

**Rereading Women's Magazines: The Feminist  
Identity of *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break***

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## SUMMARY OF THESIS

### **Rereading Women's Magazines: The Feminist Identity of *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break***

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In this thesis the attraction of women's weekly magazines to their readers was explored. Three bestselling titles in Britain, *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break*, were analysed for their production, content and reception using Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model as a theoretical framework.

The production of the magazines was addressed via interviews with the three editors and documentary sources, all placed within an environment of post-feminism which characterised the magazines' launches. The editors claimed their publications were intended to act as more than entertainment to the readers and identified *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break* as incorporating feminist elements. This feminism was interpreted as an attempt to support working class women in their struggles with everyday life via two distinct approaches: first, to offer advice, reassurance and information in the editorial (for example health, articles on employment and finance) and second, to give women a voice in the true life stories from which other readers could draw strength.

The editors' intentions for *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break* were realised (although with different results for each magazine) in the content, which was analysed using both qualitative and quantitative methods. It was found that despite the potential ambiguity of certain content, the magazines nevertheless incorporated a supportive feminist agenda, but this was not always recognised by the readers. Over one hundred women were interviewed individually or in focus groups and it was found that they interpreted the magazines in a number of ways. This finding expanded on Hall's original three decoding positions of accept, negotiate and oppose.

Although readers did not necessarily decode the magazines as intended by the editors, further evidence for the supportive feminism was apparent in the community ethos generated by the sharing of magazines amongst readers. It was also found that the trust and mediated interaction between a reader and her magazine further encouraged a sense of community. It was concluded that *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break* were offering a supportive feminist agenda to their readers, some of whom recognised and used this content in their everyday lives.



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## INTRODUCTION

The questions addressed in this thesis are concerned with readers' interpretations and use of three weekly women's magazines - *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break*. Specifically, I have set out to discover both why and how women read these magazines, whether they read them as intended by the editors and what functions the magazines fulfil in women's lives. This is a broad research question but one informed by current writing in both cultural studies and feminist studies and also by my own experience as a reader of women's weekly magazines.

Women's magazines have existed in Britain since the eighteenth century (White 1970) so it might be expected that questions around their reception by readers had already been addressed, either in sociological or psychological studies of media. However, this is not so - as I will illustrate in chapter one, the focus of research on the media has shifted only recently from a concentration on the text to a consideration of the audience (Livingstone 1996). Various cultural forms like magazines and soap operas, although investigated extensively for their content and conditions of production, have an unknown effect on their readers or viewers. Studies by Ferguson (1983) and Tuchman (1978) positioned the woman's magazine reader according to a text which both writers saw as supporting women's subordination to men and as limiting readers' horizons to marriage and domesticity. In such studies there was little sense of the usefulness, attraction or pleasure of women's magazines and nothing of the reader's choice in interpreting *Woman* or *Woman's Weekly*, for example. Further studies (Winship 1987a; Ballaster, Beetham, Frazer and Hebron 1991) have now considered women's magazines in relation to pleasure and reception by readers, but only in a tentative way. The one study which investigates the everyday use of women's magazines is Hermes's (1995) exploration of English and Dutch readers' reception of various titles including monthlies, weeklies and feminist publications from a perspective entirely centred on the reader. Hermes's emphasis is less on the text than the routines and lifestyle changes of readers and how women's magazines fit into such rhythms. The distinctions *within* different magazine genres are not drawn out so the variations between *Best* and *Bella*, for example, both mainstream weeklies, are not considered. Hermes identifies one weekly as much like the next, only differentiating

*between* genres, for example weeklies, gossip magazines, feminist titles and glossy monthlies.

The choice of *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break* as titles to research was made for several reasons. First, the three magazines are all recent additions to the weekly market. *Best* was launched in August 1987, *Bella* in the October of that year and *Take a Break* in March 1990. At the time of *Best*'s first issue, no new women's weekly title had launched and then published successfully since *Woman's Realm* in 1958 and the magazine market was thought to be in decline (Barrell and Braithwaite 1988). Titles had been launched but had not been successful (for example *Candida* in 1972, *Celebrity* in 1986). Only *Chat*, launched in 1985 but then relaunched in 1989 when it was acquired by International Publishing Corporation (IPC) remains in the weekly market (Braithwaite 1995). To introduce a new weekly was an innovative move by *Best*'s publishers and rejuvenated an ailing market.

Second, the success of *Best* and *Bella* and *Take a Break* made the magazines interesting, suggesting that they had succeeded in finding a formula more relevant to women's changing lifestyles than previous magazines. Sales of weeklies had been declining - the introduction of three new titles inspired other publishers to launch similar style magazines and the entire weekly market benefited from increased sales. Third, the style of *Best* differed from the existing weeklies when it was launched, being designed around busy, practical information with an avoidance of empty white space and long features. *Bella* differed in another way with a focus on true life stories, later emphasized to a greater extent by *Take a Break* and subsequently adopted by *Best*. The traditional weeklies (*Woman*, *Woman's Own*, *Woman's Weekly*, *Woman's Realm*) have since copied the true life formula.

Fourth, *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break* are all owned by German publishers - *Best* by Gruner and Jahr of the UK (G&J) and *Bella* and *Take a Break* by H. Bauer Publishing. Their success in the British market, based on similar sister magazines in other countries, raised questions about the formulaic nature of women's magazines. Both Bauer and G&J considered all women to be interested in the same broad issues and concerns, regardless of their geographical location. The origins, success, publishers and formulae of the three magazines will be considered in more detail in chapter three.



The literature on women's magazines did not answer or indeed address the questions in which I was interested, and the recency of *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break* meant that there was little academic writing on these particular magazines. As a reader of women's weeklies, I felt there was more to the magazines than an emphasis on marriage and family, and I knew the magazines gave a lot of pleasure to readers, something that had been neglected by most academic writers. The positive aspects of magazine reading had been given little attention but I did not simply want to point out how wonderful *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break* were. The accusation of uncritical celebration has often been levelled at much postmodern writing on culture (Morley 1996). I considered it appropriate to redress the balance of previous research and explore the attraction of weeklies to readers but with an awareness of the less attractive features of the magazines. I also intended to take seriously the editors' view of their magazines and analyse just what *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break* were meant to achieve.

The aim of my research as informed by my own experience of reading women's magazines and other writing on the topic, was broadly to understand the attractions of *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break* and their success in the competitive British weekly market. Such a broad aim raised further questions: why do women read the magazines? What do readers get from them? Are the magazines interpreted in the ways intended by the editors? Could the contradictory image of weeklies as inconsequential and yet ideologically influential be challenged by audience research? Do the magazines have any wider functions outside the confines of the text? All these questions concerned me and none had been answered in the existing literature on women's magazines. Clearly, I had to take a different approach to previous studies and situate the research mainly with the readers rather than the content of magazines, although I did not want to isolate the reception of magazines from their production environment. Magazines are very much a product of their social and historical environment and to neglect this would have been to disregard the reasoning behind their existence and form. Neither do the readers exist in a vacuum and the political and social climate regarding feminism is particularly important both in the production and reception of magazines. I found Faludi's (1991) writing about the backlash against feminism to be a key source for analysing the response the magazines (especially *Best* and *Bella*) generated when they launched and this analysis is described in detail in chapter



three. As well as feminism being important in how the magazines were received when first published, the actual content of *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break* in relation to feminism was an area which I felt merited consideration. A paragraph in the *Spare Rib Reader* could have been discussing *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break* rather than the (now deceased) feminist monthly:

*Spare Rib* aims to reflect women's lives in all their diverse situations so that they can recognise themselves in its pages. This is done by making the magazine a vehicle for their writing and their images. Most of all, *Spare Rib* aims to bring women together and support them in taking control of their lives.

Rowe 1982:607

The aims of *Spare Rib*, a magazine dedicated to the women's movement, appear very similar to the aims the three editors discussed in their interviews with me and I address the potential feminism in the magazines in chapters three and four and how this was interpreted by readers in chapter five.

In addition to exploring the readers' perspectives of *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break*, I wanted to include an analysis of the content of the magazines as this was how the editors expressed their intentions. The readers' interpretations, therefore, could be seen as a response to the messages encoded by the producers of the magazines. This theoretical approach involved both the production and reception of the magazines, something not previously undertaken.

The structure of the thesis is as follows. In chapter one, I have analysed the literature on women's magazines and identified the gaps in the existing research. The literature on *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break* is scarce but other magazines, particularly the traditional best sellers like *Woman* and *Woman's Own* have been studied and these studies are discussed in chapter one. The shifting ideologies in cultural studies, specifically around reception analysis, have been documented to provide a historical and theoretical context to my own study, placing it within the trajectory of media research. Chapter two relates the development of my research and situates it in a more personal context, positioning the thesis in relation to my involvement with women's magazines since I became a reader in the late 1970s. In this chapter, I also document the research as a process grounded in a particular methodology,

discussing the various methods used and problems encountered with the intention of providing information for others about to begin similar research.

Chapter two provides the theoretical and methodological contexts and in chapter three I address the empirical research, beginning with the encoding of the magazines by the editors. This chapter is based on documentary sources and interviews with the editors. Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model provides the theoretical framework for an analysis of the encoding of messages by the producers and the conditions of production. The areas of health, true life stories and money, work and rights articles flagged in chapter three are carried through into the content analysis in chapter four and the decoding of the magazines by readers in chapter five. In chapter four, *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break* are analysed using both qualitative and quantitative methods and the results of the content analysis related back to the editors' intentions for their magazines. In chapter five, how the readers decode the messages in the three areas of content are qualitatively analysed and discussed. In these three chapters, Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model is critically used to analyse the production, form and reception of media messages in the magazines. In chapter six, Hall's model is elaborated upon to address the social use of magazines in terms of gift relations and community. The way that readers use the magazines in an everyday sense became an important part of the research because of the readers' emphasis on the activities surrounding *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break* in addition to the attraction of their content. In the conclusion I draw together the research findings and discuss the roles that *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break* fill for their readers and assess the appropriateness of Hall's (1980) model for exploring magazines. I then suggest possible ways of building on the research findings in this thesis.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Media Research and Women's Magazines

#### Introduction

In this chapter, the existing literature on women's magazines will be discussed and critically analysed, and placed within the theoretical trajectory of media research as a whole. Until recently, there was very little work undertaken on the reception of women's magazines by readers - the majority of studies focused on the content and occasionally the production of magazines. Only with the increasing interest from feminists in the cultural forms enjoyed by women, and cultural studies' change in direction from text-based analysis to the actual reception of media forms has the field of popular culture widened to take into account previously under-researched media such as women's magazines, soap operas, talkshows, romantic fiction and so on. Even with this now legitimate interest in popular culture, the new women's weeklies have been largely overlooked. With the exception of Winship (1990, 1992) and Ballaster, Beetham, Frazer and Hebron (1991), the former looking at *Best* and the latter including both *Best* and *Bella* together with women's magazines generally, little attention has been paid to the magazines which are the focus of this thesis. *Take a Break*, Britain's best selling women's weekly, has never been the topic of sustained academic analysis. In this chapter, I will examine the existing writings on *Best* and *Bella* and other women's weeklies, and explain my theoretical approach to the study of women's magazines and how they are interpreted by readers. It is useful to outline the development of media and cultural studies so that the rise of audience research and the understanding behind it can be explained, thus situating the later work in a historical context. First, an introduction to the three magazines on which I will focus - *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break*.

#### The magazines

*Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break* are women's magazines, published weekly on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday respectively. *Take a Break*, launched in 1990, is Britain's best selling woman's weekly with a circulation of around one and a half million. *Bella*, launched in 1987, until recently was the second most



popular weekly with sales of just over one million, but circulation has declined to around 750,000. *Best*, also launched in 1987 but with sales of 950,000, has gradually settled down to about half that number with a circulation of around 550,000. The woman's weekly market, in terms of circulation, looked like this for the first half of 1996:

<i>Take a Break</i>	1,447,950
<i>Woman</i>	819,205
<i>Woman's Own</i>	789,732
<i>Bella</i>	767,698
<i>Woman's Weekly</i>	742,754
<i>Chat</i>	561,305
<i>Best</i>	551,063
<i>Hello</i>	480,979
<i>Eva</i>	302,336
<i>Woman's Realm</i>	280,553

**Table 1. ABC Figures for January-June 1996** (*Press Gazette* 9 Aug 1996)

*Take a Break* has remained the best selling woman's weekly since its launch in 1990 and *Best* has stabilised at around half a million for the last few years. Since I began studying the magazines in 1993, *Bella* is the only one of the three to change its circulation figures, which could be due to a number of possible reasons - comments in a recent *Press Gazette* (16 August 1996) suggested the publishers of *Bella* had become complacent with its position, failing to keep ahead of a competitive market. Recent staff changes at the magazine may also have affected *Bella's* position, although its decline goes back to 1995. The magazine has lost 134,000 sales since the first half of 1995 and to return to 1993, its ABC figures for January-June were 1,062,000 (personal communication with *Bella's* circulation dept). The issues I used for my research dated from September 1994 to July 1995, thus covering the period both before and during the decline in sales. The magazine did not appear to me to change significantly in this time but one possible reason for *Bella's* decline is the behaviour of its competitors. Having copied *Bella's* original formula, they have effectively made *Bella* into another mainstream title, rather than an innovative leader (although as I shall show later, there are still differences

between *Bella* and other comparable magazines). For the casual reader, weeklies can look homogeneous, and *Bella* may have lost that element of originality which set it apart from the rest of the market. However, as I interviewed *Bella's* editor before the slump in sales, I have no explanation from the magazine itself on its loss of readers.

Although I will discuss the magazines' history and production in detail in chapter three, it is important to stress how popular *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break* are, despite recent sales losses for *Bella*. (During my initial research the popularity of the magazines plus their innovative style and German origins made them obvious subjects for analysis - see chapter two for a discussion of the research trajectory). *Take a Break* is read by five million people, including a large proportion of men - John Dale, editor, claimed 20% of *Take a Break's* readership is male, although the National Readership Survey reported the figure as 23% (NRS 1996). But *Take a Break* is clearly ahead of its competitors in readership terms. *Bella* at its most popular was read by around four million, but this figure has decreased to 3.5 million with its decline in circulation. *Best* has a readership of just under two and a half million and *Best* and *Bella* include male readers of 14% and 18% of their respective readerships (NRS 1996). The average readership (in millions) of the top ten women's weeklies is set out in the following table:

<i>Take a Break</i>	5
<i>Woman's Own</i>	3.9
<i>Bella</i>	3.5
<i>Woman</i>	2.8
<i>Best</i>	2.5
<i>Woman's Weekly</i>	2.4
<i>Hello</i>	2.3
<i>Chat</i>	2.1
<i>Woman's Realm</i>	1.4
<i>Eva</i>	0.9

**Table 2. NRS Figures (in millions) for July 1995-June 1996**  
(NRS 1996)



The extent to which these magazines reach out to the female population in particular is not to be dismissed, although of course the question of what is a reader needs to be addressed. According to the National Readership Survey, a reader is identified as such if she has read or looked at a weekly magazine during the preceding seven days before the NRS interview. Such readers are named 'average issue readers' and make up the final readership total for each title. Other readers, who look at the magazines less frequently, are not included in this total figure.

The point I want to make is that *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break* are worthy of analysis because of their reception by millions of women (and men) every week, especially *Take a Break*. However, the three magazines have not been studied to any great extent, except for the examples cited earlier, and to understand this lack of interest in the magazines it is necessary to look at the history of media research and in particular the feminist perspective. As Winship noted in her preface to *Inside Women's Magazines*:

Admitting within feminist circles that I was doing research on - of all things - women's magazines used to make me feel just as comfortable as when I hastily muttered an explanation of my 'study' to politely enquiring friends of my parents: 'Oh, you're going to work on women's magazines are you dear, when you've finished?', silently voicing, I believed, 'What is the education system coming to ...' Whether feminist friends voiced it or not I felt they were thinking ... I should do it on something more important politically.

Winship 1987a:xiii

An examination of the current state of feminist research into magazines and media research in general will place this thesis in its proper context, both historically and theoretically.

### **History of approaches to media research**

Theories about the extent to which media messages affect or influence their receivers have been a key component of communications studies, without necessarily involving any empirical research on the issue. Research in the 1920s and 1930s defined the audience as a mass that was passively subjected to whatever messages were broadcast (Morley 1995). In this hypodermic model, messages were seen as being injected straight into the audience for an

immediate response. The general consensus during these inter-war years was that the media wielded a pervasive influence on their audience, a consensus that had developed for a number of reasons. Technically, there was an unprecedented increase in new forms of media (press, radio, film) which led to the mass production of communication, often owned by the same companies. Linked to this technological development was the belief that the mass media had been used to brainwash people during the First World War, and had helped to promote the rise of fascism in this inter-war period. Also connected to the social and historical circumstances of the time, urbanization and industrialization were thought to be responsible for destabilizing society, leaving individuals unsettled and isolated, easy targets for manipulation by the mass media (Curran, Gurevitch and Woollacott 1982).

The Frankfurt school, establishing itself in America after leaving Germany, initiated a critical study of mass communication and developed an early model of cultural studies. Other research had been undertaken before that of Adorno and Horkheimer but it was not from a critical perspective. Rather, it was carried out within established media and social institutions with the intention of providing useful material for these institutions - what Lazarsfeld defined as 'administrative research' (Kellner 1995:52). For the Frankfurt school, the term 'culture industry' referred to the industrialization of mass produced culture and the commercialisation of this process. Combining a culturalist approach (textual analysis) with communications research (political economy of the media and its institutions), the Frankfurt school used a framework of critical social theory to study culture and communication in a capitalist society. The function of the culture industry was to provide ideological legitimation of the capitalist society in which it existed, an approach explained by Adorno and Horkheimer (1993). According to these two proponents of the Frankfurt school, the working class had already learned acquiescence at work, controlled by technology and management, and repeated such behaviour in their leisure time, passively consuming rather than producing. Mass culture, such as Hollywood films, succeeded in securing the allegiance of the masses by imposing on them a particular view of the world. Adorno and Horkheimer made the observation that nobody could escape from the products of the culture industry, given its capacity to provide something for everyone. They also pointed out the one-way nature of modern mass media, specifically the radio which they saw as being constructed to avoid the possibility of

participation or input on behalf of the listener. Even today, despite the advent of talk shows and real life on television and radio, media communication remains primarily in the hands of producers, not the consumers (but see chapter six for a discussion of the interaction generated by the magazines). For Adorno and Horkheimer, any differences in the products of the culture industry were illusory - cosmetic differences only masked an underlying product designed to promote capitalism and the acquiescence of the audience.

The critical theory developed by the Frankfurt school declined in importance in the post-war period and its ideas were often dismissed as being unduly influenced by the social and historical circumstances of its time. More recently, writers such as Kellner (1995) and Stevenson (1995) have incorporated elements of the Frankfurt school's approach into their theories of media cultures, acknowledging the usefulness of a perspective which considers the institutional, historical and ideological aspects of culture. However, difficulties remain with the Frankfurt school's approach - Kellner (1995) problematized the dichotomy between high and low culture which contrasted mass culture (films, radio, press) with authentic, high culture. He criticised the Frankfurt school's insistence on treating high and low culture as very different, suggesting instead that ideological elements should be identified in the complete range of culture, rather than in just mass culture. Limiting critical, subversive and emancipatory opportunities to high culture is problematic - the Frankfurt school privileged high art as a site of emancipation and resistance without recognizing that an active audience can produce its own meanings (including opposition) in response to the mass products of the culture industry. According to Kellner (1995), the Frankfurt school privileged high culture as a site of opposition whereas mass culture was ideological, intended to dupe passive consumers. Such a perspective positions the audience as victims of brainwashing, without human agency. Those 'outside' ideology, however, retained agency as manipulators of the masses, smoothly operating the machinations of capitalism, although as hegemony theory later showed, ideological oppression was never a smooth process (Hall 1988). But even though the early Frankfurt school focused on ideology, this approach provided an alternative to the more populist and uncritical approaches to cultural studies. Adorno and Horkheimer were concerned with the way existing society was reproduced, how social norms and practices were presented positively, and with the legitimization of capitalist organization of society. Both Kellner (1995) and Stevenson (1995),



although acknowledging the Frankfurt school's problems, maintained its theoretical input was an important corrective to the current position in cultural studies which largely focuses on the micro politics of resistance (i.e. the taking of mass culture and subverting it for one's own use) to the exclusion of the macro politics of cultural power. As Kellner claimed:

the Frankfurt school approach is valuable because it provides an integral model that transcends contemporary divisions in the study of media, culture and communications.

Kellner 1995:30

There was no immediate step from the Frankfurt school's critical ideology to an interpretive celebration of resistance. Towards the late 1940s and early 1950s, there was a shift in direction in media research towards a more psychological approach, as the Frankfurt school's pessimistic mass society thesis proved incompatible with American perspectives of society (Morley 1995). It was argued that people manipulate, rather than are manipulated by, the mass media, reducing the amount of influence the mass media exercised over the audience (Curran, Gurevitch and Woollacott 1982). A series of empirical experiments, using laboratory and social survey techniques, demonstrated that people expose themselves to, understand, and remember communications selectively, according to prior dispositions. This 'uses and gratifications' approach claimed that the audience actively bring to the media needs and uses that shape their response to the media. The focus was on the individual as the basic unit of consumption, and an understanding of media use was placed within a functionalist framework that emphasised psychological aspects or needs. Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch (1974) outlined the objectives of the uses and gratifications approach as explaining how the media is used to gratify people's needs; understanding the motives for media behaviour; and identifying the consequences that follow from such needs and behaviour. The conventional belief in the power of the media began to diminish, supported by empirical evidence from media studies (Klapper 1960). In addition, views of individuals in society began to change - rather than seeing them as atomised units, it was believed that society was comprised of selections of small groups, bound by ties and dependency. Underpinning this new conclusion about the relative lack of media influence was a rejection of the mass society thesis. A two step flow model of media use was developed, suggesting that individuals may be more influenced by their peers and friends than by what they read or see in the

media. Such an approach was developed by Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955), who studied the 1940 American presidential campaign and its influence on voting behaviour.

Researchers in the uses and gratifications tradition developed a new perspective on the media, illustrating the variability of response and interpretation by listeners, viewers and readers. In effect, this meant that the idea of a mass audience, all reacting in identical ways to the media, was rejected (Morley 1995). However, the uses and gratifications approach overplayed audience freedom and ignored issues of ideology, reducing difference to individual psychological traits (although this approach is still applied to effects research in a psychological tradition [Rubin 1994]). In the late 1960s and early 1970s, an alternative, critical approach arose in media studies. The uses and gratifications school was challenged from two directions - first, there was a new look at the previous empirical research undertaken in this tradition. It was concluded that studies *had* shown media influence under various conditions. For example, when the issue in the media was remote from the viewers'/readers'/listeners' own experiences, or when information rather than attitude was involved. The studies of Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) showed that the media had a central role in *consolidating* the values and knowledge of audience members, whereas the earlier hypodermic syringe model had claimed the media *change* attitudes and beliefs. Thus, the hypodermic syringe approach had been set up as a straw model for the proponents of the uses and gratifications school to react against, but in fact the latter approach did not demonstrate a powerless media. In addition, the development of a new mass medium in television further prompted a reassessment of old empirical studies.

Second, writers in the Marxist tradition began to influence mass media research in the 1970s. It was argued by academics such as Murdock (1982) that the mass media were key factors in maintaining class domination and were therefore more powerful than the uses and gratifications approach suggested. Research within a Marxist paradigm tended to concentrate on the production of cultural forms, for example the political economy approach which emphasizes the structural factors that shape production, and the determining conditions of existence of media forms (Nixon 1993). Texts were seen to bear particular messages, constructed within unequal relations of power, and the content and reception of such texts were not given any great attention. As a



reaction against this perspective, methodologies emerged which sought to centre the text, attributing more meaning and importance to the internal, rather than external, moments of production. *Screen* theory was perhaps the most extreme proponent of this view, combining structural linguistics with Althusserian Marxism and Lacanian psychoanalysis to position the viewer, leaving little space for the audience as a social construct (McGuigan 1992). As a critique of *Screen's* focus on the text, writers from the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in Birmingham pointed out that *Screen's* textual determinism ignored history and the polysemic nature of media messages, and isolated the reader/viewer from all other texts (Turner 1990). In their analyses of television and its viewers, researchers at the CCCS focused on the power of the text to propose particular readings, and the options of the audience in decoding those readings. The notion of the audience as passive consumers was overturned by Hall's (1980) theory of cultural production and reception. Hall's encoding/decoding model (1980) was the basis for such research, and attempted to account for the whole of the communication process, from the production and textual organization of media to its active reception. Hall pointed out the polysemic nature of texts and the potential asymmetry between the encoding and decoding processes. His encoding/decoding model will be discussed in further detail below.

Morley's (1980) study of *Nationwide* epitomised Hall's approach and his use of empirical methods indicated the direction of future media research. Morley was able to illustrate Hall's proposition that viewers are not passive recipients of media messages, but that the audience actively engages with texts, although Morley's work was not without problems. In particular, he encountered difficulties in the area of artificial viewing of television and the attempt to fit viewers' responses into prescribed decoding alternatives. Subsequent studies (for example, Hobson 1982; Radway 1987) elaborated on Morley's work, and attempted to locate the reading of texts within the routines and activities of everyday life. The emphasis shifted from a straightforward interpretation of just the media message to an active interpretation of the whole text (for example television programme, romantic novel) within a situational context. In Morley's (1986) work, this took the form of analysing the consumption of television in a domestic setting, paying particular attention to the way women's position in the household structures their relations to television. Therefore, the focus on the audience, itself a response to centring the text, has widened to include not only

the messages but the whole response to a particular form - when and where it is read, who reads it, for what purpose, and how it fits in to everyday routines.

However, the uses and gratifications model and this new interpretive approach appeared to be very similar - both incorporate elements of an active audience, see potential audience resistance, and want to know what the audience do with the media, rather than what the media do with the audience. As Evans (1990) pointed out, though, interpretivists argue for a more flexible reading of media texts, suggesting that although there may be a possible dominant ideological meaning to a text, consumers can produce their own individual meanings. Interpretivists mainly focus on such oppositional readings (for example, Ang 1985; Radway 1987), unlike researchers in the uses and gratifications approach, who proposed that consumers take what they want or need from the media, rather than actively negotiating or opposing texts. There is a danger here of the interpretivists becoming too audience-oriented and returning to a more psychological approach, but generally researchers in this tradition do not reject structural factors - notions of class, gender and ethnicity are seen as important in forming consumers' responses to cultural products (Morley 1980; Gray 1992). In this sense, interpretivism can be said to include the salient features of past research models and approaches and to combine these with an emphasis on the role of the reader in consuming and interpreting media messages and texts. However, recent research, especially that by Fiske (1987), has been criticised (for example by Stevenson 1995) for being too quick to celebrate audience resistance to mass culture and for ignoring the power of the media to encourage a preference for certain meanings over others. The interpretivist turn in cultural studies has gone too far for writers like Kellner (1995), who stressed the need to incorporate the critical ideology of the Frankfurt school while acknowledging the activity of the audience to interpret texts without necessarily finding resistance.

