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What is This?

Celia KITZINGER and Deborah POWELL

Engendering Infidelity: Essentialist and Social Constructionist Readings of a Story Completion Task

This study has two main aims: (a) to explore young men's and women's representations of 'unfaithful' heterosexual relationships; and (b) in so doing to explore the theoretical and methodological implications of story completion as a research tool. One hundred and sixteen student subjects (seventy-two females and forty-four males) were given a story completion exercise, featuring a presumably unfaithful heterosexual partner — approximately half with a same-sex and half with an other-sex protagonist. Content analysis indicated that male subjects tended to sexualize and female subjects to romanticize the cue relationship. Males described the relationship as casual and sexually-focused, and minimized the emotional impact of infidelity, especially on the same-sex protagonist, who was most often described as reacting with indifference. Female subjects described the cue relationship as mutually loving and trusting and emphasized the emotionally devastating impact of infidelity for both same- and other-sex protagonists. Physically violent actions were more common in stories written by men. The findings are discussed in relation to feminist research on sex differences and sexuality and the implications of using story completion within essentialist and social constructionist perspectives are explored.

Heterosexual relationships occupy contested ground in feminist theory, having been identified as a key site both of women's oppression and of women's desire (Jeffreys, 1990; Segal, 1994; Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 1993). Research on young people's heterosexual relationships has drawn attention not only to the physical and emotional vulnerability of young women, but also to the neediness and vulnerability of young men (e.g. Holland et al., 1993). This study used story completion to explore an aspect of heterosexual relationships which often serves to expose emotional vulnerability — the realization of sexual infidelity by a partner.

The gendered power relations within which heterosexual relationships are lodged mean that, as Wetherell (1995, in press) points out, 'women are supposed

to do the romance in relationships and men are supposed to do the sex'. A number of investigators have confirmed that young women, more than young men, report being in love as the main reason for being sexually active (e.g. Cassell, 1984; Zelnick and Shah, 1983). According to Moore and Rosenthal (1993: 95):

> Young men frequently interpret their initial sexual experiences as learning and experimentation, and as contributing to their sense of self-definition, rather than as a way to become emotionally close to another ... Young women, on the other hand, usually assume that commitment will accompany physical intimacy, that sex and love automatically go together ... These divergent perceptions are likely to give rise to frustration, confusion and hurt ...

The very capacity for sexual arousal among young adolescent women may be bound up with understanding this sensation as love: through labelling their experience as 'love', an act which might otherwise be characteristic of a 'slag' is transformed into something 'beautiful' and 'pleasurable' (Jackson, 1982; Lees, 1986).

One result of young women's construction of sexual relationships as coterminous with love is that young women are more likely to define their sexual encounters as occurring with a 'regular' or 'steady' partner, while their male partners are more likely to regard these same encounters as 'casual' (Rosenthal et al., 1990). Similarly, studies invariably show that the huge majority of young women expect themselves and their partners to be sexually monogamous: in a survey of about 2000 adolescents, 98 percent of young women compared with only 75 percent of young men expected to be monogamous (although 86 percent, of males expected their partner to be). In response to the question 'What would you do if your partner was unfaithful?', the majority of both sexes replied that they would either 'talk it over' or 'get angry' but 15 percent of girls responded passively, saying they would 'do nothing' and a similar percentage of boys offered 'aggressive' or 'disturbingly vengeful' responses (e.g. 'Beat the shit out of them'; 'Beat her up because she was a fucking slut'). The authors conclude that 'it is clear that the meaning of fidelity in steady relationships differs for adolescent girls and boys'.

The meanings attached to monogamy and infidelity also seem to be different for adult men and women, with Hite's (1981) finding that most married men in the USA had sex outside their marriages, unknown to their wives, while at the same time expressing very negative feelings about the possibility of their wives' involvement in extra-marital affairs. As Neu (1980) points out, sexuality provides a central arena for jealous feelings and behaviours and an understanding of jealousy has been a key concern in the study of close and romantic relationships (e.g. Buunk, 1991; Mathes et al., 1985; Mathes, 1986). Although it has been suggested that young women 'police monogamy' as an alternative strategy to condom use in HIV/AIDS protection (Thomson and Holland, 1994), it is typically men who are seen as the more possessive and jealous sex, scoring more highly on the Interpersonal Jealousy Scale (Mathes, 1991), this supposedly rooted in 'evolutionary biological' reasons (Barash, cited in Symons, 1987). Young men's

possessiveness of their girlfriends has been described by Larkin and Popaleni (1994), who document the surveillance tactics used by young men to monitor their girlfriends' behaviour, activities and access to other friends — these included being spied on through windows, having their diaries, address books and mail read without permission, being telephoned countless times to verify their whereabouts and being visited unexpectedly at different events or in different places:

> I met this woman R ... she was a wonderful woman. I used to babysit for her, occasionally. But K would phone seventeen times while I was babysitting. He would look in the windows when I was there with the kids because he thought I was having an affair with R. He just thought I was having affairs with everyone. He was possessive ... more than I can even describe (quoted in Larkin and Popaleni, 1994: 221).

Jealousy is widely described in the psychological literature as deriving from insecurity and fear of loss. According to Neu (1980) 'at the center of jealousy is the desire to be desired or for affection, the need to be loved'. Much of the literature on men and masculinity suggests that young men are vulnerable in heterosexual relationships because negotiating sexual encounters can engage their emotions, connect them to their need for affection and render visible their dependence on women (Seidler, 1989).

> Successful masculinity puts them under pressure to conceal the extent of their vulnerability through caring, dependency, loving and any other characteristic of nurturing or effeminacy. A man laid low by love can be dependent, hurt, dismissed, rejected; he is a man at risk as a man (Holland et al., 1993).

According to Holland et al. (1993: 3), young men's strategies for defending themselves against vulnerability have the effect (if not the intention) of subordinating young women: 'becoming successfully masculine pressures young men into sexual strategies which are also mechanisms for subordinating women'.

This study set out to investigate some of the dimensions of young men's and young women's representations of infidelity in heterosexual relationships and, in so doing, to explore the use of a particular method, the story completion task. This method was used in one of 'psychology of women's' classic studies (Horner, 1972) but since Horner's findings have generally fallen into disfavour (at least in academic feminist contexts) her method is now rarely adopted in feminist research. One purpose of the research reported here was to explore the possible uses of story completion for feminist psychologists today This article is unusual, then, in foregrounding its method as more than merely a vehicle for the collection and promulgation of the results: here story completion is topic as well as method and the article is 'about' story completion as much as it is 'about' young people's representations of infidelity in heterosexual relationships.

The majority of the studies cited earlier, like most in this area, rely on *direct* self-report measures (interviews, questionnaires, diaries), in which people are

asked to report directly about their experiences, beliefs, attitude and behaviours. An alternative approach is to attempt to solicit these *indirectly* and in more or less 'disguised' ways, through projective techniques such as the Thematic Apperception Test, the use of inkblots (the earliest use of which is attributed to Stella Sharp, more than 20 years before Rorschach, cf. Rabin, 1981), Draw a Person and sentence or story completion methods (Rabin and Zlotogorski, 1981). Projective techniques are advocated when the researcher suspects the existence of barriers to direct self-report: these might include the 'barrier of awareness' (people's lack of awareness of their own motives and attitudes) and the 'barrier of admissibility' (people's difficulty in admitting certain feelings). Projective techniques, by providing ambiguous stimulus material, are supposed to create conditions under which the needs of the perceiver influence what is perceived, and people ascribe their own motivations, feelings and behaviours to other persons in the stimulus material, externalizing their own anxieties, concerns and actions through fantasy responses:

> A projective technique is an instrument that is considered especially sensitive to covert or unconscious aspects of behaviour, it permits or encourages a wide variety of subject responses, is highly multi-dimensional and it evokes unusually rich and profuse response data with a minimum of subject awareness concerning the purpose of the test (Lindzey, 1961: 45).

