Analyzing young women’s experiences of hidden gendered power in heterosexual relationships

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Abstract

Based on qualitative analysis of data from 18 semi-structured interviews with young women between the ages of 18 and 27, the aims of this research were threefold. The project undertook, firstly, to identify and explore mechanisms of hidden gendered power in young people’s intimate heterosexual relationships. Secondly, it endeavoured to illustrate and analyse how young women experienced and contested the operation of such power. Thirdly, the project aimed to demonstrate the epistemological complexities involved in operationalizing ‘power’ for empirical social research in the sphere of intimacy, by questioning whether findings vary according to the theoretical conceptualization of power adopted.

Lukes (2005) and Hirschman (1970) formed the main theoretical background to the project. Two types of power were identified from data analysis and related to Benjamin (1998) and Komter’s (1989) findings: the inhibition of ‘Use of Voice’ and the legitimizing effects of ‘Traditional Gender Ideology’. The extent to which these types of power could be considered hidden and gendered was assessed. Respondents’ practice of ‘Infantalizing’ partners, which contested traditional understandings of heterosexuality and power, was identified and explored. The application of two theoretically sound measures of power demonstrated how empirical results varied depending upon how power was conceptualised. As such the epistemological complexity of identifying power in intimate relationships was illustrated throughout the project report.

The significance of this project lies not only in its vivid illustration of young women’s reported experiences but also in the implications of the finding that two, theoretically based, empirical measures of power produce contradictory results when applied in the context of intimate relationships.

Key words: power, intimate relationships, gender.
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1. Introduction

This research project undertook to qualitatively explore and analyse how young women experience hidden gendered power in their intimate heterosexual relationships. The principal aims of the research were to:

1) Identify and explore mechanisms of hidden gendered power in young people’s intimate heterosexual relationships.
2) Illustrate and analyse how young women experienced such power and contested its operation.
3) Demonstrate the epistemological complexity of operationalizing ‘power’ for empirical social research in the context of intimate relationships, by questioning whether findings varied according to how power was conceptualized and measured.

The scale of the project was unavoidably restricted by the limited time and finance available, which in turn constrained the geographical location and number of participants. The scope of the investigation was also limited by specific decisions made when identifying the research question and developing the project aims.

Young people’s intimate heterosexual relationships were an appropriate area for social research due to the absence of the legal and material context of marriage. The absence of this context creates relationships in which it is unlikely that either partner would be discouraged from leaving by external structural constraints such as loss of economic stability; the effects of leaving such relationships are predominantly emotional and personal. Resultantly, investigating experiences of this kind of relationship may have facilitated an exploration of hidden gendered power as a characteristic of heterosexual intimacy itself, rather than as a reflection of economic, political or cultural structures.

The research focus on hidden gendered power in non-marital relationships was also developed in response to issues in existing literature such as the ubiquity of research into observable power in marriage, (O’Connor 1991, Duncombe and Marsden 1993, Vogler and Pahl 1994, Hardill et al 1997) and the relative lack of research into young people’s intimate relationships. Although young people’s relationships may not entail the material conflicts emphasized by research into marital power, (see O’Connor 1991, Vogler and Pahl 1994, Hardill et al 1997) young people undoubtedly experience relational conflicts, negotiations and conversations (see Benjamin 1998:771) which may be more indicative of hidden gendered power. Despite recent research concerning young people’s heterosexual relationships (Frith and Kitzinger 1998, Holland et al 1998, Kuttler and La Greca 2004, Chung 2005, Noland 2006) there was a perceived gap in terms of understanding hidden power. Research has focused on observable decision making, diverting attention away from underlying power processes (Komter 1991:54). This furthered the appropriateness of the research aims which also sought to question the popular assumption of the egalitarian nature of romantic love (O’Connor 1991:840, Jamison 1998:137-138) and to problematize Giddens’ (1992:184) identification of the “democratization of the private sphere” by exploring how hidden gendered power can operate in the most private, personal and intimate of settings (Scott 2001: 143).

Why was the research limited to the experiences of heterosexual women? Although it has been argued that same sex relationships are less susceptible to inequitable gendered roles and identities (Jamieson 1998:137), Kelly (1996:45-46) suggests power in lesbian and homosexual relationships is also patterned by gender. However, despite the importance of understanding
how hidden gendered power operates in same-sex relationships, their inclusion here was beyond the necessarily limited scope of the project. Additionally, young women’s *experience* was chosen as the appropriate unit of analysis in line with the feminist standpoint that theory should be anchored in women’s lived experience, and that the variety of such experience is in need of vital recognition (Davis 1991:222, Benjamin 1998: 791).

The exclusive focus on young women’s experience excluded the possibility of exploring young men’s understandings of their intimate relationships. Although a full investigation of hidden gendered power in heterosexual intimacy would need to be grounded in men and women’s accounts, this exclusion can be justified. The rationale for this project was not based on a view of all women as inevitably subjugated, although literature (Komter 1989, Benjamin 1998) indicated that women, rather than men, were more likely to have experiences of being subject to power. In light of this, and with reference to Chung’s (2005:445) call for an assessment of the impact of second wave feminism on young women’s understandings of their intimate relationships, it was considered appropriate to focus limited resources on producing an in-depth, rich understanding of young women's experiences: breadth was sacrificed in favour of depth.

The research was further limited in that participants represented one half of a relationship; different data would have been generated if couples were interviewed together or if participants were aware that their partners were involved in the research. This was justified by the limited available time and resources, in conjunction with the methodological and ethical difficulties that could arise from ‘couple interviews’, including issues such as reduced disclosure, rapport and compromised anonymity.

Furthermore, appropriate conceptual tools were required in order to investigate hidden gendered power in intimate relationships. There are many, sophisticated and competing, theories of power, but these would be of limited use were they not empirically applicable. Existing research lacks explicit examination of how power is conceptualized and applied (Frith and Kitzinger 1998:299-300, 304), and the empirical operationalization of power is epistemologically complicated. As such the third research aim undertook to explore the contradictions that arise from the operationalization of power in the context of intimate relationships, by questioning whether empirical results differ according to how power is theoretically conceptualized.

The project report is structured into sections and subsections. Firstly, relevant literature is reviewed, assessed and drawn upon to develop appropriate concepts and measures. Secondly, the research design, data collection, and qualitative analysis techniques are described and appraised, followed by a consideration of ethical issues. Thirdly, the research findings are presented for consideration structured according to the analytical themes of Use of Voice, Traditional Gender Ideology, Conceptual Issues and Infantalizing. Finally, conclusions are drawn, discussed and evaluated and the original research aims are addressed.
2. Literature Review

Chung (2005:447) describes heterosexuality as a central mechanism in the reproduction of patriarchal power relations, and a substantive body of literature has addressed this topic from various theoretical perspectives. The review presented below constitutes the theoretical context from which the research aims were developed and concepts of power were drawn.

2.1 Steven Lukes (2005) and Aafke Komter (1989)

Lukes (2005: 11, 28) argues that power can be hidden and ideological in form; operating in the absence of observable conflict and ensuring acceptance of one’s “place in the existing order of things”. Lukes (2005:22-23, 27, 40) proposes that hidden power can inhibit grievances from being aired and suppress challenges to the powerful. As such Lukes’ theory of power can be related to concepts developed in feminist research including ‘silencing’ and ‘self censorship’ (Benjamin 1998: 773, 790), and thus has clear potential to be applied to intimate relationships.

Komter (1989:189, 1991:55) draws on Lukes to investigate hidden power in marriage, and suggests that power can operate invisibly, despite apparent consensus. Komter (1989:192, 207-209, 212) identifies ‘invisible power’ in ideological mechanisms operating through “common sense” (Ibid: 195) understandings of gender. Such ideological hegemony can act to naturalize unequal power patterned by gender (Ibid: 203, 209). For instance, Komter (Ibid: 209) uses the example of a belief that ‘women do more childcare because they enjoy it’ as a manifestation of ideological power explaining and excusing gender differences, and thus inhibiting attempts to challenge inequality. It was appropriate therefore to use ‘Traditional Gender Ideology’ as an indicator of hidden gendered power and to investigate how this was experienced by young women in intimate relationships.

Lukes (2005: 29, 37, 44-45), suggests that hidden power can be identified by the “relevant counterfactual”, or action that would be possible were it not for the operation of hidden power. Following Lukes, Komter proposes that hidden power in marriage can be identified by searching for women’s “subjective preferences under hypothetical conditions of autonomy” (1989: 190). Thus women’s “desire for change” (Ibid : 192) is understood as the relevant counterfactual and hidden power is identified through women’s strategies for attempting to effect change in relationships.

