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For June, Dawn, Charmagne and Dot,
with thanks – Julia O'Connell Davidson

Methods, Sex and Madness

Julia O'Connell Davidson and
Derek Layder

London and New York

Chapter 1

Social research and everyday life

> Germain Garnier, christened Marie . . . was a well-built young man with a thick red beard, who, until the age of fifteen . . . had lived and dressed like a girl, showing 'no mark of masculinity'. Then once, in the heat of puberty, the girl jumped across a ditch while chasing pigs through a wheatfield: 'at that very moment the genitalia and the male rod came to be developed in him, having ruptured the ligaments by which they had been held enclosed'. Marie, soon to be Marie no longer, hastened home to her/his mother, who consulted physicians and surgeons, all of whom assured the somewhat shaken woman that her daughter had become her son.
>
> (Laqueur 1990: 127)

This story, told in the sixteenth century, reflected the centuries old belief that 'women had the same genitals as men except that . . . "theirs are inside the body and not outside it" ' (Laqueur 1990: 4). If girls were too boisterous, their vagina, uterus and ovaries, which were imagined as an interior penis, scrotum and testicles, might simply fall out, transforming them into males. In *Making Sex*, Laqueur shows how for thousands of years it was common-sense knowledge that there was but one sex, that the female body was an inverted male body. Since around the eighteenth century, however, common sense has postulated the existence of two 'opposite' sexes, female and male, and that the difference between the two is biologically defined, fixed and immutable. Until the eighteenth or nineteenth century, it was also common-sense knowledge that women could not conceive unless they experienced orgasm during sexual intercourse (how else could they release the seed from their inverted testicles?), many people also believed that venereal disease could be cured by sexual contact with an uncontaminated partner – an idea which was sometimes offered as a defence by men who were on trial for the

rape of young children (Simpson 1987). Common-sense knowledge about madness has also changed over the centuries. Gods, demons and devils, rather than an unhappy childhood, a disease or a genetic predisposition, were once the assumed 'cause' of bizarre or erratic behaviour and moods.

Where does such taken-for-granted, common-sense knowledge come from and what is its relation to 'scientific' enquiry? Looking back at the tragic consequences of common-sense beliefs that venereal diseases could be transmitted outwards or that a pregnant woman could not possibly have been raped but must have fully participated and enjoyed the act, it is tempting to see scientific knowledge as quite separate from, and infinitely superior to, everyday thinking. One version of the history of the natural sciences certainly presents the scientist, from Galileo on, as engaged in a heroic struggle against the benighted ignorance of lay people, and there are social scientists who conceive of their profession in much the same way. The twentieth century has seen an ever-expanding trail of 'experts' who draw on social science research to explain to the unenlightened how to behave at job interviews, how to be a more effective manager, teacher or social worker; how they should bring up children, make a marriage last, or cope with bereavement; how to recognise, avoid or deal with alcoholism, annorexia nervosa, depression, stress and a myriad of other afflictions. In short, both social scientific and natural science research can be presented as sweeping away 'old wives tales' and the prejudiced 'mumbo jumbo' that is common sense to reveal the hard, objective truths beneath it. What we aim to show in this chapter is that the relationship between scientific and everyday thinking is rather more complex than this.

This book is about the research methods used by social scientists and aims to equip the reader with a basic knowledge of the most commonly employed research techniques. But it is not simply a 'how to do it' manual. The book is also concerned with the methodological and philosophical problems associated with social research techniques, for an appreciation of these problems helps us to take a more critical approach to the knowledge which comes from social research. The book as a whole aims, therefore, to challenge the notion of 'scientific' and 'common-sense' thinking as two completely separate, even antagonistic, ways of knowing about the world. It suggests that the relationship between the two is far more intimate. Social scientists draw on their stock of everyday, taken-for-granted knowledge to conduct research, and the findings of social scientific research seep back into the pool of common-sense knowledge. Because of this interplay between scientific

knowledge and everyday thinking, there is also a strong relationship between social power and social research and this political dimension of research (especially gender politics) is another of the themes addressed throughout this book. Though the same case could be made in relation to any field of sociological or psychological enquiry, whether it be 'racialisation', work and industry, health, education or whatever, the remainder of this chapter illustrates these points through a consideration of research into human sexuality.

COMMON-SENSE AND 'SCIENTIFIC' CONSTRUCTIONS OF 'NORMAL' SEXUALITY

Through a combination of medical, biological, psychological and social research, sexology (the science of sex) appears to have transformed everyday thinking about human sexuality, liberating us from many of the more repressive religious and traditional beliefs about gender roles as well as about how often we should have sex, with whom, when, where and in what position. Sexologists thrust their work upon us through the medium of sex manuals, popular magazines throb with their advice and agony aunts grind their message into the inhibited, the virginal and the guilty. Ever wider audiences now rub up against their ideas in television programmes like *The Good Sex Guide*, and the refrain to the sexologists liberation song is to be found in popular books and films, like Madonna's *Sex* and *Nine and a Half Weeks*. Nowadays, it is not only acceptable, but demanded, that women should enjoy sex. Surveys tell us that masturbation, far from being practised solely by a small minority of enfeebled moral degenerates, is an almost universal pleasure. Certain 'beastly and monstrous' techniques condemned as mortal sin by St Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century are now highly recommended as 'foreplay'. Oral intercourse, we are told 'cannot fail to . . . improve the intensity of the orgasm. . . . It is worth any time and patience making oneself really proficient at it' (Chartham 1971: 71). A hint of S & M is high fashion. Agony aunts tell wives who have discovered their husbands have a penchant for cross-dressing that there is no reason to worry, a lot of men get thrills this way.

From the vantage point of the 1990s, one could be forgiven for thinking that common-sense thought has taken a passive role in its relationship with sexology – that it has simply lain back and allowed itself to be penetrated by the ideas and research findings of a hard science. If the historical development of Western ideas about human sexuality is considered in a little more depth, however, the interplay

between scientific and everyday thinking looks rather different. And, as always, looking at the history of ideas tells us something about the history of power relations. We see who has been in a position to define the research agenda, to conduct the research and to disseminate their ideas, as well as links between society's prevailing distribution of power and advantage and the way in which research findings are interpreted.