Derided by psychometrically oriented psychologists as methodologically unmanageable and 'sloppy' (cf. Rabin, 1981: 16) and omitted from many contemporary feminist and feminist-friendly research methods texts (e.g. Davidson and Layder, 1994; Denzin and Lincoln, 1994; Reinharz, 1992) projective tests were met with enthusiasm in the 1940s and 1950s in part as 'a revolt against the traditional academic and arid psychology' of the time, with its 'scientific' pretensions (Rabin, 1981).

In her widely cited study on 'fear of success', Matina Horner (1972) gave undergraduate students the opening sentence of a story to complete. Women were administered the following cue: 'After first term finals, Anne finds herself at the top of her medical school class.' For the men, the verbal lead was the same except that the cue character's name was given as 'John' and 'her' was changed to 'his'. On the basis of the resulting stories, Horner argued that women have a 'motive to avoid success'. According to Horner:

> In response to the successful male cue, more than 90 percent of the men in the study showed strong positive feelings, indicated increased striving, confidence in the future and a belief that this success would be instrumental to fulfilling other goals — such as providing a secure and happy home for some girl ... On the other hand, in response to the successful female cue 65 percent of the girls [sic] were disconcerted, troubled or confused by the cue. Unusual excellence in women was clearly associated for them with the loss of femininity, social rejection, personal or social destruction, or some combination of the above. Their responses were filled with negative consequences and affect (Horner, 1972: 162).

Stories written by young women and cited by Horner to illustrate her point include one in which Anne deliberately lowers her academic standing the next term and helps her boyfriend to improve, then marries him, drops out of medical school and raises their children; another in which Anne is terrified of becoming a lesbian; and a third in which she is physically beaten and maimed for life by her jealous classmates.

Matina Horner's work was enormously influential, generated over 200 other studies and stimulated a great deal of critical attention and discussion of her work, much of which draws attention to various problems of method and interpretation. For example, Horner's cue sentence has been criticized as being too limiting and specific: research using much vaguer cues ('After much work, Joe/Judy has finally gotten what he/she wanted' (Tresemer, 1974); 'John/Anne has succeeded ...', (Gravenkemper cited in Paludi, 1984)) does not replicate Horner's findings. Most importantly, in terms of the current research, Horner accepted the view, advanced in psychoanalytic writings, that motives are developed early in childhood and become relatively stable attributes of personality, highly resistant to change. Monahan et al. (1974) and Solomon (1975), however, demonstrated that a cultural interpretation is preferable to an intrapsychic one: their research designs crossed subject and task factors (half the male and half the female subjects wrote stories in response to a cue involving a successful woman; the other half of both sexes wrote stories to a cue involving a successful man). Results from both these studies indicate that both male and female subjects are more likely to project 'fear of success' imagery onto the successful woman than onto the man, suggesting a cultural explanation: 'the stereotypes surrounding women's achievements are negative ones, learned and accepted by both sexes' (Monahan et al., 1974). Condry and Dyer (1976: 73) similarly challenge Horner's 'motivational' interpretation of her findings, arguing that 'research evidence to date suggests that the extent to which a woman will "retire" from competition may be explained by anticipated male punitiveness to female success in these circumstances'. They conclude 'in short, we can hardly use a "motive possessed by women" to explain away the inequities of society' (Condry and Dyer, 1976: 76).

It is clear both from the origins of projective methods in psychoanalysis and from the writings of feminists and other researchers who use projective methods — and from that of their critics — that story completion is generally understood and interpreted in an 'essentialist' way — that is, as revealing 'real' 'underlying' personality differences, 'motives' and 'unconscious' desires in subjects. Indeed, it is often because projective methods are supposed to be *better* at getting at what people 'really' think that they are recommended. It is supposed that they penetrate behind the layers of defences and denials: 'in unconstrained response to sentence beginnings, the subject inadvertently reveals his [sic] true self' (Rhode, 1947: 170). There is, however, an alternative position. Instead of trying to use the story-completion task to uncover 'true selves' or essential personality characteristics, researchers can instead interpret these stories as reflecting contemporary dis-

courses upon which subjects draw in making sense of experience. In other words, it might be possible to use what is conventionally viewed as a psychoanalytic and 'essentialist' method within a social constructionist framework.

Most qualitative methods are open either to social constructionist or to essentialist interpretations: data from interviews, observation and case studies have all been used within both paradigms (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). The demise of the story completion method (especially among feminist psychologists) has resulted partly from critiques of Horner's original study as 'unscientific' and partly from feminist critiques (from both essentialists and social constructionists) of the psychoanalytic — especially Freudian — theories and practices, with which projective methods are associated. Now that feminists (along with other social constructionists, postmodernists and 'crisis' psychologists) have destabilized the positivist notion of 'science' and now that we have developed clear alternative theoretical frameworks within which to interpret our data, it may be time to cut story-completion free from its psychoanalytic moorings and to see what we can do with it in the context of feminist social constructionist research.

Media studies researchers have used techniques not dissimilar to story completion in investigating audience understandings of the British miners' strike (Philo, 1990) and of AIDS media messages (Kitzinger, J., 1990). The 'News Game' involves showing audience groups a set of pictures relevant to the topic under investigation (e.g. still photographs from television news and documentary reports on AIDS) and asking them to play the role of journalist in producing a related story. Analysis of these texts (and of discussions between subjects in the course of preparing them) is supposed to 'allow us to explore the possible influences of the media on people's understandings' (Kitzinger, J., 1990: 323). It is striking that, although this technique shares features in common with both the story completion task and, more obviously still, with the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT), the resulting data are read rather differently. In a media study of AIDS, stories generated by an image of a person looking down a microscope are read as data which indicate 'the ways in which the media may "frame" people's thinking on AIDS' (Kitzinger, J., 1990: 334). By contrast, within a psychological study of sex differences in human motivation, stories generated by an image of a person handling test tubes (a standard TAT picture) are read as data which reveal 'perceptions of competitive achievement' (Pollak and Gilligan, 1982: 161). Thus, very similar methodological approaches are interpreted in different ways: the media study seeks to locate what people say in relation to the media, the psychological study seeks to locate what people say in relation to their psychologies. These differing assumptions should serve, at the very least, to relativize each other: how can researchers warrant such different readings of parallel data?

