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## CHAPTER 3

### RESEARCH DESIGN

#### **INTRODUCTION**

In the previous chapter I offered a survey of some of the key literature in the field of auto-ethnographic and feminist approaches to research, notably Skeggs (1995, 1997), Jermyn (2004), Maynard and Purvis (1994), Stanley and Wise (1993) and Johnson (in Steinberg et al, 1997). I briefly introduced some of the key concerns raised by these various theorists about auto-ethnographic approaches to research in terms of both the pleasures and perils of this type of work. The concerns raised in these various texts reflect my own fears and concerns about pursuing this kind of research, and are therefore a useful source from which to launch my own discussion of the dilemmas I have found myself facing. Key areas of interest for this project centre on Skegg's notion of the "insecurities" of ethnographic-type research (1995:194-6) and Jermyn's discussion of the place of the researcher as a fan or active consumer of the popular cultural texts discussed in research (2004: 203). I discuss my own dilemmas about these issues here, using this design

chapter as a space within which to problematise my own methods. In many cases these dilemmas are not simple issues that can be resolved, but my approach to this project is one of honesty and openness about my methods, and as such I feel it is particularly important for me to acknowledge any problems I have identified with the research. In the following analysis chapters, in particular the 'Heterosexuality Revisited' concluding chapter, I reflect further upon how these dilemmas were resolved, or not, in the practice of the research. As well as setting out my methods, or the 'design' of my research, in this chapter, I will also reflect upon my relationship with the project and offer an overview of my own viewing history.

## **THE DESIGN OF MY RESEARCH**

Noting that feminist research has tended to focus upon older women, often housewives, and on particular genres such as soap opera and melodrama, Thomas suggests there is a need to broaden the scope of feminist work in this area (1995: 122). She suggests that broader definitions of audiences worthy of study might incorporate: men, women in employment, the impact of questions of sexuality and ethnicity, and a wider range of texts for consideration (122). With this in mind, my study focuses upon a group of women of an age and background not frequently included in previous studies. This project also seeks to address a broad range of film and media

texts, selected for inclusion by the women I interviewed, rather than being imposed by myself. Additionally, this study addresses the impact of heterosexuality upon the young women I spoke to, and attempts to unravel the complex relationship between institutionalised heterosexuality, Hollywood film (in particular romance film), and the multiple identities of woman and feminist for contemporary women. In doing so, this project addresses some areas that have previously been missing from feminist research on media audiences, as highlighted by Thomas.

I approached this project by recruiting a series of young women who were willing to be interviewed, and recorded on tape, discussing their favourite films, actors and actresses, early film memories, and the way in which film represents both women and heterosexual relationships. I wanted to focus the study upon women who were similar in many ways to me: in terms of age/generation, educational background, and sexuality. The reason I was interested in finding 'sameness' in the sample of women I interviewed was partly to isolate how far the complex negotiation of multiple identities of heterosexual, woman, and feminist vary across individuals. I felt the greater the degree of similarity across the women in other aspects, the more individual differences would be about their approaches to the film texts, rather than because of differences in age etc. I required the participants to be educated to first-degree level. Again, this was partly to homogenise the sample, but also in order to lessen the feeling of distance between

researcher and researched as discussed in this chapter and elsewhere in this thesis. Thomas is critical of those researchers who do not acknowledge the power dynamic in the researcher/researched relationship, saying that the intimacy experienced by some feminist researchers with the women they interview can mask that imbalance of power (1995: 124). She goes on to support the kind of research in which the researcher “shares a common culture” with those she is studying (126), but says that still, in the majority of cases, the audiences are “less privileged in class and career terms than the researcher herself” (127). Selecting a group of women with a similar level of education to me helped to lessen such power dynamics. In fact, several of the participants in my research had studied to Masters level, and a number of those had done so in film and media subjects, so had very similar academic knowledge to myself. Another was a graduate of women’s studies and had a very sophisticated grasp of feminist theory that in many ways outstrips my own. Many of the women I interviewed were economically and in career terms far more privileged (if for privileged we can read advanced or senior) than myself. The age range of the participants was from 23-36 years, my own age being 26 during most of the interview period. Again, similarity of age produced a set of film texts and cultural reference points that I shared with the women I interviewed, contributing to an ease of conversational flow due to shared experience. This helped to maintain a relaxed approach in the interviews, as well as allowing me to be a part of the research myself since my experiences fitted well with the women I spoke to.

Thomas talks about the danger of feminist academic work becoming more “introspective and self-obsessed” if researchers focus exclusively on their own culture, however she also suggests that there is a positive side to researching those similar to oneself rather than always defining the “other” (1995: 127). Thomas’s comments are noteworthy, particularly since she warns against research that defines certain types of politics or pleasures as ‘correct’ in the eyes of the researcher. Radway’s important work with the Smithton women (1987) was marked by her barely disguised judgement on the kinds of pleasures they found in romance fiction, something Thomas draws on (1995: 119). Being a fan myself of many of the popular texts discussed by the women places me in a position where I certainly cannot, and would not, begin to place feminist value or judgement upon any of the favourites discussed. Their guilty pleasures are my guilty pleasures.

I interviewed sixteen women in total, divided into twelve interviews. Six interviews were one-on-one, whilst six were with two women and myself present. In the cases where I interviewed two women together, it was because they had suggested themselves that they be interviewed as a group. I interviewed each woman once, with the exception of one participant who was interviewed once alone, but was also present for two other interviews (where circumstances dictated). I knew Eight of the women prior to the interviews, although each to a differing degree. Some were close friends of several years, some new acquaintances from work, and some my

family or family of existing friends. The other eight women were unknown to me prior to the interviews and were recruited through a wide call for participants issued to all research students at the university. All of the women were given an information sheet about the project and interview process prior to meeting for the interviews (see Appendix 1). This detailed not only what I was hoping to examine in the project, but also what sort of demographic categories I was looking for participants to fit into. Initially I requested women to participate who were between the ages of 25-35, heterosexually identified, and educated to at least degree level. The interviews took place in a variety of contexts: with friends and family they tended to take place in the participants' homes. I interviewed the women who I did not know prior to the project in rooms or offices on the university campuses, and on one occasion in the canteen. The following extract from my research diary written after I interviewed two women in a shared office where there was a lot of activity during the interview reflects some of the difficulties encountered with the locations of the interviews and circumstances beyond my control during them:

Research Diary

22/1//05

Interviewed Paula and Melanie together and then Mary afterwards on her own.

With P&M was all a bit odd as they were late coming down to reception to meet me

and then they weren't sure if there was a free office to use. We ended up in the one Mel shares with a few others and they were in there too including one colleague who was seeing students in there. It was all a bit crowded and noisy and someone was cutting the lawn outside the window, which didn't help! Also someone put the kettle on in the middle of the interview and so I'm not sure how much of that section I will be able to hear on the Dictaphone (which is getting increasingly worse in its quality of recording anyway). Paula was a bit older than some of my interviewees have been which gave a new angle, although she did seem a bit shy at first. Melanie was a bit more outgoing and kept things moving quite well. I didn't feel it was the most comfortable one I've done and I did feel quite conspicuous in the office with so many other people around.

I felt that intimate interviews (with no more than two participants and myself present at a time) were the best method of research for this project due to the personal nature of them. I briefly considered using larger focus groups but quickly dismissed this idea for several reasons. Firstly I felt that transcribing data from larger groups would be problematic in terms of identifying individual contributions, and problems caused by participants talking at the same time or being seated far from the dictaphone. Secondly, and more importantly, I felt that larger groups would be more intimidating for the participants, and would likely make the women less inclined to share honest personal thoughts and feelings. I felt that one-on-one interviews would offer a greater opportunity for me to build a sense of rapport and trust



with the women I interviewed, allowing for more open and honest answers. In the cases where I interviewed two women together, this was always because they had themselves identified that they wished this to be the case.

The information sheets sent to the interviewees before the interviews explained that I wanted the interviews to be as informal and relaxed as possible, as well as explaining that I would be participating in the conversations myself. I laid out the kinds of topics I hoped we would discuss to give them the chance to think a little about the subject before the interviews. I included on these sheets an explanation of my own perception of my heterosexuality to show my own take on the subject. I would draw here upon the work of Stanley and Wise on making yourself vulnerable as a researcher in order to lessen “the power divisions” between yourself and those you research (1993:177). Stanley and Wise argue that the closest you can get as a researcher to redressing that imbalance is to include yourself in the research and make yourself vulnerable. This is why I offered these extra details about my own life and relationship to the project to the women prior to interview: so that they could see I was willing to make myself vulnerable too. The information sheets also included a list of general questions I would use during the interviews if we felt they were needed to encourage conversation. The questions are detailed below and I found I used most of them at some time during the interviews:

What are your favourite films?

What are your early memories of watching films with your girlfriends?  
Who are your favourite film actors and actresses?  
How do you feel about the way women and men are presented on screen?  
How do you feel about the way heterosexual relationships are presented on screen?

