

## The perfectible vagina: size matters

VIRGINIA BRAUN and CELIA KITZINGER

With the construction of women's genitals as problematic, the 'private' female body becomes a site for potential improvement. Socio-cultural accounts of vaginal size in the West construct a tight (but not too tight) vagina as desirable, and a 'loose' vagina as undesirable. The importance of size is evident in contexts as diverse as slang, comedy, and surgical practices to tighten the vagina. After identifying the desirability of tightness, we analyse talk collected from women in individual and group interviews, and in undergraduate tutorials on intersex. In women's talk, we found a curious pattern: women identified the cultural desirability of a tight vagina, and noted negative uses to which this is put (such as the positioning of women with 'loose' vaginas as promiscuous). However, when women described their personal concerns about vaginal size, these were couched in terms of anxiety about being too tight. We argue that constructions of vaginal size are problematic because they create another site of bodily concern for women, and are used to control and abuse women. We suggest that they also reflect a disregard of women's sexual pleasure, and a lack of familiarity with the functions of the vagina.

### Introduction

Clear standards of beauty and 'normality' exist for Western women's bodies, and the widespread use of diets, fitness regimes, and cosmetic surgery attest to the fact that the female body is a site for improvement. Work theorizing the female body as subject to the Foucauldian notion of disciplinary power, as a site of self-surveillance and improvement (e.g. Bordo 1986, Bartky 1988, Morgan 1991), has focused on a female body that is visible, whether clothed or not, to the outside world—i.e. the 'public' body. However, the cultural obsession with improving or 'normalizing' the female body does not stop at the visible/public body. The notion of a perfect vagina, and its corollary, an imperfect but perfectible vagina, is evidence that such norms extend to the private/hidden domain as well. However, other than female genital mutilation (e.g. Bibbings 1995, McCaffrey 1995, Wright 1996), practices around the private body have not received the attention of feminist critics in the way that practices of the public body have done (although see Adams 1997, Mander-son 1999).

Constructionist frameworks have proved useful for researching sex, the sexual organs (e.g. Laqueur 1990) and sexuality (e.g. Weeks 1981, C. Kitzinger 1987, Tiefer 1995). In this paper, we use a broadly constructionist

---

*Virginia Braun* works in the Department of Psychology at the University of Auckland, New Zealand. *Celia Kitzinger* is with the Department of Sociology at the University of York, UK. Address all correspondence to Virginia Braun, Department of Psychology, University of Auckland, Private Bag 92019, Auckland, New Zealand; e-mail: v.braun@auckland.ac.nz

framework to focus on the vagina (the ‘passage’ between cervix and external genitalia, although see Braun and Kitzinger (2001) for a critique of such definitions), exploring the issue of vaginal size. Our analysis centres first on the cultural context which renders women’s genitals problematic, considering the various discourses and practices that construct vaginal size in Western cultures. Our theoretical position assumes that socio-cultural practices and processes help create the means by which women and men make sense of women’s bodies. Women’s experiences of the vagina, and their talk about those experiences, is constructed in relation to broader cultural systems of meaning. Moving from a cultural level to a personal one, we then examine women’s talk about vaginal size. Finally, we provide a critical examination of ‘size’ as a concern, focussing on the implications for women’s health, sexuality and identity.

### **The cultural context: women’s genitalia as problematic**

A significant amount of women would gladly swap their real vaginas for something less troublesome—an unexploded warhead in their back garden, say. (Ellen 1999: 33)

Forming a perfect partnership with the ‘unhappiness’ many women feel about their outwardly visible bodies, women’s genitals are often constructed/experienced as a ‘problem’ and a source of concern (Greer 1971, Dodson 1974, Laws 1990, Shaw 1995, Ensler 1998). The problem pages of popular women’s/teen magazines and internet sites frequently contain letters inquiring about genital normality (e.g. *Cosmopolitan* 1997a, *Company* 1998a, Stearn 1998), so-called feminine hygiene products grace shop shelves and advertisements (Kane 1997), and options for ‘aesthetic’ genital surgery abound (e.g. vaginal tightening, labial trimming, liposuction of the pubic mound, vulval fat injections, hymen reconstruction; Rogan 1994, Adams 1997, Greer 1999, Manderson 1999). Such practices construct the female genitals as a potential problem (Banks-Smith 1997, Kamps 1998) and as a viable site for beautification and normalization.

These concerns and practices derive from a cultural context in which women’s genitals are primarily derogated (Braun and Wilkinson, 2001) and where many women cannot bear to look at their anatomy (Howard 1997). They also reflect a society where many women are still not aware of the diversity of ‘normal’ genitals—despite feminist visual presentations designed to illustrate precisely this (e.g. Dodson 1974, Corinne 1989, Blank 1993).