The current directions taken by researchers in cultural studies are to look both at the product itself and its conditions of production, or to focus on the consumption of culture by users. The former approach is not to return to an economic determinism, as in the political economy approach, but to examine how the interdependence between cultural and economic practices have a reciprocal effect in the sphere of cultural production (Nixon 1996). Such an approach is particularly apparent in writings on masculinity and consumption



(for example Nixon 1993, 1996; Mort 1996) and has been used to look at young women's magazines (McRobbie 1996). McRobbie drew upon the work of Nixon (1993) on men's magazines, to look at how the processes of launching and producing a magazine and locating a set of readers are discursively constructed through competing cultural values. Thus the conflicting interests between publishers, advertisers, designers and journalists represent a site of intersecting values and aims, but one where the journalists might think of themselves as sharing the same identity as the intended readership. In the case of the fortnightly magazine for young women, *More!*, McRobbie (1996) noted how journalists incorporated a strong sense of taste and style, similar to that of their friends and peers which the readers were thought to share. The ideal reader is easier to cater for, because she is a knowable agent, just like the young journalists themselves, although this does not necessarily make her predictable in her reading habits. To return to the relationship between the cultural and economic, Nixon (1996) suggested a move towards more empirical research with the practitioners who mobilize new markets - producers (such as publishers), cultural intermediaries (advertising agencies), and consumers, linking in the commercial imperatives and motives with the construction of a new audience, such as the 'new man' or the 'post-feminist woman'. Magazines like *Loaded* have successfully attempted to create the 'lad' as opposed to the new man. *Minx* has attempted to create the sassy, postmodern girl (who seems, so far, to be remarkably similar to the *Cosmopolitan* reader) - the success of *Minx* has yet to be established. Discussing *Minx*, Garratt (1996) suggested that all that needs to be done to launch a new magazine is to identify new niches and sell to them. However, niches may need to be created - women's weekly magazines had been addressing the same audience for decades before Bauer and G&J came to Britain and divided what many thought was a solid, homogeneous (if ailing) market. Although an age division existed in magazines (teenage, young women, older women), Bauer deliberately characterised the weekly readers by class, constructing a new product to reach ordinary, working class readers who enjoyed reading about other working class women, rather than the celebrities of television and Hollywood. G&J did the same with *Best*, a practical, service magazine, addressing readers as busy, active women with little spare time (see also chapter three for a discussion of the glocal nature of constructing readerships). These readers were always there, but had not been addressed as separate groups before - the novelty of *Bella* and *Best* was that in identifying

such readers they created successful markets for themselves in a genre that many media commentators had assumed to be in irreversible decline (Barrell and Braithwaite 1988).

In the brief outline above of the development of media research, I have made little reference to women's magazines or indeed to many studies regarding cultural forms of particular relevance to women. Until the late 1970s, researchers in the media disregarded women's interests, assuming a male audience and failing to differentiate according to gender. It was only with the rise of feminist researchers that women's interests were placed on the agenda, and this followed the move in cultural studies into looking at more popular forms of culture. McRobbie (1978) was particularly concerned to include girls and women in studies of youth culture, noting that most of the existing studies had focused on working class boys (for example, Willis 1977). Turner (1990) discussed the emergence of feminist approaches and the recognition of the importance of everyday culture. This shift in emphasis to popular culture legitimated the study of phenomena such as daytime radio (Hobson 1980), *Crossroads* (Brunsdon 1981; Hobson 1982), magazines like *Woman* (Winship 1978, 1981; Ferguson 1983), the television programme *Dallas* (Ang 1985), romantic fiction (Radway 1987) and watching videos (Gray 1992). Such research attempted to give credence to female audiences whose preferences and enjoyment had been devalued by those with more cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984), although as pointed out earlier by Winship (1987a), such research was not always accepted as useful or important by feminists.

### **Existing research on women's magazines**

The field of research on women's magazines is not extensive and there are wide gaps in the existing literature, particularly on the reception of magazines by their readers, and the new titles have largely been overlooked. However, there are a number of studies which have taken as their focus the older, more traditional women's weeklies, from a content and/or production perspective and these are worth looking at in some detail, specifically to understand how women's magazines were viewed by academic writers and how the magazines were thought to influence their readers. These classic studies also serve as a reminder of the content of women's weeklies before their style changed in the late 1980s, and the approach of the authors of these studies reflected the



current sociological thinking at that particular time when they were written. Some researchers focused on a single part of the content of women's magazines, for example health (Weston and Ruggiero 1985; Feig 1988; Guillen and Barr 1994), romance (Alexander 1989), fiction (Fowler 1984), advertising (Millum 1975; Winship 1980; Masse and Rosenblum 1988; Busby and Leichty 1993) and work (Ruggiero and Weston 1985; Demarest and Garner 1992; Keller 1992). Other researchers investigated specific magazines, for example Winship (1983) on *Options*, McCracken (1982) on *Cosmopolitan* and McRobbie (1996) on *More!*. Further researchers looked at the genre as a whole or selected a variety of magazines, for example Ballaster *et al* (1991), Winship (1987a, 1987b) and Hermes (1995).

The classic study of women's magazines is by Betty Friedan, who wrote *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963. This book was one of the first studies to look at the role of magazines in shaping women's lives. Having written for magazines herself, Friedan was able to offer an insider's view of how editors and publishers see women (i.e. as housewives and mothers) and how they promote this perspective through the magazines. Friedan examined the content of the most popular American titles of the time, for example *McCall's* and *Redbook*, and concluded that their focus on domesticity and exclusion of anything beyond the home, shaped the readers in terms of their expectations (low) and horizons (narrow). In Friedan's analysis, the focus was on production and content and there was no audience research to determine the extent to which readers accepted the magazines' image of women. Such an approach fitted with the prevailing sociological emphasis on the message, rather than its reception. Thus, from an early feminist perspective, women's magazines were seen as a means of keeping women out of the public sphere and firmly in the home. This concept of magazines persisted, with writers such as King and Stott (1977), Winship (1978), Tuchman (1978), Ferguson (1983) and Hebron (1983), all looking at the content of popular women's magazines and inferring that the images of femininity portrayed in their pages directly (and adversely) influenced their readers.

Friedan's American study was iconoclastic for its questioning of a previously unconsidered cultural form and opened the door for further investigations into women's magazines. In Britain, academics and/or feminists were slower to look at magazines, one of the first studies being White's (1970) historical analysis of



women's magazines from their inception in the seventeenth century to the late 1960s. White's (1970, 1977) thorough analyses of these early publications, together with Barrell and Braithwaite's (1988) descriptive documentation which also includes more recent titles (up to the late 1980s), means that there is little need for me to repeat the historical data, given its already comprehensive treatment in these two studies. Ballaster *et al* (1991) have also covered similar ground in their historical approach to women's magazines.

The British equivalent to Friedan's (1963) study was a book by Ferguson (1983) called *Forever Feminine*. Ferguson's study was an in-depth examination of women's weekly magazines from the perspective of their potential influence on readers. Discussing the circulation figures of *Woman*, *Woman's Own* and *Woman's Weekly*, Ferguson pointed out that the *readership* figures gave a more accurate picture of the range of possible influences of women's magazines:

This extensive secondary readership contributes an additional dimension in their potential social influence. To the extent that their female readers accept their messages, the influence of those messages can be multiplied many times through a mother's influence on her children, a wife's influence on her husband, a lover's influence on her partner, and women's influence on one another.

Ferguson 1983:3

Ferguson's concern was to document the messages in women's magazines and hypothesize how these might affect the readers. According to her analysis of the magazines' content, and her interviews with editors and other staff, the most popular women's weeklies of the time were promoting a 'cult of femininity' (Ferguson 1983:4) in which women were encouraged to perform certain rituals and behaviour (including buying weekly magazines, beauty routines, domestic tasks) in order to become a part of this cult. In other words, magazines contained the instructions in how to be a woman, promoting femininity as a career in itself.

The emphasis in Ferguson's writing was on the undesirability of women's magazines, the subversive ideology they were providing for readers. Such was the prevailing view of media at the time - women's magazines were open to

analysis from a critical, ideological perspective. But Ferguson also mentioned the positive functions of women's weeklies, for example she noted that:

For some women, there may be nowhere outside the pages of these journals where they are consistently valued so highly, or accorded such high status.

Ferguson 1983:9

Yet the overriding message from Ferguson was that women's magazines were promoting the idea that feminine fulfilment and personal happiness can only be found through achieving certain material and emotional ends, all of which are inherent in becoming a woman, for example having children, a nice home environment and a loving partner.

Without being overly critical of Ferguson's work, which was a comprehensive study of the production and content of the bestselling women's weeklies of the 1970s, her theoretical concerns meant that it was unnecessary to talk to readers of these magazines. As Hermes (1995) suggested, given that readers were supposed to be socialized by magazines, there was no theoretical or other need to interview them. Ferguson's emphasis was on the ideological messages incorporated in the magazines, mainly from a negative rather than a positive perspective, but she was not alone in this approach. Tuchman's (1978) text on women's magazines took a similar view, assigning an influential role to magazines as shaping women for marriage and dependency. And a study by Earnshaw (1982) emphasized the role of magazines in the ideological oppression of women. Again, the emphasis was on textual messages rather than the reception of magazines by readers.

Both Ferguson's (1983) and Tuchman's (1978) studies predated the later trend in popular culture for considering seriously the pleasure of the audience and for taking the audience's perspective into account. However, such a move in cultural studies is not necessarily dependent on the prevailing theoretical climate. Men's magazines have been studied to very little extent as yet, and the few studies that do exist focus mainly on the production (Nixon 1993; Breazeale 1994; Mort 1996). It would seem, therefore, that before cultural forms can be analysed for their reception by readers, it is important to investigate their production and content, thus situating them in a social and historical context. Nixon's (1993) study of men's magazines is interesting for its

focus on the social conditions which led to the mid 1980s/early 1990s surge in men's titles like *Arena*, *GQ*, *Esquire* and *Loaded*. He linked their launches and success with the rise in women's magazines at the time and the desire of advertisers to penetrate the young men's market, a demographic group hard to reach by other media. Magazine publishers wanted to extend the market in a climate of the increasing importance of consumption and leisure, together with constructs of the 'new man' (Nixon 1993:469), leading to a more stylish kind of magazine for men. Like in the women's market, previous titles made the innovations of later magazines more palatable and acceptable to advertisers and the audience, for example the recent crop of gossip magazines such as *OK!*, *Here!* and *Now*, are structured on the success of *Hello!*, but have changed its formula (O'Hagan 1996). The smaller men's market has certain parallels with the huge women's magazine industry, yet there are no titles to compare with *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break* or indeed any women's weekly, as the men's publications are all monthly.

The pleasure gained from reading women's magazines has been analysed in a study by Winship (1987a), who acknowledged the pleasure she herself obtained from reading *Cosmopolitan*, *Woman's Own* and *Spare Rib*. Winship explained her choice of magazines by noting that *Woman's Own* was picked for its popularity (the best read weekly in Britain at the time), *Cosmopolitan* for its success as a monthly, and *Spare Rib* for its influential and radical journalism. She also looked at the commercial side of magazines via *Options*, a glossy monthly launched in April 1982. What Winship found in relation to why women read magazines involved a mixture of the relevance of the text and the importance of the social conditions of reading. She noted that the magazines provided for the rhythms and routines of women's lives in which private space and time are precious and the boundaries between work and leisure are blurred. Magazines represented a reliable and affordable treat, not just entertaining but informative too, giving a justification for their purchase. Within the text, there was reassurance - individual problems were given individual answers (wider social or structural problems and answers were rarely addressed) and the few true life stories were comforting in their suggestion that things could either be worse and one's life is not so bad after all, or that other women have the same problems. The magazines presented a catalogue of women's ability to survive in the face of adversity in a man's world. *Inside Women's Magazines* was written too early in the 1980s to include an assessment of *Best*, *Bella* and *Take*



*a Break*, which differ in a number of respects from those discussed by Winship, but it is nevertheless useful to any future research concerning women's magazines and one of the key texts in this area. Central to Winship's analysis was her willingness to convey the attraction and pleasure afforded by women's magazines, rather than concentrate exclusively on the negative textual messages and their ideological influence on readers. Winship (1987a) pointed out the contradictory nature of women's magazines, partly due to her own liking for magazines and her desire to understand their fascination for the women who read them, including herself.

In keeping with the notion of pleasure, Winship (1990, 1992) continued her look at women's magazines by focusing on *Best*. Her 1990 study, a teaching text for the Open University, considered women's magazines generally but also two weeklies, *Best* and *Woman's Own*, were compared. In an interesting and useful article, Winship placed the production of women's magazines in their social and historical context, and also addressed the content and possible reception of magazines, although without any audience research. From the cover to the contents page and the fiction and fashion, Winship documented the magazines' approaches and highlighted the differences between *Best* and *Woman's Own*. She found that *Best* attempted to incorporate more equality of gender representation in its pages, but at the same time acknowledged this as her own interpretation of the magazines:

You may feel that I am misplaced in the interpretation I have made of 'Pyjama drama' and that *Best* is premature in its pride. Whatever your reservations about how to understand these images I hope you are prepared to go some way towards accepting that they do embody some kind of representational shift.

Winship 1990:44

Winship continued in both this article and in a later chapter on *Best* (1992) to refer to the different interpretations available to readers, a theoretical leap forward compared to the earlier writings of Ferguson (1983) and Tuchman (1978), for example. Winship's analysis of *Best* in her second study was focused around fiction, fashion and the problem page, and she reached a similar conclusion to that in her 1990 study - *Best* attempted to disturb the traditional world of women's magazines by its 'oddball' stories and unresolved problems, pointing to an uneasiness on women's behalf with their expected feminine roles

and responsibilities. Like the intention to portray gender equality on the fashion pages, *Best* resisted easy stereotypes by leaving characters in both fiction and problem page in unresolved situations, thereby leaving the reader disturbed too. Winship suggested this representation in *Best* might reflect the experiences of real women, illustrating their ambivalence about their lives and the (unfulfilled) expectations they have of men. The comments Winship made about the fiction are, I believe, applicable to the true life stories in the later editions of *Best* - women's difficulties and unresolved situations are still addressed but as first person accounts or narratives rather than through fictionalised characters. Unlike the other comparable weeklies of the time (with the possible exception of *Bella*), *Best* offered the option of being a less comfortable read - the traditional weeklies maintained their more established formula which was perhaps less disturbing than *Best's* potentially ambiguous approach to femininity.

Winship's two articles on *Best* (1990, 1992) and her book on women's magazines (1987a) all portrayed the contradictory content and the attraction of reading women's magazines and yet they excluded the accounts of readers (with the exception of Winship herself as reader). Ballaster *et al* (1991) included an audience study, although only a small one. Ballaster *et al's* work, according to a critical review by Hermes (1995), was an uncomfortable mix of feminist concern for the harmful ideology in women's magazines and a celebratory acknowledgement of the pleasure of reading. According to Hermes, this left the reader of *Women's Worlds* with just one possible position:

The only relatively comfortable reader position as regards this book is to share the authors' mixture of pleasure and guilt.

Hermes 1995:3

Hermes's critique of Ballaster *et al* was a valid one, although the latter were making the point that women's magazines are contradictory publications and that women do react to them with a mix of emotions. Like the earlier studies by Tuchman (1978) and Ferguson (1983), Ballaster *et al's* focus was on the construction of femininity in women's magazines, a construction beset by contradictions. Ballaster *et al* discussed these contradictions and linked them to the reading of magazines by actual readers. For example, they pointed out how women's magazines often assert women's right to financial independence, but at the same time this apparently feminist position serves to locate women

within domestic frameworks, because financial independence ensures that children can be supported despite the irresponsible behaviour of men. Some of the readers in their study recognised this kind of contradiction in the magazines, articulating a dissatisfaction with the magazines' instructions in how to look beautiful, when such instructions resulted in unwanted comments from passing workmen. Similarly, the way women's magazines claim to represent their readers, or offer them a guide to living, means that they reproduce the very contradictions they promise to resolve - such tension is illustrated in the magazines' intentions to act as aspirational publications for women, while simultaneously representing the reality of women's lives with all their problems, setbacks and unhappy circumstances. Having made this point, Ballaster *et al* asked how readers interpret and use women's magazines, and how they deal with the contradictions. It is here that they urged more investigation into women's use of magazines, a question to which they were unable to do justice with their small survey of readers. They emphasized the exploratory nature of their focus groups with women, intending the material to be suggestive rather than conclusive.

Ballaster *et al* (1991) found problems with the intended preferred reading of the magazines they investigated, and with the often contradictory responses of the readers they interviewed. Ignoring the former problem, but addressing the latter, Hermes (1995) looked at readers' motives for buying and reading magazines, and so picked up where Winship (1990, 1992) and Ballaster *et al* (1991) had concluded their own studies. Hermes focused totally on the consumption of magazines - no production or textual analysis here, but instead the ways in which readers make magazines meaningful in their everyday lives. Hermes interviewed 80 respondents, a mixture of Dutch and British readers, including 16 men, and her range of magazines covered monthlies, weeklies, gossip titles and a Dutch feminist publication. Hermes's aim differed from that of the earlier researchers of women's magazines - she was uninterested in individual titles, historical analyses, production details or particular content. She wanted to fill in the gaps of previous research and look at what women do with the magazines they read, an intention not dissimilar to Radway's (1987) *Reading the Romance* and Morley's (1986) work on television. Hermes criticised earlier research which focused on the content rather than the reception of magazines and suggested:



It seems highly probable, therefore, that we know more about the concerns and the views of researchers than we do about actual practices of women's magazine use and the experiences of other readers, who, after all, make up the majority of women's magazine users.

Hermes 1995:10

The actual choice of research topic in the first place puts the researcher's concerns on the agenda, but Hermes was correct to point to the lack of material in this area. Reflecting the move in cultural studies to a more interpretive based approach, Hermes successfully situated magazine reading within everyday routines by interviewing readers about their use of magazines at different times in their lives. Yet she found that for the majority of her respondents, reading women's magazines had hardly any meaning at all. Readers spoke mainly of its 'cultural insignificance' (Hermes 1995:143), countering the pervasive view in popular culture research that texts are inevitably meaningful. Such a 'fallacy of meaningfulness' (Hermes 1995:148) offered a distorted view of cultural products, giving them unwarranted importance and relying on the feedback of fans rather than ordinary readers/viewers/listeners. Hermes avoided such a mistake and instead succeeded in theorizing the mundaneness of everyday media use.

Women's magazines have not yet been analysed in terms of their preferred meanings (that is, what the editors are intending the readers to decode), or in connection with how they are used contextually. It would seem that the existing literature on women's magazines is largely focused around their content, which is examined from a critical ideological perspective. The question has always been what do magazines do to the women who read them, usually answered from a negative position. With the exception of Winship, Ballaster *et al* and Hermes, the general message coming from the research is that women's magazines are bad for readers and that women need to be forewarned about what is really in their favourite weekly or monthly. But with the recent shift in cultural studies to a more audience oriented position, Winship (1987a, 1990, 1992), Ballaster *et al* (1991) and Hermes (1995) (particularly the latter) asked how magazines are used by their readers, an approach which emphasizes the content and consumption but ignores the production of magazines. Yet how do the production, content and consumption of women's magazines fit together, and is it important to take into

account all these three stages? No existing study on women's (or men's) magazines has taken such an approach, even though it would offer a comprehensive account of this particular cultural form. To return to Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model, an analysis of its theoretical intentions will explain why such a perspective would be a valuable addition to the existing literature on women's magazines, adding to an understanding of why and how such magazines capture the attention of millions of women every week and what they are intended to achieve by their producers.

### **Encoding/decoding**

In this section, I will focus on Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model, Morley's (1980) application of this model and Thompson's (1990) methodological approach to media analysis. All put forward theories using a three-phase approach to the study of media which has influenced my own approach, although I will not be using their work uncritically. I have developed Hall's model, partly as suggested by Morley (1996), and I have elaborated on Thompson's (1990) methodological framework for my research.

Hall (1980) conceived of the encoding/decoding model in the 1970s as a response to and development of earlier theories of mass communication. The model attempted to combine the power of media institutions to set agendas with the notion of an active viewer whose responses are structured beyond the level of individual psychology (Morley 1995). Hall intended the model to be used with television programmes, specifically news and current affairs, and gave examples of its potential application to these areas. However, it is possible to apply the theoretical framework to other forms of media, including women's magazines, although the issue of what is being encoded in such media is more difficult to discern than in current affairs discourse.

Utilising the idea of an active audience but broadening that activity from individual psychological factors to a wider cultural and social framework, Hall continued to incorporate the power of the media in setting agendas and defining issues, all within a theory of how communication actually works. Criticising the accepted sender/message/receiver model for its linearity, Hall suggested a reconceptualisation of this simple process:

It is also possible (and useful) to think of this process in terms of a structure produced and sustained through the articulation of linked but distinctive moments - production, circulation, distribution/consumption, reproduction. This would be to think of the process as a 'complex structure in dominance' sustained through the articulation of connected practices, each of which, however, retains its distinctiveness and has its own ... forms and conditions of existence.

Hall 1980:128

Each stage mentioned above is relatively autonomous from the others yet the encoding of a media message does link to its decoding - each stage in the process affects the potential content of the next stage but does not determine it. The 'practices' which Hall discussed above are realised in a discursive form of signs and symbols which have particular meanings within the terms of reference supplied by codes the audience shares with the producers of media messages (Morley 1995). If the audience does not share the same codes, then the signs and symbols will have a different meaning according to the viewer's own reference points. The producers (Hall used television to illustrate his point but other media forms such as magazines would include the editors as producers) operate within the routines and established conventions of professional practice, the technical infrastructure of their medium and the institutional relations of production. The role of the producers is to encode a meaningful message to be decoded by the readers/viewers who in turn bring their own interpretative frameworks to the decoding process. The construction of meaning takes place at different moments in the encoding/decoding model's process - producers encode messages in the form of meaningful discourse, for example a television news programme like *Nationwide*, or a woman's magazine like *Bella*, and these messages are appropriated as meaningful discourse by viewers/readers who decode and use such messages. The discourse is translated into social practices, reproduced by viewers or readers to complete the encoding/decoding circuit and feeding back into the production process. For example, women read *Best* which frequently features diet information whose message is reinforced by the use of thin models on the fashion pages. As I know from my research, this information is often used by readers and incorporated into their daily routines (at least for a short time - many women 'yo-yo' diet in quick bursts, giving up after weeks or days). Thus, the readers buy special 'diet' foods, exercise videos, leotards and may even join a gym or aerobics class or watch Mr. Motivator on breakfast television. From its



audience research, feedback from readers in the form of letters and true life stories, and monitoring of general cultural trends, *Best* knows that women are pursuing exercise and diet regimes, and so continues to include such information in the magazine. In this way, the linearity of the former sender/message/receiver model is rejected because the cultural practices recommended by *Best* are connected to the production environment of the magazine (a general fitness culture), other media (breakfast television, Rosemary Conley exercise programmes), the behaviour of the editorial staff (who, like their readers, may be dieting and exercising), as well as the readers themselves. All these activities are happening simultaneously rather than in a progressive sequence. And the reader herself may opt in and out of these activities, dieting for special occasions or for seasonal events like Christmas.

When the audience decodes the media messages, there may not necessarily be a fit between the codes of encoding and decoding. Hall suggested this 'lack of equivalence' (Hall 1980:131) was connected to the asymmetry between the codes of source and receiver at the moment of transformation into (encoding) and out of (decoding) the discursive form. The degrees of understanding or misunderstanding in the communicative exchange depends on the relations of equivalence established between the encoder and decoder, which in turn depends on the ability of the codes used to transmit straightforwardly or distort what has been transmitted. Moores (1993) suggested there are two reasons for this potential asymmetry between encoding and decoding messages and the first concerns the polysemic nature of texts. They are open to more than one reading, visual signs in particular having several possible associations at a connotative level. Such a semiotic openness was qualified by Hall in an attempt to restrict this polysemic quality of messages:

Polysemy must not, however, be confused with pluralism. Connotative codes are not *equal* among themselves. Any society/culture tends, with varying degrees of closure, to impose its classifications of the social and cultural and political world. These constitute a *dominant cultural order*, though it is neither univocal nor uncontested. This question of the 'structure of discourses in dominance' is a crucial point. The different areas of social life appear to be mapped out into discursive domains, hierarchically organised into *dominant or preferred meanings*.

Hall 1980:134 (italics in original)

In Hall's television example, the professional code of news production works mainly to prefer hegemonic readings. The pattern of preferred readings, therefore, has become institutionalised and incorporates the social order as a set of meanings, practices and beliefs.

Moore's (1993) second point about the asymmetry of the encoding/decoding process concerned reading practices. The subjects who decode media messages are not necessarily the same as the text's implied or preferred readers. Hall (1980) suggested that audience research should be aimed at identifying significant clusters of meaning. Of course, certain media texts will be able to reach their implied readers better than others, for example a magazine like *Everywoman*, which was produced by feminists for other feminists, would experience more equivalence between the stages of encoding and decoding but for most texts, the social and discursive positionings of readers/viewers will vary, leading to different decodings of the message. In his encoding/decoding paper, however, Hall had tentatively hypothesized three possible decoding positions, although he stressed these had yet to be 'empirically tested and refined' (Hall 1980:136). Hall's three positions consisted of a dominant-hegemonic position, a negotiated position and finally an oppositional position.

The first hypothetical position is when the viewer decodes the message in terms of the reference code in which it was encoded. To relate this to women's magazines, if the editors intended a housewife and/or consumer position for their implied readers, as in the magazines Friedan (1963) analysed, then readers in the dominant-hegemonic position would decode the magazines in this reference code. Such a position would support Hall's assertion that the preferred reading is congruent with dominant definitions of social reality. The second position identified by Hall is when the legitimacy of the hegemonic definition is acknowledged by the viewer but at the same time at a more restricted, situational level, the viewer rejects such a hegemonic version of events and opposes from her/his particular perspective. To relate to magazines, the idea of women as housewives might seem acceptable to the negotiating reader for other women, but for herself, this approach may bear little or no relation to her willingness to give up a career or get married, although it may relate to parts of her life. The third hypothetical position of Hall's is an oppositional stance, when the viewer/reader decodes the message within the preferred framework but then recontextualises the message into an alternative



reference structure. A magazine reader would see every mention of women's practical and personal skills (cooking, craft articles, beauty, fashion) as patriarchal oppression to control women's lives and restrict their horizons.

Hall (1980) emphasized the hypothetical nature of the three positions, pointing to the need for empirical research on the model and Morley (Brunsdon and Morley 1978; Morley 1980) obliged with an analysis of the local news programme *Nationwide*. Morley (1980) found problems with the three positions, although he later endorsed the model as an appropriate way to investigate the production, content and reception of television discourse. He commented:

I remain convinced that the model, while needing developing and amending in various respects, still offers the best alternative to a conception of media texts as equally 'open' to any and all interpretations ... which readers wish to make of them.

Morley 1996:282

The developments suggested by Morley include the analytical separation of questions of recognition, comprehension, interpretation and responses, which Hall's model tended to blur together (see chapter five for a discussion of additional decoding positions). But Morley's earlier concerns, encountered during the *Nationwide* study, related to the context of decoding and the nature of the audience. The artificiality of showing viewers *Nationwide* in an unfamiliar group setting (in other words, constructing an audience where none existed) led Morley to propose a contextual model of media consumption in everyday life, a model which Morley himself has since used (Morley 1986) and which I followed. In addition, he found that viewers' decodings of *Nationwide* could not be reduced to their socioeconomic location - viewers occupying the same position offered different responses, leading Morley to connect social location with discursive or institutional positioning (Moore 1993). A further problem lay with the notion of a preferred reading - Hall's (1980) formulation of this implied a deliberate intention on the part of the producers. As Moore (1993) suggested, the operations of ideology may be related more to the accepted reproduction of dominant definitions and professional conventions than the intentional biases of producers or institutions, although this is not always the case and indeed it would be difficult in practice to distinguish the two. Further, the preferred reading is problematized by its very identity - how can it be discovered? And does it reside in the text itself or is it only available



when being read? It is possible to ask the producers, as I did, for their preferred meaning but as noted above, this is not always possible. Morley (1996) responded to the dilemma of the preferred reading in the following paragraph:

The analysis of the text or message remains, of course, a fundamental necessity, for the polysemy of the message is not without its own structure. Audiences do not see only what they want to see, since a message (or programme) is not simply a window on the world, but is a construction. While the message is not an object with one real meaning, there are, within it, signifying mechanisms which promote certain meanings, even one privileged meaning, and suppress others: these are the 'directive closures' encoded in the message.

Morley 1996:282

These 'directive closures' are what Brunson and Morley (1978) followed in order to reproduce the reading of *Nationwide* by operating within the dominant decoding framework, and Morley (1980) later developed this idea by analysing which sections of the audience made a dominant reading of the message. But as he later pointed out (Morley 1995), to raise the notion of a preferred reading and its possible decoding by different audiences is to argue that the meaning produced by viewers/readers reading a text cannot simply be read straight off from the text. The text, in other words, should not be considered in isolation from its social and historical conditions of production and consumption. Unlike the earlier *Screen* theory, in which subjects were positioned by the text, thus making it the focus of analysis, Hall's encoding/decoding model emphasized that a text's meaning will be construed differently according to the discourses and social locations available to the audience. However, Morley also cautioned attributing too much power to the audience in making their own meanings from a text:

The power of viewers to reinterpret meanings is hardly equivalent to the discursive power of centralized media institutions to construct the texts which the viewer then interprets, and to imagine otherwise is simply foolish.