My intention had been to return to interview each woman or pair a second time, during which I would ask more probing questions about their relationship to the identities of heterosexual, woman, and feminist.

Unfortunately personal circumstances did not allow this, so I followed up the face-to-face interviews with a series of emails to all the women inviting them to respond to a set of three questions (see Appendix 2). In the email, I offered each woman the opportunity to respond to the questions, saying they should only do so if they felt comfortable. I also made it clear that the responses would be used in a similar way to the interview material. That is that I would quote their words but would give them a pseudonym in the write-up so they would not be identifiable. I also explained that they could say as much or as little as they liked in response to the questions, and should feel free to think about their answers and discuss them with others first if they felt it would help. In the email I asked the following questions:

What does it mean to you to be a woman?  
What does it mean to you to be heterosexual?  
What does feminism mean to you?

Having told the women it was optional whether they responded to these questions or not, I had to accept the consequence which was a very low return. Only five of the sixteen women responded to the initial email. I

contacted them all a second time two months later, offering another opportunity to provide responses, but nobody did. I will analyse the responses (and lack of response) later in this thesis, in the concluding chapter 'Heterosexuality Revisited'.

Whilst the questions focused specifically on film texts and film stars, in the interviews discussion did at times range further into television, pop music, and magazines. This was not something I policed at all, allowing the women to range freely across different forms of popular culture. The decision to focus this study on film texts was one I made early on in the project, and is a decision I would probably change if I were to approach this study again in the future. The reason I initially chose film as the focus was because the issues I was interested in examining had been made visible to me through studying film theory, in particular feminist film theory. For example, as discussed in detail later in this chapter, one of the main driving forces behind this project and the questions I seek to answer within it, came from an experience of my own during a film studies seminar at Birmingham University. It seemed appropriate therefore that I focus the study on film texts and the relationship the women I interviewed have with those texts, since the theories I was grappling with were focused on the relationship between film spectators and films. As the project progressed, I came to realise that much of the theory I was discovering and finding useful for my investigation was drawn more broadly from cultural studies traditions and

concerned wider popular cultural forms such as television, magazines, fiction, poster art, and popular music. Since the women also discussed experiences including these other forms as well as film, on reflection it might have been beneficial to broaden the scope of the project to include other popular cultural forms. However, as the thesis stands, the main focus is on film and film stars and there are still compelling reasons for this.

Following the interviews, I played back the tapes of the discussions and transcribed them verbatim as accurately as possible. I included in the transcripts pauses, laughter, and requests for me to stop recording. I tried to remain as faithful to what was said as possible. After transcribing each interview I assigned pseudonyms to the participants and to any other person mentioned by name in the interview (such as partners and friends). Having transcribed all the interviews, I analysed them, looking for themes, differences, particular comments, or discussions that interested me or that seemed important and relevant to the research questions. I highlighted some things simply because they struck me as particularly vivid moments in an interview for some reason. I noted every film or television text that was mentioned in the course of each interview and logged them in a table noting how many interviews each was mentioned in (see Appendix 3). I did the same for the men who were discussed (see Appendix 4). This information is, again, presented and analysed in the three following analysis chapters. Eventually I grouped comments from the interviews into three broad

categories that would become the analysis chapters, each loosely connected to one of my research questions. The three broad topics of interest were: the heterosexual woman, the heterosexual man, and the heterosexual romance. In the following chapter, 'Living and Reading as a Heterosexual Woman', I expand further upon the difficulties I found in deciding what to discuss in the analysis, and what to leave out, offering the solutions I eventually employed. Suffice it to say that for me the idea of being the editor of these women's words was a cause of constant worry throughout this project. I have also come to realise, in the words of Skeggs, that when you work with all the contradictions and complexities of human lives, "searching for coherence is an impossibility, an ideal and a fantasy" (1997: 32). When I stopped looking for coherence, and embraced the contradictions, I found the material spoke for itself.

Since the interviews, I have had several conversations with a number of the women who I interviewed. The women who were friends or family prior to the project periodically discuss how the work is progressing with me, and some of them have discussed how they felt about some of the topics, and in particular the email questions I asked. I have also talked to a couple of the women who I did not know before interviewing them, some at great length, about the project. I have maintained a level of contact, via email, with all the participants, giving updates as to the progress of the project. I have offered all of the women the opportunity to see the transcript of their interview and

said if they are unhappy with any of the content they should let me know (see Appendix 5). Only two of the women requested to see the transcripts for their interviews, and both were happy with the text. Three of the women have asked to be able to read an abstract or excerpt from the finished thesis. As I have stated elsewhere in this thesis, I believe that this project is ultimately about those twelve women, and myself, and the complex lives we are all living. I am greatly indebted to all of the women who agreed to be interviewed and allowed me into their lives, if briefly, to share their experiences. Skeggs once again provides the comfort of having had the same feelings about her research as I have about mine. She notes the feeling of always being indebted to those who have taken part in her research, reporting that feminist ethnographers are “always grateful that people will actually speak and spend time with you” (1995: 197).

## **“INSECURITIES” IN ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH**

I discussed Skegg’s description of ethnographic research as containing “theoretical insecurities” (1995: 196) in the previous chapter in terms of the ever-changing nature of the subjects of ethnographic work making factual results difficult to conclude. Skeggs herself says of theories developed as a result of ethnographic research that they “may work to explain things one day, they may not the next day” (196). For Skeggs this is partly why it is so

important in ethnographic research to discuss methods and processes: the researcher is party to the ever-changing outcomes of the research, and is therefore in a strong position to reflect upon the developments. Part of the fear of pursuing this ethnographic project for me was the uncertainty about the responses gathered. Would the women I interviewed be happy to talk to me? How would I know if they were being honest with me? What if after all the work and all the interviews, when I came to analyse the results there was nothing of value there? I also worried about the variability of this research: ultimately I could only capture a snapshot of the women's thoughts, opinions, and feelings during an hour or two of one day of their lives. Is this really representative of their thoughts about the things I asked them about? Could I represent them fairly on the basis of these short interviews?

The way I have come to view these worries about the instability of the research is by thinking through the reasons why I chose to pursue the type of research I have, using the particular approach I have. I wanted to explore women's relationship to womanhood, heterosexuality, and feminism through a popular cultural medium. I wanted to use a popular medium like film because most people of my generation have watched films from their teenage years onwards, and therefore my research would not exclude anyone I approached from taking part simply because they had not seen a particular text. The advantage of conversations built around popular cultural forms like film and television is that they open up discussion to be as broad

as those participating choose it to be. Had I pre-selected film texts to discuss then I would have been directing the discussion to a greater degree and I wanted the women I spoke with to range as widely as they wished in order to discuss central themes of feminism, heterosexuality, and womanhood. In what may seem a slightly odd approach, I tackled my fear of the broadness, unknowability, and fluctuating nature of ethnographic work by ensuring my work would be as broad, unknowable, and fluctuating as possible. By reflecting upon what I believed to be important about researching women's lives from a feminist perspective, I grew to see that my research design would have to facilitate the broadest possible remit for conversation in order that the themes would be drawn from what the women wanted to discuss, rather than being imposed by me as researcher.

When I first set about this research project I really did not know what I was hoping to uncover. More than this, I did not really know what I wanted to ask. Long months during the first year of the project were spent agonising over my own perceived lack of direction and focus for the project. It is hard to pinpoint exactly when I decided upon an ethnographic approach, but extracts from my research diary help. Nine months into the period of study I wrote my first research diary extract, on the advice of my supervisor because I was struggling with the direction of the study. By the time I came to write this entry, some nine months into the project, I was crippled by a lack of



confidence and confusion about the direction I wanted to take the research in. Following a meeting with my supervisor I wrote the extract below:

Research Diary

24/11/04

Since this is the first entry in my research diary and I have been researching now on my PhD since March, I don't really know where to begin. I guess part of the reason I have started this now is to do with how I am feeling about my PhD. I have been writing on it since around June which was when my RD1 form was formally accepted by the Faculty Research Committee. I have completed about 2/3 of the literature review. In itself this seems unbelievable as this was the size of my MPhil thesis and that took me a year to research and write!

I keep feeling really unsure about the direction I'd like to take the research in, and I think I'm having a crisis of confidence in my ability to do this and do it well. I'm always worried about how far my PhD project will define me – every time I go to the hairdressers or meet someone new for the rest of my life this topic will be seen as defining who I am! I think some of this has to do with the experiences I had with my undergraduate dissertation and the difference of opinion I had with one of the markers. I guess her comments stayed with me more than I realised and have become something of a thorn in my side. I felt she was questioning my credentials as a feminist. Doing something that examines women's positions as spectators and how feminist theory can help explore that appeals a lot.