### **The cultural valuation of tightness**

The best thing a cunt can be is small and unobtrusive: the anxiety about the bigness of the penis is only equalled by anxiety about the smallness of the cunt. No woman wants to find out that she has a twat like a horse-collar. (Greer 1971: 39)

It is not hard to find cultural evidence that the perfect vagina is ‘a nice tight vagina’ (Chumbley 1999: 112). Germaine Greer (1999: 2) writes: ‘in many cultures (and increasingly our own) the most desirable vagina is as tight and

narrow as a rectum'. Adams (1997: 69) noted that 'the ideal "natural" woman' is 'represented in the tight vagina ("one of nature's miracles")'. This miracle can, however, be (re)created by 'God-the-surgeon'. To make a vagina tighter, fat siphoned from women's thighs can be 'squished' into the walls (Banks-Smith 1997, Greer 1999). Laser surgery can 'rejuvenate' and tighten it (e.g. Matlock 1998). The vagina is also tightened during ostensibly medical (i.e. necessary) procedures. A common perception of childbirth is that it 'destroys' the vagina, so that it 'gapes slightly' (Chumbley 1999: 42), even becoming 'a great, gaping void' (Saunders 1983: 99). After an episiotomy or tear from childbirth, women are often stitched 'a little smaller than before' (S. Kitzinger 1983: 25, Manderson 1999). Caesarean sections not only make birth more convenient for the surgeon, they 'avoid vaginal sagging' (Robinson 1998, Manderson 1999), and keep the vagina 'honeymoon fresh' (Orr 1998: 7). Kegel exercises (after birth) tighten and strengthen the vagina (e.g. Howard 1997, Manderson 1999), and this is part of their appeal (<http://www.geocities.com/HotSprings/Spa/4502/vagex.html>).

Matlock (1998) emphasizes, as do media articles covering his work (e.g. Havranek 1998), that vaginal tightening increases sexual pleasure for women. The idea that a tighter vagina might increase men's sexual pleasure as much as, or more than, women's, is conspicuously absent (although the tight stitch after episiotomy is sometimes known as the 'husband stitch', S. Kitzinger 1994: 71). Feminist commentators have been more sceptical, suggesting that such procedures are principally focused around male sexual pleasure (e.g. Braun and Enslar 1999). We are not denying that a tighter vagina might increase women's sexual pleasure, but remain unconvinced that concern about tightness is primarily a concern *for* women.

This ideal of vaginal tightness is also transmitted through a wide range of other cultural contexts—in comedy, media, conversational interaction, slang, and so on. For example, in her 1995 award winning comedy stand-up, *Top Bitch*, British comedian Jenny Eclair makes frequent reference to the state of her vagina. In relation to childbirth, she talks about it becoming so big that she uses 'rolled up duvets' instead of tampons, and that it is 'like a woolly after the wash—all baggy round the neck'. Slang terms such as bucket fanny/minge/cunt, horse collar, or welly top (e.g. Green 1998), and phrases such as 'like throwing a sausage down a back alley' or 'like waving a sausage in the Albert hall' (Collins 1996: 121) provide an accessible vocabulary (and representation) of the loose vagina. Vaginal size is cultural currency.

Heterosexual 'preference' for a tight vagina is not simply a Western phenomenon. Studies from Central and Southern Africa have demonstrated desire for a 'dry and tight' (Brown *et al.* 1993: 989) and warm vagina for heterosexual intercourse (Runganga *et al.* 1992, Pitts *et al.* 1994, Civic and Wilson 1996), primarily for men's sexual satisfaction (thus ensuring fidelity). To this end, women engage in various practices to tighten the vagina. Women who are infibulated (the most extreme form of genital mutilation) have the vaginal entrance sewn tightly shut, resulting in a narrow vaginal opening—sometimes the size of a matchstick (Williams and Sobieszczyk 1997). This tightness is reported as being associated with (among other things) male sexual pleasure (El Dareer 1982, Osman and Mulholland 1992, Wright 1996). While it is easy to criticize such practices in non-Western

countries, 'voluntary' genital mutilations in the West bear parallels. Many (e.g. labial trimming) are similar in practice to forms of female genital mutilation (Bibbings 1995, Manderson 1999, see also Runganga *et al.* 1992), although we choose not to think of them in the same way—the rhetoric of individual free choice and empowerment prevails (see Manderson 1999).

Transmitted in all these contexts, from the quasi-medical to the popular, is the message that a tight vagina is the right vagina to have. However, the 'too tight' vagina is also a concern (e.g. Brumberg 1997; *Company* 1998b), particularly in relation to vaginismus (e.g. Valins 1992). In fact, many women with vaginismus report a belief that their vagina is 'abnormally small' (Valins 1992: 121, Wilson 1998, Goldsmith 1995), but this too-tightness is almost always represented as psychological rather than physiological, as 'the vagina itself is never too small to accommodate a penis' (Stearn 1998: 127, Llewellyn-Jones and Abraham 1998). As recently as 1992, *Black's Medical Dictionary* (Macpherson 1992: 616) noted that vaginismus is 'usually psychological in origin, due, for instance, to a *neurotic temperament* or to *frigidity*' (emphasis added). These accounts notwithstanding, socio-cultural representations of the too-tight vagina, and what it means, are considerably less common than descriptions of too-loose a vagina.

### Talking about size

Having discussed the broader socio-cultural context, we will now turn to a consideration of talk about vaginal size. Our data are drawn from two different sources: First, size was a topic in five interviews (coded I1–I6) and 13 focus groups (coded FG1–FG16) with women (including one male-to-female transsexual), conducted as part of a more encompassing study of the vagina conducted by the first author. Interviews were designed to explore women's experiences of, and perceptions about, the vagina, including questions about language, doctors, sex, and their feelings about their own vagina. Size was not a question included in the interview schedule, and in all but four of the interviews was raised by the participants themselves. The women interviewed were almost all white and predominantly heterosexual. Over two-thirds were aged 30 or under. Second, data were collected in undergraduate tutorials on intersex (coded T1–T16), run by the second author as part of a human sexualities course. The tutorial topic included a discussion of cultural notions/representations of what 'normal' female and male genitals should be like and, in five of these, vaginal size was discussed. In four, it was raised by the participants themselves. No demographic information was collected for tutorial participants, but the students were primarily or exclusively female.

