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Reading 'The Prostitute'

Appearance, Place and Time in British and
Irish Press Stories of Prostitution

Lorna Ryan



READING 'THE PROSTITUTE'



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Appearance, Place and Time in British and Irish Press
Stories of Prostitution

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Preface

Prostitution, particularly the prostitution of women, has long been the concern of thousands of writers worldwide. This book is about broadsheet newspaper stories of prostitution. It was a project which began with a specific concern to document what the Irish and British press were saying about prostitutes and prostitution. There is a paucity of empirical research on this topic and the study is thus an exploratory one. My interest in the subject of prostitution stemmed from a more general interest in the area of sexuality and also from an interest in the divisive debates amongst feminists about the role of prostitution in contemporary Western societies. I was also interested in the role of the medium of the press and in media discourses generally.

When I started collecting broadsheet press articles about prostitution I was struck by how they did not conform to my expectations – there were no overt instances of sexist language, the ‘whore image’ to which feminists referred was not readily identifiable. The absence of what I would have seen as ‘negative language’ sent me back to the literature, a corpus dealing with historical, medical, psychopathological, and sociological aspects of prostitution. However, even armed with these diverse knowledges gave me no immediate handle on my textual materials. My sense of puzzlement cannot be understated – why were my materials, ever increasing in number, taken from the broadsheet press in two countries, so unremarkable? My attempt to find an answer to this question led me to a number of different methods of textual analysis, to further forays into the enormous literature on prostitution, on women’s sexuality, on language or discourse. But to no avail. My initial aim of writing about the broadsheet press’ coverage of prostitution seemed at that juncture to be misguided. One aim of this book is to provide a

naturalistic account of a research study. In this sense it follows John Maxwell Atkinson's seminal work, *Suicide: Studies in the Social Organisation of Sudden Death* (1982) and the initial problems Atkinson encountered were those I was to later engage with in this study. I was able to make sense of the problems I encountered through an engagement with the work of the ethnomethodologists.

The ethnomethodological enterprise, pioneered by Harold Garfinkel and Harvey Sacks, claims to reorientate sociological enquiries, a reorientation which is based upon a shift from 'why' to 'how' questions about the social order. Crucially, at least for this study, one of its central features is its exhortation to sociologists to view the obvious, mundane and commonplace features of social life as 'anthropologically strange'. The research question about press articles on prostitution (and prostitutes) was radically reformulated along the lines suggested by ethnomethodology. What was said about prostitutes was no longer of prime interest, rather, how the newspaper texts could be said to be about prostitution/prostitutes at all became the central research question. In this way, I was concerned to explicate common sense methods of reasoning which I as analyst had initially unthinkingly relied upon. In short, it meant that I followed the ethnomethodological injunction to treat resource as topic, to be truly reflexive in relation to my analysis of my materials.

The analysis employed demonstrates that the press accounts of the activities of prostitutes and of the prostitutes themselves use descriptions of appearance, place and time in providing for, in ethnomethodological terms, 'recognisably correct' categorisations. Questions of motive and intent are central to the unequivocal categorisation of women as 'prostitutes'. This categorisation is based upon culturally specific understandings of types of women and types of activities which are used by both journalists and readers, including analysts. Reading is thus dialogical. The title of this book, *Reading 'The Prostitute'*, aims to encapsulate this process, and it involves both the textual and the visual. In regard to the latter, press pictures have been overlooked by many theorists of the press, a neglect which this study aims to rectify.

An overview of the study is provided in Chapter One and the developments and revisions made over the course of the study are elaborated throughout the book.

1 Introduction and background to the research

1.1 Introduction

This book documents an investigation of the construction of 'the prostitute' in the British and Irish broadsheet press over a five year period (1987-1991). It aims to forge connections between three broad fields of research; namely, prostitution, the study of media processes and the study of discourse in everyday life. The issues of social categorisation and classification emerged over the course of the research as central to the question of the discursive construction of 'the prostitute'. The study is concerned primarily with female prostitution. This is so because of two factors; firstly, the newspaper stories which served as the data for this study were 'about' female prostitution; secondly, my interest was focused on questions relating to the social control of women.