Morley 1996:291

I now want to return to the difficulties encountered by Morley with the encoding/decoding model that I briefly referred to above, as there are some problems which need to be discussed further. Morley (1992) related the main

problems with the model to the difficulties he found in his study of *Nationwide*. These difficulties applied more to the decoding than encoding stage of the model, although there were problems in the notion of a preferred reading. In what Morley labelled as the 'fundamental limitation of the encoding/decoding model' (Morley 1992:136) he pointed to the context of viewing or reading as essential to shifting the focus of decoding. In the *Nationwide* study, the question of the viewers' dominant, negotiative or oppositional position took precedence over whether those viewers would have watched the programme at all, given the choice. The artificiality of such media use renders as irrelevant the questions of the encoding/decoding model because the viewers did not necessarily have any natural interest in the programme. Assigning them to a decoding category, as Morley attempted to do, proved futile in the context of their media routines and habits. This difficulty does not occur with my own research on magazines, as the women were genuine readers who read *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break* as part of their everyday lives. Morley (1986) built on the *Nationwide* study and his recognition of artificial viewing to situate subsequent research in the home with viewers, and he added the question of what different families 'do' with television material, as well as how it is interpreted. However, what families 'do' with television is a different activity and has different connotations to the activities surrounding magazines. 'Doing' in Morley's sense of television is concerned with power relations, gender and family relationships. 'Doing' in relation to magazines (as I discovered during this research) involves actually using the material in the content in a practical way, and the social networking around magazines as gifts (see chapter six). The research with families also allowed Morley to explore in further detail notions of class, as he realised in the *Nationwide* study that viewers' responses could not be determined by their socioeconomic location, but that their use of additional discourses to make sense of the programme allowed for differences both within and between viewers in the same location. Socioeconomic position remained a factor in decoding but it did not determine response to the extent of excluding other factors, for example education.

In the encoding part of the model, and in relation to television, Morley suggested that the encoding/decoding metaphor implied television acted as a conveyor belt for a pre-given meaning rather than as a medium of producing meaning through signification (and that meaning production takes place in all three phases of the model). But Hall did not intend the model to be read in



such a way and emphasized the different moments of meaning production and their continuous nature. Morley also problematized the confusion between the author's intentionality and her/his professional ideological terrain. Thus, in *Nationwide*, the field of the programme makers' professional ideologies is left to one side. However, it is difficult to see how the two could be separated. In relation to magazines, the editor is very much a product of his or her environment, situated in a particular location, and whose intentions for his or her magazine comes out of that situation. Thus, for the magazines, these encoding problems suggested by Morley in relation to television are not readily transferable. He also suggested that this notion of decoding blurred a number of processes that might be better seen as distinct. For example, although decoding indicates a single act of reading, much more actually needs to be explored including issues of attention, relevance, comprehension and, particularly with the magazine readers, interpretation of the text without reducing this to agreement or disagreement of the preferred reading. This critique of the decoding stage is relevant to magazines, as the issues discussed are easily confused and merit separate consideration.

What people do with the media (in Morley's example, who decides which channel to watch, the gendered power relationships and so on) is a dimension which is lacking in the encoding/decoding model, as I found in my research with magazines. The activities surrounding magazine reading, particularly in terms of women's relations and communities (which are addressed in chapter six) clearly could not be explored solely in the context of Hall's model. However, the situatedness of media use remains a problem for the encoding/decoding model only if one expects the model to be a comprehensive theory of all aspects of media use. There remain important issues within the use of media that are not covered by the encoding/decoding model, but the model's emphasis is on the relation between the reader and the text, not how texts are used by readers to sustain and negotiate social relationships. This latter aspect of media use is relevant to women's magazines and both widens the scope of analysis of this thesis and has implications for Hall's original model. If the way texts are used in this broader social context impacts on how readers decode the messages (and it is not certain whether this happens), then the relationship between text and reader is affected, consequently impinging on the encoding/decoding model. However, it is clear that my research on magazines has to move beyond the model if I am to explore the wider social context of



magazine use, so important to the readers. Following the increasingly localized shift in cultural studies (Livingstone 1996) it would seem that such a limitation of the model is a basic problem for researchers which calls for additional approaches which are discussed in the next section.

Morley (1980, 1986) has comprehensively critiqued Hall's encoding/decoding model via his studies of *Nationwide* and family television viewing, yet my research on women's magazines moves beyond Morley (and Hall) because of my focus on community. Morley does not discuss the locating of media use within such a wide boundary, only going as far as the family. Neither Hall's encoding/decoding model nor Morley's development of the model can adequately accompany my own research into this broader context of media use.

Given these problems with Hall's encoding/decoding model, particularly in the decoding stage, it might be helpful to suggest alternative means by which the reading of magazines might be explored. Hermes (1995) for example, utilised an interpretive repertoire approach in her study of readers. By taking this perspective, Hermes prioritised how readers made magazines meaningful in the context of their changing lives and experiences. Repertoires are the different cultural resources that people utilise to talk about magazines and they are used for characterising and evaluating actions and events and other phenomena. They are the underlying meaning systems to which we refer in recurring themes and issues. Hermes reconstructed the repertoires used by the people she interviewed, detecting themes from the readers. However, repertoire is a slightly ambiguous concept in that it is not very clearly distinguished from discourse by Hermes. In unpacking the way Hermes has used repertoire, it seems to be used specifically because of the perceived fantasy element in reading magazines. Hermes found that readers used repertoires related to several fantasies - those of being competent, rational, up-to-date, of always being prepared, and of the ideal self who is in control of her life. Such repertoires were reconstructed by Hermes from the interview transcripts, although there is little information about how such themes were identified in her data, and why these fantasies and not others were so important to her readers. Given the emphasis on fantasy, Hermes considered this to be more important and relevant to the readers than the more practical uses of women's magazines I found in my own research. Because of this difference, it seemed

inappropriate to follow Hermes and use repertoires rather than discourse. Yet I have drawn upon certain aspects of Hermes' repertoire analysis, specifically the ways in which repertoires overlap and contradict between and within readers. Such a lack of neatness and blurring between Hermes' repertoires was discernible in the discourses used by the readers I interviewed. Where Hermes found commonalities and differences between female and male readers, I identified them between women of different age, occupation, education, race and so on. By using discourse rather than repertoires, I invoke a sense of the readers being more situated by their social locations, something Hermes does not stress.

An alternative approach to exploring the reading of magazines was taken by Frazer (1992) in her use of discourse registers to explore how girls read *Jackie*, a teenage magazine (which is no longer published). Discourse registers are institutionalized, situationally specific, culturally familiar ways of talking, and Frazer found it was possible to shift registers dramatically according to context. The girls in her study who read and commented on *Jackie* were able to use registers of the problem page, feminism, the tabloid press, discourse of popular culture and so on. Again, like Hermes' use of repertoires outlined above, Frazer confined her research to the readers rather than including the production of magazines, thus helping to fill the lacunae in existing studies. This illuminated how readings are not fixed or predictable but fluid and subjective according to the different discourses used by readers (although there remains the notion of a preferred reading).

Both interpretive repertoires and discourse registers would help to overcome the limitations of Hall's encoding/decoding model and as suggested above, I have drawn upon discourse to explore the readers' decodings of *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break*, placing them within the methodology of Thompson (1990) outlined below. As Ballaster *et al* (1991) suggest, readers (as well as critics) produce readings of magazines structured by social context and shared cultural meanings, and the researcher can produce a picture of the limits and ranges of the discourses that are available to talk about magazines, mapping how their use differs and overlaps between readers.

As can be seen from the above discussion, the decoding stage of Hall's model is a site of contested ideas, research and theories amongst cultural studies



scholars. A debate taking place between Morley (1996) and Curran (1996) regarding the new revisionism in audience research included much criticism on both sides for the increasing tendency to find and celebrate opposition in all media reception. As the outline of the development of media research showed earlier, scholars in cultural studies are currently taking an interpretivist approach, focusing on the reception largely to the exclusion of production and content, and Hermes's (1995) work on women's magazines is a good example of this approach. But Curran (1996) criticised the lack of concern in recent audience studies for macro processes, particularly the abandonment of notions of power and the politics of communication. The theoretical consequences of such a focus in research indicates a tendency to underestimate the force of the text in constructing meaning and to over-emphasize the power of the audience in choosing from the polysemic meanings available. However, this approach does avoid the emphasis on ideology of earlier research, although Morley (1996) would suggest the move has gone too far. He commented:

Much recent work in this field is marred by a facile insistence on the polysemy of media products and by an undocumented presumption that forms of oppositional decoding are more widespread than subordination or the reproduction of dominant meanings.

Morley 1996:281

Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model is an appropriate approach for studying the totality of media messages without losing sight of either the power of production or the ability of the audience to construct their own meanings (within the constraints of a preferred reading framework and taking into account the limitations discussed above). But Hall did not suggest how the model could be operationalised, how the encoding/decoding stages or possible three responses to the message were to be investigated. Thompson (1990) constructed a method of inquiry which corresponds with Hall's encoding/decoding model, and which he termed the 'depth-hermeneutical approach' (Thompson 1990:281). He defined this approach as a broad methodological framework comprising three phases or procedures, which correspond with Hall's three stages - social-historical analysis, formal or discursive analysis, and interpretation, although Thompson did not explicitly link his methodology with Hall's encoding/decoding model. Thompson outlined his approach:



I shall argue that the analysis of symbolic forms can be most appropriately conceptualized in terms of a methodological framework that I shall describe as 'depth hermeneutics'. This framework highlights the fact that the object of analysis is a meaningful symbolic construction which calls for interpretation. ... But symbolic forms are also embedded in social and historical contexts of various kinds.

Thompson 1990:272

Thompson used what he called a 'tripartite approach' (1990:273) for the analysis of mass communication, paying particular attention to the context of the reception and appropriation of media messages, the third phase of his analysis, although he continued to be aware of the interrelations between meaning and power, taking a critical approach to the analysis of media. Thompson's first phase of his depth-hermeneutical approach is a social-historical analysis in which the production, transmission and reception of symbolic forms are placed within a wider context. According to Thompson, all media products are characterised by their conditions of production. To relate this to the three magazines, *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break* are set within an environment of weekly magazine production with its tight deadlines, employment hierarchy and competitive market. In addition, the wider cultural environment of more women working, changing expectations of both women and men and increasing gender equality provide a context in which the magazines are constructed. As a further stage of analysis in this first phase, Thompson pointed to four basic aspects of social contexts which might define a distinct level of analysis: the spatio-temporal settings in which symbolic forms are produced and received; the fields of interaction which characterise relations between individuals and their opportunities; social institutions and the rules, resources and relations which constitute them; and social structure, which refers to the differences in distribution of power, opportunities and life chances. The analysis of social inequalities of class, gender and ethnicity would be included under the social structure level. In practice, all the four extra elements would most likely be incorporated within the general analysis of social and historical relations. In addition, as a further stage of the social-historical analysis, Thompson included the technical media of transmission, meaning the exchange of symbolic forms between individuals, for example electronic transmission of television and radio, face-to-face interaction between individuals, or mediated interaction between a reader and her magazine (see chapter six for a fuller discussion of the different types of interaction generated

by magazines). As Thompson pointed out, such technical developments do not exist in isolation and so need to be included in their particular social-historical contexts:

They [*technical media*] always presuppose certain skills, rules and resources for encoding and decoding messages, attributes which are themselves unevenly distributed among individuals; and they are often deployed within specific institutional apparatuses which may be concerned with regulating the production and circulation of symbolic forms.

Thompson 1990:283

What is emphasized in Thompson's first stage of the production of media messages is the context in which it takes place and the unequal distributions of power which affect the participation of those who encode the meanings, but from an institutional or social/cultural perspective rather than an individual psychological one. In this sense, Thompson placed more emphasis on the political economy of mass communication than Hall (1980), who did not explicitly link discursive practices with how the economy and the state shape cultural production (Stevenson 1995). Hall's emphasis was on the fit between the discursive construction of the message and its interpretation by the audience. For Thompson, the production of symbolic forms cannot be separated from their social conditions. He summarised the first stage of inquiry as:

The task of the first phase of the depth-hermeneutical approach is to reconstruct the social-historical conditions and contexts of the production, circulation and reception of symbolic forms, to examine the rules and conventions, the social relations and institutions, and the distribution of power, resources and opportunities.

Thompson 1990:284

The processes of the production and transmission of media messages can be analysed by a combination of social-historical analysis and ethnographic research. Thompson (1990) also suggested taking a more interpretative approach, in terms of talking to the producers to discover how they view what they are doing, what they are trying to achieve and so on, an approach I found appropriate for my research. Such an interpretation of everyday understanding (or 'doxa') illuminates the implicit assumptions in the production process, difficult for the researcher to access by other means. Nixon (1993) advocated



the use of such an approach in his study of men's magazines, suggesting that the professional knowledges and actions of media workers be incorporated in methodological practice, as they are formative in the shaping of media texts. To add to this analysis, van Zoonen (1994) suggested that a process of cultural negotiation takes place at the site of encoding. Such a process involves the competing frames of reference within the production environment, for example the advertising director may have conflicting aims to the feature writer, who in turn may have different intentions to the art editor. A conflict between commercial and aesthetic motives would result in a contradictory text, incorporating the diverse encodings of different producers. Such a conflict has been discerned in women's magazines, where various constraints limit the abilities of the editors to encode the particular meanings they want readers to decode (Wolf 1990). The editors' intended messages, therefore, are contradicted or diluted by the essential need to be commercially successful, the necessity of including advertisements, the constraints of what readers expect from a woman's weekly, and in terms of the market the magazines are aiming for. The encoding stage of media messages, then, is not without negotiation, conflict and contradiction. As van Zoonen put it:

Negotiations at the level of the texts concern the different meanings available in a text as a result of the contradictions in institutionalized production, and as a result of independent and unpredictable interactions between contending signs and codes in a text. Such textual 'negotiations' reverberate in the reception of media discourse.

van Zoonen 1994:9

The second stage of Thompson's tripartite approach is a study of the content of media, the symbolic constructions which make up the messages from the producers. Thompson envisaged a number of ways in which to approach the discursive analysis, depending on what is to be analysed. He emphasized the interconnectedness of the content with the production and reception of symbolic forms, suggesting that if it were to be isolated, discursive analysis would become merely an abstract exercise, oblivious to what is being expressed by the structure it is intended to reveal.

Thompson's methods of undertaking a discursive analysis included various well known means of examining the content of media - semiotic analysis, conversation analysis, discourse analysis, syntactic analysis, argumentative



analysis and narrative structure (Thompson 1990). The aim is to analyse the media message as a complex symbolic construction which displays an articulated structure. As an example, Thompson suggested the analysis of a television programme would include the juxtaposition of words and images, the angles, colours and sequences of the imagery, the style of language, the structure of narrative, the use of devices such as flashbacks, the interconnections between other programmes, and so on. For a woman's magazine, I suggest the content would be examined in relation to the choice of features, topics and stories, the language style, the tone of address to readers, the use of photographs and imagery, and comparison with other magazines, all of which I have undertaken in the content analysis of *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break*. Therefore, a combination of the above methods of analysis can be used to examine the second stage of Thompson's depth-hermeneutic approach, corresponding to Hall's middle stage of meaningful discourse.

The third phase of Thompson's tripartite model is that of interpretation, a creative construction of meaning of what is represented. Again, this stage can be examined by a combination of social-historical analysis and ethnographic inquiry. Thompson emphasized how the process of interpretation is also a process of reinterpretation, because the symbolic forms to be interpreted are part of an already pre-interpreted field. To relate to magazines, the readers may have already interpreted the texts and appropriated them into their everyday lives. It is then up to the researcher to interpret their interpretations of the meanings in the magazines. This may lead to conflicts of interpretation between different researchers and also between the readers and the researcher (see chapter two for a fuller discussion of the process of interpretation).

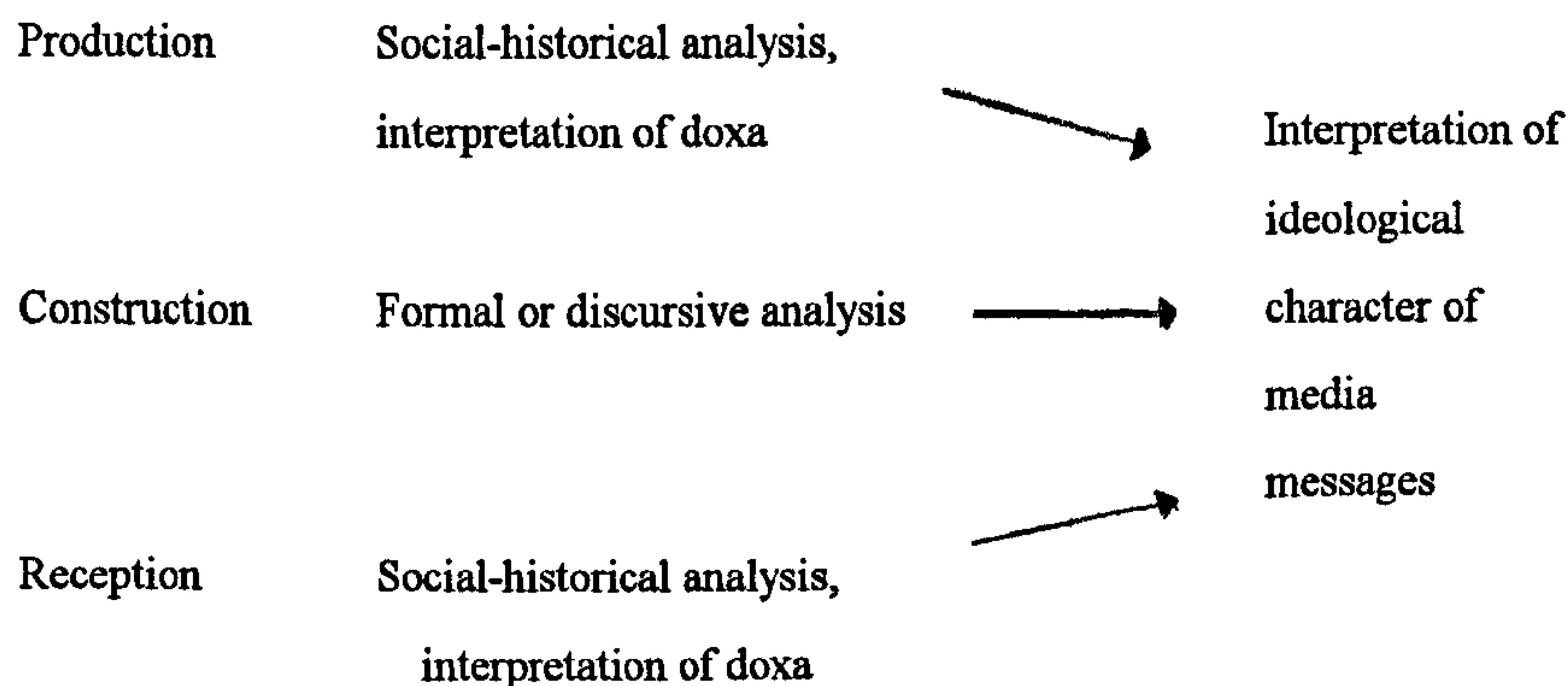
Thompson adopted a more comprehensive view of decoding than that taken by Hall in his encoding/decoding model. The latter was concerned primarily with the viewers'/readers' response to the text and the position taken (hypothesized as either dominant-hegemonic, negotiative or oppositional). As Morley (1980) found in his *Nationwide* study, the importance of context in the reception or indeed consumption of media messages needed to be considered and my own research impelled me to take a similar view of the context of media use. Thompson also acknowledged this and he emphasized two areas of interest:

The specific circumstances: in what contexts, with what company, with what degree of attention, consistency and

commentary, do individuals read books, watch television, listen to music etc? The socially differentiated conditions: in what way does the reception of media messages vary according to considerations such as class, gender, age, ethnic background and the geographical location of the recipient?

Thompson 1990:305-6

Thompson also questioned how individuals make sense of media messages and incorporate them into their everyday lives, emphasizing the consequences media messages have for consumers, including consequences for the relations of power in which such individuals exist. Thompson's depth-hermeneutical approach is summarised in the figure below:

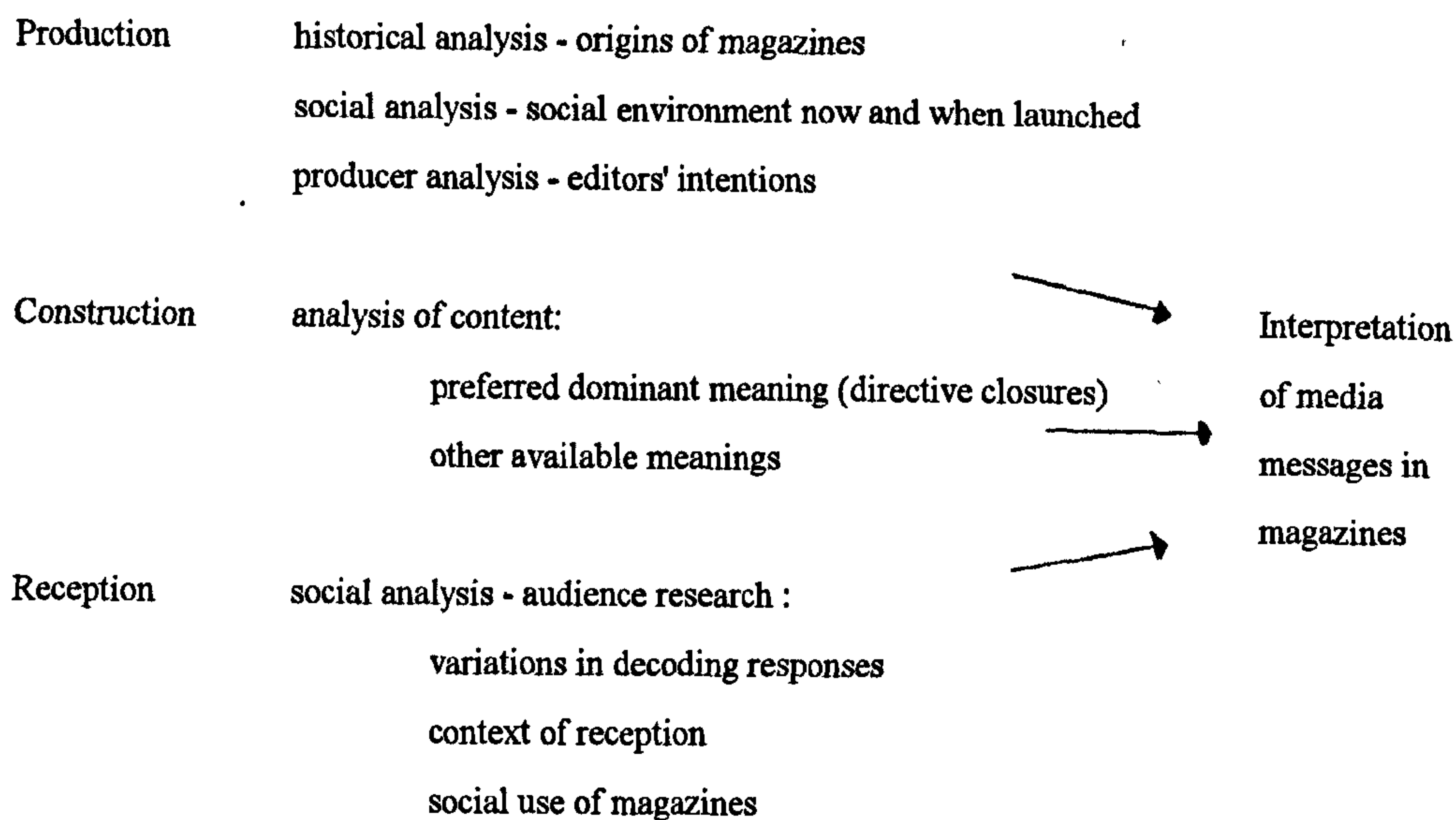


**Figure 1. The methodological development of the tripartite approach**

(adapted from Thompson 1990:307)

To relate Figure 1 more closely to women's magazines, I have constructed a revised version below:





**Figure 2. Model of investigation into women's weekly magazines**

I have followed Thompson's model but elaborated on each stage, showing the steps I used in my analysis of *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break*. Like Morley (1986, 1992, 1995) I have widened Hall's (1980) original focus on the reception of the media message to a consideration in which the media form as a whole is considered in its context of consumption, thereby including both responses to the text and how magazines are used in everyday life. In addition, I have drawn on alternative approaches to explore the decoding of magazines by readers.

To avoid the 'fallacy of internalism' (Thompson 1990:291) Thompson emphasized that the character of media messages cannot simply be read from the messages themselves but that the three phases are necessary to interpret the ideological character of media messages. The fallacy of internalism would take the form of a content analysis undertaken in isolation from the social and historical environment in which that content was produced, distributed and received. As an empirical example of the tripartite approach, he cited the work of Radway (1987) on romantic fiction, a study which combined an analysis of the conditions of production, the content of the romance novels, and an analysis of how the novels were consumed by readers. Hobson (1982) also used a similar methodology in her analysis of the soap opera *Crossroads*.



Women's magazines have not been approached using Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model or Thompson's (1990) method of inquiry.

### Summary

Taking Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model as a theoretical framework, and using Thompson's (1990) means of methodological inquiry, it is possible to study *Best, Bella* and *Take a Break* in their totality i.e. from production to content and reception. Hall's model is the structure on which this study is based and yet I have extended his remit to include the context of media consumption, the main limitation in this model. Morley (1986) had already considered the importance of situating the decoding stage in its everyday context, as this is where the audience use and appropriate the media, and I have taken this further by situating magazine use in the wider community. As Radway (1987) discovered, it is not only the content that is important but also how particular media products are used for other purposes which may not be evident from the actual text. In addition, to consider the readers' perspectives via ethnographic methods is to acknowledge the potential polysemic character of media messages and to reject the text as all powerful in positioning subjects in a specific location. However, the role of media institutions and the factors which impact on their day-to-day production of media continue to influence the content and therefore the consumption of media.

The following study will address in turn the stages of Hall's model and discuss the production, content and reception of *Best, Bella* and *Take a Break*, plus the context of consumption. Chapter two will address the methodology of the study, detailing how the research was developed as a process and allowing the reader to follow this process.

## CHAPTER TWO

### The Methodological Development of the Research

#### Introduction

Few accounts are available in media studies of how research is actually undertaken. This omission made the formation of my own research more difficult, as there was a lack of detail in previously published work which relates to methodological considerations. My intention with regard to this chapter is to make clear the progress of the research in attempting to formulate an account of how women use and interpret women's magazines in light of the editors' aims and objectives, and to what extent the content can be said to be 'feminist'. Such an account will enable the reader to follow my reasoning and conclusions, and will expose my chosen methodology to critical scrutiny. First, I will discuss the possible approaches to media research, looking at the methodological justification for my own choice and how the methods I used fit in to the methodology. In situating myself in a particular tradition of cultural studies research, I aim to contribute to some of the central debates taking place in this field. From a more personal perspective, I then describe how I came to be interested in women's magazines, explaining the background to the research. Then I will discuss the stages of the research - my initial structuring of the research question and design; access to readers; interviewing readers and editors; undertaking a content analysis; examining the production of the magazines; and then analysis of the data. Throughout these stages the constraints and problems of conducting research will be discussed in terms of how they might have shaped the research.

#### Methodological choices

Social science research can be either qualitative, quantitative, or a combination of both. Bogdan and Taylor (1975) have divided the quantitative and qualitative approaches into two schools of thought - first, the positivist perspective which involves seeking facts or causes via surveys and questionnaires, leading to quantitative data and statistically proven relationships; and second, the phenomenologist perspective which seeks understanding via participant observation, unstructured interviews and personal



documents, leading to qualitative and descriptive data. This distinction between positivist and phenomenological approaches does not imply that the respective methods cannot be mixed (and indeed there is a certain amount of overlap between the various methods) but that the use of different methods indicates different attitudes and beliefs on behalf of the researcher. In taking a positivist perspective, the researcher is signalling her/his belief in the importance of quantifying and classifying people into certain categories which may result in generalizations and predictions. By choosing qualitative methods, the researcher is acknowledging the importance of intersubjective meanings and how people construct their particular world. Therefore, the choice of method is not arbitrary - it indicates the researcher's theoretical perspective and it also, to a certain extent, determines the choice of analysis.