The ‘relevant counterfactual’ approach can be problematized by arguing that there are always unlimited alternative possibilities; the range of ‘counterfactuals’ is in fact infinite. Isolating the ‘relevant’ counterfactual thus becomes a matter of choice between outcomes and subject to theoretical bias. The claim to be able to identify hidden power is itself epistemologically problematic: how can power be hidden to some yet visible to others? In addition, conceptualizing power as ideological implies troublesome notions of false consciousness and “real interests” (Komter 1989:190 Lukes 2005: 144:148), as such the operationalization of any notion of ideological power must be carefully conceived and justified.

Two elements from Lukes’ (2005) theory and Komter’s (1989) research were retained for this project. Firstly, to avoid the issues of false consciousness and real interests Komter’s (1989) concept of ideological power was developed into a focus on respondents’ use and negotiation of ‘Traditional Gender Ideology’, and related explanations of heterosexuality and gendered behaviour in their accounts. Secondly, the notion of hidden power as preventing the airing of grievances was adopted since it appeared highly applicable to non-marital relationships. However, because of the difficulties of searching for relevant counterfactuals this project
concentrated on the extent to which young women reported expressing desires and dissatisfactions in their relationships, and their strategies, motivations and explanations for doing so.

2.2 Alfred O. Hirschman (1970) and Orly Benjamin (1998)
This discussion leads on to the concept of ‘voice’. Hirschman (1970) proposes that all social relationships can be characterised by the possibility of exit (leaving the relationship) and voice, (expressing desires and dissatisfactions), and these are affected by the loyalty felt towards the relationship. Hirschman (1970:26-29) suggests that that ‘voice’ is often the most effective method for expressing dissent and initiating change in social relationships, indicating the importance of the voice function in intimate relationships. Furthermore ‘voice’ explicitly relates to Lukes’ (2005:22-23, 40) theory that hidden power can prevent the airing of grievances. These two theories, considered together, indicated the appropriateness of investigating hidden gendered power in intimate relationships in terms of young women’s vocalization of desire and dissatisfaction, their ‘Use of Voice’.

Benjamin (1998:771-774, 782) conceptualises power in marriage as the ability to articulate desires and dissatisfactions and asserts that a “silencing of women’s concerns” (Ibid: 773) characterizes marriage relationships. Benjamin (1998: 771, 774), like Komter (1989:192, 203), finds that women’s ‘voice’ can be inhibited by hidden gendered power processes such as fear of jeopardising the relationship, feeling rules and anticipation of a partner’s negative reaction. This supports the conceptualization of power as ‘Use of Voice’ and indicates the need to investigate this type of power in young people’s heterosexual relationships.

2.3 Discussion
Two interrelated conceptualizations of power were developed from a synthesis of relevant literature: ‘Use of Voice’ and ‘Traditional Gender Ideology’. These concepts were mobilized to identify hidden gendered power and to explore how young women experience such power in intimate relationships. However, Lukes (2005:61-62) describes ‘power’ as an “essentially contested concept” with the results of its empirical application effected by how it is theorized. The methodological and epistemological implications of this needed to be addressed, as was evident in the literature.

Craib (1994: 34, 81, 123) argues that intimate relationships are routinely characterized by unrealized desires, which could be (mis)construed as ‘relevant counterfactuals’ indicating an operation of hidden power. Craib (Ibid: 149) however, asserts that characterizing intimacy in terms of power is “a great oversimplification of what goes on between people”, and looks to internal psychodynamic processes in order to understand intimacy. This theory appeared to form a continuum with those outlined above, and demonstrated the multiple approaches to understanding intimate relationships. The idea that ‘voice’ can remain unconscious and unarticulated even within the self had implications for methodology, and related to Frith and Kitzinger’s (1998) critique of intimate relationship research.

Frith and Kitzinger (1998: 304) take issue with Duncombe and Marsden (1993) and other intimate relationship research, arguing that the discussion of how concepts are operationalization is often insufficient. Frith and Kitzinger (1998:299, 305-307, 310) propose that interview data is “talk-in-interaction”, constructed in the interview context, rather than a “transparent window” (Ibid: 304) on respondents’ actual experiences. This approach was woven into the project as relevant to the application of Lukes (2005) and Hirschman (1970), which rely on participants’ disclosure of their ‘real’ desires. This also links to Craib’s (1994) focus on internal processes, and raises the question; how can power be identified through ‘Use of Voice’
if respondents themselves can be unaware of unexpressed desires that they may or may not have?

It is evident that the concepts developed for this investigation were not uncontested, but rather were selected as appropriate from a synthesis of relevant literature. The project was situated in debates on the extent, form and existence of hidden gendered power in intimate relationships, and was conducted in the context of continuing disputes over how power should be theorized.
3. Methods and Procedures

3.1 Population
The population consisted of heterosexual women aged 18 to 27 in the Edinburgh area. Participants were self-described middle class and had education to Scottish Highers/A-Level or were currently involved in further study. The comparatively young age of the population facilitated a focus on interpersonal power in intimacy since participants should have been relatively unconstrained by cultural, economic and political structures external to their relationships (see Chapter 1.). Thus the population was theoretically significant, compensating for its un-representativeness and the subsequent lack of generalizability to women from other generations, regions, levels of education, sexualities and class backgrounds. The negligibility of limited generalizability was furthered by the explorative nature of the research aims and illustrative value of the findings (Mason 2002: 121, 126-127).

3.2 Sampling
The explorative nature of the project rendered the use of statistically random sampling unsuitable. There was no requirement to ensure statistical representativeness, therefore strategic, purposefully illustrative sampling strategies were adopted (Mason 2002: 121, 124, 126-127 Robson 2002: 193, 264, 267). Although these strategies precluded the possibility of generalizing from the findings they were appropriate due to the theoretical significance of the population (Mason 2002:124-125).

Participants were obtained through self selective and ‘snowball’ (Robson 2002: 265) sampling. Potential respondents were invited to participate via Edinburgh University e-mailing lists. Despite a good initial response rate there were high incidences of ‘no shows’ (Morgan 1997:42) and eight participants were obtained by this method. Bias occurred as a consequence of using a self-selecting sample since respondents may have volunteered due to interest in the topic. However, this was preferable to using a deceptive cover story (Morgan 1997:48 May 2001:130). The ‘snowball’ sampling involved respondents inviting contacts to participate in the research and ten participants were obtained by this method.

3.3 Data collection
The primary method of data collection was 12 individual qualitative interviews, which lasted between 20 minutes and two hours, combining a semi-structured schedule with unstructured techniques (Mason 2002:62, Robson 2002: 270-271). This was appropriate to the research aims since it generated rich qualitative data, and provided access to participants’ accounts which would not have been possible with standardized quantitative techniques such as questionnaire surveys (Morgan 1997:11, Mason 2002: 63-64, 66, Robson 2002: 271). The semi-structured schedule allowed the interviewer keep the discussion relevant (May 2001:123, Mason 2002:62, Robson 2002: 270), whilst participants could speak in their own terms and so to an extent, structure the nature of the data (May 2001:123). This facilitated the discovery of new understandings which challenged theoretical preconceptions (May 2001:124). It was evident that the personal character of the research stipulated that in-depth qualitative interviews were the only feasible method for addressing the research aims (May 2001:135).

The interview schedule\(^1\) was constructed with reference to relevant literature, and included open-ended questions on Use of Voice and Traditional Gender Ideology. Pilot interviews were conducted, used to design an effective schedule, and provided experience in rapport-building

\(^1\) See Appendix I
Open-ended questions facilitated co-operation, disclosure and the generation of in-depth data (May 2001: 130, Robson 2002: 275-276). Probes were used to encourage detailed responses in areas of relevance in a flexible, personally tailored and natural way which would not have been possible with methods such as postal questionnaires (May 2001:123, 129, Mason 2002: 64, Robson 2002: 272-273, 276). Interviews were audio recorded and observational notes were made during and immediately after each session.

Shortcomings of qualitative interviews, such as the likelihood of social desirability effects, were related to the nature of the project. For example Duncombe and Marsden (1993: 224) document the social pressure to present intimate relationships in a positive light. These effects were reduced through emphasizing the common experience of ‘bad’ relationships, and by the shared social characteristics of interviewer and interviewees which encouraged good rapport and disclosure (May 2001:136). Further issues included the impossibility of exact repetition, and consequential unreliability (Robson 2002: 273) of this method. However, one of the epistemological positions adopted in this project was that bias in data collection is never completely avoidable (Mason 2002: 65). As such total standardization was rejected in favour of efforts to understand the un-standard interaction of semi-structured interviews (Ibid).