Conceding that *both* media influences and individual psychologies contribute to subjects' stories (and the authors of both studies would almost certainly be willing to make such a concession) does not obliterate either the difference in focus, or — most importantly for the current research — the underlying

essentialism of both approaches. Despite the obvious differences in the studies cited earlier, they are nonetheless both ways of 'doing' essentialism. Whether the 'cause' of subjects' stories is located in media images or in motivational drives, the interpretation of these stories as indicative of something essentially 'inside' the person's head (their 'fear of intimacy' or their 'understanding' of AIDS) locates both studies within an essentials paradigm. Questions like 'What do people think?' and the search for 'not just *what* people know but *how* and *why* they know it' (Kitzinger, J., 1990: 321, emphases in original) are essentialist questions which assume something lying 'behind' the stories — some underlying 'understandings' or 'fears' which can be inferred from the stories told. From a social constructionist (or discourse analytic) position this move 'behind' the story is illegitimate and cannot be warranted: there is only the text.

A social constructionist framework challenges taken-for-granted categories — including the 'individual' and the 'self' and draws attention to the constructed nature of sexuality and emotions, including romantic love and sexual jealousy (see Kitzinger, 1987 and 1995 for further discussion of social constructionism). A social constructionist reading of story completions would involve rejecting the notion that this method gives the researcher privileged access into people's 'real' feelings or understandings, in favour of the recognition that, as Jaggar (1989: 148) puts it, 'we have no access either to our own emotions or to those of others, independent of or unmediated by the discourse of our culture'. People make sense of feelings and relationships through the discourses around love and sex which pre-exist us as individuals and which are continually recycled in the love songs and love stories of Western literature and contemporary media so that 'those who feel themselves to be "in love" have a wealth of novels, plays, movies and songs on which to draw to make sense of and describe their passions' (Jackson, 1993: 212). As media analysts have pointed out, themes of betrayal and jealousy, appalling revenges wreaked by broken hearted lovers and dreadful tragedies resulting from false accusations, are common to many genres, from classic literature to romantic fiction; from comics to Shakespearean drama, from classical opera to popular music; these stories are produced and reproduced by the social actors whose experience such stories serve to construct. From a social constructionist perspective, then, it is not that people's stories of love and betrayal reveal their underlying psychological states (independent of media representations); nor that such stories reveal the influence of media representations (independent of individual psychological states); nor that such stories are some (potentially specifiable) combination of individual psychologies and media influence. Rather, the construction of psychological and media representations (and of the relationship between them) are all discursive achievements.

This study illustrates the use of the story-completion method and aims to explore and assess both essentials and constructionist 'readings' of data generated in response to a cue relating to sexual infidelity.

METHOD

The subjects were 44 males (mean age 22:3) and 72 females (mean age 21:10), drawn from the student population of a UK university, who participated in the research as part of a social sciences course on research methods. University students are typically used as research subjects for convenience but are particularly appropriate to the current research because, as predominantly single young adults, most of them may be assumed to be highly engaged in issues of dating and (in)fidelity in their own lives. Additionally, in terms of the method employed here, they are fairly literate, reasonably fluent writers, accustomed to the request that they express ideas on paper. They were assured of anonymity and, although the entire class was require to complete the story-completion exercise as part of their practical work, completed stories were handed in at the end of the class only by those students who consented to their story completions being used for research purposes.

Subjects were given one of two versions of a story-completion exercise:

Version A: 'John and Claire have been going out for over a year. Then John realizes that Claire is seeing someone else ...' (i.e. the implication is that *Claire* is unfaithful).

Version B: 'Claire and John have been going out for over a year. Then Claire realizes that John is seeing someone else ...' (i.e. the implication is that *John* is unfaithful).

The deliberate ambiguity of the cue story — 'seeing' leaves the precise nature of the relationship ambiguous and 'someone else' leaves the sex of the other person unspecified — is in accordance with Tresemer's (1974) recommendations for a return to the traditional ambiguity characteristic of projective tests. The use of third person cues is as recommended for non-clinical populations, who tend to reveal more socially undesirable information for these than for first-person cues (Getzels cited in Rabin and Zlotogorski, 1981). Unlike Horner's initial study, this research design crossed subject and task factors: Version A was completed by 20 males and 37 females; Version B by 24 males and 35 females.

Although 'objective' scoring systems have been developed for the analysis of completion tasks, these were inappropriate to the current research because they presuppose essentialist theoretical substrates. For example, the sentence-completion task is employed by Loevinger et al. (1970) to evaluate levels of ego development, by Rotter and Rafferty (1950) to derive an overall adjustment score and by Rhode (1947) to determine an individual's dynamic functioning. Such studies assume the prior existence of (and, indeed, reify) constructs such as 'the ego' and 'adjustment'. The intention here was to treat the story-completion data in much the same way as one might treat interview, focus group or diary data within a fairly open-ended qualitative research study and, consequently, the resulting data were subjected to thematic content analysis. Both authors read through all the stories independently and then jointly generated coding categories which might enable us to address the similarities and differences between those cue

stories in which Claire is the unfaithful partner and those in which John is the unfaithful partner, and between stories written by men and those written by women. Data were then independently coded, with a high level of agreement between coders; the few disagreements were resolved by discussion.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results are discussed in relation to: (1) depictions of the cue relationship; (2) accounts offered to explain the reasons for one partner's infidelity; and (3) descriptions of the injured party's reactions to his/her partner's infidelity. The findings will be related to the (mostly, but not exclusively, essentialist) literature in this area as we present each in turn, but further discussion of the differences between essentialist and social constructionist readings of these results will be postponed until the concluding section of the article.

The Cue Relationship

The vast majority of stories produced in response to the cues provided in both versions (A and B) were stories about an unfaithful partner. The phrase 'going out for over a year' (the only description provided of John and Claire's relationship) was interpreted by 100 percent of the subjects — both male and female — as implying a sexual involvement between Claire and John — an assumption which is interesting in so far as it can be seen as reflecting a pervasive sexualized reading of heterosexual relationships which is unlikely to have been the *only* interpretation available 40 or 50 years ago. The word 'seeing', however, proved more ambiguous: refusal of the implied cue story-line was a particular feature of those stories implying that Claire was unfaithful (Version A), 10 percent of which (compared with only a single story from Version B) in some way rejected the 'facts' or implications presented. One male subject, apparently overlooking the explicit statement that Claire and John have been 'going out for over a year', asserts that they have 'only been together a week', adding that Claire's infidelity 'doesn't matter as she is a bit of a slag', and in five stories the man with whom John suspects Claire of having an affair turns out to be a relative or friend, rather than a lover: three female subjects present him as 'a long-lost half-brother', 'a supportive friend' and a gay male schoolfriend; two men offer a newly discovered father and 'an innocent friend'.

Similar refusals of the cue story are evident in Horner's (1972) data — for example, a story which overlooks the explicit statement that Anne is 'top of her medical school class', asserting instead that Anne is top of her *nursing* class; or another which presents Anne as a code name for a non-existent person created by a group of medical students who take turns taking exams and writing papers for Anne. In keeping with an essentialist tradition, Horner interprets these stories as evidence of 'evasion' or 'denial', commenting that some women showed 'an

inability to accept the information presented in the cue' because of their 'fear of success'. A parallel essentialist interpretation of the findings of the current study would presumably be that a sizable percentage of both men and women 'evade' or 'deny' evidence of a woman's infidelity because of their fears and anxieties about female sexuality. (From a social constructionist perspective, a preferred interpretation might explore the extent to which the culture provides discourses of unfounded male jealousy [e.g. Shakespeare's Othello and Laertes] which offer a socially available 'story line' around which stories of male suspicion and female innocence can be constructed.)