When I first had the idea of looking at women's magazines, it was with a vague notion of investigating how they influenced their readers in terms of identity. This was quite a psychological concept, bringing to mind studies of stimulus and response in laboratory conditions. It seemed to be concerned with measuring women's immediate reaction to magazine content on some kind of evaluative scale, rather than analysing what readers usually do with their magazines. Studies have been undertaken using such quantitative methods, for example Stice and Shaw's (1994) experiment to determine the effects of magazine images of thin fashion models on female undergraduates' self esteem and body satisfaction; Shaw's (1995) study into the effect of fashion magazines on adolescent body image. While these studies are important, I reasoned that such an approach would not tell me much about why women choose to read certain magazines, and what they find interesting in them. And such a quantitative approach would not be grounded in current sociological thinking about the use of media, and how the media fit in to people's everyday lives. Women's magazines (and certainly the new weeklies) had not been analysed from this perspective, although Winship (1987a) had suggested that magazines, like soap operas, might be used to structure the day or to function as treats after housework, but no empirical evidence for this use of magazines was available. The possibility of analysing women's weeklies in the same way had occurred to me but I did not know whether such an approach would be appropriate to magazines. My intention to address real readers had already been articulated by Radway (1987) in *Reading the Romance* which took seriously the concerns of actual readers, rejecting textual analysis as removed



from the very people the critics of romance were attempting to understand. Radway refused to treat readers as subjects positioned by the text, or as abstract ideal readers, instead leaving the 'ivory tower of textual analysis' and interacting with real readers (Ang 1996:99). Although there were some problems with this approach (see Ang 1996), the methodological leap taken by Radway set her work apart from earlier feminist texts such as Modleski's (1982) textual study of soap opera. Also, an attempt to talk to readers, rather than assuming their positions from the text, fitted in with Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model and his intention to decentre the text. Considering myself to be a reader of women's magazines (Radway was not, as she admitted, a reader of romantic fiction), I wanted to understand how others read them too, but was aware that my position as a researcher meant I could not also be a part of the group I was intending to study (Brunt 1992) even though I had been once (see **My position as researcher** below).

The methodological basis of my research was grounded in a desire to understand women's use of magazines from their own point of view. The way readers interpret and make sense of magazines like *Bella*, *Best* and *Take a Break* was intended as the focus of my research, indicating a hermeneutic approach to the study. Hermeneutics (i.e. the science of interpretation) is essential to explanation in the social sciences. Geertz (1973) argued that a semiotic concept of culture is derived from webs of significance spun by human beings. Thompson (1990) added a recognition of the structured social relations within which symbolic actions are always embedded, and the need to recognise that cultural phenomena are situated in relations of power and conflict and socio-historical circumstances. An analysis of culture by Geertz and Thompson requires that an interpretive science be in search of meaning, rather than an experimental science in search of laws. (This is not to imply that there are no alternatives between these two poles - additional methodological possibilities include symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology). Ethnography needs to aim for a 'thick description' (Geertz 1973:6) of the activities and happenings that are being observed. A thick description is a stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures in which actions are produced, perceived and interpreted. However, the act of interpretation by the ethnographer is not a straightforward process. Social science is situated in a subject-subject relation to its field of study, whereas natural science is involved in a subject-object relation (Giddens 1976). This distinction indicates that social science is dealing



with a pre-interpreted world, where the subjects have the capacity for self-reflection, and may be changed by the actions of researchers. The objects of natural science have no such capacity. Given these differences between the investigative domains of social and natural science, Geertz (1973) suggested that ethnographers are performing second order interpretations, that is, they are interpreting the interpretations of the people they are observing:

What we call our data are really our own constructions of other people's constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to.

Geertz 1973:9

Both Radway (1987) and Hermes (1995) noted this in their own studies of romantic fiction and women's magazines - these studies were *their* interpretations of women reading. My own research is my interpretation of how readers interpret *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break*. I have included in chapters five and six extensive quotations from the interview transcripts to allow my interpretation of what the informants said to be followed. By including quotes from readers, I am allowing, as far as possible, the informants to tell their own stories (albeit with my own selection and editing of the transcripts). But the question remains over what makes a good interpretation by the researcher. Taylor (1985) discussed this issue in detail. First, he noted that an interpretation is an attempt to make clear an object of study - to bring to light an underlying coherence or sense. In order to achieve such an interpretation, three conditions are pre-supposed: first, a set of objects which can be addressed in terms of coherence or non-coherence; second, a distinction between meaning and expression so that the meaning may be expressed in other ways; and third, the notion of a subject for whom the expressions are meaningful. With these conditions in place, an interpretation can be undertaken, but there is a problem in knowing whether this particular interpretation is a valid one. With reference to my research, I will be attempting to make clear both why and how women read weekly magazines, but others may not necessarily agree with my interpretation. As Taylor (1985:17) put it, 'what are the criteria of judgement in a hermeneutic science?'

To justify my interpretation, a number of points may be introduced. First, I have taken a multidimensional approach to women's magazine reading. Via ethnographic interviews with readers, talking to the editors of the magazines,

and analysing their content, my interpretation has developed from a tripartite approach to give a comprehensive picture of this cultural form. By looking at the whole process, I have avoided what Thompson calls the 'fallacy of internalism' (Thompson 1990:307) i.e. examining the content of the magazines in isolation from the social-historical conditions under which they are produced, purchased and read. Also, the trajectory of my interpretative analysis has been clearly signposted in this chapter to allow others to follow my reasoning. In addition, I have found similarities with related research, for example Radway (1987), Gray (1992) and Hermes (1995). These three factors indicate my attempts to give a good interpretation of the data, although the *generalizability* of my research is another matter. Geertz suggests that ethnographic findings are particular and should not be generalized - 'where an interpretation comes from does not determine where it can be impelled to go' (Geertz 1973:23). However, given the common characteristics of women's magazines (despite the wide variety of titles available) I suggest that my findings could be applied to other women's magazines other than *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break*. As yet, there is no comparable research in this area. In addition, I suggest that the particular interpretations made by readers with the same cultural capital could be used to explore other (women's) genres such as soap operas. Thus, although I do not claim to have looked at a representative sample of readers (despite interviewing a wide range of women), this does not in itself invalidate any suggestion that my research be useful for further studies both in different or related areas of popular culture.

In accordance with the methodology I chose, the methods I used were mainly although not exclusively qualitative in nature. The primary method was semi-structured interviews both with individuals and 'focus groups' (see page 62) but in addition I used documentary sources and content analysis, the latter incorporating qualitative and quantitative elements. I also used two different questionnaires (see Appendix 1) which served two functions. The first questionnaire was to access readers and the second, more open-ended questionnaire was intended to gather details about the respondents' use of media. A brief explanation of how the interviewees were chosen is appropriate here. The groups I chose were not simply picked at random, although the constraints of access played a part in the eventual profile of women interviewed. The groups spanned a range of public and private locations - women at work (bank clerks, library staff, beauty consultants, women seeking



work or wanting to change jobs in a Job Club); women at leisure (social group of elderly women who used the library, friendship group in a local school); women in education (access course students, university undergraduates and postgraduates); women in their capacity as mothers (mother and toddler group, mothers of nursery school children); women as community volunteers (participants in a Catholic church group); and assorted women who were interviewed in their capacity as my friends, although they would have fitted into one or more of the above groups. Plus the individual women accessed via the newsagents who were all interviewed in their own homes. Thus, I managed to access women with a range of ages, occupations, education, family circumstances and ethnic backgrounds, who were a combination of regular readers, casual readers and non-readers. Some individual women and groups refused to take part in the research - the leader of a local slimming group, who had initially agreed to a focus group, declined after speaking to her area organiser; a group of women who worked as cleaning staff in the university decided after all that they did not have enough time to stay behind after finishing their morning's work; and a local library's art class felt a discussion about magazines would be too disruptive to their work. Taking advice from a colleague doing research on consumption and shopping malls, who had utilised local Job Clubs for his research, I contacted the Sheffield Job Club organiser but was refused access to the city's clubs. However, Derbyshire Job Clubs had no objections to my request to talk to members.

### **My position as researcher**

The idea of looking at women's magazines came out of my undergraduate course on culture and media. Writing an essay for that course on women's weekly magazines, I realised that first, little attention had been paid to the three popular new weeklies called *Bella*, *Best* and *Take a Break*, and second, there was a lack of previous work on the reception of magazines by readers. This gave me the idea of investigating the new weeklies in relation to how they were interpreted by readers. However, my interest in weekly magazines for women went back further than 1993 - it was rooted both in an affectionate memory of titles like *Woman's Realm* and *Woman's Weekly*, which my mother and grandmother occasionally used to read when I was a child, and my own reading of such magazines in pre-university days. I had read *Woman* and *Woman's Own* from the late 1970s to the late 1980s when I was working as a

bank clerk and then nursery nurse, graduating from the pre-teen *Jackie* to *19* to the weeklies. Thus I felt, like Janice Winship (1987a), that I was a genuine fan of women's magazines and had an interest in exploring their attraction to readers. My 'fandom', however, disappeared for a time while I was doing A-levels and a university degree and the way my attitude changed towards women's magazines intrigued me - from being an avid reader of several weeklies and monthlies, and getting a lot of pleasure, information and entertainment from them, my opinions changed during higher education. I began to see women's magazines from a different perspective, informed by reading such texts as Ferguson (1983) and Tuchman (1978). Abandoning my previous enjoyment of *Woman* and *Woman's Own*, I viewed magazines as ideologically unsound, focused on women's position as family caretaker and/or beautiful object. Although I had vaguely identified myself as a 'feminist' from about the age of 25, I had always articulated this mainly in personal terms as centred around financial independence and not as a political statement. At work in the nursery school, my feminism was expressed in trying to promote gender equality in the classroom, a stance all education employees were meant to share. Without really thinking about it, I had adopted a liberal feminist perspective for myself, something which deepened as I entered higher education and became more interested in culture and media. From a liberal feminist standpoint, women's weekly magazines did seem to be problematic to me (see chapter three for a discussion of feminisms and the media).

My disapproving view of magazines persisted until the third year essay, when I was reminded of how I used to enjoy *Woman* and *Woman's Own*. Clearly, there was a discernible gap between the way academics wrote about women's magazines and my own previous experience of reading them. There was little acknowledgement of pleasure for the readers in academic texts but I knew from the behaviour of friends and colleagues that magazines could both be pleasurable and useful. The existing research on women's magazines up to 1993 (when I started my research) with the exception of Winship (1987a) ignored the pleasure of reading and focused on certain ideologies, particularly that of patriarchy. These interpretations of magazines did not fit with my remembered readings or those of my friends. The question of how *real* readers (as opposed to analytical academic readers) interpret magazines was consequently an issue I wanted to address in the research, something that



cultural studies as a whole had been moving towards (for example Radway 1987).

### Research question and design

Once I had decided on which magazines to focus, I had to construct a research question. The whole area of researching women's magazines seemed far too large and unfocused. Clearly, I could not research the three magazines in their entirety as this would be an enormous project. The thesis had to be made manageable and narrowed down in its focus. The dilemma of choosing the direction of the research was resolved when I began to familiarise myself with the chosen magazines. I began buying them sporadically in October 1993 and then regularly in September 1994 and continued to do so until the research was complete. In addition, I occasionally bought (or was given) other weeklies like *Woman*, *Chat* and *Eva*, in order to keep up to date with new titles and any changes in the established weeklies. During the three years of my research, five new weeklies were launched (*Eva* and *Now* by IPC, *That's Life* and *Enjoy!* by Bauer and *Here!* by G&J) and one ceased publication (*Me*, owned by IPC, at the beginning of 1995).

Reading the magazines, I found my attention drawn to the true life stories, which seemed to me initially to be depressing and downbeat. I wondered why women wanted to read such stories and whether they too felt depressed about them. The older, established weeklies like *Woman* and *Woman's Own* had only occasionally featured such true life accounts, and the more old fashioned titles such as *My Weekly* and *Woman's Weekly* continued to feature romantic fiction. Given the prominence of the true life stories in the new magazines, I hypothesized that these true life accounts were an attraction for readers and decided to focus my research around these stories. What I found when I began talking to readers was that the true life stories did play a part in the magazines' attraction and that for some readers, the stories filled an important social and psychological function. This point was also made strongly by the editors of *Bella*, *Best*, and especially *Take a Break*, not just in relation to the stories but other features too, like the health pages and the advice articles. In fact, a view of the magazines as 'feminist' publications, in the sense of supporting and advising women, was the editors' strongest theme and one which they fiercely defended. Here, then, was the direction of my research - the editors saw

themselves as encoding feminist messages into the magazines, which were then decoded by some (not all) readers. Were the editors successful in their attempts at encoding? Which readers decoded the feminist content? What other meanings were available to readers? In other words, how were readers using *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break* and what roles did the magazines fill? The research would then be addressing notions of identity in two distinct ways - the identity of the magazines themselves, and the identity of the readers in possibly relating to the elements of feminism in the content. It would also keep the focus on the readers, which was my original intention. I hypothesized that such an identification on behalf of the readers would perhaps depend on their social locations and other factors such as age, ethnicity, experience and education. I decided to focus on women readers, as these were the intended audience of the magazines, although it was not until later in the research process that I discovered 23% of *Take a Break's* readers are men - the corresponding figure for *Bella* is 18% and 14% for *Best* (NRS 1996). Obviously, women were still in the majority as readers and thus I felt my focus was appropriate. Also, there was no research as yet on *any* readers of these magazines, thus to address men would seem to be a second priority to interviewing women, the intended readership.

The question of the magazines' identity was something I personally had to address. Although I was again becoming a fan of women's magazines, I was very conscious of the 'downmarket' (i.e. compared to the glossy, ostensibly feminist monthlies) image of women's weeklies and at the beginning of the research felt embarrassed to buy them, particularly *Take a Break*. I wondered whether other readers felt the same about purchasing the magazines or if they were even aware of the magazines' downmarket identity. The (middle class) participants in Ballaster *et al's* (1991) study were clearly conscious of the importance of reading the 'right' magazine in public, preferring to be seen with expensive monthlies than cheaper weeklies. But how other women responded to *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break* remained to be discovered in the fieldwork. The fact that 1.5 million people buy *Take a Break* suggests that the embarrassment I experienced when buying magazines is not universal. What it means to be a *Take a Break* or *Bella* or *Best* reader, then, was an issue to be addressed, both from the readers' and editors' perspectives.



To do this research, I had to work out the most suitable order in which to undertake the study. I had already familiarised myself with the magazines, although not to the extent of doing a comprehensive content analysis. The first step, therefore, was to talk to readers to obtain an idea of what they read in the magazines, why they read them, what they thought of the true life stories, how and when they read them, whether they shared the magazines and so on. These early interviews were exploratory in nature, giving me a feel for the most basic things such as whether the women be interested in talking about the magazines they read, or if *Take a Break's* appeal rested purely on its competitions and not on its stories. Once a number of readers had been interviewed, I thought it would then be appropriate to interview the editors, as I would be able to discuss the findings of my own research - using the data from the readers would also give me an advantage in terms of being able to offer the editors feedback from readers, should they require any (although they did not - the magazines regularly undertake their own very thorough readership surveys using focus groups and in-depth individual interviews). The editors' interviews would then provide more data to take back and use with further interviews with readers. When the interviews had been completed, and I had gained an impression of the most popular and well-read parts of the magazines, I would then be in a position to undertake a content analysis. This structure fitted Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model, which has been operationalised by Thompson (1990). Looking at the encoded messages in the context of production, analysing these via the content and the readers' interpretations of the magazines, would allow me to explore the relationship between the encoding and decoding stages of the magazines and to theorize why certain readers recognised and decoded *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break* as intended by the editors.

The order outlined above was followed successfully, although certain constraints were placed on each stage. The task of finding readers to interview took longer than expected, the editors were more difficult to access than I had anticipated, and the content analysis was begun before all the readers had been interviewed. The latter was due to the delays in accessing readers in my attempts to interview a wide range of women and therefore the content analysis was started to utilise the time between interviews. This overlapping of the research stages was unavoidable and it did not, I think, affect the research outcome in any significant way. The readers I interviewed after I had begun the

content analysis did not have radically different views of the magazines to previous interviewees and did not indicate a change in the choice of features for the content analysis. If anything, they confirmed my choice of content to analyse.

### **Accessing readers**

Millions of women read weeklies and so I believed it would not be too difficult to find readers to interview. However, despite the large readership, I was taxed as to how these readers could be accessed. Also, I could not offer any financial incentive to readers for their help and time. Reading previous studies for information proved unfruitful, as those studies which detailed their recruitment used university students who were often in classes taken by the researcher herself. Ballaster *et al* (1991) included four groups in their small study of magazine reception but it was not clear how or why these groups had been chosen. The only study to describe the methods used was a doctoral thesis by Earnshaw (1982). She contacted local newsagents who supplied her with the names of women who had regular orders placed for *Cosmopolitan* or *Woman's Own*. Earnshaw also interviewed several women on a youth opportunities programme at a local further education college.

Taking Earnshaw's methods and adapting them, I decided to ask local newsagents to place a short questionnaire in their *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break* magazines, both on the shelves and those on order. The short questionnaire focused on demographic details together with a few questions about the magazine - how long they had been reading it; their favourite features; why they had started reading it and so on (see Appendix 1 for a copy of the questionnaire). I started with a newsagent run by a friend of my hairdresser, and this prior contact, plus the location of the newsagent (in a small village on the outskirts of Sheffield) meant that the exercise was quite successful. The short questionnaire was returned by ten readers (out of 40) and five of them put their name and address, indicating they were willing to be interviewed. The outcome was that I interviewed two of these women - the remaining three were unavailable (two due to illness and one to whom I wrote but there was no reply).



When I tried the same method in five newsagents in a different area of Sheffield, the initial response was cooler. One of the newsagents had seemed particularly promising, offering to give out the questionnaires to his regular customers, yet he did not hand out any questionnaires at all. It took many subsequent visits to these newsagents to check for any returned questionnaires, but often there were none to be collected. Another newsagent took the questionnaires, saying he would deliver them to some regular customers in a local hospital. After I had handed over the questionnaires, I realised this was not a good idea - the women would be unlikely to agree to be interviewed when they returned home from the maternity hospital with a new baby. Nine questionnaires were returned, but as I had suspected, none contained names or addresses for further contact. This experience taught me the risks of losing sight of the research, as handing responsibility over to another agent made me feel as though I had lost control. A similar situation occurred again, later in the fieldwork, when I used a contact to put me in touch with further readers - I was assured they were all regular readers of weeklies like *Bella*, *Best* and *Take a Break* but as it turned out, none of them read these three weeklies on a regular basis.

I felt that the overall poor response from the newsagents was for three reasons: the newsagents were not personally known to me and had no interest in my research; the shops themselves were used by passing trade rather than by predominantly local people; and the shops had no ordered copies of *Best*, *Bella* or *Take a Break* to deliver. All magazines were purchased off the shelf. Overall, seven women were interviewed via the newsagents.

In the time waiting for the newsagent questionnaires to be returned, I began to look for different ways of accessing readers. Because of the importance of prior contact in terms of being known and trusted by the readers (which had been emphasized in the newsagent method), I decided to approach previous colleagues from my old jobs as bank clerk and nursery nurse. However, I worried that by using people known to me, this would somehow invalidate the research, and that they would not see me as a researcher, but in the identity I used to have. Using prior contacts, though, is a recognisable tactic in fieldwork (for example Hermes 1995). The advantage of knowing a person far outweighed any potential problems with their perception of my identity. In the bank where I had worked from 1978 to 1983, some of my old colleagues

remained and I contacted one, with whom I was still in touch socially, to organise a group interview. This was successful, mainly due I think to my established relationship with the bank clerks and my unquestioned access into the bank itself - an unknown researcher would have been unlikely to gain admittance into the staffroom, where I interviewed the women during their lunch break. In the children's nursery where I had worked from 1989 to 1990, I was allowed access to the parents, some of whom had returned with younger children and were therefore known to me. Generally, using prior contacts was a successful way of reaching readers, and did not affect the research in any significant way. Only in one instance did the interviewing of a friend problematize the research process, although this could have occurred with any of the interviews - Kath Price, a library assistant, gave the information she thought I wanted to hear in a focus group discussion, which is a common situation in any interview, although there were other elements interacting in this particular interview (see pages 64-5 for a fuller discussion).

As I had only worked in two previous jobs, I could see problems in relying on this limited prior contact to meet readers. I obviously needed to extend my network of contacts, and began doing this by going to the local library where a friend worked. This opened up a whole new range of possible groups - the library staff themselves; groups who used the library in a leisure capacity; and groups who advertised their activities on the library noticeboard. In addition to the library, I contacted local community centres, playgroups, further education colleges, women's groups, students, church groups, and friends. Not all of these groups were accessible. I also took the chance to interview groups of women when the opportunity presented itself. For example, at a social event, two women who were interested in magazines offered to discuss them (although they thought I had the glossy monthlies in mind), and they were very critical of the weeklies. During a makeover at a city centre department store, the beauty consultant mentioned all her colleagues read women's weekly magazines, and would I like to talk to them? This led to a lunchtime meeting in the local winebar, not ideal in terms of noise, but a useful discussion nevertheless and one that I would not have considered had the opportunity not arisen by chance.

As I explained in the above discussion, the women I interviewed came from a wide range of backgrounds. This strategy was a deliberate attempt to use



conventional sociological categories so that I could connect them to the readers' positions in decoding the magazines. Obviously, socioeconomic position is an important factor in Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model, although I am aware of the criticisms this singular focus has generated among researchers such as Morley (1992) (see chapter one). In Hall's model, other sociological categories such as race, age, education and so on, tend to be disregarded. In this section, then, I will explain the organisation of the readers into various categories and relate these to their decoding positions in chapter five.

Gray (1992), in her study of video watching in the home, suggested that people occupy and assume different subject positions in their social relations. Hence, an individual's socioeconomic location is not their only position, but she/he is also crossed by a number of other (sometimes contradictory) discourses. The cultural resources available enable people to produce meanings actively but they also limit or determine the choices people make in their reading or viewing habits, and consequently in their interpretations and use of these media. To allow the researcher to make connections and explanations of different media use, it is necessary to gather information from participants about important contextual factors, for example age, employment, education and so on (Gray 1992). The women I interviewed enjoyed a variety of such factors, making my sample appropriate for comparing difference and similarity between the readers. Such a diverse selection enabled investigation of the women's cultural competence or capital (Bourdieu 1984).

Like Hermes (1995) and Gray (1992), I identified the women using a number of criteria, including occupation, partner's occupation, education, and then more qualitative factors such as home and appearance. The reasons for taking what might be seen as an impressionistic approach to determining a reader's social class is that more formal means of classifying readers (for example the Registrar General's categories) seemed too rigid, and were not particularly designed with women in mind but were intended for men. Some of the readers I interviewed did not slot easily into the standard categories. For example, Kath Price, who worked in the library, would have presented a problem if it had been necessary to classify her using a single criteria. Leaving school at sixteen with O-levels and working as a library assistant locates her as working class, yet she later took A-levels at night school, lives in her own house and

regularly takes unpaid leave from work to travel to different parts of the world. Her partner is a skilled welder yet has an erratic working pattern, being unemployed at the time of interview but currently working. Their lifestyle defies simple categorisation and it would be a misrepresentation to classify Kath as working class purely on the basis of her occupation. Given that one of the aims of my research was to take seriously the concerns, experiences and lives of women who read *Best, Bella* and *Take a Break*, it would be inappropriate to squeeze them into pre-formed categories without taking into consideration their individuality and differences. Using a broad brushstroke, it is possible to place all the readers into middle class or working class, and although I have used these terms when it has been appropriate (for example, a working class position for Nora Green and her friend Lynn Barstow, both home wardens living in council houses with a basic level of education), for some of the readers a rigid labelling of middle or working class was unsuitable. Therefore, it frequently made sense to discuss the readers in more local terms i.e. relating their education or occupation as separate but relevant factors affecting their use and/or decoding of *Best, Bella* and *Take a Break*. Class, then, has various contributing factors, some of which may conflict and problematize easy classification.

As I am not engaged in statistically robust research, a hard quantitative account of the readers is unnecessary. A qualitative, more rounded picture of class position was preferred, and this was based on the factors discussed above. With some of the readers I was able to obtain more information than with others because of the interview situation or their willingness to talk about themselves. Thus, in the individual interviews, it was much easier to bring personal histories and family details into the conversation than in the focus groups. Whilst I gained in terms of numbers of women and interaction between them in the group situation, I had less opportunity to discuss more personal issues, which was much easier in the one-to-one encounters. However, I did have the questionnaires which helped to fill in certain gaps about the women's lives and media use. In Appendix 2, I have included details about each respondent which helps to locate them in terms of family, employment, age, education, gender and race, and I refer to these where necessary in chapter five. Below, I will give a brief summary of the women I interviewed in relation to their sociological categories.



The majority of women were white, working in low paid occupations, with male partners and had grown-up children. Amongst the individual interviewees, Lynn Barstow and Nora Green (both home wardens), Pat Evans and Beryl Fraser (both cloakroom attendants), and Anne Lane (shop assistant) fitted into this category. These women were all middle aged or older. Tricia Hallam and Sheila Strong did not work outside the home, Tricia being a full time homemaker and Sheila having recently retired. Julie Irving was unemployed. June Gray, a part time shop assistant was divorced, currently without a partner and Kath Price, a young, white, library assistant, lived with her male partner but had no children. Of the other women interviewed individually, Rene King was a young, black, single, nursery nurse, and Kim Carter and Louise Tyler were young, single, white students. Maureen Steel, Enid Collins and Lucy Brown were all elderly widows with adult children and Irene Dickens and Jean Howard, also elderly, had never married. The remaining women interviewed individually were all white and aged in their thirties with male partners and children - these were Pamela Cooper, Diane Harrison and Delia Wilson (all full time homemakers) and Debbie Forster (trainee solicitor) and Christine Lee (teacher). Dianna Hartley (deputy headteacher) was the only one of this 'group' not to have children.

The beauticians, bank clerks, both access course groups, both mother and toddler groups and the library staff mostly (although not exclusively) consisted of white women, married with children, with education up to O-level grade and with partners working in manual trades such as building. The access course groups consisted of a mixture of women employed part time or unemployed or caring for children at home. The women in the Job Club were all white, in their twenties, with no children and obviously looking for work. The group of Catholic women in Doncaster all worked as church volunteers and the social workers were in full time jobs, having recently graduated. The other four groups were made up of two sets of students, the retired women in the friendship group, and the elderly women who used the library for their recreational meetings.

In this section on readers, I have used their interview situations as a way of dividing and presenting the material, but this is an artificial distinction in that it does not affect the factors which constitute their identities. In chapter five, it is these factors which will be the basis of analysis, not the mode of interviewing,

although different topics of conversation were prioritised in different situations. It would have been easy to categorise the women in each group as the same, but there were obvious differences between them, for example, in the east Sheffield Mother and Toddler group, the education of the women ranged from O-levels to a university degree.

Thus, this brief overview of the women I interviewed offers a picture of the varied locations they occupied. The majority were white, but as a white woman myself, this seemed appropriate. As Gray explains in her choice of white women to interview: \*

All the women shared the same ethnic background ... it is in the nature of this kind of research that the relationship between researcher and researched is a particularly delicate one. Quite simply, as a white researcher, I felt unqualified to establish the appropriate subject-to-subject relationship with women whose ethnic background I did not share.

Gray 1992:31-32

An attempt to establish such a relationship with Denise, a black woman in the north Sheffield Access Course group, was unsuccessful. Denise had promised to set up a further interview with her church group but changed her mind because she said they did not want to be treated like 'guinea pigs'. There was nothing I could do to refute this accusation, but simply accept that this particular line of inquiry was closed to me. Rene King, though, as an old colleague, was much easier to interview as we had an existing relationship based on mutual respect and liking. As will become clear in chapter five, not all black women explicitly referred to their ethnic status in relation to reading magazines, for example Polly in the Friendship Group.