Sex and the Christian moralists

For centuries in Europe, strictures and advice on sexual behaviour were provided primarily by the Church and theologians. In a world created by God, everything had a purpose, and the early Christian moralists held that sexuality was given by God for the purpose of procreation. For theologians like St Thomas Aquinas, it followed from this that natural sex was sex within marriage for the purpose of begetting children. Anything else was not only sinful, but also transgressed natural laws by violating the true purpose of human sexuality (Ruse 1988: 184). From this line of reasoning, a 'hierarchy of sin' could be developed. All lust was immoral and, even within marriage, copulation for pleasure alone was a mortal sin. Moreover:

> Intercourse between husband and wife was supposed to take place in the 'natural' position, the wife stretched out on her back with the man on top. All other positions were considered scandalous and 'unnatural'. The one known as *retro* or *more canino* was unnatural because it was the way animals performed. The position *mulier super virum* was at variance with male and female characters, the woman being passive 'by nature' and the man active.
>
> (Flandrin 1985: 120)

But some vices were worse still. They conflicted 'with the natural pattern of sexuality for the benefit of the species' (Aquinas, cited in Ruse 1988). In ascending order of heinousness, these were masturbation, bestiality, homosexuality and, as Aquinas put it, acts where 'the natural style of intercourse is not observed, as regards the proper organ or according to other rather beastly and monstrous techniques' (cited in Ruse 1988). Through reference to the scriptures and to the natural world, then, Christianity presented sexuality in terms of a moral dualism. There was good sex, which was natural and sanctified by God, and there was bad sex, which was both unnatural and immoral. There were, of course, dissenters from such views, even a few who defended homosexuality, but until the nineteenth century, everyday thinking

about human sexuality was powerfully shaped by the Church's twin dualisms – moral/immoral, natural/unnatural sex. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, however, there was, as Weeks puts it, a:

> sustained effort to put all this on to a new 'scientific' footing: to isolate and individualise the specific characteristics of sexuality, to detail its normal paths and morbid variations, to emphasise its power and to speculate on its effects.
>
> (1985: 66)

Sex and nineteenth-century science

The philosopher Bertrand Russell (1976) holds that the scientific world-view which emerged during the eighteenth century is distinguished from pre-scientific thought by its demand that statements of fact be based on observation, not on unsupported authority (such as the Bible); by its insistence that the physical world is a self-acting, self-perpetuating system, not one driven by gods or men; and by the dethronement of the idea that everything in the world has a God-given 'purpose'. Science thus answers epistemological questions (philosophical questions about how claims to knowledge can be proved or grounded, what will count as 'facts') in a very different way to religious or magical thought, and it might therefore be expected that a scientific approach to the study of sexuality would signal dramatic change. Scientific claims about human sexuality would now have to be based upon observation and rigorous empirical studies, not upon readings from the scriptures. From the mid-nineteenth century on, human sexuality became part of the field of study first of biological and medical science and then of psychoanalysis. But though the new scientists of sex would all have wished to make a sharp distinction between their own 'scientific' approach and traditional, superstitious or religious thinking on the matter, what is most striking is the way in which they invariably reproduced the basic dichotomy between 'natural' and 'unnatural', 'normal' and 'abnormal', 'good' and 'bad' sex that existed in theological and religious thought, and how similar their views were on which sexual activities fell on which side of this great divide.

In his second book, *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*, published in 1871, Darwin argued that for a species to survive, it needed not only to adapt to its environment, but also to reproduce effectively. Biological scientists went on to explore the dynamics of sexual selection in the animal kingdom, and applied their findings to the

human world. What these scientists discovered in the animal kingdom was 'evidence' that existing social norms and gender roles were perfectly suited to the survival of the species, while sexual activities that society frowned upon were dysfunctional and unnatural. Was this a fortuitous coincidence, or did these men's existing moral and normative values affect their research agenda, shape their observations and the way in which they interpreted them? This tradition has recently enjoyed something of a revival in the work of sociobiologists who use similar methods to produce equally conservative claims about human sexuality. Ethological studies of animals in their natural habitats are used to support assertions about the 'natural' order of the sexes. We are told that human males are 'naturally' promiscuous, dominant and territorial because male baboons have 'harems' of female baboons, male lions 'dominate' female lions, sticklebacks 'aggressively' defend space. There is little to add to Weeks' comment on such analyses:

> What is happening here is the attribution of highly coloured social explanations to animal behaviour. Why should groupings of female animals be seen as harems? They could equally well be seen, for all the counter-evidence available, as prototypes of women's consciousness-raising groups. To say that perhaps evokes a smile. But so should the circular argument by which explanations drawn from human experience are attributed to animals and then used to justify social divisions in the present.
>
> (Weeks 1986: 51)

As well as biological scientists, those working in the field of medicine applied new and rigorous methods of enquiry to contribute to the growing body of scientific knowledge about human sexuality. Again, what now seems most conspicuous is the way in which 'science' merely embellished common-sense knowledge, especially in so far as the essential 'nature' of man and woman was concerned. Laqueur notes that 'Sometime in the eighteenth century, sex as we know it was invented' (1990: 149). The ovaries and the uterus were 'discovered' and a model of male and female as biologically and incommensurably different was developed. These organs, in particular the ovaries, were seen to be the controlling organs of the female body:

> the ovaries . . . are the most powerful agents in all the commotions of her system . . . on them rest her intellectual standing in society, her physical perfection . . . all that is great, noble and beautiful, all that is voluptuous, tender and endearing . . . her devotedness, her perpetual vigilance, forecast, and all those qualities of mind and disposition which inspire respect and love and fit her as the safest counsellor and friend of man, spring from the ovaries.
>
> (Dr W. W. Bliss, 1870, cited in Ehrenreich and English 1976: 33)

Reproduction was woman's central purpose in life and the reproductive organs dominated her entire physical, emotional and psychological being, so much so that almost all ill health (mental or physical) could be traced to the womb or ovaries, and any kind of 'unfeminine' behaviour, whether excessive work or exercise, masturbation, reading or voting, threatened to seriously damage those organs (see Ehrenreich and English 1976). To preserve her health, a woman needed to conserve her energies. She should not develop other bodily organs (particularly not her brain) or engage in any vigorous activity, she should be passive in the sexual act itself, otherwise her energies would be sapped and her reproductive organs would atrophy. Thus a scientific justification was provided for the passive role that had previously been ordained by God. Of course, this 'conservation of energy' theory was hardly liberating for men either. Medicine taught that masturbation and excessive sexual activity depleted the body's energies and thus provided 'scientific' backing for religious strictures on the subject, but men did not suffer the grotesque fate that befell thousands of women as a consequence of the new 'scientific' knowledge. The surgical removal of the clitoris as a treatment for 'nymphomania' was recommended by some doctors (Ehrenreich and English 1976: 39) and:

> Bilateral ovariotomy – the removal of healthy ovaries – made its appearance in the early 1870s and became an instant success to cure a wide variety of 'behavioural pathologies': hysteria, excessive sexual desires, and more mundane aches and pains whose origins could not be shown to lie elsewhere.
>
> (Laqueur 1990: 176)

But where women were constructed as passive and passionless, man's 'natural' state was one of activity, and his sexual life was no exception. Too much restraint, as well as too little, could be harmful. The work of the early sexologists (scientists of sex) drew on and reinforced this notion of innate and incontravertible differences between male and female sexuality. Havelock Ellis's contribution in *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* (1897) was to show how women were not only naturally passive, but also masochistic. Again, their 'nature' had biological roots. After describing some extremely vicious attacks on young children and

claiming that it is easy 'to trace in women a delight in experiencing physical pain when inflicted by a lover, and an eagerness to accept subjection to his will', Havelock Ellis explains that 'The psychological satisfaction which women tend to feel in a certain degree of pain in love is strictly co-ordinated with a physical fact. Women possess a minor degree of sensibility in the sexual region' (Ellis 1987: 523).

In the last half of the nineteenth century the sexologists also began to define, list and classify sexual 'abnormalities' and the pathologies that give rise to them. They concentrated primarily upon 'venereal disease, sexual psycho-pathology (the major "abberations" and their connection with "degeneracy") and eugenics' (Bejin 1985a: 181). Best known of these early pioneers is Krafft-Ebing whose 1886 study, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, provides a catalogue of sexual 'perversities' illustrated with real life case studies. Once again, the congruence between medical and traditional thought was striking. Homosexuality, condemned as immoral and unnatural by religious thinkers, was identified by medicine as a 'mental disease'. Men and women who failed to find sexual bliss in 'normal' coitus and engaged in other practices, such as oral sex, were 'masochistic' and masochism was found to be 'a pathological overgrowth of specifically feminine elements' (Krafft-Ebing 1914: 152). To conceive of such sexual activities as a manifestation of 'ill health' rather than as 'sin' is often held to be a more liberal approach. People are not, after all, generally seen as personally or morally responsible for their sicknesses. But one has only to consider some of the 'treatments' and 'cures' that have been imposed upon homosexual men this century (from electric shock aversion therapy to castration) to see that the practical consequences of being judged 'sick' instead of 'sinful' are not always so very different.

Disseminating scientific knowledge about sex

If science draws on society's stock of taken-for-granted knowledge about the world to define its research agenda and to classify and interpret its observations, how does scientific knowledge feed back into everyday thinking? So far as sex is concerned, the general public appears to have an almost unquenchable thirst for knowledge. Today, as in the past, those who research or write about sex claim to be immediately inundated with requests for help with sexual problems, letters asking whether given sexual practices are normal or not, even unsolicited videotapes of couples in coitus (all such contributions from readers of this book should be sent to the authors). The amount of

printed matter devoted to sex further indicates that people's appetite for advice on how to have 'good' sex is insatiable. Until the early years of this century, such advice was largely reserved for men (being passive recepticles, of course, women needed only moral, not practical guidance), but increasingly, 'scientific' knowledge about human sexuality has been fed to wider audiences.

In 1918, Beatrice Webb, the renowned liberal 'socialist' and feminist, insisted that evil came from ignorance and made the case for sex education for children. They should learn about the reproductive organs and be informed that 'reproductive processes should not be carried on without the sanction of matrimony' and told the precise age at which it is 'right' to engage in such processes: 'research . . . proves that first babies born when the mother is twenty-three are better than first babies born when the mother is either under or over twenty-three' (Webb 1987: 498). Webb takes from 'science' the idea of some kind of bodily 'energy' that is linked to the reproductive organs and explains that such 'energies' are particularly intense and troubling to girls between the ages of fourteen and twenty. She recommends that growing girls displace this 'energy' by taking plenty of exercise, eating plain food, sleeping next to an open window and taking a daily cold bath. Webb also warns mothers about 'certain abnormal activities of the reproductive organs' (1987: 500). These turn out to be masturbation. Once again 'thorough daily cleanliness' ('brisk' applications of soap and a 'plunge into a cold bath') is the prophylactic and should this fail, the child:

> should be put into a warm sleeping suit, and brought up to sleep with hands outside the bed clothes. To children old enough . . . one could explain that it is very exhausting, makes them dull and stupid, and is a waste of the powers given them for the good of the world, for the good of their children.
>
> (Webb 1987: 501)

This message of sexual restraint proved to be an enduring theme in sex education. A 1956 book aimed at a child audience explains that being 'civilised' makes us more intelligent but physically weaker than our forebears and young men and women should therefore 'wait until they are about twenty before they get married . . . by . . . that age the girl is strong enough to have babies without any trouble, and the boy is strong enough to look after his wife and baby' (Matthews 1956: 33). Restraint is also a moral imperative:

> We can, of course, behave like animals and have sexual intercourse just because it gives us pleasure, just as we can eat a whole box of chocolates in one afternoon because we enjoy it. If we are greedy about eating chocolates we can't do much more than make ourselves sick. If, however, we are greedy about sexual intercourse, then we are doing one of the most selfish and wrong things we can possibly do. . . . Sexual intercourse between a husband and wife who want children is a very great thing . . . but we must *never* look upon it as an amusement which we can enjoy whenever we want it.
>
> (Matthews 1956: 37)