Preliminary group interviews were attempted in order to explore the range of respondents’ experiences and assist with the schedule design (Morgan 1997:18, 22, 30). This was an appropriate method, allowing a large amount of data to be gathered relatively quickly (Morgan 1997: 11) and worked well in conjunction with individual interviews (Robson 2002: 287). Robson (2002: 284) argues that the group interview has “emancipatory potential” and this was appropriate to the research aims. In practice however the ‘groups’ were reduced to three sets of paired interviews which lasted between 45 minutes and two hours, and provided useful data and experience for individual interview schedule design. The practice of presenting men as child-like was a recurrent theme in initial interviews, so was subsequently included in individual interviews. This demonstrated the reflexive adaptation and production of unanticipated data enabled by qualitative techniques (Robson 2002: 276).

3.4 Analysis

Analysis began with the thematic notes made during data collection (Kvale 1996:83, May 2001:124). Initial interviews were transcribed verbatim, involving immersion in the raw data (Robson 2007:130), revealing how participants spoke in addition to what was being said (Frith and Kitzinger 1998:301, May 2001:123) and facilitating reflexive evaluation of technique. Analytical notes were made during, and after, each transcription. Later interviews were partly transcribed, with passages of interest transcribed verbatim (Robson 2002:290 2007:131) according to the focus developed from literature and previous interviews. Practical issues were encountered, the quality of one recording was so poor as to render it effectively inaudible, and one paired interview tape was badly damaged. Since these incidences occurred late in data collection, the number of participants was effectively reduced to 15.

Interview data was not considered as reflecting pre-existing ‘facts’ (Mason 2002:64, Frith and Kitzinger 1998: 305-306) but as being constructed in the interaction of the interview context. Self report data was vital to the project aims (Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002:71) yet direct access to respondents’ experiences was not facilitated by the data, which rather constituted participants’ interpretations, memories, presentation and shared understandings of their relationships and their identity. Recognizing this was prerequisite for good qualitative analysis (May 2001:123) and was linked to the problems of identifying hidden power: How can research uncover processes of which the participants are supposedly unaware? This was addressed through a synthesis of established concepts, reflexive critique of the specific operationalizations.
of ‘power’, alertness to the constructedness of interview data and critical awareness of the imposition of order on chaos, rather than assuming that themes could simply “emerge” from the data (Frith and Kitzinger 1998:304).

Analysis was conducted in four thematic areas developed from literature in accordance with the threefold research aims. Firstly, the ‘Use of Voice’ and ‘Traditional Gender Ideology’ concepts were used to identify hidden gendered power, young women’s experiences of such power, and their strategies for contesting its operation. Extracts of discourse were coded accordingly and classified along two typologies as indicative of positions of power or powerlessness (Mason 2002:159-160). Secondly, these two concepts were developed into measures of power and applied to the data to question whether different operationalizations of ‘power’ produced different findings. Finally, young women’s experiences and contestation of power in their relationships were analysed in terms of the practice of ‘Infantalizing’ their partners. This analysis followed Frith and Kitzinger (1998:299-300, 309-310) by paying attention to what function “talk-in-interaction” served for respondents.

3.5 Ethical Issues

Ethical issues arose from the methodology and the specific nature of the project and included informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality (Mason 2002:79-81). Participants’ informed consent was sought through verbal and written explanations of the research and how data was to be used in reports. Respondents were made aware of their right to withdraw from the research (Mason 2002: 81) and anonymity was attempted through the use of pseudonyms, and by the omission and editing of personal details. Confidentiality was approached by careful handling of the data, and the researcher made sure not to disclose details to third parties. In paired interviews (Robson 2002:285) participants pledged to keep the interview content and other participant’s identity confidential and anonymous. These measures not only addressed potential ethical issues but assured participants that their accounts would be treated with respect and discretion, therefore encouraging them to feel at ease discussing personal experiences.

The personal nature of the data entailed further issues; focused questioning about intimate matters and the emphasis on negative aspects of relationships could have distressed participants (Mason 2002: 79). Sensitivity was therefore an essential interviewing skill. Ethical issues arose in the conflict between the social desirability of presenting a successful relationship and prompting to emphasize negative experiences. Duncombe and Marsden (1993:237) describe the dilemma of encouraging conscious articulation of dissatisfactions, which may lead to relationship termination. Over-disclosure was also an issue; participants may have revealed personal experiences of, for example, violence or sexual abuse (Mason 2002:80) or sought out the personal advice of the interviewer (Benjamin 1998:776). Participants were provided with useful contact numbers where such experiences may be discussed. These issues were considered and continually addressed throughout the project, through reflexive adaptation of interviews to the perceived needs of individual participants.

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See Appendix II

See Appendix II

Which participants were encouraged to choose themselves, creating a relaxed and humorous atmosphere.

See Appendix III and IV

See Appendix V

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4. Research Findings
The data offered multiple possibilities of analysis and interpretation, however, guided by the literature review, and in order to address the threefold aims of the research, the data were analysed in terms of four key themes: ‘Use of Voice’, ‘Traditional Gender Ideology’, ‘Conceptual Issues’ and ‘Infantalizing’.

4.1. Use of Voice
The literature review established the importance of Use of Voice for identifying power. Incidences in participants’ accounts of:
- Vocalizing desires, needs and wants,
- Openly expressing dissatisfaction, annoyance, anger and upset,
- Overtly attempting to initiate change in the relationship through direct communication
were taken as indicators of Use of Voice. Three levels of Use of Voice were identified, and reported strategies for using Voice effectively were also explored.

4.1.1 Effective Use of Voice
Participants’ awareness of Voice was inferred from accounts in which, without being prompted to do so, respondents spoke in ways consistent with what Lukes (2005) and Hirschman’s (1970) theories might lead us to expect. Respondents reported extensive expression of dissatisfactions, and these accounts ranged from an emphasis on mutual communication:

“Yeah, of course I’d try and change it [if dissatisfied with something] but I think we’d try and change it together, I would sit down, if I had a problem with something I’d sit down and say to him I have a problem with this…and I wouldn’t go behind his back or be sneaky about changing things.”

Jane

“I’m really big on communication, if I have a problem I will say it, and just try to find a compromise or just talk it out to see if we could make some sort of change for the better, just be direct, get the problem out there, communicate what it is.”

Charlotte

Through to claims of authority and assertiveness:

“He kept trying to change the subject, he probably wanted to make out with me or something, but I was like ’no we’re going to have a serious discussion about this’, so we did.”

Trixie

“When you first start a relationship you have so much more power to tell them what you expect and what the boundaries are, I’ve always said ‘I’m going to be like this’ on the first or second date or ‘look I can be a basket case and I need to know you’re the sort of person who can accept that.’”

Melody
“If I’m upset or angry, I will tell them and express what I want and how I feel.”

Susie

In contrast to Benjamin’s (1998:771) and Komter’s (1989:192, 1991:59-60) conclusions that hidden power inhibited women’s Voice, these statements demonstrated the willingness of some respondents to use Voice, not only to express opinions and emotions, but also to initiate material changes in their relationships. Any observer who wished to argue for the universality of hidden, gendered power routinely disadvantaging young women in intimate relationships would need to demonstrate that these participants were systematically mistaken (for example through false consciousness) in their accounts of their abilities to use Voice with positive outcomes.

Duncombe and Marsden (1993:237) argue that emotional communication and women’s Use of Voice, especially with a non-communicative male partner, are indicative of powerlessness rather than power. However, Duncombe and Marsden assert, rather than demonstrate, this operation of power (Frith and Kitzinger 1998:304), and it appeared unlikely that power could be exercised on the basis of silence and “emotional remoteness” (Duncombe and Marsden 1993:236) alone, since it would prove difficult to discern what the ‘power exerciser’ actually wanted. At the very least such power would have to depend on other bases (such as external economic, political and cultural resources) for its operation and this is an area for further research.

Moreover, no less than two thirds of respondents volunteered the opinion that “airing grievances” (Lukes 2005:11, 22-23, 40) was a successful and appropriate way to realize one’s will and influence the relationship:

“I’d probably bring it up, I’d be the one to bring it up, it’s nearly always me that mentions stuff, I will say ‘look can we talk about this’ and even if he doesn’t agree with what I’m saying he’ll listen to what I have to say, I just sort of bring it up and then it gets talked about, and that’s it, I’d say nine times out of ten we can sort things out, come to a compromise and the issue gets resolved.”