Further difficulty was encountered with a group of women on an access course who were quite hostile to me, which was unexpected, as I had met them previously and given a talk on being a mature student at university which had been well received. However, when I returned for the focus group, they were quiet and uninterested - my impression was one of resentment because of my status as a mature student who had already gained her degree, and suspicion as to my motives for the interview (although this had all been explained). I also felt there was some resentment at my appearance - many of the women were living on low levels of income and regarded my appearance (clothes, make-up)



as evidence of a more comfortable lifestyle. However, a woman in the access course group did arrange for me to interview women at a mother and toddler group she helped to organise.

In terms of age, however, I had no problems. Many of the older women I spoke to treated me as they would their daughters' friends, plying me with coffee and home-made cake. The younger women I spoke to related to me as an equal, with shared cultural reference points like *Jackie* magazine. As I only interviewed one man (an undergraduate), who was included in a focus group, the factor of gender was not an issue. This man had unexpectedly turned up for a focus group I was conducting with students who were taking a course on media - as he was friends with the other students, and read women's magazines, I decided to allow him to remain in the group.

Accessing readers, therefore, took the form of utilising old contacts and making new ones, sometimes snowballing from one group to another. It also involved reaching individual readers via newsagents. Overall, 14 groups were interviewed, with an average of 6 women in each, and 24 individual women. Thus I interviewed 109 women altogether (see Appendix 2 for the detailed list of participants). These interviews took place between September 1994 and July 1995 and were in the north of England (Sheffield, Rotherham, Doncaster, Manchester and Chesterfield).

### **Interviewing readers**

The choice of individual or group interviews was made partly on the constraints of accessing readers and partly on the grounds of wanting to talk to women in different locations. I hypothesized that women would read *Bella*, *Best* and *Take a Break* both at home and at work and perhaps read them for different reasons in these private and public locations. I also used this combination of groups and individuals to gain a mix of readers - in the groups, there was usually a range of readers from regular to casual to non-readers. The individual women also ranged from regular to non-readers, but obviously women contacted via the newsagents tended to be loyal readers. By going through newsagents, I ensured that I would have regular readers. It would have been inappropriate to contact non-readers via newsagents and thus their presence in the groups was an ideal way to reach such women. I felt the

inclusion of non-readers to be an important part of the research as, like Radway (1987), I wondered whether such women might have an absence of (or indeed an addition to) certain discourses which made the use of *Best, Bella* or *Take a Break* irrelevant or uninteresting.

The method of group interviewing I used was focus groups although I had never used this method before. A popular means of gathering data in current sociological research, the use of focus groups goes back to the 1940s when they were utilised by Merton (Merton and Kendall 1955) in his study of morale films. Since then, the method has largely been used by market researchers for consumer purposes, only recently finding favour again with social scientists. The numerous books written on focus groups (for example Morgan 1988, 1993; Stewart and Shamdasani 1990) offer a distorted picture of what actually happens in a group. In my research, there was no professional moderator, no rewards for participants, no purpose-built location for the groups to take place and no support personnel to take notes or do the transcribing. Despite such practical difficulties, my choice of focus groups was made deliberately because of their appropriate articulation around source material - such groups are ideal situations for using artefacts like magazines to centre the discussion. Kitzinger (1994) emphasized the interaction between research participants in focus groups which is expressed in everyday forms of communication like jokes, anecdotes and word associations, thus revealing group norms and conventions. Even with straightforward conversation, the use of focus groups can help the researcher to access taken for granted meanings and assumptions although it must be remembered that the group situation is a false one and is not naturally occurring data.

The combination of readers in the focus groups allowed the regular readers to explain the magazines and their attraction to the non-readers, giving the non-readers an opportunity to articulate their own attitudes to the magazines. In this way, a dialogue was set up within the groups and my role was to facilitate the discussion with prompts and/or specific questions. There is always a danger in group interviews of strong personalities dominating the discussion but I rarely found that this was a problem. The equanimity of the group discussions may have been due to the fact that they were all single sex groups (except for the university students) and that they were all pre-existing groups (again, except for the students), in which the dynamics were already established. As



far as I was aware, only one group may have been adversely affected by dynamics, and that was the bank clerks, where some members of the group were noticeably more reserved than others. They may have been more subdued either because they were quieter or because they were junior members of staff, both in age and seniority. The bank group was the only obviously hierarchical focus group interview I carried out - the library staff were much more equal both in terms of age and experience, and the beauticians worked on separate cosmetics counters and seemed to be on the same occupational level.

Before each group, I introduced myself and gave a short talk on who I was and what the general purpose of the group was. Of course, some of the groups knew me already (bank clerks, postgraduates, university students) but on all the occasions I tried to keep the atmosphere informal and relaxed - I did not want participants to feel uncomfortable in any way. I went through the same routine with the individual interviews and in each situation the same magazines were used to focus the discussion (particularly useful for the non-readers in the groups).

Prior to starting the interviews, I had constructed a question schedule. This was piloted on the first focus group, which was the postgraduate students. The schedule had several purposes: to help reduce my nervousness in the first few interviews; to remind me of the key areas I wanted to ask the reader about; and to give the interviews some structure. At first, this latter point seemed important, but with the individual interviews I soon realised that some women had their own agenda for agreeing to see me. For example, one woman was obviously lonely, having recently been widowed, and her reason for talking to me was to tell me about her late husband and to have some company. Another woman kindly agreed to see me because she worked in one of the newsagents where I had taken the questionnaires, but she was more interested in discussing television programmes and indeed kept the television on during the interview. In both these interviews, I managed gently to steer the conversation back to magazines, which actually fitted in quite well with the women's own agendas, as they were both keen magazine readers. Other women, however, treated the interview like a question and answer session, adhering rigidly to the questions I asked and not wanting to take the interview in any other direction. The group interviews also tended to diverge into discussions which took off and those which seemed to need the structure of my questions. Thus I was prepared to be

flexible with the interviews in terms of using the schedule. Because of the lack of previous research on magazine readers, I was willing to let the groups/individuals set their agenda yet I also had my own agenda which I wanted to address. The result was a combination of both agendas, usually mine to start with and then the group or individual's, if they had one. The interviews took from between 20 minutes to one and a half hours to conduct, but many more hours to transcribe.

The original intention was to interview groups and individuals just once but in one case, I interviewed a reader twice. This was Kath Price who worked in the library and who had arranged the library staff focus group for me. During the focus group, she had contributed to the discussion, pointing out the features in *Best* which she saw as representative of a more equal portrayal of women (the gardening articles, features on driving, up-to-date health advice). However, when speaking to her at a later date, she began to discuss the magazines using a more feminist discourse, highlighting the emphasis on appearance, thinness, domestic responsibilities and family. I arranged to interview her individually and she expanded on her theme, criticising the magazines for their narrow portrayal of women. Although this view had been implicit in the group interview, I had not picked it up, even though Kath had talked of certain features as challenging the overall presentation of women, thus implying what she thought of the remainder of the magazine. I did not feel that Kath's different responses in the two situations invalidated either set of data in any way - Kath did read women's magazines at work and enjoyed them together with her colleagues and in the focus group, she had emphasized this particular reading because it coincided with what she thought I was looking for in the discussion. Reading magazines at home, which she did only occasionally, she focused on what she saw as the narrow horizons presented to women. Kath's comments pointed to an ambivalence towards magazines which Winship (1987a) has discussed - a woman's magazine offers many different articles and features, making one coherent reading difficult to sustain.

The location of the interview influenced the direction of the discussion. For example, my interview with the bank clerks took place in the bank staffroom and thus the use of magazines at work, as a shared activity, was one of the major elements in the interview. The women showed me where they sat at lunchtime, where magazines would be left for others to look at, the activities



that went on at the same time as reading, who took the magazines home, and so on. This is not to say the interview focused exclusively on work - the women talked of their own use of magazines at home and on holiday but the location of the interview allowed the women to speak together of sharing magazines and their function at work. Likewise, the women interviewed at home focused on their individual use of magazines, the place that media have in their daily routines, and the sharing network of friends and family. However, this is not to say that the context of decoding necessarily affected how the magazines were interpreted - Morley, who took viewers out of their homes to watch *Nationwide* in a group setting with their colleagues, suggested that the cultural and linguistic codes we use do not change with locations:

The situational variables will produce differences within the field of interpretations. But the limits of that field are determined at a deeper level, at the level of what language/codes people have available to them - which is not fundamentally changed by differences of situation.

Morley 1980:27

Kath's apparent differences in opinion of *Best* magazine illustrated Morley's point - trying to find good things to say about *Best* in the group situation, she nevertheless did not fundamentally change her position on women's magazines in the individual discussion. She simply focused on different parts of the magazine and did not have to be sensitive to her colleagues' opinions. In the individual interview, she also stopped directing her comments to what she thought I wanted to hear, and offered her own opinion of women's weekly magazines, which was a combination of a recognition of their attempts to incorporate what she identified as more feminist content, and an irritation with their portrayal of women as perpetuating certain negative stereotypes. Kath's behaviour in the library focus group was, I believe, a result of our friendship - having organised the group, she was anxious that it should be 'useful' for me and so, to be in line with her colleagues' opinions, she presented a positive view of magazines, thinking this would be more appropriate than any negative thoughts. The rest of the group, seeing me primarily as a researcher rather than a friend, had no reason to modify their responses. Now, this situation relates back to the use of people known to the researcher, a means of access to magazine readers also used by Hermes (1995). Although it clearly works as a way of reaching people, issues of friendship, prior knowledge of the research, anxiety to please and validity of response need to be addressed. I do not

believe that a similar situation arose with any of the other contacts made via people I knew, as these were acquaintances or ex-colleagues, rather than close friends, and therefore had less interest in the utility of the interview. However, interviewing in multiple situations may allow the researcher to gain a more rounded understanding of the issues being discussed, as single interviews may be selective in ways that the researcher has no means of determining. It is difficult to control for such influences but interviewing more than once (if time and resources and participants permit) might be a means of overcoming any factors peculiar to single interview situations.

The interview locations were not usually open to negotiation. Individual women were interviewed in their own home, which was to save them any expense in travelling and to ensure they felt at ease, or at the nursery before picking up their children. Groups were interviewed in their group locations, either work or leisure oriented. The only interviews where there was a choice of locations were those with friends - we either met in pubs, restaurants, or their home, and the decision was up to them. Naturally, some locations worked better than others - the restaurants and pubs tended to be noisy but relaxed, the mother and toddler groups were very noisy and the women were constantly distracted by children, the social groups tended to carry on with their activities (knitting or sewing) and to discuss these, and the home interviews were interrupted by telephone calls, television programmes, breast feeding and friends calling. This latter distraction was turned to my advantage, as the friend joined in the magazine discussion. In other words, there was no ideal location for interview, but each situation had advantages and disadvantages, although the mother and toddler groups seemed more disadvantaged than most due to the noise and interruptions.

I recorded all the interviews except one - this was Irene Dickens in Manchester, who refused to be taped. This was not a problem, as I was able to make notes instead, but Miss Dickens accused me of surreptitiously taping the interview, as I had naturally taken the recorder with me. Despite being introduced by a mutual acquaintance, Miss Dickens was rather suspicious of my motives for the interview and remained formal and wary - the encounter was not very fruitful, especially given her opinion of *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break* as low culture and trash. I only failed to tape one other interview, which



was a mother and toddler focus group, and this was due to an error on my part with the cassette recorder.

In addition to interviewing women, I asked them to complete a questionnaire on their reading and social details (see Appendix 1). This gave me the background information on their use of magazines, their thoughts on the content, and demographic details. Not all women completed a questionnaire - the ones who were non-readers did not fill one in, as the questionnaire was structured around the reader's favourite woman's weekly. And the women I interviewed in a job club were not asked to complete a questionnaire, as they obviously had literacy difficulties - their demographic details were solicited verbally during the interview. After the first focus group, the questionnaire was modified slightly to make it clearer and easier to complete. The women accessed via newsagents had already completed a questionnaire, which had been placed in the magazine and then returned to the newsagent, before being collected by me. Reflecting on the questionnaires, I realise now that it would have been more useful to have constructed a short one just for personal details, which I could have given to all the participants, and then a slightly longer one for those who read *Best*, *Bella* and/or *Take a Break*. This would have ensured a questionnaire from *all* the women, not just the readers.

After each interview, both individual and group, I sent a card to the participants, thanking them for their time, hospitality and views on magazines.

### **Content analysis**

The content analysis of the three magazines took place after the majority of the reader interviews and after the editor interviews. It took far longer than I had anticipated which was due to the volume of material I wanted to analyse. Even though the content analysis was not the central focus of the research (the readers were the main focus) I nevertheless felt that to gain an adequate impression of the magazines, I needed to look at least six issues of each (see Appendix 3 for a list of magazines included in the content analysis). This would then take me across a whole year's worth of magazines, if taken from alternate months. Beginning with September 1994 and concluding with July 1995, 18 issues were chosen according to their position in the particular month i.e. for September, the issues from week one were selected, in November, issues from

week two, in January, issues from week three and so on. Seasonal bias was avoided by excluding Christmas issues and by spreading the sample of magazines throughout the year. Only certain parts of the content of the magazines were examined - building on the editors' comments and the readers' preferences for certain features or articles over others, and taking into account my own interest in the magazines, I decided to focus on the true life stories, the health pages, and the articles on money, work and rights. The true life stories were chosen because they first attracted me to *Bella*, *Best* and *Take a Break* and differentiated these three magazines at the time of their launch from all the other weeklies. They also make up a large proportion of each magazine. The readers all discussed the true life stories and so did the editors - they are an integral and important part of the image of *Bella*, *Best* and *Take a Break*. The health pages were also picked up and discussed by the readers and editors - Jackie Highé was particularly proud of *Bella's* health. Amongst the readers, the health content was a contentious issue, with women divided in opinion on the usefulness or the potentially worrying aspect of the health information. The money, law and rights articles were again mentioned by the editors (although not by John Dale as *Take a Break* does not include such content) and formed one of my interests because of their potential challenge to the stereotyped domesticity and triviality of women's magazines. Occasionally, certain features or subjects in the magazines were continued over several issues and these have also been included in the content analysis (for example, *Take a Break's* breastfeeding campaign; readers' letters responding to previous articles).

The content analysis included both qualitative and quantitative elements. The quantification element related to the composition of each magazine in terms of fiction, letters, problems, editorial, health, advertising, fashion, beauty, showbusiness, competitions, cookery and travel. This analysis illustrated how much of each magazine related to reader content, something that was directly relevant to my assessment of the magazines. The true life story analysis was undertaken with SPSS because of the large number of stories to be examined (121). Each story was coded according to 12 factors which addressed the age, class, ethnicity and sex of the main character(s); the author, topic, tone and ending of the story; the definition, portrayal and status of the female character(s); and the portrayal of the male character(s). Such a detailed analysis of the stories highlighted the different characteristics of each magazine and enabled me to choose a typical story from each for a more in-depth



analysis. The coding categories were pre-tested on one issue each of the three magazines and after slight adjustments were used to analyse the 18 issues in the sample.

The qualitative elements were related to the content of the health pages and the money, work and rights articles. These were analysed for their representation of women and women's expected roles, their independence in financial and legal matters, and women's assumed interests and concerns. The true life stories were explored with the 12 categories and one story from each magazine was examined in depth for its portrayal of characters and presentation of topic.

The content analysis, therefore, had three stages:

1. a quantitative examination of the content of the magazines in terms of page allocation
2. a qualitative assessment of the health, and money, work and rights articles
3. a combined quantitative and qualitative analysis of the true life stories.

## **Production**

An analysis of the production of *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break* involved two related strands - the launch of the magazines and how they developed. These required separate methods of inquiry. I analysed the launch using mainly secondary sources of information, and the subsequent production of the magazines in terms of their encoded messages was approached via interviews with the editors.

Following the suggested methods of inquiry outlined by Thompson (1990) and discussed in the previous chapter, the production of magazines needed to be placed in a social and historical environment. Therefore, the launches were obviously an important element in each magazine's history and I investigated these with a combination of sources. As all three titles are fairly recent publications, it was straightforward to obtain copies of their first issues from the British Newspaper Library in London (although when I first enquired, *Take a Break* had yet to be classified five years after its launch, indicating its perceived status within the Library). Examining these first issues enabled me to

see how the magazines had changed over the years, not only in content but also in style. Further secondary sources allowed me to discover how the magazines had been received when they launched. Newspaper articles, features in press industry publications like *Campaign* and *Press Gazette*, academic journal articles (Winship 1990, 1992; Driver and Gillespie 1993) and books (Barrell and Braithwaite 1988; Braithwaite 1995) supplied information about the early *Best*, *Bella* and/or *Take a Break*. Readership and circulation figures were provided by British Rate and Data (BRAD) and the National Readership Survey (NRS) and also by the publishers themselves.

Having gathered information on the origins of the three magazines, the current production practices and what the magazines were intended to convey to their readers had to be addressed. The primary source of material was my interviews with the editors, where they discussed their role, intentions for their magazine, particular feminist perspective and the weekly magazine market. More factual information was taken from the publishers' media packs.

The task of interviewing the editors was approached slightly differently to interviewing readers. The editors were contacted more formally via their personal assistants and it took many letters and telephone calls before I was able to secure interviews in March and April 1995. The *Take a Break* editor, John Dale, refused to be interviewed face to face but agreed to a telephone interview. Unfortunately, this took place at his instigation just before 9 o'clock one morning, and he certainly had the advantage in terms of surprise and preparation, although fortunately my interview schedule was to hand. Both Jackie Highe (*Bella*) and Maire Fahey (*Best*) granted me face to face interviews at their headquarters in London.

My approach to the editors differed markedly from my interaction with readers. For the editors, I bought a new suit, had my hair cut, and wore more make-up than usual. For the readers, I dressed smartly but not expensively and, after the first two or three interviews, did not feel so nervous. But I felt extremely nervous about talking to the editors, and other people's reactions were different too. When they knew I was going to London to see the editors, it was as if my research had taken on a new status, it became more professional and serious. The impression I got from family and friends was that anyone could talk to magazine readers but the editors were a different matter. In a



way, I felt this too, despite the difficulty I had encountered in accessing readers. There was an element of power which clearly rested with the editors, who were being very obliging in giving me time - all three said they did not normally do interviews because of tight schedules. Although I felt this time constraint to a certain extent with the readers, it was more evident with the editors, who had the power to refuse me an interview. Of course, the readers had that power too, but partly by using people I knew I circumvented that obstacle. Also, with the readers, I often fitted in with their established routines, for example the group of elderly ladies in the library discussed magazines while doing their knitting and sewing; the mother and toddler groups continued to keep an eye on their children at play; Nora Green and Lynn Barstow were having their usual morning coffee; whereas the editors had given me a specific time for the interviews. In addition, the editors' powerful positions meant that I felt unable to pursue any line of questioning which they seemed reluctant to answer, especially John Dale, and this may have been partly due to gender, partly due to the interview situation - I felt much more at ease with Jackie Highe and Maire Fahey.

The three editors all responded differently in the interviews. John Dale felt there were many questions he did not want to, or could not, answer, and replied 'no comment'. The telephone interview lasted for half an hour. Jackie Highe from *Bella* gave me an hour and answered all the questions in great detail - as *Bella* editor from its inception, she obviously knew everything about the magazine. Maire Fahey of *Best* had only been editor for approximately one year when I spoke to her for half an hour and still seemed to be unsure about some areas of magazine production, being happier to discuss practical issues like choice of cover models rather than policy matters within the magazine. Thus the three interviews were very different, both in content, time and openness. After the interviews, I occasionally rang the magazines for further information or clarification and this was always available.

### **Analysis of interview data**

The process of analysis was begun after the very first interview with a reader. Because I transcribed the interviews myself, I was able to start compiling themes, ideas and shared concerns from the readers with which to analyse the transcripts. This use of readers' data, combined with my own prior interests

and previous research, plus themes taken from the interviews with the editors, provided me with a range of categories for analysis. As the interviews with readers progressed, I used the information from previous transcripts to inform the next interviews. For example, I had considered the health features in the magazines to be useful and informative, an assessment that came from reading existing literature and my own reading of the magazines, both supported by comments from the editors. The first few readers I interviewed confirmed my opinion of the health but a later focus group (with a mother and toddler group) put forward a challenging view of the health as potentially worrying, confusing and unnecessarily depressing. This new perspective on health was then incorporated into subsequent interviews as a possible alternative to my original conception.

A software package for qualitative data such as NUDIST would undertake an analysis of the interviews by using themes and sub-themes, searching for relationships and inconsistencies between the data. Another way of doing the same task would be to search the interview transcripts on screen and to code the relevant text according to themes or sub-themes, building up a matrix of data in separate files. Manually, this same method of analysis could be undertaken with the transcripts on paper, using highlighter pens to code the text and constructing a matrix to incorporate details of each interview in relation to themes and sub-themes. As I had no access to the NUDIST programme, although I had attended a workshop on how to use it, I decided to code the interview transcripts on screen using a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967). This decision was informed by a course in analysing data at the BSA Summer School, Birmingham, in September 1995, where different methods of qualitative analysis were discussed and explored. Grounded theory was chosen because it emphasizes the generation of theory from the data, and as readers' interpretations of magazines has not been widely studied before, this was an appropriate method of analysis. Although I was using Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model and therefore testing its applicability especially for the reception of magazines by readers, I was also exploring the data with other studies in mind, particularly Radway (1987). As discussed in chapter one, Hall does not address the contextual elements of decoding, concentrating mainly on the different way of interpreting by readers/viewers, but the everyday use of media (also studied by Hermes 1995) was something I was receptive towards. My main research goal was to look at



the relationship between the encoding and decoding stages of magazines and account for the mismatch I discovered between these two stages. This had never been done before with women's magazines and I wanted to use the interview data to account for the variable interpretations made by readers.

In grounded theory, the researcher develops categories from the interviews, reflexively using the data to inform the next interview and develop ideas, and I had already been doing this throughout my fieldwork. In practical terms, a thematic framework is constructed, indexing and charting the interview data, defining concepts and mapping their nature and range. Certain chunks of interview data will be placed in more than one category or theme, suggesting a possible association. Other interviews may be comprised mainly of discreet themes, or be unrelated to certain categories. The same concept may be defined differently by various readers, indicating possibly contradictory definitions. Thus, I had several themes with which to code the interview transcripts, enabling me to look for sub-themes, patterns and inconsistencies. Two major themes were identified as the concepts of content and context, and further themes within these related to sharing magazines, using them to fill time, and lifestyle changes (context) and information, practical content, entertainment, worry, support and triviality (content). The separation of content and context was an artificial one, because the readers did not always articulate their use of magazines in this way, but it was a useful distinction to aid analysis of how magazines are not necessarily read just for their content. The other major theme was the feminist content in the magazines and how this was interpreted by readers. Thus, I read through all the interview transcripts numerous times, pulling out data related to three main themes - the feminism in the magazines; the practical use of magazines; and the social context of reading magazines.

The process of analysing the interviews was a long one, as I had interviewed over one hundred women, although most of these were of course in groups. The outcome of such an in-depth analysis allowed me to reveal patterns and inconsistencies in the data, for example the relationship between education and interpretation of the feminist content; or the unreliable factor of ethnicity as an indicator of decoding position. I was able to use Hall's three ways of decoding (see chapter one) to explain the readers' responses which pointed to the importance of certain structural factors in the practice of media use. I also

added to Hall's three positions by constructing further responses of my own - that of not engaging with the magazines at all; reading the magazines specifically to oppose them; and engaging with the magazines but not recognising the editors' intended message i.e. reading magazines for other reasons. These positions will be discussed further in chapter five.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this chapter has been to explain both how the research was undertaken from a practical perspective and the philosophical basis which informed my particular approach. In addition, I have explained my position both as a researcher and as a fan of women's weekly magazines.

I have discussed the practical considerations at length because when I began this research, there were no methodological accounts of how to undertake a study in this area - I hope my account will help others to formulate their own research process. But the research as a process did not run as smoothly as this chapter might suggest, particularly the problem of accessing readers which took many months to solve. And yet interviewing women, often in their own homes, was the most rewarding and interesting part of the whole research.

The next chapter will explore the editors' encodings in *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break* in the context of the magazines' launch and subsequent success in Britain, the competition from domestic publishers, and the current state of the weekly market. In other words, the production of *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break*.



## CHAPTER THREE

### The Production of *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break*

#### Introduction

In this chapter, the first stage of Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model will be addressed - the editors and their production environment. Very little work has been undertaken on this aspect of women's magazines, the notable exceptions being Ferguson (1983) and Winship (1992), as discussed in chapter one. In the latter study, Winship examined the weeklies, specifically *Best*, and looked at the context of its production, including the launch environment. As one of the few studies on the new magazines, Winship's work is a useful source of both information and comparison, as she discussed *Best* shortly after its launch. Ferguson's study was carried out with the editors of established women's monthlies and weeklies such as *Woman*, *Woman's Own* and *Woman's Weekly*, the best selling weekly titles in the late 1970s, and overall she interviewed 34 women's magazine editors in Britain and the USA. Her findings will be compared to the views of the current editors of *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break* to help establish whether the new weeklies do differ markedly in their editorial approach to the more established publications.

After looking at the editors' encodings, a brief historical account of the three magazines will place them in a social setting. *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break* had a noticeable impact on the weekly market in Britain and this needs to be examined to place the magazines in their appropriate context. The environment into which they launched in terms of existing magazines, the political and social climate, changing expectations of women, and the potential 'backlash' against feminism (Faludi 1992) all had a possible influence on the magazines. Feminism in particular was a key element in the editors' interviews and had a major part to play in the identity of each magazine. To place the editors' comments about feminism in context and to identify their individual perspectives, a discussion of traditional and more recent theories of feminism will contrast with the editors' perceptions, thus identifying their origins and aims. Then, the background to *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break* and an attempt to explain their success in Britain.

## Feminist theories

All three editors described their magazines as 'feminist', and Maire Fahey went one step further by identifying herself as a feminist. But were John Dale, Jackie Highe and Maire Fahey talking about the same things when they declared their magazines' intended feminism? Or did they hold different views on what this word meant for them and their magazines? Perhaps feminism was simply a convenient label to sum up their approach to readers, encapsulating the function of the magazines as information sources and particularly for *Take a Break*, as a public forum for women's experiences. According to Stacey:

feminist theory generally suggests a body of knowledge which offers critical explanations of women's subordination ... feminists have produced diverse and competing theories about the general patterns of inequality and the broader structures, belief systems and institutions which produce and organise particular experiences, in order to analyse, understand and, hopefully, challenge women's subordination.

Stacey 1993:50

A brief look at established and then more recent feminist theories might help to place the editors' later comments in perspective and to offer a contrast which will make clearer an identification of their own views.

Barrett and Phillips (1992) suggested that the previously used taxonomies of feminist theoretical positions have become blurred and rather less distinguishable than in their heyday of the 1970s. It was always convenient to categorise feminists into liberal, socialist and radical traditions, despite the reality of their shifting and overlapping perspectives. Although these categories are less appropriate in poststructuralist and postmodern times, it is nevertheless still useful to be aware of their origins and main elements because their legacy remains apparent in the writings of the observers who criticised *Best* and *Bella* when they launched, and in the comments of the editors themselves. Taken as 'ideal types' (van Zoonen 1991:35) the three traditions can indicate the various ways in which feminists perceive the media. By extracting certain themes from each tradition and linking these to the editors' intentions, the feminist principles which are implicit in each magazine can be explored and placed within a more modern framework of postmodern and post-structuralist feminist writings.



One point that all three groups of traditional feminist theories had in common was a search for the cause of women's oppression. Their opinions differed on this subject, leading to the specific beliefs and arguments characteristic of each theoretical group, but as Barrett and Phillips (1992) pointed out, for most feminists the cause of oppression was to be found in the social structure. In a focus that was partly the result of structuralist theories in wider political and sociological thought, feminists turned to patriarchy, or capitalism, or domestic politics, to locate the cause of women's oppression, and their views on this cause affected their approach to the media.