Children thus learned from doctors, reformers and sexologists that 'good' sex was penetrative sex between people aged twenty plus, primarily for the purpose of procreation and always within marriage. The experts also had words of wisdom for women. Marie Stopes got the ball rolling with *Married Love*, published in 1918. Following its publication, she received hundreds of letters asking for advice, was invited to lecture school children on sex by the Welsh Education board and to write another book directed towards medical practitioners (Rose 1992: 119). Designed for educated middle-class wives – Dr Stopes was anxious about the survival of the 'white race' and disapproved of the 'thriftless, illiterate and careless' lower classes who undermined the Empire by producing too many weak and handicapped children – *Married Love* was seen as a radical book. It asserted that women were capable of passion, though only under specific circumstances. Stopes revealed that women have a 'spontaneous sex drive', but unlike men, theirs is governed by a 'law of Periodicity and Recurrence' which in turn is linked to the menstrual cycle (see Stopes 1987). Husbands should be sensitive to the ebbs and flows of their wives' desire, and, more shocking still, Stopes insisted that husbands should take steps to arouse the woman sufficiently to ensure that 'a secretion of mucus lubricates the opening of the vagina' (Rose 1992: 113). Women (or at least educated, white, middle-class women) were capable of experiencing, and entitled to, pleasure and passion – their husbands had a responsibility to bring them to orgasm – but 'good' sex was still penetrative sex within marriage, and it was still the man's role to control and orchestrate the act. Indeed, Stopes' views on gender roles were far from revolutionary; 'man is still essentially the hunter, the one who experiences the desires and thrills of the chase, and dreams ever of coming unawares upon Diana in the woodlands' (cited in Rose 1992: 117). This notion of the male sexual impulse as 'naturally' a desire to hunt, possess and

dominate was also central to Van de Velde's *Ideal Marriage* of 1928. With sales of over a million and a good reputation amongst the medical profession, this was possibly the most influential sex manual until the 1970s, and it fed to a very wide audience Havelock Ellis's 'concept of courtship and the biologically inevitable association between love and pain' (Jackson 1987: 62–3).

Sex and psychoanalysis

Another highly influential approach to sexology which emerged at the turn of the century was psychoanalysis – indeed many Freudians would proclaim psychoanalysis as the only true science of sex. It was through his studies of the origins of hysteria and neurosis that Freud came to develop his theory of psychosexual development and then to develop a theory of human sexuality. Put extremely crudely, Freud held that sexual energy and drives do not suddenly appear at puberty, but are present soon after birth. Freud was not suggesting that children have full and lusty sexual urges like adult desires, but simply that they take pleasure and interest in their bodies and physical sensations. In childhood, the focus of these interests changes as the individual passes through the set stages of psychosexual development; oral, anal, phallic, latent, genital. A person's future sexual orientation, as well as their future psychological well being, depends on how the various crises associated with each stage of development are resolved. So far as sexuality is concerned, a person should ideally progress from infantile pleasures (associated with teeth, breasts, anus, their own sexual organs and so on) to mature sexual pleasures that derive from intercourse between man and woman. The key dichotomy in psychoanalytic thought is therefore between 'infantile' and 'mature' sexuality, rather than 'moral' and 'immoral' or 'normal' and 'pathological' sexuality. For example, Freud insisted that homosexuality 'is nothing to be ashamed of, no vice, no degradation, it cannot be classified as an illness' (cited in Isay 1993: 3). Instead, homosexuality had its origins in the individual's childhood. The Oedipal dilemma and castration complex associated with the phallic stage of development had been inadequately resolved. It was a case of arrested or incomplete development.

Freud's theories may sound bizarre when presented in this truncated form, but they should not and cannot be simply dismissed. Not only is it essential to recognise that psychoanalytic theory has had an enormous impact on our everyday thinking, but also, as Weeks observes 'like so many other of the great intellectual preoccupations of the twentieth

century (Marxism, democracy and nationalism spring to mind), it has different meanings in different contexts' (1986: 61). Though Freud himself may have been far from progressive so far as sexual politics were concerned, because psychoanalysis involved 'a radical re-examination of the concept of sexuality' others have recently been able to reinterpret Freud in such a way as to 'challenge the orthodoxies of the sexual tradition' (Weeks 1986: 61). Having acknowledged the richness, diversity and flexibility of the psychoanalytic tradition, however, it must be noted that in Freud's own work, a basic dualism between 'good/healthy' and 'bad/unhealthy' sex persisted, albeit recast as 'infantile' and 'mature' sexuality.

Meanwhile, the interplay between taken-for-granted, everyday knowledge, social power and scientific theory in Freud's work on female sexuality is unmistakable. As infants, Freud argued, both males and females believe that everyone has a penis. Girls take pleasure in their clitoris, assuming that it will eventually grow into a penis making them whole and complete human beings. At around the age of 5, children discover that this is not the case. Some people lack a penis. They (women) are 'castrated'. The boy child fears that he too will be castrated, and his anxiety is only resolved when he switches his affections away from his mother (his primary love object) towards his father (the rival who may castrate him). The girl child is in a rather more unhappy situation. She sees herself as already 'castrated' and must somehow adjust to this mutilated condition. As Mitchell (1979: 96) puts it: 'Accepting castration means not only acknowledging the lack of the phallus, but, out of disappointment, abandoning the inferior clitoris as a source of sexual satisfaction.' Girls must come to focus on the vagina, rather than the clitoris, as the source of sexual pleasure. To achieve this transition Freud argued that girls had to transform their longing for a penis into longing for first their father, then their husband, to make a 'gift' of a baby, which is really a substitute penis.

Psychoanalytic theory thus posited the existence of two different types of female orgasm: the vaginal and the clitoral. The normal, non-neurotic, mature women might enjoy a little foreplay, but she would reach ecstacy only as a result of a penis moving in her vagina. The woman who sought or enjoyed 'clitoral orgasms' had failed to fully repress or transform her infantile 'penis envy'. This distinction between 'vaginal' and 'clitoral' orgasms entered popular consciousness through the medium of popular psychology, marriage and sex guides, women's magazines and so on – the term 'frigid' has its origin in the psychoanalytic concept of 'vaginal frigidity', that is, an inability to experience

'vaginal orgasms'. Where theologians censured masturbation, oral sex, anal sex and manual stimulation on moral grounds, psychoanalysts had scientific reasons for placing copulation at the top of the sexual hierarchy. The *normal* woman accepts the 'passive receptivity of the vagina' and only those 'frigid' women who fail to orgasm by dint of a quick poke by their husband desire such things. The misogyny which underpins this science is well illustrated in the following passage, written by two psychoanalysts in the 1950s:

> The neurotic woman, suffering from an inability to experience vaginal orgasm, finds a typical scapegoat: man. Ignorant of the fact that her own neurotic difficulty is responsible for her frigidity, she places the blame on the man's technique . . . [But] a healthy and experienced man is helpless when confronted with a frigid woman. The frigid woman's scapegoat theory is by no means harmless. It poisons a marriage, and frequently leads to extramarital affairs and divorce.
>
> (Bergler and Kroger 1954: 80)

Is it too cynical to point out that such ideas are remarkably convenient for men (who are absolved from the onerous task of discovering what their partner enjoys) and for psychoanalysts (who are assured a constant supply of fee-paying 'neurotic' women to treat)? Other sexologists certainly took issue with the Freudian distinction between clitoral and vaginal orgasms. In fact, as Bejin (1985a) points out, the orgasm became *the* central problem and concern of sexology from around the 1920s onwards. It was the female orgasm which provoked most dispute.