Although male and female subjects did not differ in their pervasive assumption of a sexual relationship between the two protagonists, or in their likelihood of refusing the implied infidelity of either partner, there were, nonetheless, clear differences between males and females in their depictions of the relationship between John and Claire. Men depicted relatively uncommitted and sexually focused relationships, and women depicted a deeply loving and trusting couple. Analysis of the complete data set of 116 stories (Versions A and B combined) showed that only 8 percent of males, compared with 70 percent of females, make any reference to love, trust or honesty in their stories. Instead, stories by male subjects emphasize the casual, provisional and instrumental nature of the relationship:

> They had developed an intense and varied sex life. They used to make love at every opportunity, wherever they were … In the changing rooms, over the kitchen table, behind that rhododendron bush in the woods, in her parents' living room, on the stairs … Then it came to him … He didn't miss Claire, he missed the sex. (M1)

> John was not particularly concerned with phoning and if the truth be known only went home to play football. The fact that Claire was there was an added bonus. (M3)

> John had no real ties with either girl and treats them both as someone who happens to be there at the time. (M5)

> It had so happened that from John's point of view the relationship had only existed so as he could get closer to Claire's sister. (M8)

A very different image of the cue relationship emerged from the female respondents, especially (although not exclusively) in Version A, where Claire is the guilty party. In this condition 80 percent made it clear that John was deeply in love with Claire:

> He was and still is absolutely and totally infatuated with Claire. (F19)

> John loved Claire so much, more than anyone else he had been with. (F28)

> He was stunned above all else. After all the times that they had spent together and on all the occasions that they had told each other how much they loved each other. (F41)

> Their relationship as seen by all their mutual friends as the perfect relationship. John and Claire complimented [sic] each other in all ways. (F38)

Permanence, commitment and marriage were all stressed by female subjects, with virtually no such references from male subjects:

> He thought his and Claire's relationship was a good and monogamous one which was likely to be of long standing. (F39)

> He was devastated because he thought he was the only one for Claire, he had hoped that one day they would get married and have a family. (F36)

> Her own feelings for him are strong and loving and she had hoped that the relationship would progress to something more permanent. (F74)

> Their relationship was a fairy tale romance, the only quarrels being over trivial things, like his nights out with the lads. But overall, Claire was his dream. (F97)

In sum, male and female subjects painted utterly contrasting pictures of a heterosexual relationship of one year's standing. Women tended to romanticize and men to sexualize the relationship. This finding echoes the research of Cassell (1984), Moore and Rosenthal (1993), Rosenthal et al. (1990) and Zelnick and Shah (1983), all of whom have pointed to young women's reliance on the language of love and young men's use of sexual terminology in describing their heterosexual relationships.

Accounting for Infidelity

Given such different portrayals of the cue relationship, it is perhaps not surprising that the reasons offered by male and female subjects in accounting for or explaining infidelity differed substantially. In seeking to explain Claire's infidelity, male subjects often depicted John as questioning his sexual technique or performance:

> 'What is it, is his dick bigger than mine?' (M1)

> What had gone wrong, he wondered. Claire always came, at least that's what she told him and from the noises that she appeared to emit from deep within and the way her body jerked and shook at the point of climax, he had never had any doubts that he didn't [sic] satisfy her sexually. But now he wondered. (M12)

> John is mildly peeved by this [Claire's infidelity] but acknowledges that Claire must have had a reason. He elects to ascertain the reason for Claire's dissatisfaction at his performance or his whatever else. ... He told her to go away and decide why she didn't fancy him. (M9)

By contrast, the reasons offered by female subjects to explain Claire's infidelity are far more complex. Female subjects often came up with quite detailed analyses of what was wrong with the relationship and were likely to offer interpretations of Claire's infidelity which revolved around emotional difficulties in Claire's relationship with John: John doesn't listen to her or pay attention to her, is preoccupied with work, is not the right one for her:

> Claire blames her actions on the lack of intrest [sic] John has shown toward her in recent months. He was always too busy it seemed to spend time with her. If John wasn't working late because there was some sort of 'crisis' at work, he'd have an all important football match. From Claire's point of view, anything, it seemed, so that he didn't have to spend time with her. When John was told this, he was surprised and shocked. He saw his working late as a way of improving their lifestyle and had not realized Claire felt the way she did. 'If only you'd told me,' he said. (F19)

> ... the affair was merely Claire seeking some emotional strength, as John was not very good with emotions and since Claire's mother had died, she had felt confused, hurt and pathetic. (F102)

> You never seem to want to do anything with me anymore ... When I try to talk to you you never listen, you just put it down to my hormones, or it's a woman's thing, I felt alone, insecure, unatractive [sic], and stupid, lately, that's how you make me feel. Robert makes me feel alive, and sexy, and interesting. (F96)

The finding that young women in this study emphasized the *emotional* components of relationships, whereas the young men raised questions about sexual technique is compatible with research which describes men's difficulties in displaying emotional vulnerability (Balswick and Avertt, 1977; Gross, 1978; Lewis, 1978; Segal, 1990; Seidler, 1994). Female subjects' explanation of Claire's infidelity in terms of John's emotional unavailability ('He was always too busy', F19; 'John was not very good with emotions', F102; 'You never listen', F96) echoes research documenting the responsibility assigned to women for 'emotional labour' (Hochschild, 1983). The gender division of emotion is such that many women express unhappiness in heterosexual relationships less as a result of men's persistent unwillingness to perform domestic tasks but rather at men's failure to do the work involved in emotional intimacy (Duncombe and Marsden, 1993). In a study of 60 newly-wed couples, only three months into marriage many wives expressed disappointment with the emotional asymmetry of their relationships: they felt they were the ones who reassured and were understanding and tender to the husbands but their husbands failed to reciprocate by being equally intimate and open in disclosing their emotions (Mansfield

and Collard, 1988). Reporting on their study of 60 married or cohabiting couples, Duncombe and Marsden (1993: 225) comment that 'most of our women respondents felt their male partners were lacking in what might be called "emotional participation" in their relationships'.

This sex difference persists if, instead of comparing male and female stories about Claire's infidelity (i.e. male and female continuations of Version A of the cue story), we compare male and female stories of same-sex infidelity (i.e. female subjects on Version A and male subjects on Version B). While women offered elaborate and detailed explanations to account for same-sex infidelity (Version A), men, by contrast, offered very little by way of explanation for same-sex infidelity (Version B). Of the 24 Version B stories completed by men, only four offer some explanation for John's behaviour; two refer to peer pressure (see below for an example), one explains that Claire is not 'good enough' for John and in the fourth John turns out to be gay. The vast majority of stories by men fail to explain or to justify John's infidelity.

> John felt under pressure from his pals at college — none of them had steady girlfriends and they all did the rounds at pubs and night-clubs. The trouble started when John went out with the boys and got absolutely wrecked. He met this girl, Sarah, went back to her place and slept over. Things developed from there, and John began seeing Sarah regularly during the week and Claire at weekends. John had no problem with this situation and both the girls were none the wiser. (M65)

> John was tall, dark and handsome — a real looker. Claire was rather dull and ordinary and it's not surprising that he strayed. (M61)

Men's failure to offer reasons or explanations for John's infidelity can be interpreted with reference to Shere Hite's (1981: 177) finding that the 'reason' men most often offered to explain their extramarital affairs was 'the male sex drive': the only explanation offered in her research, as in the current study, was that 'a few men mentioned social pressure on them to have affairs —, pressure to be "lusty", to prove masculinity by showing a strong "sex drive" — especially since "all men do it" ' (Hite, 1981: 178).