Over the course of the study, the issue of description became central. With the emergence of this aspect, the ethnomethodological enterprise, with its focus upon procedures of category production, became increasingly relevant to my concerns. However, this is not an ethnomethodological study per se; rather, it uses the insights of this approach in an instrumental manner consistent with my objective of investigating a particular discourse site, that of the press, with a view to promoting an understanding of its role in the social control of women.

In this chapter I am concerned to explicate the background to the research; a retrospective re-construction of a process which is pertinent here because the refinement of the initial (broad) research question, concerning the representations of prostitutes in press discourse, occurred some time into this study. It aims to specify the reasons why my focus shifted in the way that it did and the methodological implications of this.

The chapter concludes with an outline of the study. As the research questions were generated over the course of the study and involved a re-thinking about methodology and, relatedly, methods to be applied to the data, I have attempted to convey this in a step-by-step manner. The discussion of the background to the research is here given cursory treatment as it is further elaborated as the thesis proceeds.

1.2 Background to the study

This study originated as an exploratory study of representations of prostitutes in the print media. It followed from an earlier, brief study of British and Irish newspaper coverage of a specific event – the World Whores Congress, which was held in Brussels in 1986 (Ryan, 1987). In this study, the dominant representation of the prostitute was that of a woman forced into prostitution. Over the course of this study, I was struck by the paucity of published research relating to media representations of prostitutes. If, as has been argued (e.g., Perkins, 1991), prostitution affects all women, this neglect is especially surprising. Some work does exist however: Nead (1988) has examined representations of female sexuality in nineteenth century paintings, with a particular focus on paintings of prostitutes; Clarke (1987) similarly has examined painting, specifically Monet's *Olympia*, and Perkins (1989) has focused upon screen realism vis-à-vis images of prostitutes. Other studies of images of women, for example, Butcher et al. (1974), refer to images of 'whores' as part of a wider concern to document public imagery of women. A basic aim, therefore, was to contribute to this small corpus of work.

A secondary focus, which also emerged from this earlier study, related to formal/linguistic discourse analysis and the rather ambitious aim to develop a method of discourse analysis which would counter John Thompson's assertion that

However rigorous and systematic the methods of discourse analysis may be, they can never abolish the need for a creative construction of meaning, that is, for an interpretative explication of what is said ... Interpretative explication always goes beyond the methods of formal analysis, projecting a possible meaning which is always risky and open to dispute (1984, p. 137).

Thompson's assertion seemed to me to deny the validity of close micro-analysis of textual data; 'risky', 'open to dispute' meaning/s of one's data, denying the possibility of replication (and hence validity) of

research findings. This question of validation of discourse analytic research findings was one with which I was particularly concerned, and my adoption of the methodological procedures prescribed by ethnomethodology, including the injunctions that theorising must be grounded in empirical data; that data extracts be supplied so that readers can judge for themselves the adequacy of the interpretation offered, was, given these concerns, not surprising (cf. Cicourel, 1964; Sacks, 1984).

In formulating the initial research problem I privileged the methodological problems raised by Thompson (above) and the substantive topic of prostitution was accorded a secondary role. By the completion of the research, however, this imbalance was rectified; I argue that press discourses of prostitution use descriptions of appearance, place and time in providing for the recognition of a woman as 'a prostitute'. This argument is premised upon an understanding of language, or discourse, as language in use. Language does not simply reflect objects to which it refers, it constitutes them. The work of Austin, Searle and Wittgenstein is centrally concerned with the performative nature of language (cf. Turner, 1971). 'Discourse', as language in use, is a problematic term in the social sciences, and has been defined in a variety of ways; van Dijk (1985) defines discourse as a communicative event, Schegloff, an ethnomethodological conversation analyst, simply defines discourse as a sequence of sentences (1982). The conception of discourse used in this study is taken from Nead who understands it as a particular form of language with its own rules and conventions (1988, p. 4). Discourses embody assumptions about the nature of social phenomena, and about social reality itself.