New sexology, traditional sexism

By the 1950s Alfred Kinsey, America's most famous sexologist, was able to dismiss the psychoanalytic view of female sexuality on the grounds that anatomic and clinical evidence showed that most of the interior of the vagina is without nerves and that the 'vaginal orgasm' is therefore an anatomical impossibility. Masters and Johnson's extremely detailed research into sexual physiognomy (the biological dynamics of sex) in the 1960s reinforced this position. They found the clitoris to be the centre of female sexual response and therefore the font of all erotic sensation. Orgasms experienced during penetrative sex, as much as those experienced as a result of masturbation, or manual or oral stimulation, were clitoral orgasms. There was no separate mechanism for attaining vaginal orgasm. Even today, a good thirty years after the debate between sexologists and psychoanalysts was most heated, its

ghost still haunts the popular imagination. It is not uncommon to read letters to agony aunts bemoaning an inability to attain 'vaginal orgasm' and replies explaining that such an orgasm is biologically impossible. In the struggle of ideas between psychoanalysis and the more physiologically based sexology of scientists like Kinsey and Masters, it was the latter which won out. For this we must surely be grateful. Here, scientific enquiry produced empirical evidence which (like the discovery of the fact that women do not need to orgasm in order to conceive and the fact that venereal disease cannot be cured by coitus with an uninfected individual) can be used to promote greater equality.

This more biologically based variant of sexology certainly advanced our knowledge of the physiology of sexual response, but facts do not speak for themselves. They must be interpreted. This can only be done through reference to the researcher's theoretical, moral and political preconceptions, and many would argue that the new sexology was far from impartial in the way it interpreted the facts it uncovered. Both Kinsey and Masters and Johnson began with the theoretical assumption that males and females have very basic biological sex drives or sexual appetites which must be satisfied. Sex acts, whether heterosexual or homosexual intercourse, masturbation or bestiality, are all directed towards orgasm and so represent an 'outlet' for this drive. In their work, 'the orgasm is held up as a measure of good health, and therefore an essential component of 'happiness' (Bejin 1985b: 202). For this reason, critics have argued that the new sexology pushed us towards a world tyrannised by the orgasm. 'Good' sex became orgasmic sex and sex without orgasm became 'dysfunctional' sex which must be treated and cured by the 'sexperts'.

Certainly, these sexologists and those that followed them were practical and interventionist, they were pioneers in the field of sex therapy, and their researches informed and still inform explicit sex manuals which aim to help couples to have satisfying sexual relations (that is, to be proficient in obtaining and provoking orgasm). But while the new sexologists were permissive in many respects, one theme remained constant, that of the profound and incontravertible difference between male and female sexuality. Feminist critics like Jackson (1984, 1987) hold that it is here that the relationship between social research and social power is most visible. The gender inequalities which characterise and structure our lives in the public sphere of work, health, education and politics and which are maintained and reproduced in the private sphere of family and marriage have been reified in the research of sexologists. What is actually a social relationship of unequal power and advantage is constructed and presented as

'natural'. The domination of one group by another is disguised behind biological drives and imperatives.

Sexologists are members of society as well as scientists. As social and sexual beings, they themselves are part of the subject matter of their research, and they come to their work with beliefs and values learned from the society in which they grew up. They begin their research with the implicit assumption that (Western) male heterosexuality is 'normal' sexuality and they then measure women's sexuality against the yardstick of male normality. Freud's entire *ouevre* on female sexuality, for example, rests on the belief that to be fully human requires possession of a penis, and that the absence of this magnificent organ condemns one to a life of masochistic passivity (a belief which is hardly open to *scientific* investigation). The new sexologists, despite an emphasis on biology rather than psychic structures, were likewise convinced that to be normal is to be male and vice versa. Men were asserted to be 'naturally' more highly sexed, wanting sex more often, and achieving orgasm more quickly. Kinsey *et al.* (1953), for example, claimed that:

> For perhaps three quarters of all males, orgasm is reached within two minutes after the initiation of the sexual relation. Considering the many . . . females who are so *adversely conditioned* to sexual situations that they may require 10 to 15 minutes of the most careful stimulation to bring them to climax, and considering the fair number of females who never come to climax in their whole lives, it is of course demanding that the male be quite *abnormal* in his ability to prolong sexual activity without ejaculation if he is required to match the female partner.
>
> (Kinsey *et al.* 1953, emphasis added)

It is not 'adverse conditioning' that shapes the man's performance, of course, and if women were 'normally' conditioned (i.e., if they were like men) they too would be able to reach orgasm in two minutes flat. For men to prolong their sexual activity in order to match the female partner would require them to be 'abnormal'. For women to match the male partner by shortening their sexual activity is presumably 'normal'. Male sexuality (though Kinsey's model of the 'normal' male is highly eurocentric) is normal, anything that deviates from it is a problem. Many feminists argue that in this sense, the new sexology drew on and reinforced notions of male supremacy. The surgical procedure to reconstruct the vagina designed by Dr James Burt in the 1970s is perhaps the ultimate expression of this view of women's sexuality as sub-normal because different from men's sexuality. Dr Burt created the

'Mark II Vagina' by lengthening the pubococcygeal muscle so that the clitoris was 'more accessible to direct penile stimulation' – a 'medical response both to the "new" knowledge of the importance of the clitoris for women and the continued commitment to the pursuit of orgasms in the standard fashion most pleasing and convenient for men' (Bleier 1984: 173). Needless to say, surgery to refashion the penis in such a way as to make it more responsive to sexual activities preferred by women remains unthinkable.