Data were audio-taped and transcribed. We conducted a thematic analysis which drew on insights offered by discourse analysis (e.g. Potter and Wetherell 1987, Potter 1996). Our analysis takes into account both the broad thematic patterns of talk, but looks in more detail at what object those accounts construct, and how they construct them. In the analysis that follows, we explore the two primary themes evident in participants' talk around size: the cultural imperative for a tight vagina; and personal concerns about being 'too tight'.<sup>1</sup>

### The cultural imperative: 'vaginas are supposed to be tight'

Numerous slang terms and phrases were identified to describe a 'slack' vagina, including: 'bucket minge' (Gillian, FG3), 'Mersey Tunnel'<sup>2</sup> (Suzanne, T4), or 'like slinging a sausage down the high street' (Claire, FG15). Such expressions codify the undesirability of a slack vagina, suggesting tight-as-good through the negative equation of loose being bad. Women also articulated this more explicitly:

- Claire: You're always *supposed* to be kind of small tight little creatures, aren't you, ready for the blokes.
- Ginny: Mmm
- Marion: Yeah that's the whole point. It's like,
- Claire: 'Cause it's gotta feel nicer for them.
- Marion: Yeah, and the sensation. If it's like, if they can hardly feel it themselves, when they're having sex with you, then obviously. Like, with a-, someone who had like particularly *loose* muscles or something, [Claire: oh yeah] then if they didn't feel anything then they might as well be not *bothering*. (FG15)<sup>3</sup>

In this extract, the women collaborate to produce an account that clearly identifies (and reproduces) the cultural desirability of a tight vagina. However, the 'imperative' nature of tightness was not only noted by women, but also reinforced through the use of terms such as 'supposed' and 'should'. As Emily (T9) identified, 'vaginas are supposed to be tight'. Similarly, Carol (I1) commented, 'I'm very *aware* of the, of the sort of cultural imperative that vaginas should be tight'. The use of such language simultaneously allows the speaker to acknowledge the cultural imperative, and to display disagreement with it. These young women present themselves as cultural knowers but not cultural dupes.

Women not only recognized the cultural desirability of tightness, but also discussed how such ideas are used to position and judge women:

- Kate: On these videos and things, when they actually talk about, ah, the size of women's vaginas, and then they talk about how many fingers, and knuckles, and all this kind of thing that they can get up, and it's the more they can do,
- ?: Is the worse.
- Kate: the worse a woman's supposed to be.
- Sunita: Yes but the smaller and tighter I think is better.
- Kate: Supposed to be.
- Sunita: 'Cause of, the bigger it gets the worse it is. It's the to- to- total opposite [of penis size] isn't it.
- Kate: Yes, because you become a slut or whatever, some derogatory term.
- ?: Mmm
- Sunita: A slapper or something like that.
- Kate: Yeah, once- once it becomes bigger. (FG4)

A slack vagina, then, is specifically associated with (negative) judgements about sexual promiscuity, a meaning many women identified. For example, Susie (FG10) commented, 'If a girl's been around a lot it's like she's got, you know, a bucket fanny [laughs]', and Marion (FG15) observed that a 'bucket cunt' means 'she's easy, it's like a huge cavernous space'.

Most women commented on the gendered nature of this imperative, and the judgements associated with it. It was men who were described as wanting tight vaginas: 'that's men's fantasy though, isn't it, tight little petite

women' (Jo, FG1). And it was men who were seen as the creators of vaginal ideals:

Gillian: I've got a lot of friends that are boys now say things, like, really crude, and talk to me really crude. And they are like saying, how they went away they went round Europe two summers ago, and they sort of had girls in different places. And they were going on and on about how the best ones were the Swedish girls, 'cause they had such tight fannies that they could only get one finger up there, and things like that. [laughs] [Ginny: oh my god] So yeah, I s'pose it's from boys that you get that sort of idea that they are, they are, they are better to be like that. (FG3)

According to these women, then, the 'culture' that promotes tightness is not a 'female' culture. Rather, men produce generalized accounts of desirable 'tight fannies' and undesirable 'bucket minge[s]'. Some women also reported that men made personal evaluations of the state of their vagina (when having sex). For example, Mary described (the presumably relatively rare event) of having sex with a man first as a 'virgin' and the second time 2 years later (having had other sexual partners in the interim).

Mary: I was a virgin in 1987, and I fell in love with this guy and made love to him, and then saw him about 2 years later. And we were making love, and he said to me 'Oh you're not the same girl I knew before', and I thought he meant, I thought he meant personality wise, and this was sort, 'What do you mean'. And he said, 'You're just not as tight as you were before', and he meant my vagina. (FG1)

Some women noted that anxieties around penis size may be a motivating concern both in male desire for tight vaginas, and in the identification of women as having large vaginas. Men supposedly reassure themselves with 'I've not got a small penis, you've got a Mersey Tunnel' (Suzanne, T4). The actor Tom Arnold is reported to have made a similar comment in relation to his former wife, the actor Roseanne: 'even a 747 looks small when it lands in the grand canyon' (*Cosmopolitan* 1997b: 84).

Ultimately, the cultural imperative for a tight vagina is a moral story: a loose vagina positions a woman as (hetero)sexually promiscuous—as a loose woman.<sup>4</sup> This positioning is premised on knowing that tight is good, but also reinscribes such knowledge. It mirrors a morally informed common-sense that the vagina becomes loose through 'overuse'. This is easily identifiable culturally as well. For example, 'the more people use it the bigger it gets' is reportedly the first of 19 reasons 'Why the Internet is like a vagina' ([http://neil.franklin.ch/Jokes\\_and\\_Fun/Internet\\_is\\_Like\\_Vagina.html](http://neil.franklin.ch/Jokes_and_Fun/Internet_is_Like_Vagina.html)). The notion of loose, then, allows for a certain policing of (young) women, heterosexually, similar to the way in which words like 'slut' and 'slag' do (Lees 1993, J. Kitzinger 1995). Parallel talk about what being 'too tight' means on a cultural level, and how it positions women ('frigidity' being a possible interpretation), was virtually non-existent.