Paige

“I think from me getting annoyed in the past, and telling him, he’s realised now so he always tells me now if he’s going to be late.”

Susie

Respondents reported instigating effective communication that led to desirable outcomes such as compromise or changes in partners’ behaviour. This not only cast doubt on some of the arguments proposed by Benjamin (1998), Duncombe and Marsden (1993) and Komter (1989) by failing to demonstrate hidden gendered power operating to inhibit Use of Voice, but supported Hirschman’s (1970:26-29) assertion that Use of Voice is the most effective method of expressing dissatisfaction.

4.1.2 Ineffective Use of Voice

The data included accounts of unsuccessful Use of Voice:

“I think I try and initiate it [sex] all the time, but he says that I don’t, he must just not notice, I say to him all the time that I’d like us to have more sex but it doesn’t make any difference.”
Lee

“I worry about him health-wise, you can’t live that lifestyle [excessive drinking and drug use] for long, I tried to speak to him about it before but he was like ‘if you don’t like it you can fuck off’ so I might try and speak to his brother and see what he says.”

Lee

“One night after we’d been out he took me back to his and I said I didn’t want to have sex with him and he said that was okay, but then without making any effort to find out if I wanted him to he put his willy up my bum, and I didn’t want him to, like I really didn’t want him to.”

Maude

“Yeah I told him how much it pissed me off but he really didn’t care, I mean after it got to like the fourth time or something I realised that there wasn’t really anything I could do, so I just kind of had to take it and chill out a bit.”

Wanda

Here, Use of Voice could be thwarted by unresponsive partners, despite participants’ commitment to Use of Voice (“talking things through” or “expressing myself”) as the most effective method of dealing with dissatisfaction. An operation of power could be identified in that effective Use of Voice was prevented; although grievances were aired, they were not addressed, listened to or acted upon, reminiscent of Komter’s (1989:205) “male strategy of ignoring”. However, deducing the operation of hidden power here is problematic since these respondents appeared aware of their partners’ resistance to their attempts to initiate change. Similarly there were issues concerning the distribution of power, although Lee’s boyfriend appears to deny her expressed desires for “more sex” it cannot be known if he, in fact, has an unexpressed desire for less sex, or if their present level of sex is the result of an implicit compromise.

‘Ineffective Use of Voice’ was well illustrated by the data; one participant described failed attempts to use her Voice:

“I realised that I didn’t know how to express what I wanted, he always used to say ‘the thing with you is you don’t know what you want’ I did know what I wanted I just didn’t know how to express it.”

Roxanne

“I think I did censor myself, at a very profound level with my ex-boyfriend, I was so, I just didn’t know what I wanted, I felt very trapped, I felt really angsty, I didn’t know what I wanted but I knew that whatever it was it would be laughed at or scorned at [by ex-boyfriend] or whatever and so I would explain what I wanted in a very bad way, which even if he had been interested in he wouldn’t have been able to understand.”

Roxanne
This pointed to the complex dynamics of interpersonal interaction and suggested the operation of hidden barriers to effective Use of Voice. It appeared that there were many graduations in Use of Voice rather than a simple ‘voice’/’no voice’ dichotomy. Roxanne’s account could indicate a difficulty in articulating preference (Komter 1989:201) especially in regard to her anticipation of a negative reaction. Major epistemological difficulties occur here, since the ‘only’ evidence we had was Roxanne’s account, who herself states that she could not articulate her desires and that “I just didn’t know what I wanted”, how then can we identify power?

Following Lukes (2005), it could be argued that Roxanne exhibited a form of false consciousness in ‘not knowing’ what she wanted. Roxanne could be unaware of her own real interests, and her statements could indicate patriarchal power structuring her “very wants” (Lukes 2005:27), preventing her from “even thinking” (Ibid: 50) in ways that would challenge her boyfriend’s interests. Equally, we could follow Craib (1994) and look to internal psychodynamics and focus on processes such as unconscious desires, which could remain unarticulated even to Roxanne herself. However, this would require an understanding of Roxanne’s internal mental processes, and it is very difficult, if not impossible for an external observer to achieve this.

Roxanne’s statements appeared consistent with two contradictory theories of intimacy and power, presented schematically here, both of which were problematic to operationalize since they entailed the assumption that knowledge of internal processes, whether false consciousness or unconsciousness, could be generated. This raised epistemological and methodological issues, as well as simultaneously removing, by degree, Roxanne’s subjectivity and agency in knowing her own interests and desires.

However, Roxanne’s second statement could be interpreted as evidence of hidden power inhibiting effective Use of Voice through her expectation of negative consequences, as documented by Benjamin (1998), Duncombe and Marsden (1993) and Komter (1989). Unfortunately the origins of such self censorship are unclear, and it is debatable whether the impetus for non-expression comes from Roxanne, her partner, or other sources. Regardless of the motivations for self-censorship the question remains as to why Roxanne and others remain in relationships where their Use of Voice is so prohibited and this is an area for further research.

4.1.3 No Use of Voice
A number of participants described deliberately not using their Voice, in anticipation of negative reactions and consequences:

“I can’t talk about the relationship, I’m terrible at it, I can never talk about what makes me angry, I think partly it’s the fear of being dumped, I never talk about anything important, I think I’m just worried about the bad answers so I just avoid it.”

Wanda

“I just didn’t want to say, I was absolutely terrified because I was like what if I say but then he doesn’t feel the same way? And I guess it would have got to a point where I’d have had to say something but I just found it really hard.”

Molly
This related to Lukes’ (2005: 11, 22-23, 40) theory of power operating to prevent the airing of grievances and Komter’s (1989:192) conclusion that expectation of negative reactions can prevent women from expressing desire and dissatisfaction. Benjamin (1998:779) proposes that Use of Voice is inhibited by partners’ ridicule or intimidation, and that women avoid discussing personal wishes in order to maintain relationship stability (Ibid: 774 and see Komter 1989:198, 200, 202). These processes were evident in some accounts and seemed to indicate power operating to inhibit respondents’ Use of Voice. Although consistent with theory and previous research, the extent to which ‘fear of jeopardizing the relationship’ and ‘anticipation of negative consequences’ were gendered was ambiguous. For example, perhaps young men censor themselves for similar reasons and this is in need of further investigation. Similarly, the extent to which these processes were hidden was questionable; respondents recognized their ‘Non-Use of Voice’, yet they did not describe it in terms of power and may not have recognized it as such.

Resignation was identified as another motivation for not using Voice:

“I just tend to let things slide though, it’s just what I do, there’s no point arguing about stuff, especially if it won’t make any difference anyway.”

Jude

“I know there’s no point in getting annoyed about it, he just doesn’t register, so I can either leave it [the mess] there or put it away but if I try and project my annoyance on to him he’s just going to get really pissed off.”

Melody

“If I get dumped I just pretend it’s okay, and I always pretend everything’s okay, when really it might not be, I never fight back or ask any questions.”

Wanda

This theme was recurrent in the data, Use of Voice was inhibited by the expectation that it “won’t make any difference anyway”, and was precluded by experiences of being unable to influence the relationship. Komter (1989:190, 192, 200, 202-203 1991:59) found that resignation could lead to a ‘loss of voice’, especially in conjunction with fears of jeopardizing the relationship. This can be seen in Wanda’s “fear of being dumped” and discouraged respondents from vocalizing dissatisfaction and expressing anger. According to the conceptual framework adopted, this put some participants at a disadvantage and positioned them as relatively powerless in their relationships. However, it seemed that this process cannot reasonably be understood as ‘hidden’ since respondents’ accounts demonstrated awareness of their choice to refrain from vocalizing dissatisfactions and participants also cited their motivations and justification for doing so. Furthermore, it could perhaps be argued that this resignation indicated collusion with patriarchy, however it was unclear whether the data merited such an assertion since although resignation presented no overt challenge to the operation of this type of power, it did not actively support it either.

Additionally, the gendering of this process was ambiguous since not only was there uncertainty as to whether young men experienced similar ‘fear of jeopardizing the relationship’, but this kind of power could be gendered in various ways depending on the social context in which intimacy is situated. For example, when one gender has privileged access to economic, political and cultural resources (such as rights to employment, civic participation and education) the
other is effectively dependent on the relationship’s continuation, has more to ‘fear’ in terms of its termination and exiting (Hirschman 1970) the relationship is a more constrained possibility. In such a context this operation of power could be unambiguously understood as gendered. In the population studied, however, deliberately selected for the absence of inequitable access to such material constraints and dependencies, the possibility of exiting the relationship and searching for a new one should be far less constrained.