Different approaches to the analysis of discourse exist; for example, Fairclough (1985) distinguishes between critical and descriptive discourse analysis. The former aims to explicate the ways in which asymmetrical power relations are reproduced in and through discursive practices, while the latter, into which ethnomethodological conversation analysis falls, is concerned to describe features of texts (that is sequences of spoken or written utterances). In short, the latter approach is 'text-bound' while the former attempts to tie the processes of discursivity to wider social processes. My approach drew particularly upon the descriptive approach. However, I would reject claims that it remained 'text-bound'; rather the rationale for this approach was the detailed explication of textual processes and a consideration of the reading process involved vis-à-vis newspaper texts.

The broadsheet newspapers were selected as the data source for a variety of reasons. Firstly, as noted, there exists a paucity of work on the

media representations of prostitutes. In particular, no published work exists on representations of prostitutes in the press. Also, given my interests in methods of discourse analysis and their application to written texts, newspapers as a specific site of public discourse, with a relatively stable structure (van Dijk, 1988) were appropriate to this end. The ready availability of newspapers was also a factor in my decision to focus upon the press, albeit a minor one. The selection rationale and procedure are further discussed in Chapter Three.

One of the main changes which occurred over this study was my realisation that my focus upon written discourse in the press had overlooked what is a mundane, unremarkable feature of newspapers, namely the press photographs. In the fashion of many discourse analysts who focus upon newspaper discourse (e.g., Lupton, 1994), I had been 'blind' to their existence. Initially, however, I was not interested in visual images, although in the preliminary analysis attempted, that of a newspaper story which reviewed a book on prostitution, I broached the question of authorship by reference to the *photograph* of the author.

Initially, a comparative approach was not entertained. However due to the paucity of reports on prostitution in the Irish broadsheet press and the changing focus of the research as it progressed, the study changed from being a study of Irish newspaper reports on prostitution to one which included the British broadsheet press. This comparative focus enables me to consider whether the findings of this study are 'culture-bound' or whether (as it turned out) they hold for both the British and Irish press.

Analysis of discourse, as Fairclough points out, aims to link the local with the broader context of its occurrence:

... 'micro' actions or events ... can in no sense be regarded as of purely 'local' significance to the situations in which they occur, for any and every action contributes to the reproduction of 'macro' [social] structures (1985, p. 746).

Discourses do not exist in a vacuum; social life is characterised by division. Ethnomethodology, as Rustin (1993) points out offers a quietist view of social life, in opposition to critical discourse analysts who seek to identify ideologies which reproduce inequalities along the lines of (especially) class, gender, race. However, in approaching the texts from an ethnomethodological perspective, the aim is firstly to identify what discourse processes are occurring, and how they are operating, before invoking extra-textual context. Fairclough's statement points to how the findings from analysis are to be interpreted, not to the starting point of analysis.

1.3 Initial problems and the reformulation of the research

The following resembles the 'confessional tales' of ethnography, as described by van Maanen (1988) and briefly details the initial problems I encountered. In another sense, however, it simply points to how research does not generally proceed in a clear cut, linear manner, a point a number of researchers have pointed out (e.g., Herbert, 1989) and 'messiness' is, Marshall and Gossman (1995) say, a feature of qualitative research. This 'confessional' is necessary and its purpose is to highlight how the research underwent a transformation.

The first problem encountered was in the course of carrying out a preliminary analysis of an Irish newspaper article. I describe this fully in Chapter Four and the current aim is to sketch out what occurred. The analysis was based upon Zellig Harris's (1952a, 1952b) distributional method which claims to be presuppositionless. Michel Pecheux's (1982) work on the relative clause and ideology in discourse was also used. Briefly, the aim of analysis was to identify discourse structure, identified by lexical cohesion. The problem of valency arose and rendered the analysis, which claimed to be 'presuppositionless', invalid. My way around this was to draw upon Berger and Luckmann's (1966) work on the social construction of reality. In particular, the theme of the everyday world at the margins of which the 'nightside' or 'twilight' world is located and the cultural anxiety about the perceived encroachment upon this everyday world was central. However, this analysis was directed by the interpretative framework supplied by Berger and Luckmann, it was not derived from the formal analysis of the text.