### **Personal concerns: being too tight**

Given the recognition of a cultural context in which tight vaginas are desirable, we might expect heterosexual women to express concerns as to whether they are 'tight enough'. However, apart from two instances, where such concerns were represented as being in the past, and overcome, the

articulation of personal concerns about not being tight enough was very rare. In our data, then, there is a notable contrast between the recognition of the cultural desirability of a tight vagina and the absence of an explicit articulation of personal concerns about not being tight enough. However, while women rarely articulated concerns about being too loose, some women did express personal concerns about being too tight. For instance, Yvonne (FG6) commented, 'I have a concern that I'm very small', and Mia recounted the following teenage experience:

Mia: I felt very worried that I would never be able to have intercourse, that's what, that's it, I'm just too small. Or then when I got older and started reading around, I've got vaginismus obviously, I can't even fit a tampon up there, I'm never going to fit a penis [laughs]. (FG14)

Accounts of tightness were often embedded in fairly lengthy and intimate discussions of personal sexual experience, and we will focus our analysis here on three extracts from one group. In the following extract, Marion is responding to Ginny asking about whether 'size' has 'ever been a concern or a worry'. She assumes 'size' here means being too tight.

Marion: I think if you're comfortable with yourself and the person you're *with*, then. I mean, obviously if you're with someone who doesn't turn you on, you don't like them, you don't really want to be there, then of course everything's gonna sort of dry up, and tighten up, because you don't want to be having sex with that person, and so it's gonna make it difficult. But if you're relaxed, you're turned on by the person you're with, y-. It all depends on the situation, you're in love with them, you really fancy them, whatever, you're really drunk [laughs]. (FG15)

Rosa responds to Marion's comments with a personal experience:

Rosa: I don't know, 'cause I've been in love with him for over a year now, and we've still got the problem that I'm too little, and [laughs] he's too big, and whatever we do it still hurts. I need a smaller boyfriend.

Claire: That's 'cause Donald's huge,

Rosa: Massive.

Claire: And you're only little.

Rosa: Yes.

Ginny: How does that, is that a real problem?

Rosa: I think it is, but he's [laugh] not bothered. But I'm just like, 'No it hurts' [laughs]. 'I do, I do love you but it hurts'.

Claire: But fuck off.

Rosa: Yeah, it is, it is quite, sometimes it is.

Marion: I think it depends, like, sort of, if my boyfriend was particularly *eager* to have sex and I wasn't quite ready, like he'd mucked around for a bit and then said, 'right now I want to have sex now', and it just just didn't happen for me. It was like a it was almost a bit *forced*. It wasn't *painful*, but I think you could tell things weren't, [Claire/Rosa: mmm] that everything was a bit dry, and you thought, 'oh if you'd waited like a few more minutes', you know. But it wasn't ever, it's never been, um, it's never been really painful.

Rosa: 'Cause sometimes I'm in pain for *weeks* after. It's just like, 'Why am I with you', [laughter] because I as can never, never, ever stay with him, or have babies [laughs]. (FG15)

About 15 minutes later, Ginny asked Rosa about being too small, and whether that had ever been an issue with previous male partners. This led to further elaboration of tightness as a personal concern, by both Rosa and Marion:

- Rosa: Not as much of an issue, but it's always been an issue. But then it doesn't really bother me that much, I don't think, I don't know, sometimes it's a bit,
- Marion: I do sometimes worry about that, because I think it's sort of whether you are. 'Cause it has happened occasionally with my boyfriend, well ex-boyfriend, kind of thing, um.
- Group: [laughter]
- Ginny: Sounds messy.
- Marion: Let's not go down there. Um, but that, it has happened sometimes where it has been a bit more difficult, and it, almost a bit sort of *dry*, as it were, and I do worry that it was *me* being like hung up or something, like really tense, or just not being in the mood or, and I— I would wonder if what it would happen. I've been going, I was going out with him when I was, when I was 17, and so he's the only person I've slept with, and I was, I'm always worried now that if it, it might happen with somebody else. And I think, [laughs] just to cross that bridge if we come to it [laughs].
- Rosa: I don't know, because I used to sort of complain and say, 'Oh look, look', like we'd have sex, you know, sex two nights in a row, and sort of, and then I'd say, 'I'm in agony, I can't even walk' and he would sort of say, 'you know it can't be that bad', and I'd be like, [?: [laughs]] Oh God, you know, like being raped, and like, you know, this sort of really awful. And I was just sort of 'Oh', and, I don't know, [Ginny: mmm] I'll just have to find a boyfriend with a little willy [laughs].
- Group: [laughter]. (FG15)

The first thing to note here is the detailed, deeply personal accounts that the women produced, far more so than anything describing fears or concerns about being 'too loose'. Interwoven into these detailed accounts, however, are two very different stories about being too tight, and what that means. Each of these is considered in turn.

