The male in the head: Young people, heterosexuality and power

Holland, J. Ramazanoglu, S., Sharpe, S.; and Thomson, R.

Young people talk frankly about sex and relationships in this detailed investigation of the social construction of sexuality. In a period of sexual uncertainty and change, their eloquent and often moving accounts of sexual risk and safety provide the basis for a theory of male dominated heterosexuality. The process of constructing this theory and the problems confronted by feminist research on heterosexuality are described in The Male in the Head, which presents the main empirical findings of the WRAP-Women, Risk and AIDS project and the MRAP-Men, Risk and AIDS project.

'It is the most detailed empirical study we have of the construction of heterosexuality, and will surely be a reference point for all such studies in the future.' Professor Jeffrey Weeks

A major contribution to our understanding of heterosexual practice. In particular, the WRAP team's meticulous and insightful analysis of their data paints a vivid picture of the micro-processes of gendered power within heterosexual relationships.' Professor Stevi Jackson


Read the introduction (you will need Adobe Acrobat Reader)

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'Don't die of ignorance' - I nearly died of embarrassment: Condoms in context

Janet Holland, Caroline Ramazanoglu, Sue Scott, Sue Sharpe, and Rachel Thomson

Negotiation of sexual encounters is a complex process with many different outcomes. In this paper the relationship between knowledge of risk and safer sex practices is examined through an analysis of young women's reported experience of condom use, from which it is clear that gendered power relations construct and constrain the choices open to young women.

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This book is now out of print but may be read here (you will need Adobe Acrobat Reader) click here to read

Sex, risk and danger: AIDS education policy and young women's sexuality

Janet Holland, Caroline Ramazanoglu and Sue Scott

The authors review the history of the AIDS epidemic in medical science, social research and public policy, highlighting the way in which women have been perceived and represented in that process. AIDS education aimed at young heterosexuals is evaluated in the light of the findings of an investigation of the sexual knowledge and practice of a group of young women.
Methods of working as a research team  
Caroline Ramazanoglu

The author examines problems of making explicit the relationship between theory construction and data production; of hierarchical relationships within the team; of power in the research process; of the negotiation of meanings both with informants and within the research team; of validity and interpretation of qualitative data; and of the place of trust and emotion in the research process.

Reseaching sexuality in the light of AIDS: Historical and methodological issues  
Rachel Thomson and Sue Scott

The methodological implications of treating sexuality as a socially constructed subject are explored in relation to the findings of the WRAP study of young women's sexuality.

Learning about sex: young women and the social construction of sexual identity  
Rachel Thomson & Sue Scott

Sex education is an interactive process in which young women actively engage with, resist and accommodate a range of contradictory messages and models. In this paper the way young women experience 'learning about sex' related to their sexual practice and expectations of sexual pleasure is examined. Available models of female sexuality and influences and information sources including the home, peer groups, popular culture and experience are discussed. Understanding the social construction of sexual identity has important implications for the negotiation of safe sex.

Pressured pleasure: Young women and the negotiation of sexual boundaries  
Janet Holland, Caroline Ramazanoglu, Sue Sharpe & Rachel Thomson

Women develop and live their sexuality through an interrelated range of pressures; personal, social, physical. The authors examine the continuum of pressure, from social expectation to male physical violence, which shapes women's sexuality, sexual identity and sexual health. They describe and illustrate the boundaries of sexual pressure and violence, and the degree to which women are able to negotiate these boundaries. Modes of resistance and types of experience, both negative and positive, which can enable young women to take control over their own sexuality and sexual experience are examined.

Pressure, resistance, empowerment: Young women and the negotiation of safer sex  
Janet Holland, Caroline Ramazanoglu, Sue Scott, Sue Sharpe & Rachel Thomson

We reflect here on the sexual politics of safer sex by considering ways in which young women can become empowered in sexual encounters. Selected case studies illustrate difficulties which young women face in taking control of their sexuality and sexual experience. Some become assertive individuals, but their experiences demonstrate that empowerment for women must be a collective project shifting the balance of power between men and women throughout society.

Sexuality and ethnicity: Variations in young women's sexual knowledge and practice  
Janet Holland

In this paper the author describes the sample of 150 young women who took part in the WRAP study, focusing on similarities and differences between young women from different broad ethnic groups - white, African-Caribbean, and Asian. We discuss their experience and knowledge of sex education, AIDS and AIDS education, and consider family and cultural influences on sexual behaviour. Their perceptions of men, women and sexual relationships, and understanding of risk and safety in sexual encounters are examined. Despite differences in class, cultural, religious and educational background there was perhaps a surprising degree of similarity in the young women's responses. The paper concludes by drawing out implications of the findings for policy and practice.

Wimp or gladiator: Contradictions in acquiring masculine sexuality  
Janet Holland, Caroline Ramazanoglu, & Sue Sharpe
As young men struggle to attain masculinity, they are drawn into the exercise of power over women, but at the same time exposed to the possibilities of failure. Using depth interviews with young men aged 16-21, in this paper we explore their strategies for defending themselves against vulnerability in the process of acquiring heterosexual masculinity. These strategies include adopting the protective coloration of the peer group, impugning a woman's reputation, objectifying women (the 'bastard' syndrome), and seeking out the sexually knowing older woman. Without young men necessarily intending that this should be so, these strategies reproduce and reinforce the exercise of male power over women. We trace the operation of these strategies in the young men's accounts of their own experiences.

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Buying information

The Tufnell Press

With heterosexuality currently being examined more rigorously than ever before, this accessible and engaging book charts the development of feminist and sociological theorizing on sexuality and the emergence of a radical critique of heterosexuality. Stevi Jackson reviews a range of important theoretical and substantive issues, and she demonstrates an important shift in feminist thinking from an emphasis on male dominance within heterosexual relations to a critical perspective on heterosexuality itself. Janet Holland, J., Ramazanoglu, C., Sharpe, S. and Thomson, R. (1998) The Male in the Head: Young People, Heterosexuality and Power. London: Tufnell Press. “The Male in the Head: Young People, Heterosexuality and Power,” by Janet Holland. [PDF]. “We have been impressed by the power of heterosexuality, but also by the capacity for some young people to develop the kinds of critical consciousness of this power that enable them to challenge heteronormativity in at least some personal encounters. This volume of essays, Thinking Straight, contains important and pivotal works in the emerging field of critical heterosexual studies. Written by prominent academics from across the disciplines as well as from international locations, these works interrogate the meanings and practices associated with straightness—the historical, social, political, cultural, and economic dominance of institutionalized heterosexuality.