Writing about other-sex infidelity, men (as we have seen in their stories in response to Version A) depicted John as worrying about his sexual performance. When women wrote about other-sex infidelity (in response to the cue story in Version B), sex was never mentioned: instead, Claire interrogates the nature of the relationship as a whole and castigates herself for being too possessive, too demanding or for failing to give John his freedom:

> What had she done to deserve this? She thought she had done everything he had ever wanted her to. She never put a 'ball and chain' around his neck — he'd had as much freedom as he wanted. But surely this was taking it too far. (F70)

> He may be seeing someone else — but after all, he was still seeing her, so it didn't mean he didn't enjoy her company. The more she thought about it, the more she realized that the relationship had been oppressive to him. (F72)

> Her failings had driven him into the arms of another. (F112)

In sum, female subjects accounted for both same-sex and other-sex infidelity by reflecting upon the emotional quality of the relationship: female infidelity was presented as a result of *lack* of emotional closeness and intimacy and male infidelity as deriving from excessive intimacy. By contrast, male subjects offered very little by way of explanation for same-sex infidelity (peer pressure being the only explanation that cropped up more than once) and agonized over possible sexual shortcomings when considering other-sex infidelity.

Finally, it is worth noting that, in 15 percent of the stories written by male subjects, Claire's new partner is a woman — and that this makes the situation 'even worse':

> She was seeing another man, or even worse, a woman. (M2)

> His initial distress is even further compounded when he finds out that Claire is in fact seeing a woman. (M7)

> Was it my fault? Was it her fault? Was it another man's fault? Or even another woman's? John suddenly felt very insecure ... 'There is no easy way to tell you this, John. I'm sorry, but I love Jane and I'm going to live with her.' (M11)

Two (5.4 percent) of the 37 women also describe Claire as involved in a lesbian relationship and they graphically describe the threat that this poses to John who is 'shocked', 'disturbed' and 'distraught', not simply by the fact of Claire's infidelity but by the additional 'threat to his masculinity' of a woman rival:

> Claire had secretly been romantically involved with one of her friends from work. They had known each other for at least three years, but only recently had they started dating. ... John was shocked that he had lost Claire to another woman as it was something he would never have imagined could occur and it was, to him, quite disturbing. Although Claire was willing to still see John, it was something he could not deal with and, consequently, he told her that they were over. Claire and Julie lived happily every after! The End. (F20)

> At first he feels betrayed, sick to the stomach with the realization that Claire has been seeing someone else. But. ... there's far more to it than that. He feels that somehow his masculinity has been threatened, his male prowess has been damaged beyond belief. For the other person that Claire is now seeing is another woman! [...] He was distraught about the effect it had upon his image. How would he ever be able to face his family and friends now the truth had finally 'come out'. (F37)

There is only one story (written by a male subject) in which the unfaithful John turns out to be gay and the relative frequency of the lesbian theme here (especially from men and especially in the context of their commonly expressed concerns about sexual performance) suggests that lesbianism is experienced as a real threat by some of these male subjects (and is known to be experienced as such by some of the female subjects). (See also the accusation of lesbianism referred to by one of Larkin and Popaleni's [1994] subjects quoted earlier).

Responses to Infidelity

One of the most striking differences between stories written by male and female subjects was in the number and nature of words describing emotions. More than twice as many men as women wrote stories which contain no emotion words at all: only 12 percent of the stories written by women contain no emotion words, compared with over a quarter (26 percent) of the stories written by men. The absence of emotion words in stories written by men was particularly marked in those stories in which John is the wronged party (Version A); here John's emotions are not described at all by 30 percent of men (compared with only 11 percent of women). These findings support existing research which suggests that there are important gender differences in willingness and ability to think and talk in terms of 'love' and 'intimacy' and to make the emotional effort which appears (to many women at least) necessary to sustain close heterosexual relationships (Duncombe and Marsden, 1993).

(i) Responses to Claire's infidelity (Version A). As we have already noted, 10 percent of subjects responded to the cue in such a way as to refuse the implication that Claire was unfaithful. In the remaining stories by male subjects, John's reaction to Claire's infidelity was represented as relative indifference. The majority portray an unmoved John, who quickly dumps and forgets Claire. In these accounts, John's termination of the relationship is accomplished without any description of emotional turmoil or even mild unease: 'No offence, Claire', says the 'John' of one story, 'but you blew it!' (M9). (Note, too, the absence of emotion words attributed to John in the next four extracts.)

> He has to make a decision, does he leave her or try to win her back ... He realized that Claire was too insensitive and ruthless.

> She did not care for him like he did [sic]. It was time to call it a day. John had decided. John and Claire were no more. (M103)

> Claire let John know her feelings for both the men in her life and John realized that this would not be a problem in his relationship with Claire. The main drawback being that John's hoped-for plans for marriage would have to be 'put on hold' for a while. In due course, at various social events, John got to know George quite well, and a 'budding' friendship began. (M104)

> 'Bollox' says John and promptly dumps her. Afterwards, Claire gets run over by an articulated lorry. Such is the price of infidelity!!! (M18, whole story)

> It was the sex he was missing and he soon realized that a good looking lad like him would have no trouble finding that somewhere else ... That night he went down to the local nightclub to get over Claire. (M1)

> John is disappointed rather than hurt that she is not the sweet girl he had taken her for. Without hesitation he decides to confront her and finish the relationship that perhaps should never have started. (M4)

Reflecting on the historical construction of masculinities, Lynne Segal (1990: 108–9) cites Leonard Woolf's description of the way in which 'masculinity' involved concealing the 'real' (vulnerable) self beneath a tough exterior:

> It was the fear of ridicule or disapproval if one revealed one's real thoughts or feelings, and sometimes the fear of revealing one's fears, that prompted one to invent that kind of second-hand version of oneself which might provide for one's original self the safety of a permanent alibi (Woolf, in Segal 1990: 108–9).

When emotion words *are* used by the male subjects, the most common is 'anger' (or a variant such as 'rage', 'enraged', 'furious', 'outraged'): e.g. 'He felt anger, anger that could make him happily murder the both of them in their beds' (M6). Just over a third (36%) of male stories described men (both 'angry' men and men about whom no emotion words are used at all) reacting to Claire's infidelity with violence and aggression: as such, these bear more resemblance to the betrayed and jealous men of stereotype and literature. Anger is, after all, a 'male' emotion according to what has been described as the 'emotional double standard' (Shaver and Hendrick, 1987: 235) whereby anger and aggression are 'masculine' emotions, whereas compassion, empathy, caring and so on are 'feminine' emotions. (Compare also Crawford et al., 1992; Fischer, 1993; Komarovsky, 1974; Shields, 1987.)