Marion's story is one about tightness when having sex with a person that 'you don't want to be having sex' with.<sup>5</sup> Tightness is normalized within this account, through statements such as 'obviously', 'of course', and 'it all depends on the situation'. These strategies effectively construct tightness as an *expected* effect, not at all unusual, given the context. They also construct the vagina as of potentially changing size, depending on the context or the psychological state of the woman. The story thereby functions as a moral tale about the proper way to have heterosex and avoid a tight vagina—'if you're relaxed', or 'if you're comfortable with yourself'. Marion's second account reinforces this, functioning as a tale of tightness in the face of her personal failure to have heterosex in an appropriate manner. She is either 'hung up' or not 'in the mood'. In this sense, Marion psychologizes tightness as relating to mood and emotion. In so doing, she constructs herself as responsible for her own state of vaginal tightness. However, in this account, this is also something that can easily be overcome—if only she were relaxed, in the mood, or drunk.

Rosa presents an alternative account of being tight that 'naturalizes' the problem in terms of physiology, and potentially challenges Marion's account. The problem here is translated into an ongoing couple problem ('we've still got the problem'), and one that results not from lack of love, but from the seemingly 'natural' (and therefore immutable) state of Rosa being 'too little', and her boyfriend Donald being 'too big'. This is not something that relaxation or comfort can fix, and is not clearly either party's 'fault'—it happens, 'whatever we do'. While Donald is constructed as 'too big' and indeed 'massive', the personal identity Rosa constructs does not seem to be problematic, perhaps because it is

represented as both 'naturalistic' and therefore 'factual', and as a joint problem.

However, the seemingly unproblematic account of a couple size problem, and hence no-one individually being responsible, is challenged by Ginny's questioning as to whether this had happened with other male partners. If Rosa answers 'Yes', her construction of size as a couple problem becomes untenable, and her very vague and 'resistant' answering of this question suggests that it is problematic. When she does produce an account of extreme pain ('I'm in agony I can't even walk'; 'like being raped'), it appears to be in relation to Donald. However, the immutability of vaginal size is reinforced by her 'humorous' evaluation, 'I'll just have to find a boyfriend with a small willy'.<sup>6</sup>

Another way of exploring the tension between these two accounts is to look at the way in which pain is described in each. Marion's 'I think it depends' signals the start of an account in which sex that hurts is associated with 'I wasn't quite ready' and it being 'almost a bit forced'. However, she repeats, twice, that this is not '*painful*', attending to her account being heard as one of rape or 'unwilling' and 'coerced' intercourse, particularly given her description of 'force'. She later reiterates that it has 'never been really painful' (this shift from 'painful' to 'really painful' allows for the possibility that sometimes it is just painful) and the affiliation Marion receives from both Claire and Rosa suggests the common-place nature of this story within heterosexual encounters.

Rosa's account of pain rejects this explanation, contrasting Marion's account of 'never been really painful' with her own experience of 'sometimes I'm in pain for weeks after'. The outcomes of their two scenarios are constructed as very different—Rosa's 'problem', the natural physiological one of her 'small' vagina, cannot simply be solved by taking more time. In Rosa's second account, the contrast between the two is more worked up. Rosa's account of pain is more detailed—she's 'in agony' and 'can't even walk'; it is 'really awful'; while Marion's experience has become one where it is 'a bit more difficult and it almost a bit sort of dry as it were'. Despite Marion's account of this happening only 'occasionally', she reports she is 'always worried now that if it, it might happen with somebody else'.

These detailed accounts construct being too tight as a personal concern, and something that results in pain ('agony' in Rosa's instance), be that physiologically or psychologically grounded. The detailed concerns they offer around tightness do not, however, include attention to the possible cultural meanings of tightness. Talk about tightness, then, reverses the 'pattern' found in talk about looseness, where cultural imperatives were frequently noted, but personal concerns markedly absent.

## Discussion

Despite identifying a cultural context in which tight vaginas are constructed as desirable, we do not want to suggest that size is an overwhelming concern for most heterosexual women, or even a concern at all for many. Our sample was limited to predominantly heterosexual, white women who were relatively

young. However, in the intersections between the cultural and personal, and being 'too tight' or 'too loose', we found a curious pattern: 'too loose' was almost exclusively talked about in cultural terms, while being 'too tight' was almost exclusively discussed as a personal concern.

There are two ways of explaining this pattern. The first is that being 'too tight' is a concern among the group of women we talked to, while being 'too loose' is not (yet), although they do recognize that looseness has cultural currency. Many of the women were young, and it is possible they might not have encountered situations where being 'too loose' had become salient. The other possibility is that being 'too loose' offers women such problematic identities that it simply cannot be talked about. Talk about being 'too tight' manages the possibility of being heard as 'too loose'—due to their oppositional nature, a woman who is 'concerned' about being 'too tight' cannot also be concerned about being 'too loose'. While these solutions are not mutually exclusive, we favour the second, which takes talk as more than a reflection of women's 'reality'. Whether this pattern holds with women from other age groups, or from different cultural backgrounds, remains to be seen. Given that the cultural imperative appears to be a male imperative, it would also be informative to analyse male talk about vaginal size.

In their talk, women frequently displayed an orientation to the problematic nature of size, both explicitly and interactionally, and this suggests that size discourse is worthy of our critical attention. Moreover, as our analysis has demonstrated, size is not simply something 'in women's heads' or even something discursive. It involves bodily practices that we consider to be problematic—for instance the surgical tightening of the vagina (e.g. Havranek 1998), and the husband stitch in episiotomy (S. Kitzinger 1994). It therefore has very real effects for women's health and sexuality.