### Liberal feminism

Steeves (1987) argued that much of the mainstream media research in the USA is oriented towards liberal feminism, which she saw as problematic because of its emphasis on white, heterosexual, middle class women. Liberal feminism is characterised by a concern with women's socialization into limited roles, compounded by an irrational prejudice that women and men are different (van Zoonen 1991). The aim is to show the origins of these different expectations and assumptions about gender which may be found in childhood, and the work of psychologists is sometimes drawn upon, for example Bandura 1977; Kohlberg 1966. Both psychologists stressed the importance of modelling and reinforcement for identity, including the contribution of the media, and so for liberal feminists it is essential to have appropriately equal role models for women and men, girls and boys. Indeed, the media are seen as primary socialization agents, teaching children appropriate sex roles. It follows from this emphasis that researchers working within a liberal feminist tradition feel that content analysis of the media is important to reveal the extent of gender stereotyping, and the first step towards changing media representation of women. Tuchman *et al's* (1978) work on how women are portrayed in various media, including women's magazines, is a good example of this approach, and also Courtney and Whipple's (1983) study of women in advertising. Both studies found that the representation of gender is characterised by young, beautiful women portrayed in traditional feminine roles. The implication of such studies is that a reevaluation of media gender representation will result in more positive role models for girls and women, and therefore promote equal opportunities and raise female expectations about what they can achieve (a theory problematized later in the chapter by the *Best* editor, Maire Fahey). The

construction of femininity in the media is seen as normalizing such 'feminine' attributes as emotionality and compliance, qualities not regarded as essential by liberal feminists.

The liberal feminist tradition is oriented towards individuals and there is little sense of race or class factors, with a belief that equal opportunity is possible within the current socioeconomic climate (although this is just the best known variant of liberal feminism - others do recognise class or race barriers to equal opportunities). The aim is to increase awareness of unequal representation, often by quantitative methods, thus allowing individual women to improve their own circumstances by becoming more aware of their potential. The liberal feminist theoretical perspective fitted in well with the individualistic political environment of Thatcherism and the Conservative ideology in general. Remove the obstacles of unfair media representation and women would then be free to achieve as much as men and gain equality in the process (van Zoonen 1991). However, as the comments of the editors will show, representation in the magazines is not just about gender but also about class, particularly for *Take a Break*, and the liberal feminist belief that women will respond positively to certain images in the media is questioned by the editors. The magazine that appears to be most closely aligned to a liberal feminist perspective (although not identical with) is *Best* because of its intention to act as an aspirational magazine for readers, meaning its aim to illustrate a more upmarket lifestyle than other weeklies via fashion, home improvements, and relationship and career expectations.

### Radical feminism

For radical feminists, the emphasis is on essential differences between women and men, rather than the liberal feminists' insistence on similarity. The origins of radical feminism can be traced back to de Beauvoir's (1952) description of man as subject and woman as other. A general agreement on the ubiquity of women's oppression and the depth of the problem unites radical feminists, and individual action is obviously not enough to overcome such oppression. Using the term patriarchy, some radical feminists describe men's dominance over women as rooted in the control over women's reproductive abilities, a theoretical understanding which has implications for the way both women and men live. Other radical feminists see male dominance as grounded in sexuality,



violence or labour. Well-known radical feminists such as Firestone (1970) advocated the use of sperm banks and Daly (1979) suggested that women should live apart from men in an effort to be free from male oppression. Language is also seen as a factor in patriarchy and therefore as an extension of their separatism women should establish their own language codes and meanings. This latter point, combined with radical feminists' opinions of conventional, quantitative methodologies as male-biased, indicates a different approach to the media than that of the liberal feminism outlined above. The desire for separation on behalf of some radical feminists manifests itself in a feminist press which gives attention to women's writings, especially previously overlooked literature and poetry, and also uniquely female traditions such as gossip, humour and storytelling. The use of a feminist press allows issues which are normally kept private to be publicized (and politicized) by the women themselves, for example abuse or illness, something women's magazines also facilitate. In this sense, radical feminism can lead to an ideology which either positions women as victims of men, or women as heroines, both of which are evident in the magazines.

The radical feminist theoretical position is intended to combat sexism, racism and heterosexism in literature and is thus more aware of additional factors in women's oppression than representations of women *per se* in the media. But like the liberal feminists, the emphasis is on texts, although specifically in creating their own writings. However, as van Zoonen (1991) pointed out, the ability of feminist media to attract an audience is declining. The (now folded) magazine *Spare Rib*, in giving a voice to women's issues, experiences and writing, was a moderately successful example of separatist publishing and its tradition was carried on by *Everywoman*, although this magazine itself is now under threat of imminent closure. According to a report in *The Observer*, the genre of feminist magazines has lost out to the new laddish oeuvre which includes magazines such as *Loaded* and *Maxim*, both with increasing circulations (Wroe 1996). This is not to suggest that the readership of *Everywoman*, for example, has switched to reading *Loaded*, but that the social climate has changed - a general 'backlash' against feminist publications together with the rise of a new laddish orientation has signalled the decline of the feminist market (the backlash argument will be discussed more fully later in this chapter). *Everywoman*, Britain's only national feminist monthly, is seen as archaic by Wroe in the context of a mainstream media which contrarily

disseminates feminist ideas itself and yet which incorporates such backlash publications like *Loaded*. The closure of *Everywoman* nevertheless will both reduce the choice for women who may want a magazine which is different to existing titles, and signify a blow to the radical feminist tradition of publishing women's work separately from mainstream media. However, women's voices can still be heard in the ordinary weeklies - although the magazines do not have a specific feminist identity, they nevertheless fulfil the radical feminist criterion of acting as a forum for women's experiences but the power context of mainstream media in which women's views are expressed is different to that of a separatist, obviously feminist publication.

### Socialist feminism

The third category of feminist thought is that of socialist feminism. The position of women in this tradition is seen as a structural problem which is rooted in a patriarchal class system that benefits from women's oppression (Barrett and Phillips 1992). Class oppression under capitalism is a major factor in women's oppression, and socialist feminists seek to relate gender difference to historical, social and economic conditions. The linking between gender oppression and additional forms of oppression based on class, race, age, sexuality and nationality is the underlying aim of socialist feminists. Unlike some radical feminists' emphasis on biological difference and reproduction, socialist feminists point to the material base of patriarchy as deriving from men's control over women's labour, for example Hartmann's (1978) study on women's double shift of work. However, they agree with radical feminists that gender inequality is fundamental but reject the idea of radical separatism. Instead, women should be concerned to align themselves with sympathetic political factions to gain a power base for themselves from which to achieve reform. Such a power base is normally the left wing political movement, as the term socialist feminism would suggest.

Socialist feminists do not necessarily agree in their explanations of gender inequality. Some are influenced by Althusser's work on ideological state apparatuses as imposing limits on human experience (Steeves 1987) and as sustaining class distinctions. The work of Gramsci in analysing how dominant ideology takes on the form of common sense via hegemony has also been influential in socialist feminism (van Zoonen 1991). Other socialist feminists



turn to psychoanalytic theory and the work of Chodorow (1978) on mothering, pointing to the role of parenting in socialization and thereby returning to the issue of the division of labour between women and men.

In relation to the media, socialist feminists have been influential in the work of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham, including McRobbie's (1982) analysis of *Jackie* magazine, Winship's (1980) examination of advertising in women's magazines, and Hobson's (1982) study of *Crossroads*. All these works addressed gender representation in texts but also included class analysis, and in Hobson's study textual analysis was combined with institutional structures and audience research. Socialist feminists emphasize the importance of 'exposing and changing interrelated ideologies of oppression and domination on the basis of gender, class and race within ideological institutions' (Steeves 1987:122). Therefore, like liberal feminists, they focus on the representation of women in the media but for socialist feminists this is combined with an analysis of other ideological categories of oppression, all placed within a broader context of institutional structures. John Dale's stance in *Take a Break* reflects such a focus on the interrelation between class and gender, although the class element is not explicitly acknowledged in the magazine.

I have briefly outlined the liberal, radical and socialist feminist theories because of their value in understanding the editors' positions. However, I recognise the problems with dividing feminism into these three categories and therefore wish to extend the discussion of feminist theories to take account of more recent work. This will help to locate both the magazines and their readers in terms of postmodern and post-structuralist developments in feminism.

#### Feminism, postmodernism and post-structuralism

The attempts by liberal, radical and socialist feminism to find a cause of gender relations or male domination indicated a desire to hold onto the belief that there is a dominant discourse of authority and coherence with which to define the issue. But the possibility of such a universalizing discourse has been questioned by postmodern thinkers (for example Flax 1990) as a doubtful exercise in which other knowledge claims would be suppressed to allow the dominant one the necessary authority. Encompassing difference, then, avoids

the possible concealment of experiences which might challenge a privileged theory. The combination of postmodernism and feminism has been described by Fraser and Nicholson (1990) as recognising the plural and complexly constructed conceptions of social identity, treating gender as a strand together with class, race, ethnicity, age and sexual orientation, and using multiple methods to address temporally and culturally specific problems and issues. This feminist position has emerged from a struggle between metanarrative modes of theorizing and pressure to recognise differences among women. Since the 1980s, many feminists have ceased searching for the cause of male domination and have turned to a more local investigation with less grand aims. There has been an increasing awareness of differences and cultural and historical specificity. Such thinking has accompanied questioning about the concept of 'woman', although in the three feminist theories outlined earlier, the idea of woman was already seen as a problematic concept. As woman had always been defined by men, and endowed with essential characteristics, feminists responded by articulating their own definition of woman. As Alcoff (1988) notes, the response of cultural feminists was to challenge the definition given to women by men, and to redefine it in a positive way. The response of post-structuralist feminists, however, was to reject the idea that woman can be defined at all. Through problematizing subjectivity, post-structuralists argue against essentialism as constraining the individual to her identity as a woman and thereby being unable to offer any solutions to women's continuing oppression. In addition, the difficulty with using woman as a category is that it presupposes feminists have the right to describe, speak for and invoke a universalizing conception of woman.

To deconstruct the subject, as post-structuralists do, is to deny the existence of an essential identity (but without denying common experiences) and instead to suggest that humans are constructed by social discourses and cultural practice (Alcoff 1988). The concept of woman, then, is fiction, to be problematized and challenged by feminists. Such a view opens up possibilities of difference for women, released from a predetermined and fixed gender identity and able continually to construct their subjectivity in the historical and cultural field of the moment. Alcoff (1988) cites the work of Riley in which the latter offers a concept of the subjectivity of woman as a gendered subject but without essentializing gender and without denying sexual difference. The idea is to remove gender from its all encompassing position of determining everything



about women's existence. In a practical sense, this has more relevance than the post-structuralist assertion of being fixed by social and discursive practices without space for manoeuvre. Riley's concern was to address concrete demands such as childcare without essentializing woman or motherhood and she suggested that although recognizing and meeting the needs of mothers supposes a traditional division of labour, such a recognition does not have to mean accepting that childcare is eternally female. In the here and now, which is concomitant with the philosophies of *Bella* and *Take a Break* in particular, women need childcare facilities. To avoid supporting orthodox ideals of women as mothers, Alcoff (1988) suggests rejecting all associations between the institution of motherhood and women's vocation or naturally female activity. Alcoff's own post-structuralist stance utilises the notion of position. She writes:

When the concept 'woman' is defined not by a particular set of attributes but by a particular position, the internal characteristics of the person thus identified are not denoted so much as the external context within which that person is situated.

Alcoff 1988:433

Such a view avoids the essentializing and internal identification of woman and also allows movement for the subject in relation to altering contexts of culture, economy, friendship networks and so on. Within these fields, subjects actively contribute to their position by interpreting and reconstructing their history according to the discourses to which they have access.

The recognition that gender has been challenged theoretically is important but how useful is it? As Bordo (1990) reminds us, in our present culture people's activities are always coded as male and female and the categories of woman and man are used constantly. The magazines serve as a reminder of this potential gap between theory and practice in their contradictory treatment of the concept of woman, which shifts between essentialist and cultural poles. By their very nature of attempting to address all women under the umbrella of 'woman', the editors embrace a cultural feminism which positions woman at one with nature. The editors also recognise women's multiple subjectivities by addressing readers in all their diverse roles. Thus the magazines both universalize and essentialize womanhood but also recognise and approve difference, providing a range of subject positions for readers. However, they do not engage with current debates about the opening up of masculinity (for

example, Brod and Kaufman 1994). In this area, they maintain a polarity of men as good or bad and within this continue to position men in certain locations (see chapter four).

To relate postmodern and post-structuralist feminist theories more closely to the media and therefore magazines, the work of Ang and Hermes (1991) is useful. Ang and Hermes are interested in the relation between concrete practices of media consumption and gender, particularly the way media is utilised in everyday life. By limiting research to women, however, they note that many accounts of research might encourage an essentialist concept of gender identity in that women audiences are seen as somehow fixed and unitary. They want to explore how gender identities are constructed in media consumption (although having made this point their writing continues to focus on women).

Ang and Hermes problematize what they label as 'creeping essentialism' (1991:313) in media studies. By this they mean the danger that lies in interpreting responses from audiences as originating in a working class or middle class experience. In their view, this precludes a recognition of the multiple ways in which viewers or readers make sense of media like soap opera, for example. This is not to deny the existence of class differences but it is to see them as part of a subject's identity, rather than the whole, and here there are parallels with Morley's work on television. Class can be taken as a factor that impacts on experience and which should be placed in the historical context in which it is articulated. The way that class is defined, too, needs to be clearly stated, as I suggested in chapter two. Thus, it is insufficient to treat class as determining cultural responses because the complexity and differences between subjects will lose richness and diversity in the attempts neatly to categorise such subjects as working class or middle class.

Accounting for differences between women in terms of more than class, however, still does not address the problematic category of woman. To focus exclusively on women reifies the concept and implicitly announces man as the norm, unproblematic and untheorized. However, I argue that this assumption does not necessarily have to accompany research on female audiences if the category of woman is constantly held to be an unstable, shifting and continually produced identity. It would seem artificial to include men in a study of a genre



such as women's weekly magazines, for example, when the majority of readers are women. I would also argue that as women are the intended readers of publications such as *Best* and *Bella* (and to a lesser extent *Take a Break*) and as there is little research on these particular titles at all, it was appropriate to focus on this intended readership. However, I take Ang and Hermes' point that this focus on women may serve to essentialize gender concepts, but if the research is undertaken with an attention to post-structuralist concerns and theories, then such research should not be dismissed as inherently essentialist. There is no reason why a focus on women, as in my research on magazines, should essentialize gender.

According to Ang and Hermes (1991) a person's subjectivity can be termed as the multiplicity of subject positions taken up, which locate the individual through the intersection of social discourses and practices. This subjectivity (including gendered subjectivity) is continuous and unfinished, indicating the fluidity rather than fixed nature of being a woman. Magazines are involved in this process of subjectivity by providing certain subject positions for their readers potentially to take up and identify with. As my own research findings suggest, there is nothing inevitable about the positions readers adopt from their magazines (and of course magazines are not read in isolation from other media). Readers invest in certain positions which might empower them or offer them satisfaction (both of which came across clearly in my research - see chapter five) and it might be argued that readers have an interest in identifying with particular gender positions because of the considerable cultural and social pressure to be seen as feminine and therefore 'normal' (Ang and Hermes 1991).

If media use and the meanings taken from media are seen as operating with a multiple intersection of texts and messages, it follows that any exploration of media should be set within an everyday context, a conclusion reached to a limited extent by Morley (1986) in his study of family television. By shifting the terrain of media reception research, the instability of gender in media consumption can be explored more thoroughly, as subjects' competing discourses and social practices can be accessed by the researcher. This helps to deflect the overwhelming emphasis on class as the determining factor in media use and opens up the field for more local and particular life histories (for example Gray 1992; Hermes 1995). To a limited extent, this is the approach I

have adopted in my own research into women's reception and use of *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break*. By exploring their everyday routines and practices with the magazines, and listening to the historical accounts of their situations, magazine reading can be contextualized as a social practice both constituted by and constituting subjectivities. The fragmentary and perhaps messy results of post-structuralist and feminist theories in media research need not be regarded as inadequate or insubstantial because of the recognition of inconsistencies and contradictions. Rather, as Flax (1990:56) suggests, they should encourage a toleration of 'ambivalence, ambiguity and multiplicity'. This perspective cuts across the three hypothetical decoding positions of Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model and poses problems in categorising the responses of readers to their magazines primarily in terms of socioeconomic location (as Hall's model emphasized). Although this remains an important factor in readers' use and interpretation of magazines, it is not the only or determining factor, as discussed by Morley (1992) and also emphasized in this research. In addition, the way readers use magazines cannot be accounted for in the encoding/decoding model.

Where does the preceding discussion on feminisms leave the magazines and their readers (and by implication this research project)? Clearly, the old distinctions between liberal, socialist and radical feminisms (and Hall's decoding alternatives) cannot adequately account for the ways in which readers' subjectivities are taken up (or not) and shift in a continuing process of identifications. However, the danger of essentializing gender points me towards an awareness of the difficulties of using the category of 'woman' without problematizing that very concept, but I would still argue for the necessity of exploring how the intended audience of women's magazines (ie. women) use and interpret them. But I would also caution against throwing the baby (the editors' positions) out with the bathwater (the classic feminist traditions of liberal, socialist and radical feminisms). I want to hold on to the traditional theories partly to explain the editors' positions on encoding feminism and femininity in their magazines, and also use some of the material from the above discussion on postmodernism and post-structuralism to explore thoroughly the editors' actions and intentions. The editors are not academic feminists with a particular informed position on the shifting and theoretical understandings of feminisms, but their positions are informed by what might be seen (in the academic world) as outdated writings and research on feminism



and gender. I do not intend in any way to criticize the editors' understanding but rather to explore it and its consequences for the magazines and subsequently for the readers. As Flax (1990) suggested, a fundamental goal of feminist theory is to analyse gender relations and how these are constituted and experienced. She also suggested that without action, such theory remains ineffectual. The actions taken by the magazine editors, although they may not be seen as feminist by academic theorists, do have a feminist agenda according to the beliefs of the editors and their understanding of their readers. To appreciate these beliefs, the editors' positions will be explored in the context of various feminisms, emphasizing the uncertainty of feminism in contemporary times and the inappropriateness of attempting to label or name certain behaviour or thinking as a particular and single feminist tradition.

Thus, the taxonomies of the 1970s and 1980s are indistinct in current feminist thinking and yet they can still be used together with more recent feminist writings to trace the understanding behind the editors' comments and to provide a contrast to highlight their intentions for the magazines. One way of using feminist theories is to take from them certain themes which relate to the editors' intentions for their magazines. I have identified seven themes from the theories which are evident in the editors' comments, although some themes are more applicable than others according to each magazine. Also, some contradictions will be evident both within and between magazines. Five of the themes are:

- women are active agents
- men are the cause of women's problems
- women and men are essentially different
- women are a homogeneous group
- women and men should share nurturing tasks

A sixth theme, which is more apparent in the editors' comments than in the explicit characteristics of particular feminist theories (although it relates to the radical feminists' call for a separatist press - even if the magazines are part of mainstream media, they nevertheless focus strongly on women), is that magazines are a forum for representing all women, regardless of class, age or appearance, in which they can relate their experiences. And a seventh theme, strongly emphasized by all three editors, is that of the magazines as sources of

help and advice for readers who may have no other means of obtaining certain information. Whilst this theme does not appear explicitly in any of the feminist theories outlined earlier, it is coterminous with acknowledging the power of knowledge in transforming women's lives and relates to the class concerns of socialist feminists in challenging the middle class bias of other media. As a way of categorising the editors' intended feminism, which is a combination of the seven themes for each magazine, it is helpful to give this feminism a label, and I suggest that the most appropriate label is that of 'supportive feminism'. This sums up the elements of feminism present in the magazines and the editors' intentions. However, I will also use the term 'aspirational feminism' when referring to *Best*, as this magazine differs from *Bella* and *Take a Break* in its content and address to readers. Aspirational feminism has certain common factors with liberal feminism as discussed earlier in the chapter and I characterise *Best* as incorporating both aspirational and supportive feminist elements.

The seven themes will be addressed in the section on the editors' encodings of the magazines, thus clarifying their positions and the feminisms they are portraying. Because the magazines can be inconsistent between features (for example, the true life stories may be encoded in a different way to the health), the themes are not intended to be rigorous - rather, they are aimed at illustrating the general feminist orientation of each magazine and its editor. Some of the seven themes may be in tension with each other, if not actually contradict, for example the class targeting of the magazines suggests an awareness of diversity rather than homogeneity among women, even though the editors also suggest there are common areas of female experience that transcend national boundaries. As always with women's magazines, there are inconsistencies and grey areas but I do not see this as particularly problematic. In identifying the magazines' feminist themes, it would be surprising if there was clarity and consistency both within and between the three titles.

One obvious contradiction in the magazines is the desire of the editors to acknowledge the social changes that have occurred in the last twenty years (i.e. what feminism has meant for women's if not men's lives) combined with an apparent wish to return to the 'good old days' when women were women and men were men (evident particularly in John Dale's [editor of *Take a Break*] emphasis on community as an unproblematic and positive concept). Flax



(1990) notes that the instability now apparent around gender relations makes the old models of social relations more attractive. Indeed, this was precisely the appeal of the more old-fashioned magazines like *My Weekly* and *People's Friend* to some of the women in the library focus group who enjoyed their uncomplicated romantic fiction and traditional features. Thus, the magazines are contradictory, and will not neatly slot into defined categories, emphasizing the predicted ambiguity of media research that was mentioned earlier (Flax 1990).

Before looking at the editors' encodings, a possible criticism of the magazines needs to be addressed. While it is my perspective to welcome the inclusion of feminist elements in *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break*, the editors might also be accused of picking up bits of feminism and attaching them to a non-feminist message of competitiveness - such an accusation has previously been levelled at *Cagney and Lacey*, and blockbuster novels such as *Princess Daisy* for both representing powerful and independent women and yet validating women's need to be glamorous and the patriarchal hierarchy in which they operate (Marshment 1993). I agree that the magazines are inconsistent in their attempts to portray a coherent feminist identity (however they define that identity), but feel that the magazines are in a difficult position vis-à-vis feminist credibility. As Marshment (1993) pointed out, cultural products are damned whatever position they take - damned for showing women succeeding, damned if they do not; damned for showing women as victims, damned if they do not; damned for entering the mainstream; damned if they do not. The magazines have no possibility of delivering an acceptable feminist text to all feminists and indeed the judgement of their success should be provided by readers rather than 'detached' academics who are likely to miss the low level and perhaps to them elementary feminist messages incorporated in *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break*. Of course, some academics will also be readers, such as Janice Winship (1987a) and the writers of *Women's Worlds*, Ballaster, Beetham, Frazer and Hebron (1991).

### **The editors' encoded messages**

The editors' interviews focused to a large extent on the three categories of true life stories, health, and money, work and rights features. These three categories are not necessarily discrete categories - for example, in *Take a Break* the health

features are mainly true life stories; in *Best* and *Bella*, problems at work or with money or rights may be told as a first person confessional type article. But the themes which link these three areas of content are all based around *supporting* and/or *informing* the reader. When Ferguson (1983) interviewed the editors of women's weeklies in the late 1970s/early 1980s, true life stories had nothing like the prominent profile they have today, but the rest of the content has not changed beyond all recognition. It would seem that the current editors' views also remain similar to those expressed by Ferguson. The *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break* editors all discussed their magazines as offering support and information to readers. Ferguson summed up her editors as offering 'information, support and guidance' (Ferguson 1983:141). Both sets of editors claimed their responsibility to readers was the second most important function, the first being that of commercial success. According to the *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break* editors, the true life stories, health, and money, work and rights features (and some of the other content, for example the problem page) offer readers reassurance, information, knowledge and generally somewhere to turn for advice. The informative content in women's weekly magazines is generally regarded as inferior to alternative sources of information, in much the same way as tabloids are seen as the poor relations to broadsheets (Connell 1991). And yet it would be wrong to judge the magazines as uninformative, a judgement easily made though by unfamiliar readers. Connell began his study of tabloids from the perspective of a broadsheet reader:

The general preference [*in tabloids*] seemed to be for stories about scandalous incidents involving well-known personalities. Being more accustomed to, and probably more at ease with, the conventions of broadsheet journalism I found it difficult to understand this preference ... it was difficult to imagine they had any kind of informative intent.

Connell 1991:238

After realising his mistake in trying to read tabloids like broadsheets, Connell recognised that tabloid papers do not provide the service that quality papers do but that this should not be taken as evidence that they have abandoned their intent to inform. Information is suited to the reader and it does not have to imply a political or public knowledge - there are different kinds of information which appear in various media forms and which are not the prerogative of the



quality newspapers, as Connell acknowledged. The information in *Best, Bella* and *Take a Break* was recognised and appreciated by many of the readers.

Although the editors did not actually use the word *empowerment* when discussing the informative content and the true life stories this is how some readers used the magazines, particularly *Take a Break*. I use empowerment to indicate that certain content in the magazines has the capacity to offer readers a transformative experience, although not all readers will want, need or recognise the content as empowering. In sociological research, empowerment is often linked to the research process itself, as in action-research which takes empowerment as its *raison d'etre* (Bowes 1996). However, allowing the expression of views by groups not normally offered an opportunity to contribute does not automatically constitute empowerment - the context in which such expressions are made in terms of power needs to be considered. Relating this to the magazines, rather than to the more usual situation of an action-research process, the desire to give women a voice was uppermost in the minds of the editors but it should be remembered that the women's voices were being portrayed in a particular media form which enjoys little status or credibility, even amongst some of its readers. This in itself does not invalidate the possibility of empowerment for readers who interpret the stories or health in the way intended but it does caution the uncritical celebration of empowerment as unproblematic and context free. As Bhavnani suggested, it is too easy to let the 'fetishism of experience' obstruct the process of power in which the voices are heard (Bhavnani 1988 cited in Bowes 1996:2).

The true life stories and the health do have the potential to act as empowering (both for the readers and those who share their experiences in print), as the readers' interpretations in chapters five and six will illustrate. The editors did implicitly acknowledge that the magazines could be empowering, without expressing it in so many words, but mainly in terms of giving readers the knowledge to make their lives easier, rather than changing them, although the health in particular was regarded as offering women the knowledge to challenge the often powerless doctor/patient relationship that many women experience. And in terms of the true life stories, an example from *Take a Break* (4 May 1995) will illustrate John Dale's intention to help his readers, as the story included the telephone number for Women's Aid Refuges and readers were urged to change their situation if they too suffered from their partner's

violence. Clearly, the potential for empowerment is there if readers are able, or want, to read the story that way.

Of course, the magazines as a whole are also intended to entertain as well as inform, and so certain parts of the content are not meant to incorporate any obvious supportive function. For example, *That's Life*, an amusing regular column in *Bella*, is clearly aimed at entertainment, and this was how the readers received it. But the true life stories, health and money, work and rights features intentionally have a dual role, providing both entertainment and information. If each of the three features are examined separately, the editors' encodings can be explored, incorporating the seven themes where appropriate and thus highlighting any differences between the three magazines and providing a detailed analysis of the editors' positions. The editors' preferred meanings, then, can be discussed in the context of the magazines as a whole and their production environment.

### True life stories

As the content analysis in the next chapter illustrates, *Take a Break* includes more true life stories than either *Best* or *Bella*. Editor John Dale regarded these true life stories as one of the two main attractions of *Take a Break* (the other being the competitions). In fact, *Take a Break's* publicity material identifies the true life stories as the magazine's biggest asset:

The core of *Take a Break's* appeal has to be the emotionally potent real-life stories, a powerful mixture of heart-warming love tales and heart-rending trauma. Readers laugh and cry their way through at least half a dozen pages of these true-life experiences every week - 'And I love you so', 'Letter from the heart', 'Reader confidential' and so on.

*Take a Break* Media Information Pack, 1996

Dale saw the stories as a way of putting across the meaning he wanted readers to take from the magazine - that of support. In essence, Dale viewed *Take a Break* as the champion of the working class woman in which the true life stories play a vital role. Rejecting the middle class bias of much mainstream media, *Take a Break* is intended to focus on real (i.e. working class) women's concerns and experiences. *Take a Break's* underlying aim (the primary ones being that of commercial success and entertainment) is connected to the place



of the family in a community setting. According to Dale, both families and communities are breaking down and people are losing the security of their previous roles because of social and economic changes in society:

Communities are breaking down, families are breaking down, people losing their role. *Take a Break* helps people to understand the role of family life, their role in society.