Me and my first supervisor had a really interesting talk about my feelings about the PhD and the topic. I really like the theoretical work and am excited by the prospect of investigating theories of heterosexuality further. Perhaps this is part of a wider personal exploration of my own stuff too – I think I am on a journey that scares me and I don't really know where I will be in myself at the end of it. I think there is also an element here of wanting something to be my own – I feel that I want to be happy with the definition I get from the research. So, what does it all mean? I don't know to be honest. We talked about the therapeutic nature of research work and how much it is about yourself. Maybe this is tied up in the problem – I have been in some very transitional times since I started and not sure about my own identity and therefore unsure about the identity of my research. If there are issues I am trying to work out in my research it definitely has to do with my own conception of gender and sexuality and how they play a role in my own identity. I have always researched this stuff and I think that I am looking for a way to theorise my own sexuality in away that is still broadly heterosexual but incorporates the other aspects I feel are a part of that for me. My first supervisor told me that we are all working out something about ourselves through our research...this really made me wonder about what it is I'm looking for in my own research. Perhaps it is a question of being brave.

Reading this extract now, in the light of the direction my work has taken, I can see why the approach I finally chose has been so right for me. This extract from my research diary reveals my desire to pursue what I saw as 'feminist' research, without knowing how to ally this with other interests. This

extract also reveals that I was yet to really understand the degree to which all research is deeply personal and bound up with who we are as people as well as researchers.

This small example from my research diary reveals the extent to which, even at a stage when I was not considering an auto-ethnographic approach, my life, my experience, and my identity as researcher were having an enormous impact on my research. This is why, after reading the work of theorists like Stanley and Wise and Maynard and Purvis, I believe that it is vital to acknowledge your own personal investment in research. No research is without the bias, or filter of the person who carries it out, yet not all research makes that process transparent (a view that echoes that of Stanley and Wise 1993:175). Maynard and Purvis talk about “warts and all” auto-ethnographic approaches to research as a way to avoid the “silences” of much research (1994:2). My decision to include this chapter in which I position myself in relation to the project, openly revealing my own passion, fandom and contradictions in relation to feminism, womanhood, heterosexuality, and films, is evidence of my wish to be as open about my position as possible. More than this, I have chosen to include extracts from my research diary within this thesis in order to reveal more about how I felt about the research, the interviews, and the writing up of the thesis. These extracts are, at times, personal and raw accounts of difficult moments. They reflect the times when I doubted the research, doubted myself, and doubted my ability to finish the

project. The extracts reveal how I pondered the outcomes of my research before I formed those thoughts coherently enough to include them in my written work.

There is, rightly, a debate about the degree to which including these kinds of autobiographical details can be seen as, on the one hand a vital part of the research process, or on the other as self-indulgence. Skeggs uses extracts from her own research diary in her work (e.g. 1995), and defends this approach by explaining that decisions researchers make in their work, down to the theorists they choose to draw on, are all influenced by their own life. Therefore the more open a researcher can be about their own life and the way it impacts on the research, the more transparent those biases are (1995: 194). Stacey discusses what she terms the “autobiographical turn” in feminist theory in her 1997 chapter ‘Feminist Theory: Capital F, Capital T’. She suggests that this “turn” can be seen as a useful way in which feminist researchers have disrupted the binaric divide between the personal and the public, the individual and the universal (1997: 64). Stacey suggests that:

the introduction of personal criticism is a strategic disruption of the smooth surface of abstract universalising theories that have constituted women as ‘lack, invisibility, silence’  
(Stacey, 1997: 64)

However, Stacey also notes possible less positive results of autobiographical work. She raises the possibility of the ‘self’ being presented not as a true and honest representation of the author, but as “an invention, a self-

fabrication, a strategic rhetoric or a narrativised memory” (1997: 66). I think it is useful to note that Stacey’s comments could also be applied to the people interviewed in this type of research, since as human beings we all represent ourselves in particular ways, some honest, others less so. We are not always aware of the degree to which we construct our own identities, and again, this is as true of the people who are interviewed for research projects as it is for those who conduct them (Thomas, 1995: 116). Stacey also problematises the move towards more autobiographical writing by women as perhaps reconfirming old stereotypes whereby the feminine is aligned with the personal/private and emotional realm, whilst the masculine is aligned to the public and hence theoretical realm (1997: 65-6). Stacey offers a fair analysis of all the possible interpretations of the move towards more autobiographical work in feminist theory, although I think there are some problems with her interpretation. Stacey seems to conflate feminist approaches with female writers here, hence the final point above relating to masculine and feminine realms. Since autobiographical and auto-ethnographic approaches are feminist approaches, and since male writers can engage in the practice of autobiography and auto-ethnography, and do so from a feminist perspective, then it does not necessarily follow that an “autobiographical” turn in feminist writing does anything to polarise male and female positions. Stacey appears here to assume that feminist positions can only be assumed by women: a position I do not agree with. Her concern that there will always be people who wish to dismiss autobiographical work as

silly, self-indulgent or non-academic is valid, but these people are not necessarily always, or indeed exclusively, men. I believe that in the case of the individual researcher, each person can simply approach their research in the manner that is best suited to them and to their project. I also happen to believe that the best research is the most honest research, and for me that includes honesty about the researcher's position. I find it hard now, looking back, to believe that I found it a revelation to be told by my first supervisor that most researchers are really researching themselves in their work. At the time it seemed like a strange new disclosure; now it seems so obvious that I cannot believe I did not realise it myself. In the light of that revelation I believe even more strongly in the need to tell your own story as part of your research. None of us come to these projects by accident, no matter what we might think, and the most honest way to approach a project is to acknowledge the path that brought us here.

## **THE RESEARCHER AS ACTIVE CONSUMER**

As I observed in the previous chapter, Jermyn's work on young female fans of American TV series *Sex and the City* includes some interesting discussions of the relationship between herself, the women she interviewed, and her own relationship with *Sex and the City*. Jermyn particularly notes that researchers should not shy away from admitting that they are often

“consumers of popular culture and happy recipients of its attendant pleasures”, rather than being objective observers from the outside (2004:203). This advice has great resonance for me in relation to this project since I am a big fan myself of many of the film texts that were discussed by the women I interviewed. In the interviews themselves I never shied away from letting the women know if I had strong feelings about certain films: those reactions were spontaneous and honest. In the same way, by providing an overview of my own viewing history here, and by answering the questions that formed the basic structure of many of the interviews with the women I talked to, I hope to reveal my own pleasures in these texts. Being an active consumer of many of the texts discussed, as well as an active admirer of many of the male sex symbols we talked about, helped to create an atmosphere in which the women I interviewed felt able to share their own pleasures with me.

I believe, on reflection, that my willingness to be open with the women about my likes and dislikes, pleasures and early memories of watching and acting out films with my friends, and especially my own struggles with why I like certain films when intellectually I feel I should not, helped them to confide their own stories with me. This seems like an appropriate moment to comment on my use of the terms “we”, “us”, and “our” in this thesis in relation to the enjoyment found in certain texts, or experiences by myself and the women I interviewed. I have used these terms where I feel that I am

discussing a shared experience or pleasure: where the interview made me aware of common enjoyment in particular films or men. In Hallam and Marshment's audience study on female viewers of *Oranges are Not the Only Fruit* (1995), they reflect upon the dangers of academics defining themselves as somehow different from the "ordinary" women they include in their research: "feminist academics, in defining the ordinary women as 'not me', have come to define themselves as not only 'not feminine' but also as 'not ordinary women'" (1995:14). It is precisely because I am not particularly different from the women I interviewed in many ways, because I am as much an 'ordinary' woman as they are (although I prefer to consider us all as extraordinary), that I refer at times to "us" and "our". I do not wish to set them out as distinct from myself, my feminist beliefs, my struggles with the meaning of my own pleasures and investments in certain texts, and my desire to make sense of my own identity. These issues were, to some degree, experienced by the women I spoke to themselves: something I found great comfort in. Hallam and Marshment also refer to a desire to reveal "the *extraordinary* in the lives of apparently ordinary women" (1995:15), a sentiment I identify with strongly. Having spent time with the women included in this study, I can think of no less appropriate description of them than 'ordinary'.