However, in this context resignation was understood as indicating an operation of power, since respondents were resigned to the conditions of their current relationships and saw little chance of forming future relationships in which they could use their Voice effectively. Thus the power to exit (or threaten to exit) the relationship in the hope of finding a preferable alternative became redundant, and this can be linked to the operation of Traditional Gender Ideology; a belief that ‘men’ generally do not listen precluded the belief that a preferable alternative relationship could be found and thus inhibited the possibility of initiating change. This seemed to present a case for resignation, in conjunction with Traditional Gender Ideology, as indicating an operation of gendered power in respondents’ intimate heterosexual relationships.

4.1.4 Use of Voice: Tactics and Strategies
Respondents reported strategies for when and how to use Voice, including an emphasis on timing and “picking your battles”:

“Definitely pick your battles, I think with {boyfriend} if you nip at him all the time it does dilute the power of the nip, it’s not as effective.”

Melody

“I’ll sort of tolerate things until I’m actually grumpy, so I’ll get over little things and not say anything and let them pass because I won’t want to have an argument, but then if something does properly annoy me I will bring it up, but it tends to be more of a accumulation of things that I’ve let slide.”

Maude

“I used to keep my feelings to myself a bit, but that’s not what you want in a relationship, it’s ok to keep your feelings on hold to talk about when you have the time though.”

Roxanne

“I guess in my current relationship I’m quite open on the whole, I don’t keep my feelings under control but I’ll just save them for the right time and place.”

Maude

This strategy of choosing what to be annoyed about and how to express it was reported by some participants alongside presentations of themselves as sophisticated negotiators of intimacy, with knowledge of how to initiate change in their relationships. This challenged notions of powerless femininity and demonstrated a position of relative power. As Frith and Kitzinger (1998:300) propose, this data was constructed in the interview context and performed functions for participants in terms of identity management and presentation (see section 4.4). The ‘timing’ tactic had an additional dimension, the length of the relationship:
“I think with short term relationships, ideally if there are problems then just forget about them, all my relationships that have ended, it’s always been the short ones where if they were being inconsiderate I was just like ‘well I’ll deal with it for a bit’, it’s only when I’m comfortable enough that they’re not going to turn around and walk away from me that I actually would confront them.”

Janet

“I think it’s very much a time thing as well, like once you’ve been in a relationship for a year or something then I think boundaries and that kind of thing become much less of an issue, and you can just be yourself. But if you’re in the first six months or so, I feel that I have to put on a certain person and maybe hold back some of the real person, just so you don’t scare them off.”

Louise

These quotes again illustrated the inhibiting effect of “fear of jeopardizing the relationship” (Komter 1991:59) on Voice and demonstrated the experience of this type of power. The relationship between ‘voice’ and ‘loyalty’ was also visible here. Hirschman (1970:77, 82) proposes that as feelings of loyalty for a social relationship increase, the use of the voice function expands. It appeared that the mechanism preventing Use of Voice operated more in the early stages of intimacy, when respondents’ loyalty to the relationship was relatively low and the ‘costs’ of leaving were presumably few. Respondents claimed to experience the effects of this type of power less in long term relationships, or when feelings of loyalty were such that the relationship was not jeopardized by expressions of desire and dissatisfaction.

To summarize, participants reported various experiences, with two thirds describing their Use of Voice as effective and claiming belief in the efficiency of this method of initiating change. Five participants gave accounts of ineffective or no Use of Voice due to: anticipation of negative reactions, fear of jeopardizing the relationship and resignation to the existing state of affairs. Overall, with particular exceptions, participants seemed to occupy a relative position of power when ‘power’ was conceptualized as effective Use of Voice. Strategies including timing, ‘picking battles’ and acting according to the duration of the relationship illustrated participants’ contestation of power which might operate to inhibit their effective Use of Voice. These findings addressed the first and second research aims and both supported and contested the theories that formed the basis of analytic procedure used here, pointing to the debates on how power can be understood as gendered or identified as hidden.

4.2. Traditional Gender Ideology

Background literature pointed to the importance of Traditional Gender Ideology in exploring hidden gendered power. Respondents’ use of traditional ideas about masculinity and femininity were classified according to a continuum ranging from total rejection, through critical awareness, to uncritical use and acceptance of Traditional Gender Ideology.

4.2.1 Total Rejection

A minority, three participants, reported high levels of awareness and rejection of traditional proscriptions for gendered behaviour:
“If I’m annoyed about something, he knows about it, I never try and hide my anger, not through a lack of self control; I just don’t really see why I should.”

Jane

“Traditional roles just don’t come into it, I chased him at the start, I phoned him up and I text him and I said to him ‘oh be my boyfriend’ and I told him that I loved him before he told me and stuff like that.”

Lilly

“You don’t want them to say yeah she called me three times last week, that’s not how you’re supposed to come across, you’re supposed to be not interested, which is just nonsense, I’ve always seen right through that and said it’s nonsense.”

Melody

These reported rejection of traditional feminine behaviour could be seen as a challenge to what Benjamin (1998:774, 779) describes as the shaping of relationships by ideological “institutional frameworks” of gendered expectations. The last two quotes rejected the popular belief that, in relationship initiation, men should be the active ‘chasers’ and women the passive ‘chased’. For the purposes at hand, the passivity implied by this understanding of femininity can be understood as indicative of powerlessness. By rejecting such understandings of traditional gender roles some participants challenged ideological norms and values that otherwise could position them as powerless. However, it could be argued that young women are powerful since they can ‘wait for him to come to me’, this demonstrates the contradictions of investigating power, a concept which seemed to vary as a function of the theories operationalized to identify it.

4.2.2 Critical Awareness
Another three participants, in addition to those who rejected Traditional Gender Ideology, demonstrated critical engagement:

“I’ve always been aware of being a girl and how that’s affected things, like if you do the slightest thing then you’re going to get called a bunny boiler, now how the fuck could that make sense I really don’t know, but if you call someone twice in one week then you’re a bunny boiler, if you try and take charge then you’re a bunny boiler, if you get angry, in fact if you try and express anything at all, you’re a bunny boiler. I think it’s just a thing that men say to make us back off, it’s like a warning sign.”

Melody

“There are definitely double standards I think, they’re not spoken about but they’re always there.”

Lee

“I do think that a large part of the argument is to do with these internalised roles but it’s so freaking annoying! It’d be nice if things just changed.”
This awareness could be seen as a resource enabling some respondents to negotiate a position of relative power. Through critically engaging with legitimating Traditional Gender Ideology participants challenged their “role in the existing order of things” (Lukes 2005:11), by contesting ideological power that could naturalize a position of relative powerlessness. Participants’ awareness of Traditional Gender Ideology counted against understanding this type of power as hidden, however, this was not the case for all respondents, as demonstrated below.

4.2.3 Uncritical Acceptance and Use

A slight majority of eight respondents uncritically used popular understandings of gender to excuse behaviour and attitudes that they found unacceptable in their partners:

“I think a lot of women expect them [men] to intuitively know things, because we would, he doesn’t realise stuff and that annoys me, but I’m not sure if that’s just him or actually quite a few men, I don’t think they’re as caring about others around them, men just don’t seem to be as sensitive as women.”

Susie

“He’s not very good at caring for people, I guess just because he’s a guy.”

Lilly

“I guess it’s not fair for me to expect him to be different to the rest of the men in the world and actually see these things [that cleaning needs to be done].”

Molly

“It just didn’t occur to him that that was something that would hurt me, but I think that’s just guys in general, I think girls are a lot more emotional, and ultimately, you can’t really change guys.”

Janet

Used uncritically to explain behaviour, Traditional Gender Ideology precluded the contestation of attitudes that respondents found unacceptable, encouraging acceptance of the “existing order of things” (Lukes 2005:11). By offering excuses for partners’ disagreeable behaviour such as ‘all men are inconsiderate, unobservant and insensitive’, Traditional Gender Ideology could naturalize such behaviours as inevitable. Some participants were positioned to tolerate, rather than change, objectionable behaviour in order to conduct successful heterosexual relationships. Although respondents experienced this in a variety of ways, there was only limited contestation in terms of rejecting dominant gender ideology.