> He decided to kill Roger. And Claire, he thought ... He barged his way into the bedroom. He pulled out a double-barrelled shotgun from under his coat and shot Claire and Roger in the head whilst they lay in bed. He then shot her dog and drowned her cat ... They weren't found for 3 days. (M13)

> John was angry. He felt betrayed and let down. All he could think of now was revenge. He rang his best mate up. 'Fancy coming to Ritzy's tonight?' 'Yes Sure, What about Claire?' 'Sod Claire, She's been fucking some bloke on the side. I'm going to have some fun' ... They located a couple of real tarts (short skirts, tits to the fore etc.). After buying them a few Diamond White's, John asked her back to his place. He knew she'd say 'yes'. She had been feeling his cock all night and he had felt her tits and her crotch and she hadn't complained. It was only a matter of time before they would be getting under the sheets. (M17)

> He went to his weekly meeting of the singles club and there he met a lovely girl called Miranda, a quiet, small, loving girl who would do anything for him. She cooked his meals, cleaned his house, satisfied his every sexual need and took care of him in every way. She could not do more for him in any way. John and Miranda were a beautiful couple, a wonder for all to behold. Everybody thought they were the perfect couple. Until one night something stirred within John, a primeval urge. He reached for his recently purchased chainsaw and decided to have some fun. Miranda was found without her head, Claire was found in thousands of pieces and her new boyfriend was cut in half. John then nipped round to Claire's best friend for a fiery night of passion and then got extremely drunk before killing Claire's best friend. For as every man knows, you can't rely on a woman, so drink beer and kill any woman you get close to. (M16)

Female subjects, by contrast, describe John's response to Claire's infidelity in very different terms. Although 'anger' is as likely to be used by females as by males, female subjects were also more likely to describe John as suffering extreme emotional turmoil. Eighty-seven percent used terms like 'devastated', 'mortified' and 'overwhelming shock':

> John is naturally absolutely devastated ... the whole thing had totally shocked him and upset him immensely. (F19)

> Dazed and sickened, John plotted his revenge. Sadness was followed by anger more extreme than ever before. (F24)

> Claire was the most important thing in his life, and her happiness was paramount to him. He was shocked, horrified and desperate. What would he do? (F94)

> How could she, we love each other, what am I going to do? I don't think I can live without her. (F46)

> He started to cry, 'Don't leave me, please don't leave me.' He was desperate, he fell to her legs and grabbed them as he sobbed. (F29)

> Pulling out the weapon, he ran into the lounge and stood in the middle of the floor, trembling and drenched in sweat. His head pulsed and his eyes were glazed, lifting his arm he placed the gun against his forehead and shut his eyes tightly. He placed his finger on the trigger ... (F28)

Despite the existence of considerably more mental distress and anguish on the part of John in stories written by females, violence occupies a much smaller place in these stories than it does in the stories written by males. Only one (F95) gives an account in which John murders Claire and/or her lover and this one ends with John's suicide. In another, Claire (and her lover) die in a car accident under circumstances in which John could have rescued her: 'He just walked away, his revenge having been taken without actually doing anything. He

smiled.' (F97). The word 'revenge' is used (by both men and women) far more frequently when John is the injured party than when Claire is and, as the preceding extracts illustrate, male representations of John's 'revenge' on Claire are often bloody and violent.

Other researchers (e.g. Rosenthal et al., 1990 quoted earlier; Hite, 1981: 185-6) have documented the disturbing frequency of 'aggressive' responses by men asked how they would respond to an unfaithful partner. Another study relevant to this issue and key to psychology of women is Susan Pollak and Carol Gilligan's (1982) study of 'images of violence in thematic apperception test stories'. Instead of a verbal 'cue' for story telling, four pictures from the Thematic Apperception Test were selected, two as representing 'achievement' situations (a man at a desk in a high-rise office building; three women working in a laboratory) and two as representing 'affiliation' situations (a man and a woman sitting on a bench by a river; a man and a woman performing a trapeze act in a circus). Pollak and Gilligan analysed stories written by 50 female and 88 male undergraduates and found that violent imagery was more common from women in response to situations of 'achievement' and from men in response to situations involving 'affiliation'. This indicates, they claimed, that while (as implied by Horner's work) women see danger in situations of competitive achievement and construe danger as resulting from isolation, men see danger in situations of affiliation and construe danger as arising from connection. Although this research, like Horner's, has been subjected to serious criticism (from within an essentialist perspective as well as beyond it, e.g. Benton et al. [1983] who are particularly critical of Pollak and Gilligan's a priori classification of TAT pictures into 'achievement' versus 'affiliation'), its key argument is one that informs Gilligan's (1982) work and that of the Harvard Project on Women's Psychology (see Wilkinson, 1994) more generally.

Many researchers have pointed to the problem of 'the inexpressive male' unable or unwilling to disclose any emotions other than anger. Reared by envied and powerful mothers from whom they must distance themselves if they are to become truly masculine (Chodorow, 1978), men are supposed to be agentic (rather than communal), concerned to maintain boundaries between themselves and others and to insist on their own autonomy. These representations of men and women have entered popular discourse and have become powerful stereotypes in Western culture. Drawing on images of inexpressive males, some female (but no male) subjects provided ironic commentaries on John's anger and violence: beneath the macho posturing, they suggest, is a lost, bewildered, unhappy little boy. One female subject depicts John's reactions to Claire's infidelity in terms that sound remarkably similar to the male subjects' accounts (even down to their preoccupation with sexual technique) — and then contrasts this bravado with his desperate plea for her to stay with him:

> 'Well, l don't care. Plenty more where she came from — that one in the chippy always gave me the eye. It's not as if she was any good any way. NO, back to

> the single life for me. I'd been meaning to finish it anyway I just didn't get round to it. It's not as if its my fault, there's nothing wrong with my technique. many a girls [sic] praised me and said I was the best. Yeah, here's to the late nights and endless women.' The door goes and in walks Claire. 'Oh Claire', he pleads desperately, 'please don't leave. I'll change. I'll do more around the flat. I'll stop in. I'll take you out. I know we can make it work.' (F99)

In a similar contrast between overt male anger and the underlying neediness it conceals, another woman tells a story in which John reacts to Claire's infidelity with the statement that he also had been unfaithful:

> This was obviously a lie, and Claire started to laugh at him ... '1 hate you — get out of my life!', he shouted, smashing an ornament to the floor. Claire looked at him for a while. He started to cry 'Don't leave me please. Please don't leave me', he sobbed ... Claire walked to the door. John still crying whispered, 'I love you' ... (F29)

Stevi Jackson has also pointed the extent to which the idea that men are emotionally illiterate children, unable to deal with complex emotions or to recognize or articulate their own needs for intimacy, has entered popular culture as a social stereotype:

> Women often find men emotionally illiterate precisely because men have not learnt to construct and manipulate romance narratives or wider discourses of emotion. Men are generally aware of the more superficial conventions of romance, but not its more complex aspects. Women may find this annoying and often hurtful, but they also make allowances for it. *Part of the culture of romance consists in women's shared knowledge that men are creatures with emotional disabilities which we can help them overcome, that they have a more emotional side buried under their masculine posturing* ... This shared feminine knowledge is not merely a product of romantic narrative, though it is central to it, it is also bound up with the material realities of gender, the fact that men rely on women, rather than each other, for nurturance (Jackson, 1993: 216, emphasis added).