On the subject of honesty in feminist research, Skeggs asserts a number of key features of feminist ethnography: "to reciprocate, not exploit, not abuse



power, to care, to empower, and to be honest” (1995:197). I hope that my approach to the interviews encompassed these aspects. Reciprocation was high on my agenda; in fact I often had to restrain myself from talking too much in response to films or characters/actors mentioned in the interviews. I was very aware of how easy it can be as the interviewer to take over and lead the conversation, and it was a steep learning curve for me to work towards taking an active, but balanced role. I believe that my approach also resisted exploitation or abuse of the women involved in my research. My decision to include full transcripts of all of the interviews as appendices to my PhD is part of this important aspect of the study for me. My serious struggles about how to ‘speak for’ the women I talked to are discussed further in the next chapter, ‘Living and Reading as a Heterosexual Woman’ in relation to other feminist researchers and their work on this area; they are also evident in the following extract from my research diary:

Research Diary

17/10/06

I am keeping a notebook full of lists to help me try to keep my head organised with all the things I am thinking about to do with the thesis. The list of questions I have about it just keeps growing. When I have supervision meetings I discuss the questions with my first supervisor which sometimes provides an answer and sometimes doesn't. But it's always good to get a new perspective on things and

talk them through. At the moment the questions seem to revolve around the way I am presenting the research. Is it right that I am speaking for these women? Do I have a right to be interpreting their comments and representing (maybe falsely) their views? Isn't that inherently un-feminist to speak for them instead of them speaking for themselves? In the end I have concluded that all I can do is keep those concerns at the front of my mind so I continue to try my best to represent nothing other than their own honest words and hope my grouping and interpreting hasn't edited too much out. I am going to include full transcripts of all the interviews which I think is important, and makes me feel less guilty about being an editor

I felt that the obvious way to allow the women to speak for themselves as far as possible was to include their words verbatim from the interviews in the thesis. I did not want to only include the snippets of conversation I had selected for inclusion at various points in my analysis: I wanted them to have their own voice too. I have not seen many studies in which this is the practice, although Seiter's work suggests that full transcripts should be included alongside any interpretive text (1990). It is also a way to include data such as laughter, or incomplete statements within the project, which would ordinarily be edited out of excerpts. Thomas draws attention to the value of such aspects of interviews, including body language and laughter, to research, but also highlights the ephemeral nature of such data (1995:123). An additional tactic I have employed in this thesis in terms of the women's voices being allowed to be heard other than through the filter of me, is in the

presentation. I have italicised all quotes that are directly from the women's interviews or email responses to my questions. I hope that this small act will further highlight their own words where included. Since italics are already used in these sections, film titles (when used by the women themselves) are in inverted commas in these passages, rather than italicised as elsewhere in this thesis. My own thoughts and reflections, when in the form of my research diary, are indicated by a text box. This serves to separate the different forms of my own words – those in the diary extracts are more raw and are unedited, appearing here exactly as they are in my diary.

To return to Skeggs' key features, honesty, as I have already discussed, was always of tantamount importance to this study. I do not think it is really possible to engage in auto-ethnographic research without being totally honest, with the people you are researching, with yourself, your supervisor or colleagues, and within the text of the write-up. I believe that my honesty and openness with the women I interviewed both before, during, and in follow-up emails after the interviews, helped to foster a relationship in which they were willing to give more to the project and to me than they might have done had I been less willing to share my own experiences with them. This approach is further recommended by Oakley in her chapter on interviewing women in Roberts' *Doing Feminist Research* (1995 edition):

In most cases, the goal of finding out about people through interviewing is best achieved when the relationship of interviewer and interviewee is non-

hierarchical and when the interviewer is prepared to invest his or her personal identity in the relationship  
(Oakley, 1995: 41)

Whilst acknowledging the importance of the key features in feminist research discussed above, Skeggs also notes the difficulties involved in forming close relationships with the researched. She describes the difficulties associated with researching a group of women over a prolonged number of years, and finding it difficult to maintain the level of friendship and contact expected at the same time as seeking to nurture old friendships, and complete a lengthy research project (1995: 197). Some of these difficulties were relevant in my case, and some were not. At first I did not consider this to be an issue since the women I was interviewing were drawn from close friends and colleagues using a snowball method (e.g. Hill, 1996), hence not creating many new relationships. However, this brought with it a new set of ethical dilemmas, since the groups I met with for the interviews in some cases already knew me very well. Existing friends come to the table (figuratively speaking) with much 'baggage' in terms of a friendship: expectations, prior knowledge, rivalry and jealousy, preconceived notions of who people are, and a sense of not necessarily wanting to disclose intimate information. It is important for me to acknowledge these potential difficulties as they are possible barriers to research where it is important to garner as much honesty and openness in responses as possible. The strategy I adopted for dealing with this potential issue was to speak at length with each group or individual, whether I knew them well beforehand or not, before beginning the interviews, in order to

explain thoroughly the reasons for the research, what my role would be, and the importance of confidentiality and anonymity for the participants. Another vital aspect of my research was my own participation in the interviews I conducted. I was as much a member of the researched group as I was the researcher and as I have already stated, this participation on my behalf helped, I feel, to alleviate some of the potential difficulties in gaining trust during the interviews. Additionally, I left the interviews relatively unstructured, without set questions, but rather a broad set of themes or topics for discussion. I hoped that this enabled the women to feel free to discuss their feelings, experiences, and opinions, and not to feel that they were being directed by me in the discussions. I also wanted to leave the interviews relatively unstructured so that the research was, as far as is possible in the context, led by the women themselves rather than by me. For example, I did not ask the women about a specific set of films, or even a particular genre. I allowed them to range freely over any texts they liked by asking open questions such as "tell me about your favourite films". Whilst I felt this approach worked well for my project, I was aware of the potential for the conversations to fall into more general chatter and to lose focus (a concern noted by Thomas (1995:113)). Extracts from my research diary, written following the interviews, reveal my concern about this happening particularly during those interviews with three of us present:

Research Diary

11/11/05

Just interviewed Phoebe and Beth for PhD. Was interesting as they were a total cold call – don't know either of them at all – in fact didn't know what they looked like which was interesting when loitering in reception trying to spot them! They were lovely and pretty relaxed which was good, and knew each other well which made the whole thing easier.

They were quite open and talkative, although bit tricky in places with 2 of them (first time have interviewed when it's not one-on-one), would lose track of one thread and go off on a tangent and never finish exploring an issue – that kind of thing.

However, in the case of this research I found all the conversations, whether strictly about film or not, were useful to the project since I was interested in a broad range of issues relating to being a young heterosexual woman.

By working hard to break down any boundaries between me (as researcher) and the women (as researched), I hoped to make both the women I already knew well, and those I did not, feel comfortable enough to be able to share their experiences with me. In reality, I was surprised to find that the interviews I carried out with those known best to me (close friends and family) were the most difficult to participate in. I felt much more self-conscious of what I disclosed about my own experiences and feelings with

those I knew well, and at times found those interviews uncomfortable. The extracts below from my research diary were both written after interviews with close friends, and reflect both my discomfort at how the interviews had felt, as well as my surprise that this was the case:

Research Diary

08/09/05

I interviewed Jenny yesterday – I thought it was going to be really easy and that conversation would flow etc because me and Jen know each other really well and have talked a lot about all this stuff loads of times before over a glass of wine or two. As it turned out it was really difficult and we both just felt like it was such a forced conversation. It wasn't anywhere near as relaxed as I'd hoped and it just felt really unnatural and forced. Maybe partly because we already know which films we like so it seemed odd to be saying them etc? Some things seemed harder to say too somehow – about the project and stuff.

Research Diary

27/11/05

Again, it was odd to do an interview with someone I know so well. It made it hard to ask some of the questions I wanted to ask – about heterosexuality in particular so I just bottled it and didn't ask! Felt in places like Sally was really aware of it too – perhaps she felt a little uncomfortable talking to me about some of it? It was weird giving her the info sheet to read – I kind of really didn't want to pass it to her and then wondered if she'd say something about how I defined my sexuality – she didn't, but now I think I'll think she knows it every time we talk.

In itself this was actually a very useful experience, since I conducted the interviews with those known to me earlier on, leaving other contacts until later. My (at times uncomfortable) feelings about sharing with the early participants helped me to feel empathy for the position of all of those women I interviewed. I became much more aware of the individual limits of comfort with conversation, and the degree to which people may or may not want to participate in discussions. I think that these experiences helped me to be sensitive during later interviews to any silences or reluctance to answer questions. I was also acutely aware of the, as Stanley and Wise describe it, "hazardous and frightening business" of opening yourself up to others in this kind of research (1993: 177). I did, at times, feel frightened about sharing the information sheet I had written for the participants (as reflected in the diary extract above), because of how much of myself it revealed. Although I found the process of sharing scary, it was utterly necessary since I would later require them to share personal thoughts with me. Ultimately my



approach was to never ask the women I interviewed any question I was not willing to answer myself, and I would therefore like to take the opportunity in the following section to discuss my own responses to the topics I covered with the women in the interviews by sharing my own viewing history.

Thomas's work has highlighted the way in which some feminist audience research has paid only passing reference to the researcher's own investment in the topic. She suggests that "a more detailed analysis might usefully clarify the combination of personal identification and critical distance which often co-exist uneasily in this research" (1995: 121). I hope this chapter contributes to such a detailed analysis.

## **MY VIEWING HISTORY**

In the interviews I conducted for this project, I asked the women I talked to about their favourite films, early memories of watching films, any favourite actresses or actors, and their views on the representations of women and heterosexual relationships on screen. I hope to offer briefly here some of my own responses to those questions in the form of a snapshot of my own viewing history. I have approached this history in terms of key texts for me, but in particular ones that brought me to want to pursue the questions this project poses. Hence the film and television texts I discuss here, alongside

other popular cultural phenomena that have impacted upon me, have been chosen because they relate to the key themes of heterosexuality, feminism, and womanhood. I have not set out here to systematically answer all of the questions used in the interviews since I participated in those interviews and conversations myself, and my responses are therefore a part of this project, and can be read in full in the transcripts that accompany this thesis (Appendix 8).