Our concerns with size are: first, notions of size construct women's 'natural' bodies as flawed, imperfect, and perfectible—either through exercise, surgery, or relaxation—and create another site of dissatisfaction, another area for (heterosexual) women to be concerned about. In relation to *First for Women* magazine's article on genital surgery, Rogan (1994: 93) noted, "'First" has taken a very unusual phenomena and concocted a new "embarrassing problem" that could get readers squinting nervously at their privates'. A *Cosmopolitan* article on 'The new sex surgeries' (Havranek 1998: 146) makes this explicit when it states: 'Flip through one of genital cosmetic surgeon Gary Alter's ads and you'll be bombarded with pleas to "take out your hand mirror" and check out those labia—after all, you just might not measure up'.

Second, we need to remember that discourse on vaginal size is not neutral, and is used as a means to abuse women and to position them heterosexually in certain ways: as uptight or frigid if too tight; and as a 'slag' or 'slapper' if too loose. The 'proper' woman is constructed as childlike and virginal (Manderson 1999), with an 'unused' vagina. This positioning function of size discourse is always a potential weapon, because vaginal size is a relative rather than absolute concept. As it is only evident in relation to something or someone else (presumably a man's penis, although it could also be a concern in lesbian sex), the standard for size changes according to what it is judged in relation to.

Third, there is a general lack of critical examination of what tight might actually mean—such as a lack of sexual arousal for example. To do so would involve placing heterosexual female sexual pleasure on an equal par with male sexual pleasure. While we are not denying that a tighter vagina might be sexually pleasurable for some women (although our data tell a rather different story), the net result of size discourse is that presumed heterosexual women's bodies are defined in relation to heterosexual male pleasure, rather than their own pleasure.

Finally, vaginal size is constructed as a dichotomy—either too tight, or too loose. It also offers a 'snapshot' view of vaginal size, rather than a representation of changing size over varying states of arousal. The vagina is represented as being a *fixed* size. Change, such as the swelling and ballooning of a sexually aroused vagina (Delvin 1983), or the tightening and spasmodic gripping of an orgasmic vagina (e.g. Swift 1993), is thereby obliterated. This construction contrasts starkly with the construction of the penis as an organ that does change size and state.

In this paper, we have considered both the broader socio-cultural constructions of the topic of vaginal size, and talk about vaginal size. Culturally, an imperative for tightness can be found in a wide range of contexts. In their talk, women acknowledge this cultural context and its negative effects such as positioning women as promiscuous. Such representations construct the vagina as a potential problem, and do little to promote a 'healthy' sexuality for women. They can lead to women seeking vaginal plastic surgery, practices we have argued are problematic. On the flip side, the too-tight vagina is raised as a personal concern by women, and greater attention to what size means is clearly needed. To some extent, these concerns reflect a lack of knowledge about the vagina, how it functions, and what it does. In order for this state of affairs to shift, it is important that the vagina is comprehensively addressed in sexuality education, that the meaning of size be considered, and that problematic constructions such as 'tight equals good' are explicitly challenged.

### Acknowledgements

This paper is based on doctoral research funded by the Association of Commonwealth Universities and undertaken by Virginia Braun at Loughborough University, UK. The work was supervised by Celia Kitzinger. We would like to thank Victoria Clarke, Sara-Jane Finlay, and Liz Peel for their helpful comments on a previous draft of this the manuscript.

### Notes

1. In this paper we do not focus on the different meaning size might have for lesbians, for women with Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome (C. Kitzinger 2000), or indeed for gay men.
2. The Mersey Tunnels in Liverpool, England are two multi-lane road tunnels and one train tunnel beneath the (approx. 1 km wide) Mersey River. Reference to the Mersey Tunnel invokes a very large and heavily used space, and is an easily identifiable cultural referent.
3. The different extracts from FG15 we use in this paper are presented in chronological order.

4. Genitals have also been seen as 'indices of moral character' (Terry 1995: 143) in other contexts, such as in evidencing 'lesbianism'.
5. Accounts such as these carry multiple meanings. Marion's (and Rosa's) account can also be read as that of a young woman engaging in unwanted heterosexual intercourse. However, for the purposes of this paper, we are focusing on the meaning of tightness and looseness.
6. It is worth briefly noting the failure of these women to question the coital imperative (McPhillips *et al.*, in press), despite the pain of their reported experiences of coitus.