By constructing male sexuality as 'normal' sexuality, science contributed to the maintenance of an ideology which legitimates male domination. Science drew the basic notion of a powerful male 'sex drive' from the stock of everyday, common-sense knowledge, elaborated it through reference to biology and fed it back into the well of popular thought where it could be used to explain and excuse various forms of sexual oppression. This idea of a 'sex drive' promotes the idea that men are 'victims' of their biology, living in a sexually repressive society but faced continually with overpowering sexual 'urges'. Sexual desire is presented in the same way as thirst and hunger, an appetite or physical need which must be satisfied, and Kinsey in particular was prone to explaining male sexual aggression as a consequence of 'sex starvartion'. While this kind of tolerance for male assaults is now less common amongst academics, it continues to inform much everyday thinking about sexual violence. Police officers, judges and jurists who would not dream of explaining housebreaking or armed robbery as an uncontrollable biological response to the sight of wealth still often understand and excuse rape as an irrepressible sexual urge brought about by the sight of a woman. Indeed, so 'natural' and 'understandable' are these male 'urges' that the honesty, sexuality and morality of the female victim of sexual assault is often interrogated far more closely than that of her attacker. In short, as Jackson argues, the sexologists' model of human sexuality 'not only reflects and legitimates the male supremacist myth that the male urge *must* be satisfied; it defines the very nature of "sex" in male terms' (1987: 73).

So far, then, we have seen that despite answering epistemological questions in a very different way to the moralists and theologians who went before, at the start of this century science had provided three approaches to studying human sexuality each of which, albeit for different reasons, managed to maintain the binary model so central to the Judaeo Christian tradition. Just as it did for the Christian moralists, this model of 'good/healthy' and 'bad/unhealthy' sex had a clear cut gender polarity as its corollary. Masculine and feminine roles were in explicit

opposition. What was moral, natural, beneficial to the species, normal, healthy and mature sexual behaviour for the male was precisely the reverse when enacted by the female and vice versa (see Figure 1.1). And just as the pious wished to root out and prevent activities on the 'wrong' side of the moral dualism, so scientists, physicians and psychoanalysts prescribed ways of curbing, containing and curing deviance. The new generation of sexologists who still practice today are certainly more liberal and permissive than their predecessors in terms of the way in which they distribute particular sexual activities between the two poles of 'good' and 'bad' sex. Anything (or almost anything) that contributes to the ultimate goal – orgasmic copulation – is 'good'. Only that which fails to produce orgasms efficiently is 'bad'. But they still reproduce a polar model of sexuality and the implications of their approach for gender are not entirely progressive.

Consensual sex, penetrative sex and the radical feminist position

Two decades on from the 'sexual revolution' of the 1960s, feminist, gay and social constructionist thinkers have had an impact on such binary models and their associated assumptions about gender. Feminists have pointed out that research and thinking on human sexuality has invariably treated female sexuality as a negative subset of male sexuality; lesbian women and gay men have questioned the heterosexist bias implicit in sexology; social constructionists such as Weeks point out that sexology has proved a double-edged sword in the struggle for sexual 'liberation':

> Sexology has had important positive effects in extending our knowledge of sexual behaviours and I have no desire to denigrate its real achievements. Without it we would be enslaved to an even greater extent than we are to myths and nostrums. On the other hand, in its search for the 'true' meaning of sex, in its intense interrogation of sexual difference, and in its obsessive categorization of sexual perversities it has contributed to the codification of a 'sexual tradition', a more or less coherent body of assumptions, beliefs, prejudices, rules, methods of investigation and forms of moral regulation, which still shape the way we live our sexualities.
>
> (Weeks 1986: 14)

Progressive thinkers today wish to reject this sexual tradition – to abandon the codified system which arranges sexual acts on a continuum from 'perverse' to 'normal' and talk instead of 'diversity'. Sexual acts have no intrinsic qualities and cannot be categorised as 'good' or 'bad'

	Epistemology (what will count as 'facts')	Dualisms	Man's essential nature	Woman's essential nature
Christian moralists	The scriptures and observations of the natural world	Moral/ Immoral Natural/ Unnatural	Active	Passive
Biological scientists	Rigorous and methodical observation of the animal kingdom	Natural/ Unnatural Beneficial/ Harmful to the survival of the species	Active	Passive
Medical scientists	Rigorous and methodical observation of the abnormal and perverse	Normal/ Pathological	Active	Passive
Psychoanalysts	Rigorous and methodical analysis of the unconscious mind	Mature/ Immature	Active	Passive
'New' sexologists	Rigorous observation of physiological responses, systematic surveys and case studies	Functional (orgasmic)/ Dysfunctional	Active	Passive

Figure 1.1 Sexual dualisms from the early Christian moralists to the 'new' sexologists

in themselves. Instead, acts have only those qualities that are attributed to them by the individuals concerned. The only remaining divide is between consensual and non-consensual sex acts. Such a position is, of course, highly problematic in relation to paedophilia (at what age is a person able to genuinely consent?), pornography and prostitution (if people are deprived of other opportunities for making a living, can we say that they are freely and genuinely consenting to selling their bodies?), also to extreme forms of sadomasochism such as mutilation and, of course, bestiality and necrophilia where the object of attention is, by definition, unable to either consent or dissent.

Many radical feminists problematise this whole notion of consent, arguing that in a patriarchal society, where male hegemony is omnipresent, it is virtually impossible to distinguish women's sexual consent from 'enforced submission' (Pateman 1988: 224; see also Dworkin 1987, Jeffreys 1990). But this position is equally troublesome. To insist that heterosexual intercourse is always and inevitably an expression of male domination denies the experience of those women who do desire, and obtain sexual gratification from, penetrative sex. If we accept the radical feminist line, we can only assume that such women are pathetic victims of false consciousness who mistake their pain for pleasure and/or betray their 'sisters' by colluding with the enemy. Equally, an insistence that penetration is synonomous with male violence and oppression makes the experience of those lesbian women and gay men who desire, and derive sexual pleasure from, fist fucking, 'artificial' penetrative sex or anal sex difficult to comprehend. Are these acts acceptable because they take place in the context of a different set of power relations? In that case, should we not also insist that the participants are 'equals' on non-gender hierarchies, such as age, class and 'racialised' identity, in case a middle-class man secures his 'class' domination by penetrating a working-class man or a white woman secures her 'racial' domination by penetrating a Black woman? Or is it that these lesbians and gay men are also duped by male hegemony into consenting to acts which bring them no real pleasure?