What this analysis demonstrated was that the role of interpretation was central, as was the issue how I, as a reader, read the texts. Further, and moving to consider the corpus as a whole, the stories were unremarkable, there were no overt instances of 'ideology'. The reports were measured in tone (although the double entendres contained in the headlines were noted, see Appendix II). I then turned to consider conversation analytic approaches with a view to attempting to apply such work to written texts. This yielded some success in terms of such devices as 'back-channels', 'recipient-design' and could be linked to the work of media scholars regarding the structure of the news report. However, the relevance of this work to my study of press discourses of prostitution was far from clear. Concurrently, I was, in the style of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), engaging in relevant reading on the substantive topic of prostitution and the media studies literature. The former literature constitutes a vast corpus, and as Allen has remarked

... the theme of prostitution reoccurs through the histories of women's work, welfare and poverty, class relations, sexuality, public health, crime and policing, leisure and popular culture (1986, p. 185).

In addressing this literature I was inconsistent in my approach because I was (initially) not conceptualising it in the same way as the newspapers, namely (as it was later conceptualised) as comprising different discourses articulated from a range of sites, from the academic to the legal. One option open to me was to attempt to specify the themes in the different discourses. However, this was problematic; for example, while in my earlier study (Ryan, 1987) the issue of women being 'driven into' prostitution was central, this was a minor topic in terms of the data considered in their entirety. Analysis by theme (such as prostitution and disease) was thus not a viable research strategy.

In addition, like Kathy Davis (1988), I could sense, intuitively, that there was 'something going on' in and across the newspaper stories (which by the end of the data collection phase totalled 86). In my introduction to ethnomethodology I noted one of the key methodological strategies advanced, that of the analyst becoming 'anthropologically strange' which means that the analyst cannot produce a 'gloss', e.g., that the stories are 'about' prostitution or prostitutes. This strategy was adopted by me and the result was a problematising of the stories as stories of prostitution. How was I reading these stories, what was 'in' them to warrant my description of them as 'stories of prostitution'? In short, I took a step back, after the fashion of ethnomethodologists such as John Maxwell Atkinson (1982), and asked, 'who is "the prostitute"?' And, more centrally, how is the category 'prostitute' produced over the course of an occasion of reading?

Zerubavel has remarked that the sociologist should

... direct [her] efforts towards discovering new analytical perspectives from which to view social reality and discover 'intellectual novelties' ... [It] is far more challenging and exciting intellectually to observe the mundane and familiar and to illuminate it from a novel analytic perspective (1979, p. xiv).

The 'mundane' and 'familiar' aspects of the newspaper stories of prostitution were the descriptions of 'the prostitute' in terms of physical and clothed appearance and her time and place of presence. In focusing upon the descriptions of 'the prostitute', or the formulations used to 'hint at' 'prostitute', I was departing from the mainstream approaches to prostitution as a substantive topic. I was no longer primarily interested in the content of the stories in respect of what they said about the

prostitute, rather I wanted to see how it could be said to be 'talking' about 'the prostitute' in the first place. I am therefore 'looking afresh' at the topic of prostitution.

I want to illustrate these points by reference to firstly an excerpt from a women's magazine story, and secondly, comments made by Peter Sutcliffe, which, although not data in this study, provide the most apposite examples which sum up what I experienced in the reformulation of the research question:

WOMEN TRUCKERS

Most women try to lay up in a truckstop lorry park because it's safer. But it has its own set of problems. Julie Thomas was asleep one night when a middle-aged woman in leopard-skin trousers, a boob tube, high heels and a scrap of a blouse knocked on the door of her cab. 'Anything I can do for you?' the woman said, and then her jaw dropped when Julie looked out. (Really she should have known better.) (*Marie Claire*, 1994, pp. 32-34).