## References

- Adams, A. (1997) Moulding women's bodies: the surgeon as sculptor. In D. S. Wilson and C. M. Laennec (eds) *Bodily Discursions* (New York: State University of New York Press).
- Banks-Smith, N. (1997) Review: Squishing the Fat to give New Definition to Leotards and Televised Sleaze. *The Guardian*, 9 January, p. 2.
- Bartky, S. L. (1988) Foucault, femininity, and the modernization of patriarchal power. In I. Diamond and L. Quinby (eds) *Feminism and Foucault: Reflections on Resistance* (Boston: Northeastern University Press), pp. 61–86.
- Bibbings, L. S. (1995) Female Circumcision: Mutilation or Modification? In J. Bridgeman and S. Millns (eds) *Law and Body Politics: Regulating the Female Body* (Aldershot, UK: Dartmouth), pp. 151–170.
- Blank, J. (1993) *Femalia* (San Francisco: Down There Press).
- Bordo, S. R. (1986) The body and the reproduction of femininity: a feminist reappropriation of Foucault. In A. M. Jaggar and S. R. Bordo (eds) *Gender/Body/Power: Feminist Reconstructions of Being and Knowing* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press), pp. 13–33.
- Braun, V. and Ensler, E. (1999) Public Talk about 'Private Parts': In Conversation with Eve Ensler. *Feminism & Psychology*, 9, 515–522.
- Braun, V. and Kitzinger, C. (2001) Telling it Straight? Dictionary Definitions of Women's Genitals. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 5, 214–232.
- Braun, V. and Wilkinson, S. (2001) Socio-Cultural Representations of the Vagina. *Journal of Reproductive and Infant Psychology*, 19, 17–32.
- Brown, J. E., Ayowa, O. B. and Brown, R. C. (1993) Dry and Tight: Sexual Practices and Potential AIDS Risks in Zaire. *Social Science and Medicine*, 37, 989–994.
- Brumberg, J. J. (1997) *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls* (New York: Vintage Books).
- Chumbley, J. (1999) *Your Body after the Birth* (London: Pan Books).
- Civic, D. and Wilson, D. (1995) Dry Sex in Zimbabwe and Implications for Condom use. *Social Science and Medicine*, 42, 91–98.
- Collins, J. K. (1996) *The Sex we Want: Straight Talking from 90s Women* (London: HarperCollins).
- Corinne, T. (1989) *Cunt Coloring Book* (San Francisco: Last Gasp).
- Company (1998a) Pubic Hair is Ruining my Life. May, p. 161.
- Company (1998b) Will I Ever Enjoy Sex? March, p. 149.
- Cosmopolitan (1997a) Sex 'Taboos: Am I Normal? Is He? September, pp. 156–160.
- Cosmopolitan (1997b) When Will Hollywood Free Willy? June, pp. 83–84.
- Delvin, D. (1983) Organ of the Month: Your Vagina. *She*, October, p. 121.
- Dodson, B. (1974) *Liberating Masturbation: A Meditation in Self Love* (New York: Bodysex Designs).
- Eclair, J. (1995) *Top Bitch* (PNE Video).
- El Dareer, A. (1982) *Woman: Why do you Weep? Circumcision and its Consequences* (London: Zed Press).
- Ellen, B. (1999) The Brazilian Wax ... have the Americans gone a Pluck too far? *The Observer*, 6 June, p. 33.
- Ensler, E. (1998) *The Vagina Monologues* (New York: Villard).
- Goldsmith, M. (1995) *Painful Sex* (London: Thorsons).
- Green, J. (ed.) (1998) *The Cassell Dictionary of Slang* (London: Cassell).
- Greer, G. (1971) *The Female Eunuch* (London: Paladin).
- Greer, G. (1999) *The Whole Woman* (London: Doubleday).
- Havranek, C. (1998) The new Sex Surgeries. *Cosmopolitan*, November, 146, 148, 150 [available online: <http://www.drmatlock.com/mediacosmo2.html>].

- Howard, B. (1997) Your Sexual Landscape. *American Health for Women*, 16, 58–61, 108.
- Kamps, L. (1998) Labia Envy. *Salon Magazine*, 16 March [Available online: <http://www.salonmagazine.com/mwt/feature/1998/03/16feature.html>].
- Kane, K. (1997) The ideology of freshness in feminine hygiene commercials. In C. Brundson, J. D'Acci and L. Spiegel (eds) *Feminist Television Criticism: A Reader* (Oxford: Clarendon Press), pp. 290–299.
- Kitzinger, C. (1987) *The Social Construction of Lesbianism* (London: Sage).
- Kitzinger, C. (2000) Women with Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome (AIS). In J. Ussher (ed.) *Women's Health: An International Reader* (Leicester: British Psychological Society), pp. 387–394.
- Kitzinger, J. (1995) 'I'm Sexually Attractive but I'm Powerful': Young Women Negotiating Sexual Reputation. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 18, 187–196.
- Kitzinger, S. (1983) *Women's Experience of Sex* (Harmondsworth: Penguin).
- Kitzinger, S. (1994) *The Year After Childbirth: Surviving and Enjoying the First Year of Motherhood* (Toronto: HarperCollins Publishers Ltd).
- Laqueur, T. (1990) *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).
- Laws, S. (1990) *Issues of Blood: The Politics of Menstruation* (Houndmills: Macmillan).
- Lees, S. (1993) *Sugar and Spice: Sexuality and Adolescent Girls* (London: Penguin).
- Llewellyn-Jones, D. and Abraham, S. (1998) *Everygirl*, third edition (Oxford: Open University Press).
- Macpherson, G. (ed.) (1992) *Black's Medical Dictionary*, thirty-seventh edition (London: A & C Black).
- Manderso, L. (1999) Local rites and the body politic: Tensions between cultural diversity and universal rites. Paper presented at Sexual Diversity and Human Rights: Beyond Boundaries conference (Manchester).
- Matlock, D. L. (1998) The Laser Vaginal Rejuvenation Center of Los Angeles [available online: <http://www.drmatlock.com>].
- McCaffrey, M. (1995) Female Genital Mutilation: Consequences for Sexual and Reproductive Health. *Sexual & Marital Therapy*, 10, 189–200.
- McPhillips, K., Braun, V. and Gavey, N. (in press) Defining (Hetero)Sex: How Imperative is the 'Coital Imperative'? *Women's Studies International Forum*.
- Morgan, K. P. (1991) Woman and the Knife: Cosmetic Surgery and the Colonization of Women's Bodies. *Hypatia*, 6(3), 25–53.
- Orr, D. (1998) Hands Out! *The Guardian G2*, 19 November, p. 7.
- Osman, I. N. and Mulholland, L. (1992) Female Circumcision: The View from Sudan. *Off Our Backs*, 12(11), 6–7.
- Pitts, M., Magunje, N. and McMaster, J. (1994). Students' Knowledge of the Use of Herbs and Other Agents as Preparation for Sexual Intercourse. *Health Care for Women International*, 15, 91–99.
- Potter, J. (1996) Discourse analysis and constructionist approaches: theoretical background. In J. T. E. Richardson (ed.) *Handbook of Qualitative Research Methods for Psychology and the Social Sciences* (Leicester: British Psychological Society), pp. 125–140.
- Potter, J. and Wetherell, M. (1987) *Discourse and Social Psychology: Beyond Attitudes and Behaviour* (London: Sage).
- Robinson, A. (1998) Hard Labour: Tough Choices. *The Guardian G2*, 18 August, pp. 14–15.
- Rogan, H. (1994) A Woman's Magazine Masks Sleaze as Service. *Ms.*, 5, September/October, pp. 92–93.
- Runganga, A., Pitts, M. and McMaster, J. (1992) The Use of Herbal and Other Agents to Enhance Sexual Experience. *Social Science and Medicine*, 35, 1037–1042.
- Saunders, L. (1983) Sex and childbirth. In S. Cartledge and J. Ryan (eds) *Sex and Love: New Thoughts on Old Contradictions* (London: The Women's Press), pp. 89–104.
- Shaw, R. R. (1995) Female Genital Anxieties: An Integration of New and Old Ideas. *Journal of Clinical Psychoanalysis*, 4, 315–329.
- Stearn, M. (1998) *Embarrassing Problems: Straight-Talking Good Advice* (Oxford: Health Press).
- Swift, R. (1993) *Women's Pleasure: Or How to Have an Orgasm ... as Often as You Want* (London: Pan Books).
- Terry, J. (1995) Anxious slippages between 'us' and 'them': a brief history of the scientific search for homosexual bodies. In J. Terry and J. Urla (eds) *Deviant Bodies: Critical Perspectives on Difference in Science and Popular Culture* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press), pp. 129–169.
- Tiefer, L. (1995) *Sex is Not a Natural Act and Other Essays* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press).
- Valins, L. (1992) *When a Woman's Body Says No to Sex: Understanding and Overcoming Vaginismus* (London: Penguin).