The above findings attended to the first two research aims by demonstrating the variety of ways that Traditional Gender Ideology structured respondents’ accounts. However, whether or not this power mechanism was gendered was again contestable. Although the effects of Traditional Gender Ideology, by their very nature, have differential impact depending upon gender, further investigation is required to explore how such mechanisms structure young men’s accounts. Additionally, this operation of power was characterized as more hidden than Use of Voice. Although respondents were aware of a discourse of gender differences a majority did not
question gender ideology and its implications. However, this type of power may be better understood as naturalized rather than totally hidden. It is noteworthy that some recognition of gender difference was framed in terms of male inferiority, this practice is given further consideration as Infantilizing in section 4.4.

4.3 Conceptual Issues

Use of Voice and Traditional Gender Ideology were developed into measures of power and applied to the data in order to discover whether different measures of power yielded different findings, and to explore the complexity of operationalizing ‘power’ for empirical research into intimate relationships.

Participants’ accounts describing ineffective or no Use of Voice and acceptance of Traditional Gender Ideology were taken as evidence of an operation of power and a position of relative powerlessness. Effective Use of Voice and critical awareness or rejection of Traditional Gender Ideology were taken as evidence of respondents’ contestation of hidden gendered power and a position of relative power. If researching power in intimate relationships was epistemologically straightforward then both measures would produce similar results. Conversely, if the different measures yielded conflicting results this would demonstrate the difficulty of operationalizing power in this empirical context. If this was the case then participants’ accounts could simultaneously be interpreted as indicative of power and powerlessness, for example reports of effective Use of Voice would be evident alongside acceptance of Traditional Gender Ideology.

Contradictions in the data soon became apparent. For example:

“I shout and I don’t want to be like ‘oh that’s okay’ I want to know why, why didn’t you call me, I ask the direct question, and I fully express why I’m annoyed and what I want him to do in future, then I think we resolve things by talking them through.”

Janet

Viewed through the theoretical lens of ‘power as effective Use of Voice’ this indicated a position of relative power. However, the same participant’s use of Traditional Gender Ideology was measured differently:

“I’ve never asked for someone’s number, I don’t think I could ask someone out or say ‘I love you’ first, I’d prefer the man to say it first, I think it’s just their place.”

Janet

This statement was interpreted as indicating the operation of power and Janet was classified as experiencing a position of relative powerlessness when her account was measured according to Traditional Gender Ideology. This juxtaposition revealed some of the assumptions made in social research on power in this context; namely that ‘power’ can be empirically defined and identified. Contradictions were also discovered by applying two measures to the participants as a group. Nine participants occupied relative positions of power when ‘power’ was measured by Use of Voice. However, when measured according to Traditional Gender Ideology only six participants’ were classified as occupying positions of relative power.

Table 1. presents respondents classified according to whether they occupied positions of power according to the two measures.
Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Powerful according to Use of Voice?</th>
<th>Powerful according to Traditional Gender Ideology?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Charlotte</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janet</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jude</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lee</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lilly</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louise</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maude</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melody</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Molly</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paige</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roxanne(^7)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susie</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trixie</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wanda</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Nine participants occupy a relative position of power.</td>
<td>Six participants occupy a relative position of power.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although the data was rich and varied provisional decisions were possible as to whether, overall, participants’ accounts indicated a relative position of power. As Table 1. demonstrates, there was a lack of correspondence between the measures; depending on the theoretical operationalization of power adopted, different results were generated.

These findings have a number of implications. Firstly, theoretical conceptualizations of power were highly problematic to operationalize and thus are not fully open to empirical testing. The complexities involved in the empirical investigation of power present a considerable challenge to understanding the relationships between power, gender and intimacy. Secondly, such complexity could be interpreted as straightforwardly reflecting of the chaos of ‘empirical reality’ and the messiness of interpersonal relationships. Finally, the difficulty of identifying power in intimate relationships could be a consequence of ‘power’ as a concept being primarily designed for application to the public sphere of business, governments and international relations. Perhaps ‘power’ is only measurable at the macro level, hence the problems encountered when applying the concept to intimate relationships. This is not to argue that ‘power’ does not operate in this context, or that it is not structured by gender, nor that its effects are not experienced as disadvantageous by young women, far from it. Rather it suggests that power structures the wider context in which relationships are conducted, instead of being a product of the relationship itself. Despite the difficulties in operationalizing ‘power’ we should not conclude that it does not exist, or that as a concept it is wholly constructed by the analyst.

\(^7\) Roxanne’s responses were almost evenly split in classification as ‘powerful’ and ‘powerless’ according to both measures, and as such have been omitted from this table.
This exercise addressed the aim of exploring the epistemological complexity of operationalizing power in the context of intimate relationships. The data demonstrated that equally coherent operationalizations of power, developed from theory and with precedents in previous research, produced contradictory results. This casts doubt on the ability of social research to identify power at the micro level of intimate relationships, yet leaves open the possibility that power operates in such relationships through the macro context in which they are embedded.

4.4 ‘Infantalizing’

Infantalizing was identified as a theme in the data whereby participants used metaphors of adult and child roles such as “baby sitting” when describing their relationships and presented partners as child-like or infantile. This related to Frith and Kitzinger’s (1998:299) proposal that interview data should be understood as “talk-in-interaction” serving specific functions for interviewees (Ibid: 300, 307, 310) who construct “consensual versions” (Ibid: 300, 307) of, for example, heterosexual relationships. Infantalizing was therefore analysed in terms of how participants presented their experiences in the interview context. This addressed the research aim of illustrating how young women experienced and contested power in their relationships. Through the practise of infantalizing participants were able to present themselves as capable, responsible adults, successfully negotiating complex worlds of intimacy and simultaneously cast their partners and ex-partners as vulnerable, immature, dependent, needy and emotionally infantile:

“He’s a bit like a boy, a little kid, like he needs that assurance that he’s doing something right, I think sometimes I’m quite motherly of him.”

Susie

“I was working one day and I came home and I got a guided tour of the flat from [boyfriend] who was like ‘look at all the cleaning I’ve done, look I cleaned the shower’ he was like a little kid needing to be told ‘well done’ and I was like ‘well I do this every day!’”

Molly

Participants thus discursively positioned themselves in the ‘babysitting’ role which enabled some respondents to present themselves as emotionally stronger (Frith and Kitzinger 1998 311) and more responsible than their partners and challenged stereotypes about men and women’s emotional needs and dependences in relationships. Frith and Kitzinger (1998:315) argue that to understand the function of young women’s talk-in-interaction we must look at alternative possible understandings which it may function to dispute. In this case it seemed some respondents were disrupting understandings of heterosexuality which positioned them as powerless, needy or dependent:

“He’s more like a child than anything else, I always sorted things out for him, I spent quite a lot of time making sure he was happy, if he was sad I’d make sure I could make him happy…Oh yes I looked after him, I’d make him dinner, take him to the groceries, pay his electricity bill, I do look after him, make sure he eats, I don’t know why, it’s a bit like babysitting sometimes, I always

Although it is noteworthy here that Molly’s quote could be interpreted as simultaneously reinforcing gender stereotypes, for example, ‘men’ are no good at housework. This could, depending on theoretical and epistemological stance, be taken as evidence of a relative position of powerlessness.
tried to look after him and to, tried to get something [emotional] out of him, I kind of felt obligated to do these things, he made it clear he had no family ties.”

Wanda

“He will eat something and then wipe his hand on the couch, now I can wash his clothes, he’s got a pile of paper towels on his knee, the only thing we can’t wash is the fucking couch! I tell him off and he goes ‘I’m really sorry’ and he knows not to do it but he still does! It’s a mum position it really is, I take responsibility for everything.”

Melody

In their “versions” (Frith and Kitzinger 1998:300) respondents were able to contest dominant understandings of power in intimate relationships, negotiate their experience of power and perhaps compensate for any undesirable position responsibility they may feel that they held. A methodological implication of this was that if respondents discursively present themselves as powerful agents, how is it then possible to identify hidden gendered power? This dilemma was addressed with reference to the wealth of data indicating experiences of powerlessness and by attending to the dominant understandings of heterosexuality that some young women’s accounts contested and disrupted. Primarily, it was helpful to examine the complexity and contradictions of the ‘adult/child’ analogy.

The contradictions of Infantalizing illustrate the problems of empirically identifying power in intimate relationships. If we consider adult/child relationships it appears initially that the ‘adult’ is powerful since they have the authority to issue commands and control behaviour. However, the ‘child’ can also occupy a position of power since, ultimately, it is their needs and interests that the relationship functions to satisfy. For example, although the ‘adult’ can (in theory) decide what time the child goes to bed, they are obligated to satisfy the child’s physical, social and emotional needs. This further demonstrated how the power identified in intimate relationships varies as a function of the conceptual tools used to detect it.