One of my earliest film viewing memories is of being about 8 or 9 years old and watching James Bond films on television on Saturdays. My Mum had always quite enjoyed them, and they were something we watched as a family more often than not. At that age, of course, I never questioned what I watched or how I was watching it, but I remember (like any child of that age) being particularly fascinated by the on screen relationships between Bond and the 'Bond girls'. I absolutely savoured these moments: loving the excitement of the tension and the build up to the eventual kiss and whatever followed. I also adored the gadgets, the cars, and the smooth suaveness with which Bond (for me Connery and Moore) operated. Fifteen years later I was attending a seminar in film studies as part of my MPhil at Birmingham University, when James Bond came up in a group discussion. His name was invoked as a prime example of the kinds of restricted cinematic identifications offered on gender grounds to audiences. It was argued that in James Bond films female viewers' only option is to identify with the 'Bond

girl' who, whilst feisty, ultimately has to undress, submit to Bond, and provide a to-be-looked-at-ness distraction from the main masculine-centred action narrative. However, something in this analysis did not sit well with me, and made me think back to those early viewing experiences. When I looked back, I realised I had loved Bond because I wanted to *be* him, do what he did, and experience what he experienced – I identified with his character. I would watch Bond and project myself onto his character, imagine being him, performing his stunts, mastering the gadgets, defeating the villains, and saving the day. And of course, that meant I got a beautiful girl too. I mentioned this identification with Bond in the seminar class to a mixed reception. The other women present conceded that Bond is a more interesting role than that of the Bond girls, but suggested that what I really wanted was a combination: a female Bond character. These responses from my peers confused me further. They seemed to feel that as a female spectator you automatically identify with the female characters given the chance. They wished to turn Bond into a female version so that they could identify with him, whilst I was happy to imagine myself as the male character. I puzzled over this difference: was it so unusual for women to identify this way with male characters? To complicate matters further, Roger Moore as Bond was one of my earliest celebrity crushes, indeed I remember recounting to one of my school friends the way I got a funny feeling 'in my tummy' when I saw him kiss and undress the women in Bond films! Given that I was attracted to this character of Bond, how could I also want to be

him? As I reflected back on this odd position several years later I could not work out what was going on. Was I so narcissistic that I desired someone I also wanted to be – hence desired myself? Was I exhibiting some deep desire to become a man by wanting to be someone so masculine? Was I experiencing an expression of same-sex desire for the Bond women, by wanting to be the man who seduces them? I never did find the answers to these questions in that film seminar, but I have thought a lot about them since. Indeed, recently seeing the newest film in the franchise, *Casino Royale* (2006, Martin Campbell) at the cinema prompted me to reflect again upon the relationship I have with Bond. I wondered if the intervening years would have altered my identifications, or whether the new approach to the films, along with a new actor playing the lead, would have changed my desire for the man and his role. It has not. I watched *Casino Royale* with a strong desire to *be* Bond and step into his role, but equally I found myself definitely desiring Daniel Craig as a sex symbol on screen. I had never considered anything odd or unusual about my identification (or desires) until I heard other women express that they did not feel the same in that Film Studies seminar. Despite largely identifying as heterosexual I have long viewed both gender and sexuality as a very broad spectrum across which people can occupy various positions at different moments. I suppose that this attitude to my own sexual and gendered identity has allowed me to occupy different points of identification in relation to men and women in various film roles. The following extract from my research diary reflects my

fear before I conducted the interviews for this project about never finding an adequate explanation for my viewing history:

#### Research Diary

16/06/05

The current work in progress is a 'research design' chapter that will look at how I am going to go about using focus groups and interviews, and 'locating myself in the research'. The last bit seems quite scary since I don't really know where I fit into the research, and in particular where I will fit with regards to issues of sexuality and identification. I suppose my greatest fear is that it turns out I am the odd one out, and that most women of my generation and background (generally) have very straightforward identifications! I suppose a large part of my doing this research is to account for my own viewing experiences, since I have yet to read a theory that accounts adequately for them!

It is important at this point to establish what I mean by the term 'identification' or 'identify'. For me, this has always had quite a specific meaning in relation to cinema – a cinematic identification is the character with whom you ally yourself during the viewing process. Theirs is the point of view from which you watch, absorb, and replay the film. Their perspective is yours and yours is theirs. For me, this has always been a vital area in which meaning is made in the viewing of a film. My reading of a James Bond film would be

radically different from someone sitting next to me for a great many reasons, but perhaps one of the most significant differences stems from the points of identification with characters. A female friend sitting next to me who is identifying with the 'Bond girl' would be seeing the film and its action altogether differently. 'Identification' in cinema has generally been defined in psychoanalytic terms, most notable by Mulvey (1975). As discussed in the previous chapter, for Mulvey identification in the cinema is strictly gendered, and in her 1975 essay she really only explained male spectator identification with male characters. In this case, Mulvey sees identification as deeply narcissistic – involving feelings of control, power and omnipotence on behalf of the spectator – with the male protagonist on screen viewed as a reflection of Freud's notion of the "ideal ego" (Mulvey, 1975: 12). As I also detailed in the previous chapter, Mulvey's work on identification has been widely criticised for being too rigid a framework to explain the multiple possibilities of identification experienced by many spectators. Ellis describes in *Visible Fictions* (1982) how identification can be seen as something much more fluid, since cinema invokes varied and complicated desires. He describes the way in which a spectator does not necessarily identify along gender lines, since identification is not simply about the physical character; it is also about identifying with moments in the narrative, which can involve any character (43). Ellis sums up: "Identification is therefore multiple and fractured, a sense of seeing the constituent parts of the spectator's own psyche paraded before her or him" (43). Following Ellis's reasoning, and my

own experiences that seem to fit his multiple and fractured mould, I was interested to see whether my own research with other young, heterosexually-identified women, would reveal similar multiple and fractured identifications.

So what of my James Bond fantasies? There are, of course, many simple explanations. One such explanation might be that cinema is so inherently patriarchal that it does not allow for strong roles for women who can control the narrative and direct its flow. Given this absence, female spectators like myself who are unwilling to settle for identifying with the 'to be looked at' female character, are forced into identification with a male character. Alternatively, it could simply be argued that I was experiencing same-sex desires towards the women in the films, and that my identification with the male character (who is deeply sexualised and sexual in his relationships with the women on screen) was simply transference of my sexual desires towards those women. These are sound theories, however, I do not think either one holds a full explanation. If the first were true, I would have had the same feelings with regard to other films I grew up with around that time. I remember seeing the Superman films and loving them, but I never wanted to be Superman. It seems to me that if it was simply a case of needing to identify with the strongest role in a film, the pattern would be obvious throughout my viewing history, and I do not see such a pattern. When I saw Tom Cruise in *Cocktail* (1988, Roger Donaldson) for the first time I

remember desperately wanting to be his female love interest (and she certainly did not have an interesting role). *Dirty Dancing* (1987, Emile Ardolino), another key film in my viewing history, and one that warranted a lot of discussion by the women I interviewed, also prompted me to identify with the male character. Whilst my friends all wanted to be the female lead, Baby, I always dreamed of being Johnny (Swayze's character). I did see him as a sex symbol too, but I was more obsessed with the thought of *being* him. When my friends and I dressed up and re-enacted the scenes from the film I always jumped at the chance to play Johnny. Again I do not feel that I chose Johnny's character because it is the stronger or more interesting role. Indeed Baby's role is far more interesting and the larger of the two. Add to this the fact the film is told from her point of view and I certainly do not think there was any encouragement for me as a teenage girl to identify with the male character. Whilst there are a number of other key film texts in my viewing history in which I identified with the romantic male lead, there are an equal number in which I identify with the female who gets her guy (as in *Cocktail* – see below).