John Dale, personal interview, March 1995

By portraying the everyday struggles of individuals (I use this word deliberately as people's situations are rarely explicitly linked to wider factors, with the exception of *Take a Break's* campaigns which are constructed around true life stories and which connect these to structural inequalities, particularly gender), *Take a Break* can emphasize the function of families and the importance of community by relating incidents in true life stories where there is some kind of tragedy. This serves to highlight the role of family and community relations and often it emphasizes the importance of female solidarity against the threat of male violence. Dale admitted that *Take a Break* can be aggressive towards men in the true life stories if they are represented as undesirable or villainous characters, particularly if they are a threat to the family. In this sense, men are seen as the main cause of women's problems, although it is rarely suggested that women are better off without them. Such a focus on family life serves to associate women with hearth and home, emphasizing what Dale seems to see as essential differences between women and men.

If the men in *Take a Break's* true life stories are often presented as weak, it is the women who are portrayed as strong, active agents. Dale claimed that women assert themselves in the true life stories and campaigns. By narrating their everyday existence and the obstacles they continually have to surmount, the women are shown as ordinary, working class people trying to deal with their lives in a world where the odds are often stacked against them. The combination of both gender and class discrimination, although not articulated as such in the magazine, informs many of the true life stories in *Take a Break*, identifying not just men as the problem but implicitly women's relation to education and employment, as women are frequently financially dependent on men. The readers of *Take a Break* are identified as following by the magazine's publicity material:

A *Take a Breaker* is someone with a mind of their own who knows life isn't necessarily easy, who doesn't give in, who sometimes makes mistakes, who laughs and cries and loves family and friends, and believes that today is better than yesterday and tomorrow will be better than ever ...

*Take a Break* Media Information Pack, 1996

(It is interesting to note that *Take a Break* is careful to address its readers in gender neutral language, acknowledging that around one quarter of its readership is male). As an example of the magazine's perspective, Dale used the term 'institutionalised sexism' to describe the way women motorists are taken advantage of by male garage mechanics, a topic which became a recent campaign in *Take a Break*. This campaign addressed both gender discrimination experienced by individual women, and organizational discrimination as practised by the motor industry, indicating to readers that something more than their own individualised experience was problematic. The magazine's focus on this sexist behaviour allowed women to warn other readers, via *Take a Break's* pages, about how to avoid being conned by garages. Thus, *Take a Break* can act as a site of collective knowledge and action, becoming the focus around which readers can tell their own side of the story in a non-threatening environment, and gain support and even the power to challenge discrimination in the future. Here, *Take a Break* deliberately set out to empower women and help them to take control of their lives. Although the garage example was a particular instance of gender discrimination, the true life stories give women an opportunity to articulate their experiences about a wide range of discrimination or problems, many of which they have successfully struggled through, and which resonate with other readers.

According to Dale, the editor's encoded message in *Take a Break's* true life stories is that of community - families should support each other, and in turn they should be supported by their local community. It is women who are the key figures in both family and community - they hold the family together in the face of everyday struggles and it is they who make up the community via kinship and friendship networks (see chapter six for a fuller discussion of community and women's magazines). Although *Take a Break's* focus on the importance of the family might lead the reader to accuse it of being overly moral in tone, 'the family' in *Take a Break* is not the traditional idea of a nuclear unit headed by a working father and a stay-at-home mother. More



often, it consists of a single woman with children as the centre of the family, frequently supported by grandparents (particularly grandmothers), and men form a temporary part of this group. The nonjudgmental acceptance by *Take a Break* of different forms of family illustrates Dale's emphasis on the strength of women in holding the family together and his willingness to identify men as a threat to this. It also constitutes a particular reality of family life for many women and children in Britain today. However, together with women's family orientation and reproductive capacities, there seems to be an implicit assumption that to nurture is also a woman's lot - women inevitably perform household tasks with little attempt made by the magazine to problematize such a taken for granted assumption that women are 'natural' carers. Thus, women and men are seen as different, with women identified as the caring, relational sex.

John Dale's comments in a recent edition of *Take a Break* (16 January 1997) sum up the magazine's approach to the true life stories and indeed the magazine's philosophy in general. In response to a letter in an earlier issue, in which a reader had claimed to be in a minority amongst *Take a Break* readers because of her happy childhood and marriage, good job, the birth of a planned baby and lack of reliance on the state, the magazine devoted a whole letters page to other readers' replies. Most of the published responses were angry with the original letter and many praised *Take a Break* for relating the experiences of ordinary people. In a small box at the bottom of the page, the editor wrote the following letter (see Illustration 1):

You, the reader, have created *Take a Break*. This magazine is largely inspired and written by the five million people who enjoy it every week. It portrays the reality of life in Britain today and, like life itself, our stories are happy, sad, brave and noble. We want to thank everyone for their support. We always listen to your opinions. It's you, the reader, we are here to serve.

The Editor

At the bottom of the page, Dale reminded readers of *Take a Break's* success with a boxed statement - 'Voted best magazine of its kind for FOUR years - grab a TaB', the association between readers and success further emphasized.

Dale's intended encoding for *Take a Break's* true life stories is similar to that of Jackie Highe's at *Bella* magazine. Of course, both magazines are part of the

**ILLUSTRATION 1**

*Take a Break*

**16 January 1997**



LETTERS SPECIAL

# Is TaB too SHOCKING?

All human life parades across our pages as *Take a Break* allows ordinary readers to describe their struggles. Is it a distorted lens? Or a lesson in humility? When we published Lesley Deeley's letter, you sent us one of our biggest — and most humbling — postbags ever

## WE'RE ALL RIGHT, JOHN

An announcement to all *Take a Break* readers: my husband and I are happily married, both have jobs, had happy childhoods, do not come from broken homes and do not rely on the state for anything. We have a son who was planned, no children from previous relationships, and have never been in trouble with the police, fallen behind with our mortgage repayments or been cruel to a human or an animal. We also love each other and would try to help anyone. This must make us very rare — according to your magazine!

Lesley Deeley,  
New Road, Milcombe,  
Oxon

Those of us who have broken marriages or lose our jobs and fall behind with payments are victims of circumstance. Thank your lucky stars, Lesley, and hope you never find yourself in a similar situation — it can happen to anyone.

Jeanette MacGregor,  
Strathay Road, Perth,  
Tayside

**£25** paid for Letter of the Week, **£20** for all others printed, plus **£25** for any photos we use. Please make letters and photos exclusive to us and include your first name. Write to Letters, *Take a Break*, 25-27 Camden Road, London NW1 9LL

single mother aged 21 with two boys. I have to rely on benefits as the father of my children left me.

I was pregnant at the time. Because of the stress I lost my daughter (who was not planned) at 24 weeks.

I also fell behind with the mortgage. Now I'm about to lose my house.

Like Lesley, I didn't come from a broken home, I had a happy childhood, I've never been in trouble with the police and I've never harmed a human or an animal.

My advice to Lesley is to keep her words soft and sweet — some day she may have to eat them.

Paula Mitchell,  
Macquarrie  
Court, Fort William, H'land

## You're WRONG, Lesley!

I came from a broken home, have been in trouble with the police and have been in debt. I have two children who were unplanned and two from previous relationships. I'm on income support.

Lesley says she would try to help anyone. But how can she when she has experienced so little? She also says she's never been cruel but I found her letter



Me and my kids

very hurtful.

Does she understand the suffering of people in *Take a Break*? If not, why read it? *TaB* is about normal people and their experiences.

Shontay Taylor,  
The Avenues, Norwich,  
Norfolk

I can hardly contain my anger at Lesley's letter. She is self-important and arrogant.

There are millions of families like hers all over the world. But they see themselves as blessed. They have the gift of compassion.

I wonder if Lesley feels any compassion. If she does, she should spare us her comments.

I'm glad Lesley has had a successful life. But I wonder if she could allow others to write of their success over their own trials and tribulations.

Nobody asks for adversity.

How people cope with it is of interest, if only to help us count our blessings. The 57p *Take a Break* costs is a small price to pay for a lesson in humility.

Ina Wild,  
Leamington Street,  
Oldham, Gtr Manchester

Lesley's letter was smug and pompous. Maybe if she'd suffered more, she'd have

more sympathy for others less fortunate. I don't know why you wasted valuable space on her letter.

J Little,  
Balmoral Place, Leven, Fife

Sometimes people can't help relying on the state. My granddaughter applied for a Sunday job. When she didn't hear anything, I phoned and was told they'd had 400 applications.

You're one of the lucky ones, Lesley.

Vera Lind,  
Porter Road, East Ham,  
London

## My husband preferred DARTS to SEX

I also had happiness until my life changed in a blink of an eye. I lost my job, family and health. It is your real-life stories that help us to understand the world around us.

Mrs E Clarke,  
Greenpark Road,  
Northenden, Manchester

I thought Lesley's letter sounded smug. My husband was made redundant after 36 years as a mechanical engineer. The stress of being jobless triggered his first heart attack. His final, fatal one was on Father's Day last year.

Not everyone is as prosperous and trouble-free as you, Lesley.

I'd been married 43 years. I'd never brag or look down on those less fortunate than myself.

Gwen Griffiths,  
Hazel Road, Chester

## I SCREAMED and pus squirted everywhere

Like Lesley, I've never been in trouble with the police, I love my partner and try to help anyone I can. As a student struggling on a grant and a parental contribution I sometimes fall behind on bills. And although I had a happy childhood, I lost my mother a few months ago to cancer.

I'm glad to hear of Lesley's good fortune. But I and many other readers — a minority

though we might be — do not appreciate being looked down on because of circumstances that are not our fault.

Name and address supplied

I'm happy that Lesley has a problem-free life. But not everyone is so lucky. I'm a

Rather than take a condescending attitude towards other people's misfortunes, those who have a trouble-free life should think themselves very lucky. Some people seem to court disaster but others have appalling bad luck through no fault of their own.

Gwenda Bunston,  
Calverhall, Telford,  
Shrops

Every week the strength of people in *TaB* amazes me. Those who write in with true-life stories and Letters from the Heart are so brave. They've taught me to enjoy life now — you never know what tomorrow will bring.

Nicola Ireland,  
Glebeland Road,  
Dallington, Northants

## You're RIGHT, Lesley!

Lesley is not alone in her views about *Take a Break*. My family, friends and I all take the magazine but only for the competitions.

There's so much misery and crime on the TV and in the news, we want to read about pleasant things.

I'm 79 and I remember when magazines had cheerful articles, a short story and a serial. I waited eagerly for them each week.

Dorothy Baird,  
Tarragon Drive, Guildford,  
Surrey

How lovely to read Lesley's letter. I was starting to think I was some sort of misfit. Now I know there's at least one other reader in similar circumstances to mine!

K.Punchard,  
Tweed Close,  
Farnborough, Hants

Lesley is right. Families like hers and mine do seem rare. We should feel wealthy to have a stable home and

family life and work as well. When you read about the lives of people who lurch from one crisis to another, it makes your daily hassles seem petty.

Roberta Carr,  
Staveley Road,  
Dunstable,  
Beds

## I sold SEX for BINGO

I agree with Lesley. I've been thinking for weeks now that too many sad, depressing and awful stories are appearing in my favourite mag. Please, *Take a Break*, let's have some happy stories.

Carol Lambert,  
Naver Road, Thurso,  
H'land

Does Lesley think she's the only one on the planet to live such a happy life? Many of us are in such a fortunate position but don't make a fuss about it. We just count our blessings.

Joan Blenkinsopp,  
Lamonby Close,  
Middlesbrough, N Yorks

I was pleased to read Lesley's letter. I'm glad there's someone else out there like me. Reading your stories, I



Me and my Harry

was beginning to wonder. I've been happily married for 34 years. We've brought up two sons on low wages but we're still together. It can be done!

S Barnes,  
Brookside, Bishop  
Auckland, Co Durham

You, the reader, have created *Take a Break*. This magazine is largely inspired and written by the five million people who enjoy it every week. It portrays the reality of life in Britain today and, like life itself, our stories are happy, sad, brave and noble. We want to thank everyone for their support. We always listen to your opinions. It's you, the reader, we are here to serve.

The Editor

Voted best magazine of its kind for FOUR years — grab a **TaB**



Bauer group and as Highe was the originator of *Take a Break*, it might be expected that there would be some overlap in the outlook of the two titles. But Highe placed less emphasis than Dale on the true life stories as a source of support, linking them more with the entertainment function of *Bella*, although not exclusively so. In *Bella*, the true life stories also serve as part of the magazine's focus on information. Highe suggested that *Bella* has an essential informative role which is juxtaposed with entertaining readers:

We've got this vital informative role and it's hard for me to explain to somebody outside women's magazines who might be cynical about them how strong that role is, how much we're needed. We're helping people on a very serious level, very constantly.

Jackie Highe, personal interview, April 1995

Yet if *Bella* does not entertain, it does not sell, and so the more serious information has to be packaged within a lighter formula. Thus, the true life stories can be a mix of pure entertainment with no informative role or they can provide both entertainment and information. As Highe commented:

You can work on a magazine like *Bella* and have a fairly well developed social conscience because you're going to highlight all sorts of things, you know, in the reports, in the *Talking Points* we do.

Jackie Highe, personal interview, April 1995

Therefore, many of *Bella's* true life stories are more concerned to investigate injustices, raise questions about important social issues, for example education, and to incorporate the true life accounts of ordinary people into these investigations. Thus, *Bella's* stories are less about community and the family than the highlighting of specific issues that women have to deal with and in this sense, the emphasis is on providing the reader with accurate information so she has access to all the relevant facts. Highe's encoded message in the true life stories, then, is one of advice and as a source of information, together with a lighter side - readers can learn from the experiences of others but they can also be entertained. And again like *Take a Break*, the true life stories are seen as essential to *Bella's* identity:

Using genuine and original sources, our real life has struck a chord with British women. Readers are involved in all senses



and are *active participants* in their own social documentaries.  
 Real life editorial is the cornerstone of the magazine's appeal.  
*Bella* Media Information Pack, 1996 (My emphasis)

The promise of 'active participation' suggested in the above quote is an attractive proposition for readers and one which *Take a Break* and *Best* share because of their own focus on true life. Active participation relates to the theme I identified earlier in the chapter of women being regarded by the magazines as agents in their own lives, rather than passive on-lookers who are unable to control events. All three magazines portray an image of being almost written by their readers, with a blurring of the boundaries between producers and consumers. This point will be picked up again in chapter six where the different kinds of interaction generated by the magazines will be discussed in more detail.

Like John Dale, Highe was keen to show the strength of women in the true life stories, and she also believed that women are constrained or discriminated against by men, again identifying men as women's main problem. And like *Take a Break*, the assumption that women are natural carers is implicit in the lack of problematic around this area, despite various attempts to apply a gender neutral language to the features on cookery or childcare (see chapter four). Because of the large amount of feedback about stories or articles and the letters they receive from readers, the *Bella* staff felt they had an insight into the problems and concerns of women, and these were frequently connected to men:

Men have a lot to answer for in this country, I will tell you. There are still great tracts of England where women are kept like that [*presses thumb down on desk*]. And Mrs. Average doesn't have the chance to get out of it, she can't afford to leave with the kids, she hasn't got any means of support necessarily, and I'm not talking about people on the poverty line but it is a poverty trap, just the same.

Jackie Highe, personal interview, April 1995

By portraying active, strong women characters in the true life stories, *Bella* aimed to show how women have overcome struggles or disadvantages, and this gives hope, information and reassurance to other readers in a similar situation. Representation in the media, then, was felt to be an important part of women's fight for equality. Highe stressed the responsibility of *Bella* to give

accurate information and feedback to readers who ring or write in with problems, often as responses to the true life stories, and she emphasized that every letter received by the magazine is answered:

We take it very seriously. We take it very seriously indeed. Er, yes, so it's first and foremost entertainment but by god, it gives 'em, we know that we're giving them far more than that. And therefore what we give them has to be right.

Jackie Highe, personal interview, April 1995

Both *Bella* and *Take a Break*, according to their editors, are attempting to help as well as entertain women via their true life stories, so the magazines have a serious purpose in addition to their commercial aims and entertainment remit. *Best* also incorporates similar aims according to editor Maire Fahey. Although *Best* did not launch with a true life agenda, the market trend towards the stories after the success of *Bella* and *Take a Break* encouraged *Best* to change from its strong service format (see following section on the history of *Best*). Thus, its commitment to true life stories is more recent than that of *Bella* and *Take a Break* and is a response to the competition rather than an innovation:

Erm, *Best* hasn't really latched on to the true life stories, though, I mean, I, until the past year and a half, two years. But we've finally started to see a turn around in our sales and our sales are going up, because we've responded to that need, you know. And I think it's gone beyond women's weeklies now, the television is picking up on that now and there's so much more of that.

Maire Fahey, personal interview, April 1995

Fahey recognised that the true life stories were a major attraction for *Best* readers and therefore a vital part of the magazine. But the role of the true life stories in *Best* is primarily for entertainment purposes - although the two *Reports* they include each week deal with one serious issue and one more light hearted topic, and incorporate readers' true life experiences to illustrate an argument or perspective, the remaining true life stories are oriented towards human interest mainly for their entertainment value. This is not to say that the magazine as a whole has no other purpose, but that the true life stories themselves are seen by the editor as primarily entertainment - other parts of *Best* have a more serious purpose. The *Speaking Out* column is for readers to raise issues which they think are important, although sometimes these too can



be light hearted (for example, a reader complained about the criticisms she received for wearing patterned leggings). For Fahey, the *Reports* and other features (such as the rights and employment information) in *Best*, which include true life experiences, challenged the often assumed trivial nature of women's magazines and allowed her to claim for a more serious encoded message which underlies the obvious entertainment value of *Best*. As *Best's* publicity material suggests, the magazine provides a dual function:

*Best* offers a combination of information and entertainment in a colourful and aspirational environment. *Best* readers trust the information they read - and act on it. Quality communication between the reader and the magazine.

*Best* Media Information Pack, 1996

Within *Best's* true life stories, Fahey asserted that there was no conflict between entertaining readers and also showing women in a positive light, illustrating their strengths and achievements. Identifying herself as a feminist, Fahey was keen to promote ideas of gender equality in *Best* without resorting to patronising readers:

Well, you see, I wouldn't do something like, I know there used to be a phase in women's magazines when you do something like, hey, this is a woman bus driver, you know, I wouldn't do that because I think that's patronising. Yeah, so what, you know. But we'll do something like, you know, we did a piece, in fact, we were pipped to the post by *Woman's Own*, but we had it all laid out, and we had to drop it, about a woman who was, we did it on the angle that she was sacked from her job as a bus driver because she had a period when she was on the bus route and she had no passengers on the bus and she went back to the depot and they sacked her. So now that is, you know, a woman's right and a woman's issue but that's how we would do it.

Maire Fahey, personal interview, April 1995

Although Marie Fahey felt it was patronising now to represent women in 'men's' jobs, such a representation would perhaps have been more useful when women were not routinely allowed to do jobs designated for the boys and were arguing for the law to be changed. Now, it is not unusual to see women in traditionally male occupations. However, for *Best*, women as a group remain oppressed by men, despite the former's advances in equality. For example, women are now working with men in the same jobs, but discriminated against

nevertheless because of their biological characteristics. Fahey seemed to be intending to treat women and men as the same and to minimise any differences between them, although such a strategy meets with uneven success in *Best* (see chapter four).

Despite the overall entertaining purpose of the true life stories, there is space too for looking at issues of inequality or other serious issues, and because of Fahey's declared feminist identity, the content of *Best* is intended not to offend the 'basic principle of equality' which Fahey expected the magazine to uphold:

I call myself a feminist because I believe in, erm, equality for women and, erm, I wouldn't convey any ideas that conflicted with my own beliefs ... I know that I wouldn't accept something that I thought offended the basic principle of equality.

Maire Fahey, personal interview, April 1995

For Marie Fahey, her own feminism is shown in the magazines as representing women as equal with men - she claimed to treat women and men the same in terms of sharing nurturing roles but without resorting to patronising readers.

For all the three magazines, the true life stories are an integral part of their image and identity in a crowded weekly market. Having said that, the majority of women's weeklies incorporate a true life formula to some extent, but it is *Take a Break*, *Bella* and *Best* (particularly the first two) which focus almost exclusively on ordinary people, leaving the soap actors and celebrities to *Woman*, *Woman's Own* and *Eva*. It is through these true life stories from ordinary women that the editors claim to be informing, helping and reassuring readers, as well as entertaining them, and this serious role of magazines continues in the health and the money, work and rights features.

### Health

The health pages have always been a regular feature of women's magazines - indeed, they supply information many women may be unable to find elsewhere. According to the promotional material for *Bella*, its health pages are:

- among the most popular in the magazine. We give our readers clear and positive information, focusing on the understanding and treatment of physical and mental health, keeping people up-



to-date, showing them how to make good use of the health services and taking the mystery out of medicine.

*Bella* Media Information Pack, 1996

Furthermore, this is presented 'without fuss or medical jargon, in a friendly language readers enjoy'. For Jackie Highe, the accessibility of information on *Bella's* health pages is an important ingredient of the success of the health content, which is one of the most frequently read parts of the magazine. The health fits into *Bella's* supportive and informative role and Highe saw it as performing a valuable function:

We take a lot of trouble with the health. I'm proud of the health because it's good. And it does tell you things that you didn't know. And it isn't just regurgitating all the same stuff which all the magazines do, it does come out with new and interesting things. It's a three dimensional thing, they [*readers*] regard it as an extension of themselves, they trust it enough to ring up and say should I have a cervical smear? I'm a bit worried but my husband doesn't want me to be interfered with. Their husbands are totally incapable of understanding the problems that they've got. And I'm pregnant but my doctor gave me this drug, is it safe to take it? They won't ask their doctor that, they'll ask us.

Jackie Highe, personal interview, April 1995

Discussing the health in *Bella*, Highe returned to her earlier theme of gender oppression, pointing out that it is men who are often the cause of women's problems. But she also suggested that women are poorly served by the medical profession, as women are coming to *Bella* with their queries rather than asking their doctor. Linking this with her understanding of feminism, Highe made the point that gender inequality continues to exist, despite frequent media coverage concerning the 'new' man and the idea of a postfeminist society in which equality has supposedly been achieved. Clearly, for Highe, such optimistic portrayals in the media bear little resemblance to the lives of her readers. Because of the letters *Bella* receives about health matters, Highe claimed that there remains much ignorance and disinterest around women's illnesses which causes problems for women when dealing with the medical profession:

You tend to think, don't you, because it's generally accepted by the medical profession themselves that they are now totally on top of all that stuff about the menopause and PMT and things like that, but they're not. If they were, women wouldn't be

writing to us in the way they do, we know, so there's still an awful long way to go.

Jackie Highe, personal interview, April 1995

Here, then, is the reason why women need a reliable source of medical information, a need which Jackie Highe asserted *Bella* can help to fulfil. By providing accurate, clear articles on health, Highe is giving women the facts so they can make an active, informed decision based on understanding and up-to-date information. And, like in the true life stories, there is an intention to address all women, regardless of family status or age. Because there is very little true life in *Bella's* health, just the occasional short piece to illustrate an illness or remedy, the health pages are oriented towards information rather than entertainment.

The intentions *Best* has for its health pages are similar to those of *Bella*. Again focusing on information, *Best's* health is meant to present the facts in a clear way in a language the reader can understand. According to its promotional material, *Best* health is extremely popular amongst the readers:

96% of *Best* readers find the health pages interesting and 75% always read the health pages. 88% of readers agree that the health pages in *Best* provide them with up to date news on health.

*Best* Media Information Pack, 1996

The claims made by *Best* for its health are rather more modest than *Bella's*, but it nevertheless remains an important part of the magazine. Like *Bella*, the health in *Best* is not based on true life but is more factual, aimed at keeping the reader informed about new products or latest research. This orientation illustrates *Best's* attempts to be more upmarket than its competitors - indeed *Best* calls itself the 'quality weekly', in contrast to what must be inferior weeklies by comparison. Such an aim for quality manifests itself, according to Maire Fahey, in its choice of true life story or health topic, and the way in which the articles are presented and written. *Best* expects a certain level of competence from its readers:

I don't think we write at an insulting level, and I'm not going to slag off other magazines here, but some of them have developed



a style that is, that I think is, can be a bit patronising. And, erm, we don't try to be over sentimental or anything.

Maire Fahey, personal interview, April 1995

The health, therefore, is intended to offer the reader straightforward information in a clear style and to incorporate Fahey's feminist principles, which means raising certain issues and getting ideas across, for example addressing *parents* rather than *mothers* when discussing children's health matters, indicating a belief in the sharing role women and men should take in nurturing. Yet Fahey's assessment of the health, and indeed most of the content of *Best*, is that it all takes second place to the true life stories, which she feels is the main reason women buy the magazine. Readers expect the health pages to be there, and the mix of fashion and beauty and cookery, but it is the stories which sell the magazine. There is a more explicit emphasis on entertainment than either John Dale or Jackie Highe would admit to, which reduces the need for a strong informative function, although *Best* still has this role. Therefore, the health is a necessary part of the magazine, it has a role to play in providing information for readers, but in comparison to a magazine like *Bella*, this role is more structured by entertainment than serious information.

*Take a Break* health differs to that in both *Bella* and *Best* because of its true life format. As such, it is really an extension of the true life content, with the same aims and functions discussed by John Dale in relation to the stories. According to the magazine's promotional material, the health content is 'probably among the best health pages in the women's weekly market.' In addition to these regular pages, the campaigns may also incorporate a health perspective, for example the recent series of articles, features and letters in favour of breastfeeding. In this campaign, Dale's philosophy and intentions for *Take a Break's* health can clearly be identified - here are his comments on what the magazine was trying to achieve with the breastfeeding campaign:

Women assert themselves in *Take a Break's* true life stories and campaigns. For example, the breastfeeding campaign, which isn't saying that women should breastfeed, because some women can't, just that they should have the option and the facilities in which to do so. Lots of women have no support families to leave their babies with so they have to take them when they go out, and it's no longer down to the corner shop, but to a big shopping mall. *Take a Break's* campaign in favour

of breastfeeding recognises those places that do provide facilities for women and babies.

John Dale, personal interview, March 1995

Again, it is Dale's commitment to family and community which comes out in the quote above, and his aim in the campaign was to highlight the social changes which have removed support for women with young babies and made it difficult for them to breastfeed in public. Like the regular health pages, the focus is on family life and the role of women in maintaining and holding the family together - there is an expectation that women will be at home with their babies, fulfilling the role of full time mother. But women are also presented as strong, fighting for their rights, be it breastfeeding, medical treatment, or their children's needs. Thus, the health pages in *Take a Break* extend the true life story approach, although their often unspoken assumption that women do the caring in a family context can be at odds with Dale's intentions to allow women in the magazine to define themselves as they wish i.e. not necessarily in domestic roles. In the health pages at least (and in some of the true life stories), the message from Dale is one of familial responsibility, especially the traditional female role of nurturing. This appears to resonate with the lives of the readers, as all the health stories are from real life (although chosen by the editor) and the expectation of nurturing is never questioned.

The health pages in *Bella*, *Best* and *Take a Break* are a good illustration of the magazines' overall image and identity. *Bella's* intended message to its readers via the health is one of providing information and also support by being available to deal with queries. It is intentionally accessible and down-to-earth, with a serious purpose. *Take a Break* too wants to provide that kind of service for its readers, and by using true life stories in the health it aims to reassure and offer a space for public discussion about topics important to readers. And because of the true life element, the health continues to be entertaining. *Best* also has an intended informative role, wanting to provide relevant facts and up-to-date news on medical products as well as entertain its readers. The three editors' encoded messages for the health pages, therefore, and the preferred meanings they want readers to decode, are those of information and support, with elements of reassurance, usefulness, and even empowerment, particularly with *Take a Break's* health oriented campaigns. But *Take a Break* especially includes ideological assumptions of women's caring role which are seen as



natural and therefore acceptable, whereas *Bella* and *Best* make a deliberate (if inconsistent) effort to problematize this assumption with their use of language.