- Weeks, J. (1981) *Sex, Politics and Society: The Regulation of Sexuality since 1800* (London: Longman).
- Williams, L. and Sobieszczyk, T. (1997) Attitudes Surrounding the Continuation of Female Circumcision in the Sudan: Passing the Tradition to the Next Generation. *Journal of Marriage & the Family*, 59, 966–981.
- Wilson, V. (1998) 'I felt Pain, Cold Sweat, and Panic'. *The Guardian G2*, 8 September, pp. 14–15.
- Wright, J. (1996) Female Genital Mutilation: An Overview. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 24, 251–259.

## Résumé

Avec la construction des organes génitaux féminins en tant que problématique, le corps « privé » de la femme devient un site d'amélioration potentielle. Les récits socio-culturels sur la taille du vagin en Occident définissent un vagin serré (mais pas trop) comme désirable, et un vagin « lâche » comme indésirable. L'importance de la largeur du vagin est évidente dans des contextes aussi variés que l'argot, la comédie et les actes chirurgicaux visant à resserrer le vagin. Après avoir identifié le caractère désirable de l'étroitesse du vagin, nous avons analysé les commentaires de femmes obtenus lors d'entretiens – individuels ou en groupe – dans des cours de premier cycle sur la sexualité. Nous avons découvert un modèle intéressant dans ces commentaires: les femmes mettaient en évidence la désirabilité culturelle d'un vagin serré, et relevaient les usages négatifs corollaires (tels que l'attribution d'un caractère léger aux femmes qui ont un vagin « lâche »). Cependant, quand les femmes décrivaient leurs préoccupations personnelles sur la largeur du vagin, ces dernières étaient exprimées en des termes témoignant d'une certaine anxiété quant à l'étroitesse du vagin. Nous soutenons que les constructions sur la largeur du vagin sont problématiques, parce qu'elles créent un autre lieu de préoccupation corporelle pour les femmes, source de contrôle et d'abus. Nous suggérons qu'elles reflètent aussi un mépris pour le plaisir sexuel des femmes et un manque de connaissance des fonctions vaginales.

## Resumen

Si se interpreta a los genitales femeninos como un problema, el cuerpo privado de las mujeres se convierte en algo que hay que mejorar. De los relatos socioculturales en cuanto al tamaño de la vagina en países occidentales se deduce que una vagina estrecha (pero no demasiado) es lo más deseable, y una vagina 'suelta' no lo es. La importancia del tamaño es evidente en contextos tan diversos como el lenguaje coloquial, la comedia y las prácticas quirúrgicas para estrechar la vagina. Tras identificar el deseo de estrechez de la vagina, analizamos los comentarios de mujeres recogidos en entrevistas individuales y en grupo, y en cursillos para estudiantes sobre intersexualidad. En las conversaciones entre mujeres, se observó un interesante patrón de conducta: las mujeres identificaban la deseabilidad cultural de una vagina estrecha, y notaban usos negativos (por ejemplo, tener una vagina 'suelta' se consideraba promiscuo). Sin embargo, si hablaban de sus preocupaciones personales sobre el tamaño de la vagina, mostraban ansiedad si pensaban que la tenían demasiado estrecha. Argüimos que si se

considera que el tamaño de la vagina es un problema se está creando otro motivo de preocupación sobre el cuerpo femenino utilizado en primer lugar como método de control y abuso. Consideramos que esto también refleja poco interés por el placer sexual de las mujeres, y una falta de familiaridad con las funciones de la vagina.