Whilst James Bond stands out to me as a key moment in my viewing past – a moment which has since come to make me question theories of cinema spectatorships and identification – there are many others. Some of the texts I have identified as key to my history are listed below, along with a short description of my perceived identifications:



Film Title	Character who holds my prime identification
<i>James Bond</i> (all films)	James Bond
<i>Cocktail</i>	Jordan (Elisabeth Shue), Tom Cruise's lover
<i>Grease</i>	Danny (John Travolta). I was always quite attracted to Kenickie, and Danny had such a homoerotic relationship with him, I think that was part of the appeal.
<i>Grease 2</i>	Stephanie (Michelle Pfeiffer)
<i>Pretty Woman</i>	Viv - however much I hate to say it now, I always wanted to be Julia Roberts in that film.
<i>Dirty Dancing</i>	Johnny (Patrick Swayze)
<i>Clueless</i>	Cher (Alicia Silverstone)
<i>Flashdance</i>	Alex (Jennifer Beals)

I have grown increasingly aware during this research of the contradictory relationship many women have with the media texts they enjoy. The term

'guilty pleasure' seems to be appropriate to describe the relationship we often have with certain genres and media. Examples that come to mind of my own pleasures include celebrity gossip magazines, monthly glossies, 'chick-lit' fiction, and a vast spectrum of television and film texts ranging from *Sex and the City* and *Desperate Housewives* to *Dirty Dancing* and *Mean Girls* (2004, Mark Waters). I adore the pop groups the Spice Girls and Girls Aloud, not least because I find their glamour, sex appeal, and particular performances of femininity intoxicating. When I read theoretical work that highlights the 'problems' with some of these texts, perhaps reminding me of the role of media manipulation, or the production of patriarchal-friendly versions of femininity I feel compromised for enjoying these pleasures. The question remains – can you be a feminist and enjoy reading women's magazines? The only way I have ever aligned the two in my own mind is by saying I 'switch off my brain' to enjoy the romantic films, disposable fiction, or latest mass-produced and manipulated by a (usually male) music mogul girl band. This research seeks in part to examine the contradiction held by women like me in our enjoyment of certain 'guilty pleasures' and how that might reflect, or relate to, multiple identities of woman, feminist, and heterosexual. I read with interest Whelehan's comments on the perceived impact of cultural artefacts such as teenage magazines and pop groups on young audiences: "Girls are neither passive receptacles for everything they read in magazines, nor willing and uncritical absorbers of Spice-Girl speak" (2000: 54). Admittedly, Whelehan's comments concern women much

younger than me, but it is refreshing to read a feminist critique of popular culture that does not simply assume that because a particular text carries certain interpretations or ideology within it, consumers absorb such messages unquestioningly. This research project is rooted in an acknowledgment of the intelligent and active role audiences play in the relationship between text and viewer. Therefore it seeks to examine the contradictions women feel about the texts they enjoy, and what the root of those contradictions are. These issues are examined and explored further in the remainder of this thesis.

### **THIRD WAVE FEMINISM?**

The women I have interviewed for this project are all between the ages of 23 and 36, with the majority (ten of the sixteen interviewees) falling in the 25-28 age bracket at the time of interview. It is important, therefore, to consider what influences in terms of feminism, and the role of women, have been important during the period in which we were growing up: born in the late 1970s and early 1980s and teenagers in the 1990s. Broadly speaking, for women of my generation, feminism is something that has always been there – we grew up at a time when both first wave and second wave feminism had happened, and knowledge of this has always formed part of our cultural backgrounds. We grew up only knowing a female prime minister in this country, since Margaret Thatcher was in power before many of us were even

born. As Henry states in her article 'Orgasms and Empowerment: *Sex and the City* and the third wave feminism' (Akass and McCabe, 2004), feminism of some sort has been "a constant presence" in the lives of women of my generation – we have "never lived in a world without the women's movement" (2004: 65). Henry states "This generation considers feminism a given, handed to young women at birth" (70).

It has largely been my experience that women of my age feel that because they have grown up a generation after the high profile struggles of second wave feminism, there is nothing left to fight for. It is an argument I have heard many times. Young women in the 00s seem to feel that gender equality has been achieved – equal rights, equal pay, voting, rights to choose what we do with our bodies, choices about motherhood and careers, and financial freedom. Yet it is still the case in many of these areas that equality and freedom have not in fact been achieved. Even more dangerous, by creating a whole generation of women who believe there is nothing left for women to fight for, feminism seems to me to be in very real danger of being lost as whole generations see it as having little relevance. In Henry's article, she mentions this tendency to dismiss feminism as "unnecessary or outdated" (2004: 65), claiming that whilst many women feel this way, there are another group. Henry describes a "third wave" of feminism – a movement she believes started in America in the 1990s. She describes how third wave feminism has stated that women in the twenties

and thirties have very different relationships to “both feminism and sexuality than did their ‘foremothers’” (66). Henry’s identification of this age group as distinct and uniquely different from previous feminist generations adds weight to my desire to focus my audience-based research amongst women in their twenties and thirties. In a bid to understand the relationship women of this age have with both film and with feminism, this project attempts to engage them in discussion of both.

Something Henry draws attention to in her discussion of third wave feminism is the lack of attention paid in contemporary third wave writing (and TV/film texts) to issues of race and class. She suggests that third wave feminism has come to focus almost exclusively on sexual freedom, since with an absence of racial or class issues, that is the only freedom left to be fought over:

More importantly, the feminism offered by *Sex and the City* suggests white, upper-class, straight women, have the luxury narrowly to define liberation exclusively in terms of their sexual freedom. This neglect of race and class mirrors a similar lack of attention in contemporary third wave writing (Henry, 2004: 70)

It is important for me to say here that my own research could well be criticised for such a focus since this project deals with the experiences of white, heterosexual women who are well-educated and broadly speaking could be defined as middle-class. However, as discussed in some detail earlier in this chapter, a degree of sameness between me and the women I

interviewed was important for this project. I wanted to compare my own experiences with those of other women, and as such wanted them to reflect a similar background, age, and sexuality to myself. Whiteness was not a pre-requisite for participation at all, but as it happened all the people who took part were white. Since I did not ask the participants about their ethnicity, I cannot comment as to whether within the common strand of "whiteness" there were varying ethnicities such as Irish, Scottish, Welsh etc. Perhaps my own inability to engage further with the notion of ethnicity within a sample of white participants is indicative of "the invisibility of whiteness as a racial position" as Dyer has termed it (1997: 3). I did not feel ethnicity was an important element in this study, but had my sample not been all white I might have felt differently. The invisibility of whiteness as an unmarked norm (much in the way I later discuss heterosexuality as) leads us to see whiteness and ourselves as "unmarked, unspecific, universal" (1997:45).

It is, perhaps, a limitation of this study, and my own methodology, that I have not explored or problematised the ethnicity, nor indeed the class status, of the participants, particularly given that these aspects may have an effect on the opinions, attitude, and even educational opportunities available to a person. Having not asked for this information at the time of the interviews and email questions, but becoming aware of the potential value in knowing a little more about the women themselves and their histories was frustrating. I was not in a position to be able to approach all of the participants again at

the end of the project for practical reasons, and as such certain limitations persist with regard to the demographic details of the participants provided here. For this study I felt that educational level was a more significant point of differentiation for the participants since education has a quite significant impact on the access a person might have to discourses such as those around gender, identity, and power that were pertinent to this project. Additionally, as stated earlier in this chapter, I felt that a common minimum level of education was important to lessen any feelings of inequality or hierarchy between myself as the researcher and the women I interviewed as the researched.

Another characteristic of third wavers, suggests Henry, is criticising aspects of second wave feminism seen as overly prescriptive or dogmatic. Instead, she argues, third wavers “have steered clear of prescribing a particular feminist agenda and instead have chosen to stress individuality and individual definitions of feminism” (71). Henry notes that in focusing so forcefully on individuality, and not adhering to any core collective social or political views, third wave feminism has reduced itself to one core issue: choice. She suggests that this theme is particularly noticeable in the representations of third wavers in *Sex and the City* and their various individual attitudes to marriage and children (73-4). Further debate of the individualistic nature of third-wave feminism is offered later in this chapter where I examine some of the critical responses to the Spice Girls.

One of the most significant areas in which third wave feminism has proven to be at its boldest, is in discussions of sexuality. Henry notes that as a general pattern, third wavers have tended to side with the school of thought in second wave feminism which argued that “sexual freedom and pleasure are central to women’s political liberation” (74). This focus on women’s pleasure, and in particular their sexual pleasure is evident throughout much of the media, although Henry specifically links the theme to the attitudes of the *Sex and the City* girls (74-5). However, this is by no means the only contemporary media text to send out a message to my generation that we must seek out sexual satisfaction and pleasure, that we have a right to orgasm, and that we must fulfil ourselves if we cannot find men who can. Women’s magazines are packed full of sex tips – as they probably always have been – only now the sex tips are as likely to be how to make sure you (the woman) are enjoying yourself as they are to be about giving your man pleasure. Vibrators, actually made acceptable and brought into mainstream consciousness by *Sex and the City*, are now featured in the mildest of women’s weeklies, and discussed on daytime television. In terms of the role *Sex and the City* had to play in the privileging of female pleasure in intercourse, Henry sees its role as enormously important.