When reading the story I read this excerpt and, immediately making a categorisation 'prostitute', carried on reading. It was only afterwards (that is, a number of paragraphs later) that I realised what had happened.

These four sentences raise the question of reader productivity and especially direct attention to appearance, place and time in the active 'assembly' (Sacks, 1974) of a category. It also reminded me of Garfinkel's comment about the operation of the 'et cetera' principle, namely that 'much ... of what is actually reported is not mentioned' (1967, p. 3). 'Prostitute' is not mentioned here (or anywhere else in the story), yet that it was a prostitute who knocked on the door of the cab is indisputable.

The second example comes from the transcripts of the court trial of Peter Sutcliffe, the so-called 'Yorkshire Ripper' (cf. Boulos, 1983). Peter Sutcliffe was on trial, in 1981, for the murder of thirteen women, most of whom were identified by the police as prostitutes, and the attempted murder of a further seven women. Wendy Hollway (1981) has considered the press reports of the trial in relation to the construction and reproduction of male sexuality and the 'normalising' of male violence against women which was effected in the construction of Sutcliffe as a pathological monster. Cameron and Frazer (1987) have also focused upon how prostitutes are, via discourses of sin, constructed as 'natural victims'. However, one feature of the transcripts which I want to focus attention on relates to Peter Sutcliffe's own statements about how he identified the women as 'prostitutes':

- (1) I knew there were prostitutes operating in Manningham Lane, Bradford, because I'd seen them blatantly along the road.
- (2) She was walking slowly along the kerb, looking across the road.
- (3) She looked like a prostitute and she was walking slowly at a snail's pace. I killed her with no doubt. The voice shouted 'filthy prostitute' (from Boulos, 1983, pp. 7-13).

The issue of Sutcliffe's 'recognition' of a woman as a prostitute was not a central feature in the trial, the trial was more centrally concerned with his motivations (had he, as he said, 'just wanted to kill a woman' or was he following the directive of God, that is was he bad or mad?). That Sutcliffe 'could know' that a woman was a prostitute is of interest to current concerns, his reference to appearance and demeanour (3), to place (1) were not, in the trial, considered evidence of madness.

1.4 The content of the book: An outline

The foregoing has aimed to explicate some of the sources, and initial research experiences, which led me to the research question: how are women categorised as 'prostitutes' in the newspaper stories of prostitution, i.e., how are these descriptions organised? The nature of the data, newspaper stories, raised a second, related question: how are formulations of category membership read? These two questions together led to a third question concerning the functions of such descriptions, both within the text itself and within its broader context.

Atkinson (1982), in his work on the social organisation of suicide, commented that he had been unable to continue writing beyond the literature review until the reconceptualisation of his research endeavour had been achieved. Similarly, I grappled with the literature on prostitution for a considerable time, attempting first to structure my review according to theme and after that, according to chronological publication. There seemed to be a divergence between my materials and the content of the literature. This divergence was overcome by attending to Sacks' directive that

... nothing we take as subject can appear as part of our descriptive apparatus unless it itself has been described (1963, p. 2).

This statement meant that, strictly speaking, my attempt to focus upon categorisation procedures should include the literature, as discourses of prostitution, *as data*. This approach was not fully adopted. However, by understanding the corpus of literature as other discourses, which are to

be set alongside those of the press, to be examined in the same way as I was examining newspaper discourse, I was able to proceed. Chapter Two, the opening chapter of the study proper, details the different discourses of prostitution which are in circulation (for example, in professional journals; throughout the various mass media). These discourses embody assumptions as to the nature of prostitution and journalists reproduce these assumptions in their stories of prostitution. This chapter thus lays the backcloth against which the data are to be considered. This chapter is followed by a discussion of the findings of content analysis which was carried out on the data (Chapter Three). This exercise provides an 'anatomy' of the corpus and indicates key themes present in the data over the five year period. It links back to the discussion of the different discourses by pointing to the continuities of themes between these and the press discourse. Content analysis, a quantitative method, is critiqued in terms of my aims of explicating textual process. Having introduced the reader to the data and my specific concerns with them, I move then to consider some of the current debates within the media studies field and indicate my position vis-à-vis the different approaches.