(ii) Responses to John's Infidelity (Version B). Whereas male subjects described John as reacting either with indifference or with violent anger to *Claire's* infidelity (rarely describing him as suffering pain or grief) they described Claire's reaction to *John's* infidelity primarily in terms of how hurt and miserable she is. Claire is 'overwhelmed with grief ' (M106), suffers 'massive heartbreak' (M108) and when John's infidelity is confirmed she 'merely sat on the cold damp step of the doorway, placed her head in her hands and sobbed' (M106). Female subjects also emphasized Claire's misery and she's very likely to cry in stories by females: she is 'in floods of tears' (F109), 'crying bitterly' (F110), 'she cried her eyes out' (F115), 'her tears flowed uncontrollably' (F116) and 'Claire breaks down into an uncontrollable outburst of tears' (F113). Anger often follows the pain:

> Claire was horrified and felt like being sick ... Claire spent the whole night sit-
> ting in a daze, thinking about the past year of her life and how much John
> meant to her. She felt so cheap because he had been lying to her for goodness
> knows how long. (F111)

> At first she was hurt — very hurt. The betrayal, the deceit, the shame, all these
> feelings swamped her. Everything around her reminded her of their times
> together ... all this time she had believed that he loved her, she had given her-
> self to him alone. All this time he had been seeing someone else, had been
> deceiving her ... Then this hurt turned to anger. Anger at him for causing such
> pain, anger at herself for being such a fool, for being fooled. (F116)

'Revenge' is mentioned with about equal frequency by male and female sub-
jects but the 'revenge' exacted by Claire in the stories written by female subjects
is minor compared with that inflicted upon her by John in the stories written by
the male subjects. In one female subject's story Claire pours beer over John's
head and steals his wallet (F71). In another, she contemplates sleeping with
another man in order to punish John but 'she wasn't the kind to just jump into
bed with anyone, she really had to love him and she really had loved John'
(F116). In yet another female subject's story, Claire decides — after learning of
John's infidelity — to go out more with her female friends: she 'thought that it
might be just revenge' but then discovers that her relationship with John
improves as a result of her gaining an independent life of her own. None of this
remotely compares with the murders, deaths and maimings which male subjects
described John as inflicting upon the unfaithful Claire.

Compared with female subjects, male subjects also imagined *Claire* inflicting
suffering, humiliation and violence upon the unfaithful John. As we have seen,
compared with females, male subjects depict a violent John in Version A (where
Claire is unfaithful) but they also (compared with females) depict a violent Claire
when the situation is reversed (Version B). Although the violence in Version B is
less pervasive than in Version A, these stories are nevertheless a great deal more
violent than are female subjects' stories in either Version A or B. They also stand
out for their graphic depiction of violence in the context of humiliation. Claire
doesn't simply lash out in anger; she designs and choreographs a violent and
humiliating revenge which is described in detail by the male subjects. The pub-
licity devoted to the Lorena Bobbitt case in the USA (a woman, raped and beaten
by her husband who retaliated by taking a knife to his penis, see Chesler, 1994)
may be reflected in some of the male fantasies about female revenge:

> Claire decides it's time she taught John a lesson. She arranges to meet John at
> the local VCI cinema. After watching the film, she suggests they go for a drink.
> They take a well known shortcut through an alleyway. At the most darkest [sic]
> point, two men jump on John. They strip him naked and using a marker pen
> they write across his body 'lying cheating bastard'. They then chain him to a
> lamp-post in the centre of town. John is left there the whole night until the
> police arrest him for indecent exposure. (M107)

> She goes apeshit and hack's [sic] off his dick while he's asleep with a pair of sissors [sic]. She continues to keep him captive, chained to a wall, while forcing him to engage in oral sex whenever she felt like it. His dick left suspended from the roof infrount [sic] of him to remind him why he's being punished. Claire intends on keeping him a slave for the rest of time. ... (M66, whole story)

Female subjects, by contrast, are more likely to tell stories in which the main feature is not Claire's revenge on John (as punishment for his infidelity) but rather John's regret about his infidelity (because it means he loses Claire):

> He looked up, his eyes glistening with tears. 'I'm sorry', he repeated. His voice echoed with sadness. Claire got up to leave: 'I don't ever want to see you again.' As she left she could hear him calling to her, 'Please don't go, I still love you, it was all a mistake.' But she couldn't stop. He had broken his promise to be faithful for ever. She could never love him again. (F113)

In sum, responses to infidelity were differently depicted by male and female subjects. Male subjects most commonly portrayed John's reaction (Version A) as indifference (with anger in second place) and just over a third of these stories involved physical violence and aggression; Claire's reaction (Version B) is grief and misery, sometimes also accompanied by violent revenge. Female subjects portrayed John's reaction (Version A) as shock and anger but physical violence is a relatively infrequently outcome; Claire's reaction (Version B) is grief and misery and these stories often focus on John's regrets at betraying and/or losing her as a consequence of his infidelity.

CONCLUSION

Despite the methodological distinctiveness of the current study, in a research area dominated by direct self-report measures (questionnaires, interviews and diaries), these findings are, as illustrated earlier, in accordance with much previous research indicating male sexualization and female romanticization of heterosexual relationships. The results of this research, then, are compatible with the existing literature in this area — a literature which spans both essentialist and social constructionist frameworks. We want to end this article with a discussion of how our findings might be read either from an essentialist or from a social constructionist perspective and to illustrate the difference between these.

From an essentialist perspective, these stories could be read as uncovering sex differences in 'understandings', 'beliefs', 'personal needs' or 'underlying motives' with respect to heterosexual relationships. Just as essentialist readings of the work of Horner (1972) and Pollack and Gilligan (1982) treat these findings as claims about psychological differences ('fears', 'motives') between young men and young women, with young men allegedly suffering from 'fear of

intimacy' and young women from 'fear of success', so an essentialist reading of our data would see our findings as illustrating young women's preoccupation with love and romance and young men's preoccupation with sex. Our findings could be said to demonstrate the existence of male emotional illiteracy, men's displacement of emotional concerns onto sexuality, their desperate need to prove their masculinity by sexual conquest and their objectification of, and violent feelings towards, women. By the same token, this reading would see in our findings evidence for young women's apparent lack of autonomous sexual desire, their need to experience and to interpret sexual arousal as love and the extent to which their femininity is related to their sense of themselves as objects of male desire. From an essentialist perspective, then, our findings can be read as claims about psychological differences between young men and young women — with (for the purposes of this article) agnosticism as to whether these alleged differences result from innate personality differences between the sexes, early psychodynamic concerns, sex-role socialization or media influences.

From a social constructionist perspective, by contrast, completion methods can be interpreted as providing exemplars of available 'accounts', 'discourses', 'repertoires' or 'narratives' in the social world. People make sense of feelings and relationships through the discourses around love and sex which pre-exist, and indeed constitute, us as individuals. The stories people write in response to the story-completion task are read by the social constructionist *not* as indicative of underlying 'feelings', 'motives', 'fears', 'anxieties' or 'understandings' but rather as linguistic products which draw on, reflect and contribute to ways of talking about or representing heterosexual relationships:

> Discourse analysis emphatically privileges the linguistic or the social/linguistic over what has conventionally been understood as the psychological; it argues that experience, and thus subjective psychological reality, is constituted through language and the process of representation. It is not the case that representation reflects, and is secondary to, the experience (Wetherell 1995 in press).

