‘This Sex Thing Is such a Big Issue now’: Sex Talk and Identities in Three Groups of Adolescent Girls

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Introduction

In this chapter, I shall demonstrate that the sex talk of adolescent girls can constitute a rich resource for the discursive construction of identities that transcend sexuality and highlight the complex interplay between gender, ethnicity and social class. I will present results from a study analysing informal talk about a wide spectrum of sexual experience from three friendship groups of British girls from different ethnic, cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. My linguistic analysis of the girls’ talk has a twofold aim. Firstly, it examines the construction of heterosexuality from a cross-cultural perspective, combining foci on both local and extralocal dimensions of identity. Secondly, it seeks to investigate sex and sexuality in relation to gender norms and practices and, therefore, shows how the girls in my study use their sex talk not only to identify as heterosexual or to signal varying degrees of sexual experience, but also to carry out important gender work. In fact, even talk about desire, which, according to Kulick (2000: 270), ‘makes sexuality sexuality’ is used by the Bangladeshi and white/mixed British girls in my study to position themselves in relation to dominant discourses about gender from their respective sociocultural backgrounds. Although Kulick (2000: 270) warns that research should not ‘vaporize sexuality into gender’, Kulick’s more recent collaboration with Cameron (2003) acknowledges the strong link between sexuality and gender. Cameron and Kulick (2003: 142) argue that ‘while gender does not subsume sexuality, it is clear that no absolute separation between them is possible. An investigation of either will involve the other as well. Whenever sexuality is
at issue, gender is also at issue – and, importantly, vice versa.’ For the purpose of this chapter, I shall maintain a conceptual differentiation between sexuality and gender, however, my data strongly suggest that it is neither possible nor desirable to exclude gender and identity from a discussion on sex and sexuality (see also Morrish and Leap, Ch. 1 this volume).

I shall first give a brief overview of previous research on girls’ sexuality, followed by a section on my methodological approach, including information on participants, data collection, transcription and analytic frameworks. Before analysing several conversational extracts, I discuss a range of explanations for the different types of sex talk apparent in the three groups of girls I studied. I propose that the girls use their sex talk as a resource for renegotiating sociocultural norms that influence their construction of (hetero)sexual and gender identities and I develop this argument in the remainder of the chapter.

Previous research on girls’ sexuality

Previous research on adolescent female sexuality has largely focused on girls’ disempowerment. Lees’s (1993) ethnographic study of 15–16-year-old London girls in the 1980s found that girls felt that it was important to preserve their sexual reputation, but on the other hand they also felt pressured by their peers into finding a boyfriend. In her interviews, Lees discovered that the girls had adopted a discourse that stigmatises active female sexuality, a finding that appears to be supported by Hollway’s (1995: 87) argument that ‘there is no emancipatory discourse of women’s heterosexual desire’. However, the presentation of women as sexually repressed has been challenged in more recent research. Segal (1997: 81) admits that many young women still feel pressured into having (heterosexual) sex, but opposes the equation of female sexuality with passivity, highlighting the ‘diversity and fluidities of heterosexual experiences’. Evidence of young women’s efforts to construct themselves as agents when talking about their sexual experiences can be found in the recent sociological studies of Frith and Kitzinger (1998), and Jackson and Cram (2003). Both studies acknowledge the importance of treating interview data not only as ‘a transparent window on to people’s beliefs and behaviours’ (Frith and Kitzinger, 1998: 317), but as a resource for the interviewees to construct their identities.

My own study also views the sex talk of young women as a resource to construct identities for themselves. However, in contrast to the above