Other examples of the adult/child metaphor are illuminating here. Nineteenth century patriarchalists promoted conceptions of femininity that compared women to children in terms of naivety, dependence and protection. This appears to be those who ‘have’ power infantalizing more powerless members of society. It is also interesting to try the thought experiment of imagining young men infantalizing their partners. For example:

“[boyfriend] does all the dishes and then I go and check them and make him do most of them again, I’m not letting him off with ‘oh I can’t do it’ its just not going to happen, he’ll just wash those glasses five times until I can see my face in them.”

Melody

Imagine a young man checking that his girlfriend had done housework properly, and implying that she was incapable of such adult tasks, and the image created is one of control and domination. This scenario, implausibility aside, would meet a popular response of unacceptability, yet when a young woman describes such as domestic arrangement the reaction prompted seems to be light, indulgent humour. Perhaps some respondents could ‘get away’
with infantilizing their partners since young women are implicitly disadvantaged in heterosexual relationships, so are permitted the cultural reversal of disparaging men through ideas of immaturity, dependence and incompetence in domestic labour.

These findings, firstly, reiterated the contradictions that arise from attempts to identify power in intimate relationships, with power’s ‘location’ shifting according to how it was conceptualized. Secondly, they demonstrated how respondents’ accounts were constructed in the interview context and functioned for participants’ identity management, presentation of self and construction of consensual stories of heterosexuality. Thirdly, they illustrated respondents’ reported experiences and demonstrated how unwanted positions of responsibility, alongside popular perceptions of young women as needy and dependent, were disputed in participants’ personal narratives of heterosexuality.

4.5 Summary

1) Some young women experienced power in their intimate heterosexual relationships as inhibiting their effective Use of Voice.
2) Despite this, a majority of participants reported using Voice effectively so were classified as occupying relative positions of power and as contesting power mechanisms that could operate to place them at a disadvantage.
3) Traditional Gender Ideology was indicative of gendered power in intimate heterosexual relationships. A majority of participants used traditional notions of gender uncritically and were classified as occupying a position of relative powerlessness.
4) However, a minority of participants reportedly rejected Traditional Gender Ideology, enabling them to challenge undesirable behaviour, and thus be classified as occupying a position of relative power.
5) Operationalizing concepts of ‘power’ for empirical use in the context of heterosexual intimacy was an epistemologically difficult and complex process. It was demonstrated that theoretically sound operationalizations of power produced contradictory findings. Existing literature has not taken enough account of this, and tends to assume the sufficiency of rather simplistic indicators of the operation of power.
6) Some respondents constructed consensual stories of power in intimacy, and challenged conceptions of themselves as powerless, through the practice of Infantilizing their partners, which also demonstrates the contradictory nature of power in intimate relationships.
5. Conclusions

This project endeavoured to identify the operation of hidden gendered power in young people’s intimate heterosexual relationships and to illustrate and qualitatively analyse young women’s experiences of such power. It was simultaneously undertaken to demonstrate the epistemological difficulties of the empirical operationalization of ‘power’ in the sphere of intimacy. A number of conclusions are now possible, these are outlined below, structured according to the original research aims.

5.1 Identifying and exploring mechanisms of hidden gendered power
Addressing the first research aim, it was found that a minority of respondents’ effective Use of Voice could be inhibited by mechanisms such as: anticipation of a partners’ negative reaction, resignation to ‘the way things are’, and fears of jeopardizing their relationship. These findings were consistent with the theories of Hirschman (1970) and Lukes (2005). It was evident, therefore, that power could operate to inhibit some young women’s Use of Voice. However, data indicated respondents’ awareness of such power mechanisms and it was therefore unreasonable to conclude that this constituted an operation of hidden power. It was unclear as to whether such power was patterned by gender and further investigation is required to determine whether young men experience similar inhibition of Voice.

Traditional Gender Ideology was used by a majority of respondents to naturalize, legitimize and ultimately excuse behaviour and situations that they found unacceptable and might otherwise act to change. This was interpreted as a mechanism of ideological power operating to ensure acceptance of one’s “role in the existing order of things” (Lukes 2005: 11, 28) and resignation to “the existing state of affairs” (Komter 1989:203). Respondents’ resignation to the impossibility of exerting influence prevented attempts to improve the relationship or to exit and search for a new one. The rationale behind such resignation was relevant to understanding this power as gendered; if all men were thought to be inherently and inevitably the same and it followed that there was no preferable alternative or possibility of improvement for young women, then this could be taken as evidence of gendered power. Again, these findings are in need of critical appraisal to determine whether the effects of Traditional Gender Ideology constituted a hidden operation of power. Some respondents seemed unaware of this type of power, although perhaps such processes are better understood as naturalizing, rather than completely hidden, since other participants demonstrated critical awareness of their operation.

This project provided no conclusive evidence for the one to one correspondence of hidden gendered power in respondents’ accounts of their relationships; that power operates according to gender does not imply that it is unobservable, and it cannot be inferred that because power may be hidden it is also gendered.

5.2 Illustrating how young women experience and contest hidden power
Attending to the second research aim, participants were found to contest disadvantaging processes in their relationships in a number of ways. A majority of nine participants reported effective Use of Voice, which was used to initiate positive change in their relationships. This did not support Benjamin’s (1998:771, 774, 782) conclusions which characterised power as inhibiting women’s Use of Voice, but fitted with Hirschman’s (1970:26-29) assertion that Use of Voice is the most effective way to express dissent. It is noteworthy here that Benjamin was researching power in the context of marriage, where material and structural constraints may have led to different results. Participants also described strategies to ensure their voice was effective. Similarly, a minority of three participants rejected Traditional Gender Ideology and
demonstrated a critical awareness of its operation. These findings were used to conclude that some respondents exerted influence in their relationships and challenged processes that might operate to place them at a disadvantage.

When the data was analysed as “talk-in-interaction” (Frith and Kitzinger 1998:299) it was found that participants presented themselves as powerful by Infantalizing their partners as needy, dependent and emotionally immature. This demonstrated how some respondents constructed versions of their relationships which contested understandings that positioned young women as powerless. The Infantalizing theme demonstrated the contradictions of empirically identifying power in intimate relationships, namely that both the metaphorical ‘dependent’ and ‘caregiver’ can be seen as powerful depending on how ‘power’ is conceptualized. This leads on to the third and final research aim.

5.3 Exploring conceptual issues: Does the operationalization of different theoretical conceptualizations of power produce different empirical results?

This aim was addressed by applying two theoretically grounded measures of power to the data. It was found that, as individuals and as a group, participants could be classified as ‘relatively powerful’ by one measure of power and simultaneously as ‘relatively powerless’ according to the other. This illustrated the difficulties inherent to operationalizing the “essentially contested” (Lukes 2005:61-62) concept of power and demonstrated the illusive nature of ‘power’ when empirical measurement is attempted in the context of intimate relationships.

The primary significance of this finding was the demonstration that two theoretically plausible measures of power with precedents in previous research produced different and contradictory results. This casts doubt on the ability of social research to identify power in intimate relationships and problematizes previous research and approaches to operationalizing ‘power’ in this context, which can be seen to adopt simplistic conceptualizations of power and lack explicit discussion of their development and application. Convincing theory is thrown into question by the demonstration that empirical results are dependent on the theory adopted. This raises questions, such as: Why was power in intimate heterosexual relationships problematic to operationalize when feminist common sense, theory and previous research lead us to believe that something like power must operate in this context? Why can we not measure consistently, with theoretically grounded tools, power in intimate heterosexual relationships?

The answers to these questions can take two directions. Firstly, existing theory may be in need of revision in order to be applicable to intimate relationships, provide accurate measurements of power in this context and be subject to thorough empirical testing. Secondly, theory may be adequate but only applicable in the context of macro, public relations, and inappropriate to the interpersonal interactions of intimate relationships. Power in intimate relationships could be a function of the wider structural context in which such interactions are embedded, rather than a product of heterosexual intimacy itself. These conclusions were made possible by the research design and a population of young women who were relatively unconstrained by unequally gendered material and economic power resources. Giddens (1992:184) identifies the “democratization of personal life” in late modernity, yet these findings cast doubt on the adequacy of using concepts that refer explicitly to public processes and structures in the analysis of personal life. Perhaps the endeavour to identify power in intimacy needs to shift focus to the macro context in which relationships are situated, where systematic, unequal, gendered power structures the possibilities of the micro interactions of human intimacy.
5.4. Reflections on the research experience and suggestions for further research

Epistemological dilemmas were regularly encountered when addressing how to construct knowledge about hidden gendered power in intimate relationships. Although theoretical assumptions, personal expectations and ontological and epistemological presumptions undoubtedly shaped the nature of this project, attempts were made to explicitly examine these influences throughout the research process. The project combined an explicitly feminist interest in young women’s experiences of power with critique of previous research on the topic, and reflexively adapted according to the development of the guiding research aims, which was stimulated by a continual auto-critique of the operationalization of ‘power’. Although the wider generalizability, representativeness and replicability of the findings were unavoidably restricted these limitations were not fatal to the project, due to the explorative and illustrative nature of the research aims (Mason 2002:121, 126-127).