Few people would disagree with the radical feminists' condemnation of rape, sexual intimidation and child abuse, and they are also without doubt correct to note that power and powerlessness are eroticised in Western culture. But the radical feminist campaign against the power components of sexuality (violence and capitulation, domination and submission, control and humiliation) seems to carry with it a suggestion that the social structures which give rise to inequalities in power could be transformed if only individuals transformed their sexual desires and

activities. This is too simplistic. The powerless are not made so because they are eroticised – they are eroticised because they are powerless (Segal 1993). Women's inequality in the spheres of work, family and politics is not a direct consequence of their *sexual* oppression (even though this sexual oppression may reinforce other forms of oppression). Moreover, if we move to the micro-level of individual men and women's actual sexual interaction, it seems clear that social expectations and/or explicit demands from partners that 'real' men be constantly ready with a huge, pulsating, rock hard cock does not actually make all men feel powerful, rather the reverse. As Segal observes, it seems likely that most men 'are *least* sure of their power over women, and *most* fearful of women's self-sufficiency and autonomy, precisely in their sexual encounters with them' (1993: 77). Without wishing to deny that in general, men have power relative to women, it is important to note that in (consensual) sexual life, power can sometimes be something of a chimera. Stoller (1991) notes that in sadomasochistic circles, a distinction is drawn not just between those who are 'tops' (acting out domination) and those who are 'bottoms' (acting out subjugation), but also between those who are 'pushy' (in control and making demands) and those who are 'submissive' (allowing the other person control and acquiescing to demands). It is not impossible, indeed it is quite common, to find 'pushy bottoms', that is, people who take control and make demands from their submissive position. It is not difficult to see how this can also be the case in 'normal' heterosexual intercourse.

After more than a century of scientific enquiry then, debates surrounding human sexuality remain complex, wide ranging and largely unresolved. Thus far, we have emphasised the intimate relationship between everyday, common-sense thinking and scientific research into human sexuality. The object of this exercise was to try to deconstruct the popular view of science as necessarily and always objective and detached from moral and political beliefs. But, as is argued in the following section, abandoning a blind faith in the inevitable neutrality of science should not lead us to reject all empirical research or all hope of advancing human knowledge.

EVERYDAY THINKING AND SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE

This chapter began by asking about the relationship between common-sense and scientific knowledge. Different philosophical traditions would approach this issue in different ways and it is perhaps worth considering two diametrically opposed visions: positivism and

relativism. Positivism is, at its most basic, a philosophical tradition which holds the methods of the natural sciences to be the best and most objective means of acquiring knowledge. It therefore draws a sharp distinction between scientific and common-sense thinking, asserting that only the former can reveal facts and truths about the natural and social world. Relativism, on the other hand, considers objective knowledge to be unattainable. Everyone views the world through the lens of their own culturally determined 'common sense', and the 'facts' produced by science are no more independent of culturally relative, taken-for-granted knowledge than the 'facts' produced by thirteenth-century theologians or by sooth sayers.

For positivists, everyday thinking has two main qualities. First, it is based on the uncritical acceptance of unsubstantiated beliefs or opinions about the world. It is received wisdom, often resting on ideas that have been passed down from generation to generation as articles of faith. Second, it is tainted by subjective perceptions, infused with personal values and laden with moral or political judgements. Scientific thinking, conversely, is based on rigorous, empirical observation and hypothesis testing. It is objective, it is value-free, it seeks to uncover 'facts' about the world and describe them neutrally. Take a simple example. Scientists do not rely on their own sensory perceptions to measure water temperature, because they know that subjective perceptions can be deceiving. When a person's hands are hot, water feels cool. When their hands are freezing cold the same water feels quite hot. The whole point of the scientific method is to eliminate the possibility of deception, or bias, that comes from the subjectivity of the scientist, by designing and employing neutral, passive instruments for observation or measurement (in this case, by using a thermometer).

The same approach is often recommended for the social sciences. Proper scientific procedures should be followed; hypotheses must be formulated, systematic and rigorous observations made, and, where possible, neutral measuring instruments used. Thus, psychologists, for example, do not have a little chat with a man and then assess whether or not he has homosexual tendencies on the basis of a set of subjective perceptions: 'He looked a bit effeminate to me' or 'He seemed dead sentimental about his mum.' Instead they design tests, like the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory, which is supposedly a neutral instrument for measuring aspects of the personality. The aim is to eliminate the bias that comes from the psychologist's subjectivity. Two psychologists testing the same man could not fail to produce the same result using this instrument, even if one started out with the impression

that the subject was a rampant queen and the other took the man to be a roaring straight. Similarly, positivist sociologists emphasise the importance of neutral instruments, such as surveys, for observing, recording and measuring attitudes, behaviours and intentions. The idea is that where proper scientific procedures are followed, knowledge that is untainted by the subjective preconceptions, beliefs and values of the researcher is produced. Positivist sociologists thus have little regard for the common-sense, everyday knowledge that people have about the society they live in. It is not to be trusted. Scientific methods are necessary to clear aside common sense, so revealing underlying truths and allowing us to describe the external reality which exists independently of the individuals who perceive it.

The idea that the social scientist should follow the methods of the natural sciences, setting aside all preconceptions and popular opinions and observing the social world rigorously and methodically, sounds sensible enough, yet actually raises a number of rather thorny philosophical problems. To begin with, the idea that anyone, including both natural and social scientists, ever relies *solely* on their observations is doubtful. If you looked from your window now and saw in the sky what appeared to be a flying saucer, you would be unlikely to immediately abandon a firmly held conviction that extra-terrestrial beings do not exist. You would probably seek some alternative explanation – someone has slipped you a trip, your eyes are playing you up, you are suffering from overwork. People do not always accept what they observe, because they know that their senses can deceive them and because they know that some things do not exist or cannot happen.

Scientists behave in much the same way. They too are committed to certain core beliefs and theories, and are unwilling to discard them at the drop of a hat. If a young physicist observed something in the course of an experiment which disconfirmed Einstein's theory of relativity, for example, the rest of the scientific community will not simply say 'Oh yes, Einstein was wrong. Dr X. did an experiment last week that falsified the theory of relativity.' People are more likely to assume that Dr X. made a mistake, or that she misread her findings. Indeed, Dr X. might not even bother to report her findings because she herself may assume that she was mistaken. Even if finally, after numerous repetitions, the observation held good, scientists would not simply discard the entire theory but would invent sub-hypotheses to rescue it – 'The theory holds good in all circumstances other than those discovered by Dr X'. Likewise, social scientists have certain taken-for-granted beliefs about the world which observation alone will not cause them to abandon. Segal observes that psychological research designed to

prove the 'fact' that everyone 'knows' – namely that there are innate and incontravertible *differences* between the two sexes – has continued unabated, despite the fact that 'the main finding of some 80 years research has been the massive psychological *similarity* between the sexes in terms of individual attributes' (Segal 1990: 63). Freud's seduction theory is another case in point.