Chapter Four reviews the central (qualitative) methodological premises of this study, premises which did not change over the course of the reformulation or refinement of the research questions. I then discuss in detail the initial attempts to analyse the data and draw attention to the aspects of that initial analysis which emerged as central to later analyses of both the written and visual data. The search for structure in texts was abandoned as it was not consistent with my aims. The ethnomethodological approach provided the bases upon which the analysis could proceed and I discuss some of the key elements of this approach, which lays the methodological framework for the analysis of the data. My interpretative approach is also informed by the work of Erving Goffman (1959, 1961, 1963) and I suggest that his work can be legitimately used in conjunction with an ethnomethodological approach. Chapters Five, Six and Seven comprise the analytic sections of the study. These deal with descriptions of appearance, both physical and sartorial (Chapter Five), place and time (Chapter Six). Sacks' work on membership categorisation, and Schegloff's extension of that work, are used to analyse the descriptions of 'prostitutes' in the texts. These categorisations are used to formulate activities. The legal discourse of prostitution, described in Chapter Two, provides the framework within which to consider the stories of prostitution.

The concern of these stories is with visible presence, a central concern of the legal discourse. In this sense, Gerber's (1993) reference to 'media spectacles' is particularly apposite. Goffman's (1959) work on performances is also seen to hold relevance for the interpretation of the stories. I argue that the analysis of the descriptions of appearance, place and time are used not only to formulate category membership ('prostitute') but also provide for the warrantability of the category. Appearance(s), and presence in public places (streets) at specific times, function to infer evidence of intent to prostitute. Prostitution per se is not the concern of the press discourses, rather, as in the legal discourses, prostitution is inferred from loitering (and soliciting) 'for the purposes of prostitution'. In addition, as 'prostitution' is defined as sexual availability (in the sense of indiscriminate availability for sexual activities for money), the appearance, place and time of presence are selected and read as adequate descriptions of 'sexually available women' (that is, 'prostitutes').

I continue this focus upon the 'evidence of intent' theme, albeit less foregrounded, in the following chapter, which deals with the visual images of 'prostitutes'. Becker (1981) has considered the relative neglect of social scientists vis-à-vis the visual. This neglect is particularly apparent in work on press discourse. Press photography is an important area of investigation and I contend that my analysis of the selected photographs provides a much needed contribution to the analysis of press discourse. Given the neglect of this aspect of newspaper stories, this chapter is necessarily detailed. It aims to further emphasise and validate the findings from the analysis of the written texts.

That descriptions of 'prostitutes' are constructed on the basis of appearance, their time and place of presence; that these descriptions produce unequivocal readings of the women as 'prostitutes' and work to provide evidence of 'intent to prostitute', these are the findings of the analysis of both written and visual discourses. I have, to this point, remained 'true' to the ethnomethodological directive to produce my reading on the basis of the data. I have not imported extra-textual context into my analysis. However, at this stage, the question, and one which has been asked of ethnomethodological work (cf. Rustin, 1993), is 'so what?'

Chapter Eight, the final chapter, addresses this 'so what?' question raised by an in-depth focus upon texts. It attempts to consider the context of the newspaper stories of prostitution and the common-sense knowledge that readers draw upon in the occasion of reading. I use Fisher's (1986) heuristic device, 'the contextual web', to consider context. The issue of inter-discursivity is raised, that is, the relations between discourses. That women are categorised as 'prostitutes' (as sexually available) by way of

descriptions of presence (appearance, time and place) has a wider relevance (cf. C. Wright Mills, 1959). It raises the issue of the social control of all women. If recognisable descriptions of 'the prostitute' are constructed on the basis of appearance, time and place of presence, then how are women to present themselves as not prostitutes, as not sexually available?