It was evident that this topic is in need of further investigation. This could take the form of researching young men’s experiences of power in intimacy and this would complement the conclusions drawn here on the hidden and gendered nature of power in intimate relationships. The research could be expanded and hidden gendered power could be researched with couples as the basic unit of investigation, taking into account both partners’ experiences of their relationship. Various data collection strategies could be employed, such as large scale standardized questionnaire surveys exploring whether the conclusions generated here hold out across more varied populations. Similar qualitative methodology could be used to explore similar phenomena in different populations, such as young women from under-privileged backgrounds or to investigate experiences of power in same-sex relationships. Moreover, other theories of power, for example Foucauldian theory, could be operationalized in the context of intimate relationships to further investigate the contradictions that arise when theory is applied in this empirical context.
Bibliography


Appendix I
Interview Schedule

Introduction
1. Explain purpose of research: used for dissertation, everyday, small scale operation of gendered power in intimate relationships
2. Explain process of [group] interview
3. Explain informed consent, do forms, explain how interview will be recorded and notes will be taken
4. Any questions
5. Refreshments

Section 1 – Use of Voice
Negotiation and relationship conversations, Experiences of current/most recent relationship.

1. What specifically like about partner and enjoy about relationship?
3. Is there anything in particular that annoys you? Any dissatisfactions?
4. What about disagreements/arguments/conflicts?

If you were dissatisfied with something would you try and change it?
If so, how?

What would happen? Avoid conflict/express wants/anticipate reaction/talk/compromise.

Section 2 – Use of Voice
Subjective preferences under hypothetical conditions of autonomy.
Ideal aspirations.

1. Ideally how would you like time/commitment/sex (refer to what previously discussed) to be in your relationship?
2. Ideally how would you like conflicts to be resolved?
3. If you could change anything at all about your relationship what would it be?

Section 3 – Traditional Gender Ideology

1. Do you feel any pressure to act in certain ways in intimate heterosexual relationships?
2. Are there things that you “just can’t do”? Or ways that you feel you should act? e.g. playing it cool, pretending not to care, not getting angry about certain things…controlling emotions
3. Do you feel like you sometimes have to keep your feelings under control?
Appendix I
Interview Schedule

End
1  Thank you
2  Debrief and further participation forms
3  Prize draw
4  Any questions
Appendix II
Informed Consent: Individual Interviews

Interview Information

{My name}
{My e-mail address}

Thank you for attending this interview.

The aim of this interview is to gather information on women’s experiences of power in heterosexual relationships for my undergraduate dissertation for a degree in sociology.

During this interview I am hoping to discuss the more everyday, less noticeable operations of power in heterosexual relationships. I am not investigating violence and abuse but rather smaller and more interpersonal power in young people’s intimate relationships.

If you wish to stop the interview at anytime, or have a break, please feel free to do so.

If you decide you no longer wish to take part in the study it is not a problem. Please tell me and the interview will be stopped and any information you have already given will be destroyed.

You are not obligated to answer any questions.

If you give me the consent to do so, extracts from your interview may be included in a final written report which I must submit as part of my degree programme. Analysed data may also be used in future projects and publications.

Any information that you give during the course of this interview will be treated in the strictest of confidence. I will not pass ANY information or details on to any third party or discuss the contents of the interview with anyone else.

By taking part in the interview you are also anonymous. Your name and identity will not be connected with any information you give me. When the final report is written details that could be personal to you (place names, dates etc.) will be changed.

If you decide you would like to do the interview please turn over the page to tick the boxes and sign below.
[ ] I have read and understood the above.

[ ] I consent to taking part in the interview.

[ ] I consent to extracts from my interview being used in written form as part of {My name}’s dissertation project and any subsequent research and publication.

Signed………………………………………………………………………………………………………………

Remember: You can withdraw from the research at any time.

************THANK YOU************
Thank you for attending this group interview and discussion.

The aim of this interview is to gather information on women’s experiences of power in heterosexual relationships for my undergraduate dissertation for a degree in sociology.

The specific aim of these group interviews is to discuss the more everyday, less noticeable operations of power in heterosexual relationships. I am not investigating violence or abuse in love relationships but rather smaller and more interpersonal power in intimate relationships.

If you wish to leave the discussion at any time, or have a break, please feel free to do so.

If you decide you no longer wish to take part in the research, it is not a problem. Simply tell me and any information you have already provided will be destroyed.

You are not obligated to answer any questions or be involved in any discussion.

If you give me the consent to do so, extracts from this interview will be recorded, noted down and may be included in a final written report which I must submit as part of my degree programme. Analysed data may also be used in future projects and publications.

All participants in this interview can be assured that I will treat any information you choose to share in the strictest of confidence. I will not pass ANY information on to third parties or discuss the contents of this group interview with anyone else.

However, since this is a group interview all participants also need to assure each other that what is said in the context of this discussion remains confidential and private. Any information or experiences that are shared should not be discussed anywhere else.

You will also be anonymous in any written report which uses extracts from this interview. Your name and identity will not be connected with any information you give me and no one else will be able to tell that you have taken part in this interview. When the final report is written details that could be personal to you (place names, dates etc.) will be changed or omitted. Additionally all participants should pledge to keep the identity of other participants private and confidential.

If you decide that you would like to take part in the interview/discussion please turn over the page to tick the boxes and sign.
Appendix III
Informed Consent: Paired Interviews

[ ] I have read and understood the above.

[ ] I will treat what other participants say, and their identity, in the strictest of confidence, I will not tell any third party about anything discussed in this interview.

[ ] I consent to taking part in the group interview.

[ ] I consent to extracts from my interview being used in written form as part of {My name}’s dissertation project and in any subsequent research and publication.

Signed.................................................................

Remember: You can withdraw from the research at any time.

************THANK YOU************
Ground Rules for Group Interview Discussions

{My name}
{My e-mail}

These are a few basic guidelines for taking part in the group interview.

1. Everything that is said during the course of the interview should remain confidential. You should not discuss what other participants have said with anyone outside the interview context. This way, everyone should feel comfortable taking about their thoughts, feelings and experiences.

2. Try not to interrupt when other people are talking. If you have something you’d really like to say try and hold on to it for later on.

3. Be sensitive and respect what other participants have to say. You might not agree with what other people think, but try to respect and understand each other’s opinions.

THANK YOU for taking part and please help yourself to refreshments.

**********************************************************************
******************
Interview Debrief

Thank you for participating in the interview, this sheet contains some information you may find useful, please keep it safe for future reference.

The information you provided during the interview will be used as part of my undergraduate dissertation on power in young people’s heterosexual relationships, which I am completing for a sociology degree at Edinburgh University.

All your responses will be used anonymously (your name and other details which could link to your identity will not appear in the report or be stored with written transcripts of your interview) and treated in the strictest of confidence.

You can still withdraw from the research – if you decide you don’t want information from your interview to be used please contact me via email at: {E-mail address}

Useful Numbers
If you feel you would like to discuss issues raised in the interview further the following services may be useful:

*Student Counselling Service 0131 650 4170
*Nightline 0131 557 4444
*Advice Place 0131 650 9225
*Edinburgh Rape and Sexual Abuse Centre 0131 556 9437
*Scottish Women’s Aid 0131-221-0401

Further Participation
If you have any further questions about the research, thoughts you would like to add, comments on the interviewing process or would like to see how information from your interview was used do not hesitate to contact me by email at: {E-mail address}

As part of the research I am looking for people who are interested in taking part in follow up interviews, these would be similar to the interview you just had but would concentrate on further discussion of some of the topics we talked about today.

I am also looking for people who have been interviewed and would like to give feedback on their experience as well providing comments on the way information from interviews in presented in the final report.

If you are interested in being involved in either of these two activities, please email me or fill out one of the forms provided.

**********THANKYOU**********
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