When Freud first started practising, he was visited by many 'hysterics', who displayed symptoms such as a nervous tic or cough, depression, or suicidal feelings. Many of these people claimed that, in childhood, they had been sexually abused by their father, or another close male relative or family friend. Freud initially thought that these traumatic childhood experiences lay at the root of the adult hysteria. In 1896, he gave a lecture on the aetiology of hysteria, in which he argued that hysteria was directly linked to this earlier sexual assault. But his observations and ideas were not well received by the scientific community. The medical establishment complained that he was uncritically regurgitating the 'fantasies and invented tales' and the 'paranoid drivel' of 'hysterical' women. His seduction theory was even rejected by people from whom he had expected support. People simply did not want to be told that sexual abuse was common amongst well off, well educated, respectable families. By 1897, Freud had abandoned his seduction theory. He now saw his former willingness to accept the word of his patients at face value as 'naïve' and no longer accepted that sexual abuse was occurring on the scale he had thought. Though he did not deny that sexual abuse *ever* happened, he now thought it was a rarity and that in general, his female patients were not telling him about real experiences of sexual molestation, only describing to him their unconscious wishes and desires. Nothing actually happened, but the girls longed for it to happen. They then came to see their longing as unacceptable and had to repress it, and it was this repression, not a real experience of abuse, which lay at the heart of their neurosis. In other words, Freud reinterpreted his observations in the light of what the scientific community, and he himself, already *knew* to be 'true', namely that bourgeois fathers do not molest their children and that women are manipulative liars (see Masson 1984).

And just as pre-existing values and beliefs affect researchers' observations, so they infuse the measuring instruments they design. Using the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory, for example, may help to ensure that two psychologists come up with the same measurement of a man's homosexual tendencies. But given that it takes a man saying that he likes cooking, does not believe in heaven and hell and enjoyed

reading *Alice in Wonderland* as indications of homosexual proclivities, it can hardly be described as a 'neutral' or 'value-free' implement for assessing the personality (see Ruse 1988).

Some philosophers look at this close relationship between the concepts science employs and the facts it reveals and the concepts and facts that are already part of our everyday knowledge and argue that it is impossible for scientists to uncover external, objective truths. In its extreme form, philosophical relativism asserts that there is no reality existing 'out there' independently of human consciousness, only sets of culturally relative meanings and classifications that people attach to the world. The philosopher of science, Feyerabend, for example, regards Western science as just one cultural tradition among many; just one way of imposing order on an unknowable world. There is no objective reality, for reality can only be constructed by a conceptual system, and different cultures and societies employ different conceptual systems:

> Not everybody lives in the same world. The events that surround a forest ranger differ from the events that surround a city dweller lost in a wood. . . . The Greek gods were a living presence; 'they were there'. Today they are nowhere to be found.
>
> (Feyerabend, cited in Trigg 1989)

What relativists are concerned with is the fact that we cannot check the picture of reality created by science against reality itself, in the way we might compare a photograph of a person against the person herself to see if it is a good likeness, because the only way we grasp reality is by using this self-same scientific conceptual schema – 'There is no way that we can somehow hold our concepts in suspense, while we compare them with reality' (Trigg 1989: 1). Human beings, rather than observing passively or recording events neutrally, are selective in their seeing. What they choose to observe, how they see and classify and interpret it all depends crucially on their pre-existing beliefs about the world which come either from their theoretical perspective, or from the stock of cultural knowledge and beliefs which shape the perceptions of members of that culture. Some philosophers thus arrive at a view of common-sense, taken-for-granted knowledge as something like a prism through which members of any given culture see the world.

What this means for social science research methods depends on how far along the relativist road you travel. Some would argue that the task of the social researcher is to submerge him or herself absolutely in other cultures (or subcultures or even the subjective worldviews of other individuals), in order to learn that stock of everyday knowledge which

informs social action. The object of research would be to try to reconstruct reality through the lens of these other 'common senses'. But to the extreme relativist, this approach is as flawed as the positivism which tries to ignore common sense. To make the experience of another culture intelligible, for example, it is necessary to translate what is said and done into a form which the Western anthropologist can grasp. In so doing, the researcher may well distort its meaning, and most problematic of all, he or she would never be able to find out whether or how this had happened. A male anthropologist researching the sex lives of the Dyak people of Borneo, for instance, might try to understand why men insert two inch long rods of bone into a transverse orifice in their penises before coitus through reference to Western ideas about heightening the woman's pleasure (see Ellis 1987: 526). But he could not check this translation with a Dyak man, because the Dyak man would then have to translate Western notions of 'coitus' and 'woman's pleasure' back into Dyak notions before being able to answer, and in translating, more distortion may occur, and so on. Relativism ultimately leads us to abandon any hope of intersubjective agreement across cultures, or subcultures, perhaps even between two people. We are all hermetically sealed in the prison of our own common sense and our everyday thinking is not so much a lens through which to view the world as a set of blinkers which can never be removed.

But the idea that there is no reality separate from the conceptual systems employed by people to grasp it accords quite ludicrous powers to human thought (Trigg 1989). A tree that falls in a forest falls regardless of whether a person is there to witness and conceptualise the event, children in Somalia die of starvation regardless of whether the governments of the Western world believe that they are providing adequate aid. Many people in Britain and the United States fondly imagine that they live in a meritocratic, post-racist, post-sexist society, but this does not mean that a working-class child or a Black child or a female child is truly blessed with the same chances of obtaining wealth and social power as the middle-class, white, male child. Of course one person's freedom fighter is another person's terrorist. And of course you can never know with absolute certainty that another person understands what you say in *exactly* the same way that you understand it. And of course language, concepts and beliefs affect our *perception* of social reality. But this does not mean that there really is no solid world out there separate from human beings' concepts and beliefs. In practice, as King Canute is purported to have discovered, the object world has a nasty habit of intruding no matter what people may believe about it.