The concluding remarks consider what has been gained from this project of 'looking afresh' at the issue of prostitution; what issues have been raised over the course of analysis in respect of methods of discourse analysis and what the findings suggest about the role of the press in contemporary society.

The study as a whole aims to contribute to the three fields of discourse analysis, media processes and the substantive topic of prostitution. Ken Plummer (1981) has remarked à propos of the sociology of homosexuality that it is a 'necessary half-way house' on the road to understanding wider issues of social meaning, social order and social change. This study of press discourses of prostitution is similarly a 'half-way house' in the study of social categorisation and social control of women. It concludes with final remarks about possible areas for future research.



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2 Discourses of prostitution

2.1 Introduction

Perkins' remark that 'if prostitution is the "oldest profession" (which is probably far from true), then it is also the oldest social debate' draws attention to the prolific outpourings of works on prostitution (1991, p. 1). A considerable literature exists on this subject, for example, Vern Bullough (1977) estimated that there were over 5,000 works, a figure updated by Perkins (1991) to over 6,500. In this chapter, I sketch out the backcloth against which the newspaper discourses of prostitution can be investigated, and consider a range of different approaches to the issue of prostitution. However, given the size of the existing literature, I have not attempted to provide an exhaustive review of all approaches.¹ Rather, it aims to delineate the key features of each of a selected corpus of work, from the sociological to the biographical/autobiographical literature which exists and this selective approach is guided by my concerns and interests for current purposes.

In approaching this vast corpus, I have been concerned to focus upon, in line with the theoretical and empirical focus of this study, the existence of different discourses on prostitution, that is, an 'economy' of discourses on prostitution, aiming to specify the dominant discourses and to examine their interrelationships. The term 'discourse' has many usages within the various fields in social science and broadly refers to language in use, which stresses the ways in which discourses do not reflect a pre-existing social reality but rather constructs that reality. Here, I am using Nead's conceptualisation of discourse, an approach which seeks to

... specify a particular form of language with its own rules and conventions and the institutions within which the discourse is produced

and circulated. In this way it is possible to speak of medical discourse ... which refers to the special language of medicine, the form of knowledge it produces and the professional institution and social spaces which it occupies (1988, p. 4).

In this approach to discourse (which is also conceptualised as a communicative event, following van Dijk (1988) involving the transmission and reception of information), the production of knowledge, specific to the different discourses, is highlighted. Different knowledges about prostitution (its nature, the causative factors associated with its existence) are produced from within different institutional sites and are articulated in discourse. Legal discourses, for instance, conceptualise prostitution as a public order problem and thereby legitimise police action in 'cleaning up' public places and indeed, inactivity à propos of more 'private' forms of prostitution, such as massage parlour prostitution.

The myriad of different discourses form what Fleck (1979) has termed 'thought-styles'. These are broadly similar to 'discourses' as they are produced in specific sites and articulate specific knowledges about, for example, the phenomenon of prostitution. Of particular interest to the current project are the ways in which different thought styles or discourses, from the psychopathological and medical to the legal and criminological, 'bleed into' (as Goffman, in a different context, puts it) the press discourses on prostitution.² A similar approach has been carried out by Perkins (1991, p. 63) but with a different objective; her consideration of the legal, moral, scientific and work perspectives aim to uncover an 'essential truth', a 'rational understanding':

The essential truth highlights prostitutes as little more than 'sex workers', while the artificial devices seen [in the various disciplines' approaches] mark them permanently as 'scarlet women'.

Such an approach raises complex issues of epistemology and the 'truth claims' of the knowledges produced in different discourses, issues which are not addressed by Perkins but which, I contend, are critical in advancing particular knowledges as 'essentially true'. However, for current purposes, I am not concerned to privilege any one discourse over others but wish to detail the core assumptions of different discourses with a view to specifying the linkages between different discourses. In addition, the central aim, although implicit at this juncture, is to begin the process of considering journalistic appropriations, or adoption and reproduction, of different knowledges of prostitution regarding the nature of this phenomenon and of the women in prostitution in the stories they write. The availability of the discourses (medical, legal, sociological and feminist)