexual Relationships

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Introduction and key issues

This chapter examines the increasingly heightened anxiety or ‘moral panic’ surrounding heterosexual relationships in Britain, in the context of women and men’s shifting roles, identities and relations in a rapidly changing, so-called ‘risk’ society (Beck, 1992). It focuses on the discursive construction of deviance (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994), of perceived threats to a ‘moral’/‘normal’ heterosexual life, and to the social order itself (Thompson, 1998). Such threats typically include family breakdown (divorce, cohabitation, single parenthood), homosexuality, feminism going ‘too far’, and a ‘crisis of masculinity’. Within the specific British sociocultural context, the chapter uses an example from written media as well as an extract of spoken interaction, to illustrate how dominant, resistant and alternative heterosexual identities are discursively constructed. The use of language (e.g. metaphors, exaggerated vocabulary, discourses of prediction, symbolisation and prescription) and culturally charged repertoires (e.g. about moral decline, and the individual and collective good – see Litosseliti, 2001, 2002a, b) construct particular representations, social identities and relations: for heterosexual men and women, for homosexuals, for married and cohabiting couples – and representations of the culture in general. A critical examination of these representations, identities and relations is crucial in order to avoid unproductive gender stereotyping and the stigmatising
of social ‘outcasts’ – and it is important that it happens in the particular social and cultural context that gives rise to them.

**Moral panics**

Public debate around gender, and specifically about the perceived changes in gender roles and expectations within heterosexual relationships, has intensified in recent years. This is partly the result of structural changes, such as changes in the division of labour and the domestic division of labour, as well as cultural changes, including conflicts over identity, lifestyles and morals.

In addition, post-structuralism, the cross-disciplinary emphasis on discourse, and the large amount of constantly developing research on language and gender, have both put gender and sexuality issues in the centre of discussion and given rise to increasingly critical, nuanced and contextualised approaches to these issues. There has been a shift of focus from the idea of gender roles (as binary and fixed) to the social and linguistic (i.e. discursive) construction of a range of masculine and feminine identities (Hall and Bucholtz, 1995; Bergvall et al., 1996; Cameron, 1998; Litosseliti and Sunderland, 2002). This shift means that instead of seeing men and women as producing different forms of language, it is the language that is seen as producing and sustaining gender. It also means that questions of interpretation, situated meanings, power and ideology have become more pertinent.

**Moral panics in the media**

Public debate in the specific context of the British media, particularly newspapers, unmistakably suggests an increasing anxiety about issues facing men and women, and about their shifting roles, identities and relations in a society that is rapidly changing. While sometimes acknowledging the positive outcomes of such change, there is also anxiety which revolves around the arguably negative effects of the change on notions of femininity and masculinity and on the family. This focus inevitably involves the construction and perpetuation of gender discourses or ‘ways of being’ for women and men. These discourses are, unsurprisingly, dependent on normative assumptions about gender, that is, they concern heterosexual men and women, within what can be recognised as ‘traditional’ family relationships (see Coates, this volume, for an examination of the interaction between gender and sexuality).