One way for the social constructionist to read the findings of the current research, then, is to relate the stories told here to the various narrative genres with which student subjects are likely to be familiar: pornography, romantic fiction, stories in women's magazines and soap operas, the agony columns and the *Oprah Winfrey Show*. Given that male students are much more likely to be familiar with the pornographic genre and female students with the romantic genre (Wilson, 1983), it is perhaps not surprising to find that their stories draw on and reproduce these different genres. As Stevi Jackson points out:

> Boys and men are not encouraged to develop competence in locating themselves within discourses of the emotions. The narratives woven around love and romance are available to both women and men within our culture, but not equally so. Being constituted as feminine involves girls in discourses of feeling and emotion, and more specifically the culture of romance, from which boys are more often excluded or from which they exclude themselves in order to

construct a sense of their own maleness. It is through the idiom of sexual brava-
do and conquest, not the language of romance that masculinity is asserted
(Jackson, 1993: 214).

From a social constructionist perspective, data from story completion repre-
sent neither underlying 'understandings' of media representations, nor uncon-
scious fears and anxieties: rather they represent no more (and no less) than a
selection of 'interpretative repertoires' or 'discourses' (from a discourse analytic
perspective) or 'story-lines', 'plots' or 'genres' (from a narrative perspective).
The task of the researcher is not to dig 'beneath' these stories for underlying
states but to present 'deconstructions' (Parker and Shotter, 1990) or 'thematic
decompositions' (Stenner, 1993) of these stories, illustrating their dependence
upon, and embeddedness within, socially-available discourses (see also
Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 1995 in press). Commenting on his own research on
jealousy talk by both members of a heterosexual couple ('May' and 'Jim'), Paul
Stenner (1993: 131) suggests, from a social constructionist perspective, that the
discourses he presents:

> ... should not be thought of as being *about* the relationship, *reflective* of emo-
> tions or *expressive* of May's or Jim's 'personality', — as if a reality existed
> independently beneath the discourse — but rather as *constructive* of the rela-
> tionship, *productive* of contradictory and non-essential identities and *generative*
> of emotional experience (emphases in original).

Similarly, in the present research, from a social constructionist perspective, male
subjects' tendency to draw on the pornographic genre, while female subjects uti-
lize the romantic genre, should not be attributed to differences in male and
female 'personalities', 'motives' or 'fears', i.e. to psychological differences
between the sexes (however constituted). From a social constructionist perspec-
tive these are intra-psychic phenomena, the very existence of which is a discur-
sive achievement: far from representing realities lying beneath 'mere' discourse,
they are simply another kind of discourse.

Finally, it should be noted that evaluation of the current research is based
upon different criteria depending on whether the reader approaches it from an
essentialist or from a social constructionist perspective. From an essentialist per-
spective issues such as validity of the method, reliability of the scoring, adequa-
cy of the research design, problems of experimenter bias and generalizability are
key concerns. So, for example, essentialist writers have commented favourably
on the use of written accounts as they are supposed to 'minimize interview bias-
es that could affect spoken accounts' (Baumeister et al., 1993) but have worried
about sampling errors, generalization of findings based on students to other
groups, use of exclusively female coders, failure to use anonymous coding pro-
cedures and operational definitions employed (Robbins and Robbins, 1973). By
contrast, one of the key figures in social constructionism, Kenneth Gergen
(1985), has argued that the success of the social constructionist account depends

primarily on the analyst's capacity to invite, compel, stimulate or delight the audience and not on conventional criteria of veracity (see also Guba and Lincoln, 1994: 114).

The advantages of an essentialist reading of the data presented here should be obvious. Such a reading enables one to make claims about important sex differences in understandings of and emotional commitment to heterosexual relationships — claims that may be particularly important given that many young people now report believing that sexual equality exists and that the same standards of sexual behaviour apply equally to young people of both sexes (Roiphe, 1993). These claims can clearly be related to existing research (indeed, our use of an unusual method can be seen as contributing to convergent validity) and our article could be added to the large and growing corpus of 'sex differences' literature (cf. Kitzinger, 1994). The primary *dis*advantage of taking an essentialist perspective lies in the dubious legitimacy involved in locating 'real' sex differences lurking somewhere beneath the stories. How does the researcher discover, on the basis only of the imaginative production offered by the subject, underlying 'understandings' or 'beliefs' — and what causal factors (biology, socialization, media influences) can be offered to explain them? These questions have repeatedly been raised in connection with projective measures and never resolved to most (essentialist) researchers' satisfaction. Claims made about the current data from an essentialist perspective, then, are bold claims but with a shaky foundation.

The advantage of a social constructionist reading of the data presented here is primarily that it bypasses these questions. There are no 'underlying' essences to be routed out beneath the text and hence no causal explanations to be constructed or defended: rather widespread *beliefs* in underlying essences, and causal explanations for them, are themselves 'stories' ripe for deconstruction. Claims made about the current data from a social constructionist perspective, then, sound much more conservative: the claim is only that there are some interesting observations to be made about the stories people write in response to different opening cues, with no subsequent argument (or assumption) that these reflect underlying social or individual 'realities'. Precisely because this claim is less bold, its foundations are firmer and it can more easily be defended.

However, while neatly bypassing these questions of meaning and causation, social constructionist readings leave many researchers dissatisfied precisely because such questions remain important to many people. This dissatisfaction with social constructionist readings is widely represented amongst feminist psychologists, who are concerned about the role of the so-called 'extra-discursive'. Rather than accept that there is 'only' the text, there is a strong tendency among many feminists to seek to locate texts in their interior (psychological) or exterior (social and political) contexts. The 'extra- discursive' realm is intended by some to encompass material and social reality (e.g. social institutions, social practices and social processes such as the sexual division of labour) which constitute 'a social bedrock which grounds romantic narratives' (Wetherell, 1995, in press). Others use the term 'extra-discursive' to refer to psychodynamic features:

Wendy Hollway (1995a: 127; see also 1995b), for example, now considers that 'my original work overemphasized the discursive' and she recommends the use of psychoanalytic notions which deal with emotional life, with anxiety and the unconscious, to elucidate whether and how particular discursive positions are taken up. Appeals to the extra-discursive, whether social or psychological, represent moves away from a 'strong' social constructionist (Gergen, 1985) or discursive (Edwards and Potter, 1992) position, within which terms such as 'text' or 'discourse' are intended to incorporate social or psychic 'realities'.

    Feminist psychologists have made good use of both essentialist and social constructionist paradigms in conducting and interpreting research. This observation does not mean, however, that it is possible to 'build bridges between' or to 'unite' the two approaches, as is commonly proposed (cf. Kitzinger, 1995). As the earlier 'readings' of the data presented here should illustrate, the two paradigms (even with the same data set) are incommensurable. The argument for incommensurability, however, 'works' only from within a social constructionist position, within which it is not possible to adjudicate between essentialism and social constructionism, because this debate itself is socially constructed. We have argued elsewhere (Kitzinger, 1995; Kitzinger and Wilkinson, 1995) that the essentialist–social constructionist debate is not resolvable with reference to empirical fact because data cannot settle questions of epistemology. The contribution made by this article is not to argue for one position over the other, but rather to demonstrate the use of the story-completion task in exploring young people's representations of heterosexual relationships and to illustrate the costs and benefits associated with essentialist and social constructionist readings of the same data.

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