In its insistence on female orgasm as fundamental right and essential part of sex, *Sex and the City* challenged dominant media images of heterosexuality, such as pornographic ones, in which female orgasm is secondary to male pleasure.  
(Henry, 2004: 76)



Henry also notes the importance of the vibrator and the clitoris, along with cunnilingus in third wave texts in general, and *Sex and the City* in particular. For Henry, cunnilingus represents active female sexual power, and the clitoris female potency. These two signifiers are ever-present in *Sex and the City*, instructing third wavers that they are in control of their own sexual destinies now, and as the character Miranda demonstrates in one particular episode (They Shoot Single People Don't They 2:4), if a man cannot pleasure a woman sexually then he is not worth holding onto: "she ultimately breaks up with him because he cannot make her come" (77). The vibrator, Henry observes, is a staple of third wave feminism and its texts (77-8). This focus on the vibrator as a source of female orgasm without the need for male intervention is seen by Henry as part of a move towards inscribing heterosexuality with multiple meanings:

By acknowledging the multiple forms that heterosexuality can take and by treating heterosexuality itself as problematic – that is, as something to examine and discuss – *Sex and the City* participates in the redefinition of heterosexuality called for by feminist and queer theorists.  
(Henry, 2004: 78)

Some of these calls to redefine heterosexuality were discussed in the previous chapter in relation to existing literature on theorising heterosexuality outside of enforced binary positions (e.g. Jackson, 1999; Richardson, 2000).

## NEW FEMINISMS?

Henry is far from alone in her considerations of what new generations of women (and feminists) are identifying as their key areas of concern.

Discourses around the turn of the millennium in 2000 and the implications for a post-millennial feminism are growing in theoretical literature. This said, I was surprised not to find more literature dealing with the meaning of feminism in the lives of women of my generation (the third-wavers as Henry would term it). Much of the writing about 'new feminism' seems to deal far more with the implications for women in their 40s and over in negotiating new ways of representing feminism in a changing world (Coward, 1999; Segal, 1999). However, such work is not without value for the purpose of this study, since they still seek to contextualise feminism and women's experiences within a social context that is more up-to-date than accounts that discussed the social context of first and second wave feminisms. In her article *'Do We Need a New Feminism?'* (1999), Coward sets out one of the key differences for feminism in the 1990s/00s as opposed to the 1960s/70s. She says that while women do, of course, suffer injustice in certain areas of life (for example non-equal pay), "there is no longer a coherent picture of male advantage and female disadvantage" (192). Coward also agrees with Henry's notion of women of my generation (now in our twenties) having grown up always with the influence of feminism at work in our lives. This,

Coward states, is tribute to the unbelievable successes that feminism has brought to both men and women:

Feminism has been a dramatically successful social movement. It has utterly changed what women can expect from, or do with, their lives. It has also transformed what men expect from sharing their lives with women and how they will behave towards women. Children growing up now simply take for granted feminism's messages about sexual equality and justice when only thirty years ago, such messages were widely opposed as extremist and threatening to the social order.  
(Coward, 1999: 194)

Coward also discusses the widespread changes in gender equality whereby in the 1990s women are more likely to excel at school than men, less likely to be unemployed, and more likely than ever to earn more money than their partners (198-200). Coward suggests that "older" feminists generally refuse to face up to these facts that reveal a fundamental change in gender relations, instead preferring to see the facts as "sexist scaremongering" (201), and returning their attention to the smaller areas in which women are still disadvantaged (202).

Coward's article offers a vision of modern life for women in which feminism has become increasingly irrelevant. Women fail to see the need to fight for equalities where so many successful advances have been made. Coward acknowledges that there are areas where equality is still lacking such as pay, double moral standards, and the dual burden of home and career (200-202). However, she argues that in the approach to the new millennium, feminism must face up to the changes in contemporary society, realising that

gender is a much more complex issue than it was in the days of second  
wavers:

It [contemporary society] doesn't have simple gender lines. It has many different occasions, practices, lifestyles and styles in which gender is a very significant division but not one which consistently ascribes discrimination to one side of that division  
(Coward, 1999: 205)

It was my aim that through the interviews with the women involved in this project, I might explore how far their own experiences of both feminism and gender equality/inequality back up Coward's vision of modern Britain.

### **'GIRL POWER' – INFLUENCES ON MY GENERATION**

Academic work has included, although only to a limited extent, and even then usually within a negative perspective, a discussion of the impact of the late 1990s version of feminism for young girls and women – 'girl power'. Endorsed by the pop group the Spice Girls, this might seem to some to be a laughably un-academic or insignificant movement to include in a discussion of millennium feminism; I disagree. The Spice Girls phenomenon represented for many girls their first tangible experience of the ideals and impact of feminism in some form, however limited and flawed. 'Girl power' was a call to girls (and women) to assert themselves and their opinions,

achieve their goals, pursue ambition, and never to be submissive towards men. The Spice Girls' first UK single, *Wannabe* contained these telling lyrics:

If you wanna' be my lover, you've gotta' get with my friends.  
Make it last forever - friendship never ends.  
If you wanna' be my lover, you have got to give;  
Taking is too easy. That's the way it is.  
(*Wannabe*, 1996, Virgin Records)

This disarming call to women to put female friendship before relationships, and to demand men do their fair share within a relationship (in whatever context), was an influential part of a whole cultural movement in the late 1990s. In their book, *Girl Power!* (1997), the Spice Girls say that this song reflects the fact that "We're about unity and solidarity between female friends" (1997: 34). With them the Spice Girls brought not only 'girl power', but also the figure of the 'ladette'. They opened the floodgates for a whole new chapter in young women's lives: that of being outlandish, loud, uncouth, and in general absorbing all the worst traits of masculinity and 'ladism'. This moment was signalled in part by the arrival of Channel 4's *The Girlie Show* 1996-7, Luke Campbell) and presenters like Denise Van Outen, described by Whelehan as "ladette par excellence" (2000: 51). Whelehan describes this moment as "mimicry of laddism at its most pointless" (50) and suggests that all the 'ladette' television shows only served to continue to "depict women in relation to men" (51). Alongside endless newspaper articles deriding the 'ladette' for being unladylike, unappealing, and gauche, there

was a sudden surge in reports of a 'crisis in masculinity'. The news was full of stories of boys failing at school and of men feeling depressed and no longer sure of their roles in society (*The Observer*, January 1998 '*Girls are Better than Boys: Official*'). The 'new man' had offered some alternative positions for modern men (they could now help with the house work, say they loved their girlfriends in public, and even wear a sarong if they wished in the style of the icon of the new man movement – David Beckham), however, now they felt the 'ladette' had encroached too far onto their turf.

This is, unfortunately a highly simplified account of a number of extremely complex social shifts and new cultural positions for both men and women. This topic deserves far greater explication than I can offer in this study. It is however worthy of inclusion since these shifts in gender positions, and the associated new roles available to women, form the backdrop against which I and my contemporaries were growing up. The Spice Girls emerged in my late teenage years (I was 17 in 1996 when they first burst onto the UK music scene), but still something of their message and attitude resounded with me despite my being a few years older than their target audience. The Spice Girls rode the crest of the 'girl power' wave for five years before disbanding in 2001, including a watershed year in 1997 when they collectively sacked their male manager, and decided to manage themselves (Whelehan, 2000:39). This was seen as a triumph for women who could finally take control of their personal and professional lives. In *Girl Power!*, the Spice

Girls offer their perspectives on what exactly this new brand of 'feminism' is. They suggest 'girl power' is a broad range of activities and attitudes, ranging from "When you help a guy with his bag" to "When you believe in yourself and control your own life" (1997: 6). They are also quoted as saying "feminism has become a dirty word. 'Girl power' is just a Nineties way of saying it" (1997:48a). The BBC website archive reveals, in an article from 2002 when the phrase 'girl power' was added to the Oxford English dictionary, that the term refers to "a self-reliant attitude among girls and young women manifested in ambition, assertiveness, and individualism" ('Girl Power Goes Mainstream' 17<sup>th</sup> January 2002). In 1998, when two of the five Spice Girls announced their pregnancies, it did not stop the band from continuing their global success. Melanie Brown and Victoria Beckham continued to work during their pregnancies, and refused to hide their pregnant figures under baggy clothing. In their later book, *Forever Spice* (1999), Victoria and Melanie are quoted talking about being working mums. Mel says "I think you can have the best of both worlds – you can definitely go out and work and do your thing as well as being a good mum", while Victoria extols the virtues of breastfeeding (1999). The message was clear: these women were in control of their lives and there was no-one who could stop them. In an article on the BBC news website archive, from 1997 when the Spice Girls were enjoying their peak success, the potential distance is explored between the ideals of 'girl power' and the realities many young women face as they grow up and enter the world of work:

Girl power has put a name to a social phenomenon. A generation of very optimistic young women who expect to be welcomed into the workplace and achieve in both their careers and their relationships. But they are still likely to face some inequalities despite their positive outlook. Many adult women are still talking about breaking through the career glass ceiling ('You've come a long way baby, December 30, 1997)

Without spending too long analysing the fascinating story of the fall from success of the band, who split up in 2001 following the departure of Geri Halliwell in 1998, it is worth noting that the story of 'girl power' is not necessarily an overwhelmingly positive one. For all the energy of the women, and the way in which they brought 'girl power', feminism by another name, to the masses, there is another story. Several members of the band have since revealed, in retrospective accounts of their time in the group, that the pressure they were under, particularly to look physically attractive, led to serious eating disorders (Geri Halliwell in her autobiography, *If Only*, 2000; Melanie Chisholm in an interview with *The Mirror* entitled "My Depression" in 2003; Victoria Beckham in her autobiography, *Learning to Fly*, 2002). Geri Halliwell, once the emblematic figurehead of 'girl power' now represents herself in the media as a very different woman, having appeared in several documentaries in which she reveals herself to be insecure and rather dependent upon the adoration of fans (Whelehan, 2000: 40). Victoria Beckham, an icon in the heyday of the Spice Girls for having a 'perfect' romance with England footballer David Beckham whilst maintaining a lucrative and highly successful career of her own, now cuts a very different figure.



These changes of fortune, and darker sides of fame aside, it is impossible to deny the significance of the discourse around 'girl power'. This was a time when women believed there was no need to be passive, that they could compete on an equal footing with men in the workplace, and that aspirations to be a mother and a wife did not have to come at the expense of career success. It is for these reasons that I am surprised at the relative lack of discussion of the impact of this cultural phenomenon on the attitudes and feminism of women of my age. Perhaps this is partly because my generation is only just beginning to become a generation of academics who can now write about these impacts. Whelehan does consider the role that women of my generation will play in determining the degree to which debates around 'girl power' and 'ladettes' have impacted in any way upon us. Speaking of women who were teenagers during the Nineties, she writes:

Until these young women enter the world of work or of higher education it is difficult to know whether the rhetoric of choice, control, and empowerment will have any lasting transformative effect  
(Whelehan, 2000: 52)

That impact still remains to be seen, but at least the discussion can be encouraged by works such as this. Whelehan's comments aside, I am surprised if it is the case that the Spice Girls have been denied a place in the considerations of 'new feminism' simply because they were not relevant to one age group of women. Surely feminist concerns ought to span generations of women as we look for commonality, not difference? I think it

rather has to do with the way in which feminism often treats popular culture, as something of 'low' value, and something that all too often participates in the perpetuation of stereotypes and the denigration of women. Again, Whelehan tackles this subject well. She talks of a "marked schizophrenia in the way feminists have viewed female successes in popular culture" (44). She suggests that feminists feel on the one hand that women who achieve success in often male-dominated spheres such as music and entertainment should be celebrated. However, on the other hand, feel uncomfortable with the attendant "twin requisites of glamour and bodily sexual allure" (44). Perhaps this explains something of the reticence for the Spice Girls to be given a place in third wave history. Yet, Madonna is frequently discussed in a positive light by feminists who see her as something of a post-feminist icon (e.g. Brooks, 1997; Young, 1988). This suggests that Whelehan's observations, although useful, about the discomfort of many feminists with female popular cultural icons, is not the whole picture when it comes to the Spice Girls.

The small body of writing about the Spice Girls suggests that there are other reasons why they have been dismissed as not having any real relevance to feminism. Several texts reveal unease with the perceived individualistic nature of 'girl power' as a feminist manifesto (e.g. Gillis and Munford, 2004 and Whelehan, 2000). Gillis and Munford state that 'girl power' was not only a "popular philosophy based on the virtues of Thatcherism", but that

additionally was criticised by feminists for “lacking political strategy” (173). Greer has said that despite the rhetoric of independence suggested in the language of the songs and words of the members of the Spice Girls in interviews, ‘girl power’ was really dependent upon male attention (2000: 407). Both Whelehan and Gillis and Munford offer more thorough examinations of the Spice Girls phenomenon, and debate both the arguments for and against their brand of ‘girl power’ being interpreted as a serious moment in third wave feminism. Gillis and Munford, who are happy to discuss the Spice Girls in similar terms as both Courtney Love and Madonna acknowledge there are problems with the message of ‘girl power’. They note that the women were constructed into the five spice personalities that they see as “patriarchy-friendly facets of femininity” (2004: 174). They also reflect upon the criticisms of second wave feminists to the lack of political message and individualistic message (174-5). However, they argue that given the young audience the Spice Girls were aimed at, they did offer some very positive feminist messages. The Spice Girls gave a positive portrayal of female support and friendship, offered a range of versions of femininity to identify with, a focus on female empowerment, and enabled a surge of other women-only groups into mainstream pop (174). They also seize upon the very concept of ‘girl power’ itself, saying that “the Spice Girls functioned as an antidote to conventional paradigms of femininity by providing a vocabulary which yoked together such previously divergent terms as ‘girl’ and ‘power’” (174). Finally, Gillis and Munford offer the Spice Girls

as a third wave movement within pop music which, unlike other girl bands of the time (Riot Grrrls and the Girlies) was an example of unification between 'waves' of feminism, rather than an antagonistic force. Drawing upon the Spice Girls' single *Mama* (1997), as a celebration of the mother-daughter relationship, Gillis and Munford posit the Spice Girls as a more positive representation than that of the "rebellious daughters" of second wave feminism presented by other third wave groups (176). Whelehan's assessment of 'girl power', although ultimately less favourable, also offers a well-balanced discussion. She sees the Spice Girls as complex, offering "a typically thorny problem for contemporary feminists" (2000:38). On the positive side, Whelehan notes that the Spice Girls did, to a degree, step beyond the world of pop music, becoming "newsworthy ambassadors of 'Cool Britannia' and as post-feminist icons up there with Madonna" (38). Whelehan sees 'girl power' as a potentially liberating message, and highlights the sacking of their manager by the girls as a "more concrete demonstration of 'girl power'" (39). On a less positive note, she notes that the Spice Girls' experience of fame, along with that of other all-female groups, suggest that women are still largely only successful as singers rather than musicians, and must conform to some notion of 'glamour' to succeed (41). Furthermore, Whelehan offers a critique of the Spice Girls' message, particularly as expressed in their marketing materials such as books and magazines. Here she criticises the homogeneity encouraged in their fans through imitation, and the degree to which that imitation relies upon

unhealthy body image ideals (49). Whelehan's ultimate criticism, not just of the Spice Girls, but of the whole 1990s 'ladette' movement, is that the only visible effects currently of these movements are "a reassertion of traditional models of femininity, with younger and younger girls showing more and more of their prepubescent flesh decorated by fake tattoos" (52). This ultimately reflects her main argument about 'girl power' and the relationship between the movement and the media. Whelehan discusses the way in which the media utilise the privileged few women like the Spice Girls or Madonna who have success, fortune and achieve high ambition, to suggest that all women have 'arrived'. For Whelehan, this is a deflection from the real issue of how far most women still have to go in terms of equality and opportunities, and she sees it is classic "patriarchal recuperation" (54). Whilst on the one hand, Whelehan explains, in 1998 the government's Women's Unit said that the Spice Girls could provide positive feminist models for young women, meanwhile the press were busy highlighting with delight the rumoured divisions in the band, and marital problems amongst some of the members (55). For Whelehan, this reflects the press' "implicit suggestion that female empowerment and marital bliss might somehow be incompatible" (55). Ultimately she criticises 'girl power' for lacking political bite, but reflects that perhaps this is what made the Spice Girls so successful: "girl power might indirectly offer some girls the will to pursue their dreams, but it is not a political interpretation of feminism which is why the media love it" (55).

As I have shown, there are complex arguments to be made about the value we can place on certain phenomena, such as the Spice Girls, as third wave texts. For me, the Spice Girls played a role in the patchwork of feminism that made up my own life experiences, and I observed a message being passed onto my peers that they would not have otherwise had access to. 'Girl power' might, at best, be seen as feminism-light, but many teenage girls do not have access to feminism in any other form. It is this patchwork of feminism that I hope this project begins to explore, both in my own life, and in the lives of the women I interviewed. This project uncovers a real variety of influences: both those considered to be of 'value' and those that are simply valuable to us.

## **PERSONAL JOURNEYS AND TIMEFRAMES: CONCLUDING THE RESEARCH DESIGN**

The interviews I conducted for this project all occurred within the period between September and December 2005. The final email questions about heterosexuality, feminism, and womanhood were sent out, and answers received in October 2006. The biographical information provided about the interviewees (see Appendix 7) such as age, number of children, and marital status relate to the moment in time of the interviews themselves. Naturally the women's lives have changed in the intervening eighteen months, and

those changes I am aware of are included in the details provided in Appendix 7. Being auto-ethnographic in nature, this thesis reflects the changes in my own journey over the three years it took to complete. As I have indicated earlier in this chapter, this project was very organic in its origins and development, and the extracts from my own research diaries track some of that progress as well as the decisions involved. Research, such as this project, that deals with real people and their lives and experiences carries with it a heavy weight of responsibility in representing those people with care and fairness. In the next four analysis chapters, in which I examine in detail the responses to both the interviews and the email questions, I hope to present the views of the women I spoke to as honestly as possible. In the next chapter in particular ('Living and reading as a Heterosexual Woman'), I discuss some of those complexities in greater detail as well as offering a view of cinema and its representations of heterosexual women, men, and the relationships between them.