### Money, work and rights

As *Take a Break* does not include specific features on money, work or rights (only in the context of true life stories), this section will focus on *Best* and *Bella*, both of which have regular articles on these topics. Although the content analysis will show that the three topics have only a small part to play in the overall content of *Best* and *Bella*, nevertheless the editors were keen to emphasize the presence of the money, work and rights articles, using them partly to defend their magazines against charges of trivia. Women's weeklies are often portrayed in other media as inconsequential and as existing purely for entertainment, and downmarket entertainment at that (Brown 1987), and the editors seemed slightly weary about this potential criticism, having obviously heard it before:

You know, if you're not reading a broadsheet, basically it's trivial, but, you know, they'll read them and they're learning, and I'm not being lofty saying that, they are. We have a money column and legal column and rights, you know, it's not, when I say it's an entertainment as far as I see it, I don't mean it's just kind of throwaway nonsense. I mean that, erm, I see its primary role is to entertain but within that there's a lot, you know, information as well.

Maire Fahey, personal interview, April 1995

No, it's entertainment, of course it is, and I mean, nobody says car magazines are trivial, and they're only entertainment. We can be the only lifeline to some of these readers, we can be the only means of getting help about all sorts of legal disputes and things. I mean, the same attitude exactly that makes them write in to Anne Robinson at *Watchdog*.

Jackie Highe, personal interview, April 1995

The money, work and rights articles, therefore, serve as a reminder of how *Best* and *Bella* incorporate a more serious role within their entertaining image, offering general features under these topic headings and also answering readers' specific queries. For *Best*, the articles fit in with the magazine's previous emphasis on a service format, when historically *Best* was a practicals magazine, but there is also a connection with *Best*'s image now, which is that

of an aspirational publication. According to Maire Fahey, her readers enjoy a challenge and they are rather more upmarket in terms of class than those of *Bella* and certainly those of *Take a Break*. Therefore, *Best* readers are aware of financial matters, they need to know how to invest money and how to protect their assets, and many of them enjoy a career, rather than simply a job, and so welcome the advice on work-related issues. Thus, the money, work and rights in *Best* are intended to help dispel accusations of trivia, and serve to reinforce *Best's* identity as a more upmarket magazine. However, because the focus is more on middle class readers than the other two magazines, *Best* might be accused of perpetuating the middle class bias in the media, rather than acting as a forum for *all* women's experiences.

The interests of *Bella* have little to do with being upmarket, unlike *Best* - the former are comfortably downmarket in their approach to readers and so the money, work and rights are not especially concerned with enhancing the magazine's image. Rather, they fit in with *Bella's* constant emphasis on its supportive and informative function:

The average woman on a council estate will feel, erm, unable to talk to, erm, thinking about things that might go wrong from a law point of view, from a legal point of view, with divorce, something that's gone wrong with double glazing or whatever it is. They don't really know where to turn. And successful women's magazines, and we are the most successful women's magazine, give that advice.

Jackie Highe, personal interview, April 1995

Like John Dale, Jackie Highe in the above quote is aiming her support at working class women, who may have no other avenues of help available to them. And so *Bella* is intended to act as a source of information in the areas of employment, legal rights, and finances, offering help both in the pages of the magazine and as a provider of expert opinions for readers who write in with individual queries.

The advisory function of both *Bella* and *Best*, not just in relation to the money, work and rights columns but also the health and other content (and also *Take a Break's* advice role) is closely tied to the notion of trust - readers use the magazines as sources of reliable information, as an accessible way of getting expert advice (see chapter six). In this sense, all three magazines perform a valuable role, according to their editors, which is often hidden by the image of



weeklies as for entertainment only. Indeed, the provision of news and information for readers is a strong element in all three magazines, inviting comparisons between the magazines and newspapers. I would argue that the editors see their role as partly to inform readers, as well as entertain them. The fact that women's magazines are not generally seen as providers of news is because the news is defined in a narrow sense, as belonging to the public, masculine sphere of finance, international events and politics, whereas the genre as a whole would include other news forms such as women's and men's magazines, gossip magazines, talk shows, local press and so on (van Zoonen 1996).

If the three editors' views are contrasted with those of the editors Ferguson (1983) interviewed, there are many similarities, despite the gap of more than twenty years between the interviews. Editors are still primarily concerned with commercial success, an expected finding given the competitive nature of the women's magazine industry. Yet the concern for readers has shifted from a 'big sister', encouraging kind of approach to a more open forum of letting readers tell their own stories without any overt editorial comment about the rights and wrongs of readers' behaviour. For example, Ferguson quoted one of the editors who offered a view on her magazine's responsibility to its audience:

It's a support role, really, and encouragement. Our policy is you can do anything you really want to, here's how. And so we sort of push and push and say, yes, you can, you can.

Ferguson 1983:141

It is a similar philosophy to Maire Fahey's, an aspirational element to telling readers to reach higher and make the most of themselves. *Bella* encapsulates this to a much lesser extent but *Take a Break* is not an aspirational magazine in this sense. John Dale made it clear he wanted to help working class women in their day-to-day lives, rather than offering them something to aspire to. Thus, *Take a Break's* supportive and informative role consists of allowing women a forum to relate their experiences so readers can perhaps learn from others' stories, and also fighting women's battles on their behalf. There is a sense of mutual support between the strong women characters and the readership as a whole, initiating a dialogue which begins with a story and generates a response from readers who share the experiences or who have changed their own lives as a result of a true life story. The (well-intentioned) desire to improve readers'

lives by encouraging editorial is lacking in *Take a Break* but it characterised editors' intentions for their magazines in the late 1970s/early 1980s. The caring nature of those earlier editors implied a dependent audience on the one hand and editorial enforcement of positive self-esteem on the other (Ferguson 1983). The up-beat style of previous magazine editorial has given way to a more realistic, telling-it-like-it-is approach in *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break*, although of course the three editors do include some intentionally positive content, mainly articulated in *Take a Break* via true life success stories and in *Best* and *Bella* by stories and editorial.

### **The context of production**

The work of the editors of *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break* is not carried out in isolation from institutional or commercial factors, or the prevailing social climate in which they operate. The editors are subject to pressures to maintain sales performance, not only from their parent companies but also from advertisers who pay for and expect a certain level of exposure for their adverts. The editors are informed by the situations of their readers, who relate the current concerns of women in 1990s Britain, and also by their own experiences (McRobbie 1996). In addition, the various influences on the media such as globalisation, political restrictions, economic factors, and other institutions are part of the production and consumption of the magazines. Globalisation could be seen as particularly pertinent, as the three magazines have a place in the debate about the extent to which the world is becoming more culturally homogenous. As publications from German based transnational publishers, and modelled on European titles (although the original British *Take a Break* spawned a German version) it might be argued that the success of the magazines is evidence of globalisation. Robertson (1995) however, would argue that such success is indicative of glocalisation, as the magazines are global products tailored to differentiated local markets (i.e. Britain, Spain, France, Germany and the USA). Yet the adaptation to local conditions is not simply a straightforward business response to existing global variety, but a construction of differentiated consumers and the invention of a particular market, and I will discuss such construction of readerships later in this chapter (see also chapter one). However, as far as G&J and Bauer are concerned, their formula remained fairly constant over the different European editions, although there were some differences according to locality. But the wider debate about



glocalisation, although interesting and related to the magazine industry, is not the main focus of this thesis. My emphasis lies in the specific analysis of the editors' intentions for *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break*, rather than in a detailed examination of the wider influences on the magazines. So although I do not engage with this approach in any great depth here, I am aware of its potential significance and acknowledge that there is room for such an analysis of women's magazines from a perspective oriented more to the political economy approach (Mosco 1996). In the following section, I have focused on the competition from other publishers and the backlash against feminism which occurred in the media in the late 1980s, which will place the editors' comments in perspective and illustrate the rationale behind their magazines' launches and subsequent success.

### The history of *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break*

*Best* was the first of the three magazines to be launched in August 1987. *Bella* followed two months later in October and *Take a Break* was launched in March 1990. In the early 1980s, before these new magazines appeared, the British women's weekly magazine market was in decline - sales were going down and there had been few successful launches of new titles. The general opinion was that weeklies were past their heyday and probably irredeemably doomed to eventual obsolescence (Barrell and Braithwaite 1988). As Driver and Gillespie (1993) put it, the prospects for magazine publishing as a whole in Britain looked bleak, with publishers confronted by declining circulations and advertising revenues. In the women's market (both weekly and monthly), there were sharp falls in circulation - at their peak in the 1960s, *Woman* and *Woman's Own* sold weekly figures of 3.2 and 2.3 million respectively, dominating the weekly market, but these figures had fallen to just 1.5 million each by the mid 1970s (even this latter figure would put them at the top of the bestseller list today). By the late 1980s, *Woman* and *Woman's Own* were down to around one million each (Driver and Gillespie 1993).

Despite the falling circulations, magazine titles proliferated in the eighties. This was due to the decline of mass markets and the rise of niche publishing. 'Narrow casting' (Driver and Gillespie 1993:186) led both to new markets and new sources of advertising revenue and many smaller publishing companies developed at this time, although they were only minor players in an industry

dominated by older, established names like International Publishing Corporation (IPC) and National Magazines. East Midlands Allied Press (EMAP), however, as a small publishing company which expanded in the 1970s, became one of the major names with bestselling titles such as *Just 17* and *Smash Hits*. But generally, the publishing conglomerates dominated the magazine market in Britain.

The magazine environment before *Best* and *Bella* launched in 1987 was unexciting - women were deserting the weeklies but the old favourites like *Woman*, *Woman's Own* and *Woman's Weekly* had not really changed for 30 years and seemed to be making little effort to attract new readers. IPC, as publisher of the bestsellers, remained complacent about its position and continued to dominate a shrinking (in terms of sales) market. Despite one or two attempts to launch new titles (the weekly *Candida* was launched and closed in 1972 after eight issues; *Riva* had a similar fate in 1988, lasting only six weeks), the market for weeklies and monthlies remained uneventful until an influx of European publishers began with the launch of *Elle*, the woman's glossy monthly, in 1985. This was followed by G&J's *Prima* in 1986, its weekly *Best* in 1987, Bauer's *Bella* also in 1987, *Hello!* from Hola in 1988 and finally *Take a Break* from Bauer in 1990. (There have been more recent launches too, including *Here!* from G&J in 1996; *That's Life* in 1995 and *Enjoy!* in 1996 from Bauer; and *Eva* in 1994 and *Now* in 1996 from IPC). The effect of this sudden (and very successful) challenge to IPC's dominance caused British publishers to reevaluate their titles and eventually to respond in 1988 with *More!* from EMAP, *Essentials* and *Riva* from IPC and *Marie Claire* as a co-produced effort between French Groupe Marie Claire and IPC. In 1989, IPC launched their first successful weekly for many years with *Me* (now folded) and relaunched *Chat*, a *Take a Break* challenger. All those changes combined to increase the size of the weekly market, from approximately 5.5 million in the mid 1980s to almost nine million in 1990 (Driver and Gillespie 1993). So although the circulation figures for individual magazines decreased, the market grew as more titles competed for readers, giving women more choice (in terms of individual titles) than they had ever known for a weekly magazine.

However, the question remains of why G&J felt it was possible to launch in Britain when the weekly market was in such a depressed state. To answer this



question, the state of the German market needs to be considered. G&J and their main rival, Bauer, had already competed in a saturated home environment, and had branched out to France, Spain and the USA with products similar to their original magazines. For example, *Best* is based on the French magazine *Femme Actuelle* and *Bella* on another French magazine, *Maxi*. Bauer publish a German title, *Tina*, and an American version of *Bella* called *Woman's World*. G&J also has the Spanish *Mia*, similar to *Best*. Both *Maxi* and *Femme Actuelle* are very successful in France, particularly the latter with a circulation of two million (Longrigg 1994). Clearly, G&J and Bauer had no problems with transnational publishing, surmounting language and cultural differences with ease (see below for an analysis of their view of women as homogeneous). Having succeeded in Europe, G&J were confident enough to turn to Britain. They realised that British readers were rejecting women's weeklies but rather than concluding that the market was in terminal decline, they carried out research to discover why readers had abandoned women's magazines. They found a measure of discontent with the existing titles and decided to offer a different formula. Out went the staple features used by IPC i.e. soaps and royals, and in came short articles on consumer issues, health and cookery. The overall idea was to give the reader information and entertainment in a format which could easily be picked up and put down. Bauer, having seen G&J's plans for expansion and success in Britain, renewed their competition by launching *Bella*. *Best* quickly achieved sales of one million (now halved) and *Bella* gradually increased to a high of one million, although recently sales have declined to around 750,000 (*Press Gazette* 16 August 1996).

*Bella* has changed remarkably little since its first issue. Many of the features remain the same (*The Law and You; You and Your Child; That's Life; Talking Point*) and there are the perpetual concerns of all women's magazines - *50 Ways to Lose Weight; Trim and Tasty; Relationships*. The only differences relate to the true life stories, of which there are now many more, and *Things to Make* (needlework, crafts) of which there are now less (if any at all). *Bella* obviously found a successful formula from the very beginning, based on its sister magazines in France and Germany. The attraction of true life stories was felt to be universal, and they had not yet reached the existing British magazines until imported by *Bella*:

Magazines in this country hadn't changed for many years. And Bauer is a very successful worldwide publisher, Europe

particularly, and they thought women have the same problems, the same interests, the same likes and dislikes all over the western world. The details will vary, but the fact remains that women are interested in the same things. And so, the theory was if we tailor it to the English market, the magazines that we have in Germany will be successful here.

Jackie Highe, personal interview, April 1995

new 'born' Spain

The theory behind such thinking was clearly to regard all women as a homogeneous group, with only slight variations according to their geographical location or culture. With marginal adjustments to the formula, Jackie Highe felt that a successful magazine in Germany would automatically be successful in Britain because all women are interested in the same issues and topics. Such a global approach clearly worked - Bauer's strategy of treating women all over Europe as fundamentally identical, with common interests, appears to have succeeded - rather than following the trend of niche publishing, Bauer returned to mass marketing their product. *Bella* is aimed at all women and it is intended to appeal to their shared experiences, for example caring for a home and family (cooking, health, advice about children, decorating, relationships, gardening); personal appearance (dieting, fashion, makeovers, beauty); other women's experiences which were felt to have a universal appeal (true life stories about divorce, problems about relationships, letters about families) and more business-oriented issues (women in employment, money matters, *The Law and You*). Therefore, individual or specific situations were assumed to resonate with a wider audience, namely women as a group, because of their shared experiences and common location as women.

*Best* had a similar philosophy to *Bella* when it launched - basing itself on clearly successful sister magazines in France and Spain, the formula remained largely unchanged for Britain, again illustrating the global over the glocal nature of G&J's intentions. Iris Burton, *Best*'s first editor (tempted away by G&J from the ailing IPC magazine *Woman's Own*), commented that both *Best* and *Prima* are 'centre of interest' magazines:

Shared by you and me, by your mother, my sister, the lady down the road, the girl in the office next door. It doesn't matter what you are doing by way of a career or lifestyle, there are certain elements that you still like to maintain and they tend to be the practical elements. ... But the other thing is there are very



few women, whether they are living on their own or have huge families or working or not, who don't maintain a home and who don't have the interest in it to want it to be lovely, who want to be creative with their homes.

Burton 1988 cited in Winship 1992:87

Thus, both *Best* and *Bella* were seen as magazines for all women, indicating an essential nature to womanhood. However Winship (1992) made the point that the new magazines differed from the established weeklies because of their 'centre of interest' element. Mary Grieve, editor of *Woman* between 1939 and 1963, wrote in the 1950s of a 'trade press' for women, meaning the weeklies (Grieve 1964, cited in Winship 1992:86). Readers needed this trade press because of women's preoccupation with and responsibility for material living in the 1950s and it was inevitably linked to the ideology of femininity - trade press referred to the way a woman's housewife role was professionalized as her career in the 1950s. Centre of interest, however, does not confine women ideologically to a domestic role - rather, it involves common elements which are not necessarily tied to femininity but to other areas of lifestyle or career, offering women a choice in their acceptance of such roles. No longer is 'housewife' a woman's inevitable role and the centre of interest factors can be appropriated by any woman. And so the critics of the new magazines, who suggested *Best* and *Bella* were trying to return women to the fifties' era of domesticity, did not take into account the content of the old and new magazines and their relation to the ideology of femininity.

However, given the subtle differentiation between trade press and centre of interest, it is not really surprising that *Best* was accused of being old fashioned - its content was more practical than *Bella's* (although *Bella* was also labelled as old fashioned and anti-feminist) and it was a service magazine when it first launched, a thinner version of its stablemate *Prima*. *Best's* first issue included items on embroidery, sewing (two articles), knitting (two articles) and DIY decorating, offering the reader a choice of activities, but without dictating any. Rather, *Best's* identity was constructed in deliberate opposition to the existing popular weeklies which favoured celebrity gossip and royal stories over practical content. Like *Bella*, the other features in *Best* included old favourites like healthy eating, cookery, children, problems, fiction and health. There were also four competitions compared to *Bella's* single crossword.

*Best* and *Bella*, then, were not alike when they launched, the main differences being the true life stories (*Bella* had four, *Best* none) and service content, upon which *Best* was based. Both were copying the formats of their successful sister magazines and initially, *Best* sold more than *Bella*. *Best* was good value for money - the first issue had 76 pages (the usual number for a woman's weekly is between 60-64) although it was six pence dearer than *Bella*. *Best* was literally crammed with information - there was a noticeable lack of white space and a multitude of short articles and factual snippets. As Maire Fahey noted, its identity was that of a service magazine:

*Best* used to be more practical, cookery, fashion, homes, tips. But the trend in the weeklies which, erm, over the past eight years, has been very much more about stories and not about, you know, *Best* was launched and it was very successful, and I think they launched it at a million going down, and they had to recognise the fact that women were more interested in reading stories and being entertained than in, you know, they expect to see the mix of fashion and beauty and cookery, but what they're really buying the magazine for and what we're selling on the cover is the true life stories. I think that has been the main revolution in the weeklies market in the past few years and I would say *Bella* probably started it.

Maire Fahey, personal interview, April 1995

Jackie Highe agreed with this assessment of the changes in the weekly market and acknowledged that *Bella* originated the trend. When *Best*'s sales started to decline, the format was changed towards more true life stories and it abandoned some of the practical content. Rather than aiming for 'centre of interest' in practical topics, *Best* began to aim for narratives of women's personal experiences which would relate to other readers' lives, intending to resonate with the common experiences of all women. Again, the underlying theory in such an approach addressed all women as identical, with the same problems and concerns, regardless of other factors. Maire Fahey claimed that this move into true life stories contributed to a turnaround in *Best*'s sales but Jackie Highe disagreed:

The traditional IPC magazines in this country were declining, their readership was going down, the bottom was dropping out of the market. *Best* launched into it and did well. G&J and Bauer are rivals in Germany and always have been, erm, and we saw them as our closest rival and to start off with, they were. But they sell about half what we sell now. They lost, and I think



they would have stayed up high, if they'd stayed true to what they were, which is really more of a service magazine. A nice looking service magazine with a million things in it to do.

Jackie Highe, personal interview, April 1995

For Jackie Highe, there was a recognition that the true life stories ensured *Bella's* success, but she was disparaging of *Best's* attempts to follow in *Bella's* footsteps, naturally dismissing the opposition. *Best* did not lose all its service content, but reduced its emphasis on practical issues in favour of increased realism and reader orientation. According to Longrigg (1994), Bauer occupies the downmarket sector in Germany and G&J is rather dismissive of Bauer's products - there was some disdain at *Best* for *Bella's* choice of true life stories, but when the stories put *Bella* ahead of *Best*, the latter responded by including its own stories. Because of *Bella's* success, the whole weekly market, not just *Best*, has copied the winning formula of true life stories and the nature and content of women's magazines has changed noticeably since 1987. The introduction of *Take a Break* in 1990 just confirmed the direction of the weekly market and, in Longrigg's words, 'British publishers have finally got it: chequebook journalism is the way to go' (Longrigg 1994:13).

The originator of *Take a Break* was Jackie Highe, although she never edited the magazine. The first editor was Lori Miles, formerly of *Chat*, and then John Dale, the current editor. Bauer understandably wanted to capitalise on the success of *Bella* and Jackie Highe was given the task of inventing a new magazine. Recognising the British liking for *Bella's* true life stories and the British interest in puzzle magazines, Highe decided to combine the two into one magazine, thereby expanding the market to encompass new readers who had never before bought a woman's magazine. The first *Take a Break* also included celebrity news and the usual features of a woman's weekly (cookery, health, horoscopes, letters) and an introductory letter from editor Lori Miles. For a special launch price of ten pence for the first two weeks, *Take a Break* offered the reader 56 pages of competitions, stories, fiction and beauty, together with some features now discontinued such as legal information, *Money Box*, *Books and Videos*, showbusiness, cartoons and gardening. But the core appeal of true life and competitions were present from the beginning, defining *Take a Break* in a growing market. And so, far from a weekly market in terminal decline, G&J and Bauer, together with the response from British

publishers, managed to revitalise the market and extend it by noticeable proportions.

### Backlash

At the time *Best* and *Bella* were launched in 1987, there was a general feeling that women's fight for equality had been successful. Margaret Thatcher proclaimed that:

The battle for women's rights has largely been won. The days when they were demanded in strident tones should be gone forever.

Faludi 1992:1

Postfeminism was partly a media construct, a catchphrase for the eighties which summed up the individualistic, acquisitional decade in which anything could theoretically be attained by anybody. This is not to deny that the feminist movement had achieved a tremendous amount, and some of its successes had become so taken for granted that the original struggles had been forgotten. But to argue that women were now equal with men was to ignore the evidence for inequality, for example in the areas of unemployment, pay, poverty and in the domestic context. As Winship (1987a) noted, postfeminism suggested the success of some feminist ideas being accepted as common sense but it did not mean feminism was no longer needed. Rather, postfeminism referred to the fact that feminism had ceased to have a coherent set of easily defined principles (in as much as it ever was that coherent - see the earlier discussion of feminist theoretical positions) and that the boundaries between feminists and non-feminists had become blurred, in a similar way to the divisions between feminist and non-feminist magazines becoming less marked.

This mood of postfeminism in the media partly explains why *Best* and *Bella* were criticised when they were launched, particularly *Best*. *Best*, as discussed in the previous section, had launched with a strong service format, making it an apparently easy target for media commentators to label it as an old fashioned, traditional magazine. Winship (1992) cited a *Guardian* newspaper article by Hanson in which the latter complained about the new weeklies and *Prima*, *Best's* monthly stablemate:



A new woman has emerged: she who brandishes her knitting patterns and makes her jam shamelessly. She is not so much Superwoman as Mrs Totality, unashamed of any aspect of herself, even the ordinary-homey-embroidering-a-cushion part. ... Naturally, enraged feminists have accused these magazines of setting women back 50 years.

Hanson 1987 cited in Winship 1992:85

As Winship herself commented about this quote, it is too easy to equate magazines that include home-centred activities with any necessary 'ideological backwardness' on behalf of reader or magazine. Further, I would add that Hanson's reading of the magazines is only a partial account of their content, as both *Best* and *Bella* included features unconnected with domestic matters. And yet Hanson's comments were not the only criticisms of the new magazines - Beasley accused *Best* and *Bella* of selling 'kinder and kuche' (Beasley 1987:17); Brown suggested *Bella* was a 'soft-centred, soggy traditional read' (Brown 1987:17) and *Best* was a 'slimmer clone of *Prima*', which she had previously criticised for its 'horrible' knitting patterns (Brown 1987:15).

Admittedly, both *Best* and *Bella* included content which could be seen as traditionally feminine in orientation, as the earlier analysis of their first issues illustrated, but then some of the existing weeklies also carried knitting patterns, cookery and so on. Jackie Highe, editor of *Bella*, was puzzled as to why her magazine had been singled out for criticism in this area:

I never understood why they batted on *Bella* for that. Because for me, the old *Woman* and *Woman's Own* and *Woman's Weekly* were patronising women in a much, you know, knit a teacosy, knit the royal family, knit yourself a poodle, but were much more demeaning in their approach to what women liked and wanted and would settle for. And, you know, all the old style monthlies as well.

Jackie Highe, personal interview, April 1995

However, given that *Best* and *Bella* were new publications, the expectations for their content were obviously different to the acceptance of the traditional weeklies' usual fare of domestic features and celebrity gossip. The launch of a new magazine in the postmodern eighties was seen as opportunity to address the 'new' woman rather than the 'old'. And so, in the social and economic

context of their launch, *Best* and *Bella* were classed as antifeminist magazines intent on pushing women back 50 years into the home.

Women's magazines were not alone in being accused of antifeminism. In *Backlash*, Faludi (1992) documented the proliferation of cultural products aimed at undermining women's new found independence and wanting to persuade women to return to the home. Mainly writing about America but with added British data, Faludi emphasized the role women's magazines played in the backlash against feminism. Taking their cue from mainstream media sources, magazines such as *Good Housekeeping*, *Mademoiselle*, *Options*, *She* and *Cosmopolitan* all ran features on the man shortage, infertility in older women, ill health for career women and the perils of divorce. Stories like these, according to Faludi, had originated in a climate of the religious right wing movement and new right politics in America, where the victories feminism had won for women were being challenged by men, uncomfortable with women's rising independence and status. The advancement of women in previously male areas of social life triggered a backlash against women's progress, not because women had achieved full equality but because of the increasing possibility that they *might*. As a preemptive strike, the backlash was a widespread cultural move effectively to denigrate single career women for denying their biological needs and to praise the stay at home mother for fulfilling hers. The effect, according to Faludi, was to make women think twice about delaying marriage and childbirth, and to question whether they wanted to forge a career for themselves.

Faludi's argument and examples are persuasive - there was a move in the American media in the 1980s to carry stories about the problems women would encounter if they tried to forsake family for a career, and most of these stories were based on unreliable evidence or no evidence at all. There was obviously a snowball effect which caused stories to gain credence as they were repeated in various authoritative media, and the stories came to take on the status of fact. In Britain, some women's (monthly) magazines and newspapers colluded in the myths of the man shortage and in one particularly memorable phrase, they repeated the 'fact' that single women over forty were more likely to be killed by a terrorist than get married (Faludi 1992:124). As Faludi showed, this 'fact' was the result of a throwaway comment by an American journalist and not meant to be taken seriously.



Although Faludi's backlash thesis is convincingly articulated and supported with much apparent evidence for its existence, its relation to the realities of women's lives is hard to assess. McRobbie (1994:157) suggested that rather than seeing young women as recipients of a backlash, or conversely as progressively more independent than they were in the late 1970s, it is helpful to construct the argument in terms of an 'unfixing' of women's position in society and suggest a greater degree of fluidity about what femininity means. The lack of sociological material about women's lives which would serve as evidence for or against Faludi's argument means that other sources like women's magazines can be examined for expressions of such changes. In Britain, the reaction to the launch of *Best* and *Bella* indicated a disapproval of the perceived homely content of these two magazines, contradicting the backlash theory. However, the rise of the men's magazine, *Loaded*, offered evidence to suggest that the 'new man' was only a passing phase and that what men really wanted was sex, babes, beer and football in their magazines (Maung 1996). The popularity of *Loaded* was directly related to the decline of feminist magazines like *Everywoman* (Wroe 1996), supporting Faludi's argument that the media were part of a backlash movement. But if the media were largely in agreement that to be antifeminist was the latest trend, they would not be criticising *Best* and *Bella* for their apparent homely content - surely the magazines would be applauded for this perceived return to traditional values. The fact that *Best* and *Bella* were given such a hostile reception when they were launched is evidence that their critics were coming from a post-feminist perspective. Their assumptions that women were no longer interested in knitting, craftwork or 'soppy' romance stories led them to accuse the magazines of trying to undermine the feminist struggles of the past few decades. So rather than Faludi's (1992) backlash, the magazines' launches prompted despairing comments about the undesirability of perceived anti-feminist publications, because the political and social climate of the late 1980s led media observers to celebrate a dawning postfeminist era. Of course, *Best* and *Bella* could be seen as part of the backlash against feminism but I believe this would be a misapprehension of their content, particularly in the light of the editors' comments earlier, and the previous point about 'centre of interest' magazines made by Winship (1992). Rather, the magazines epitomised McRobbie's (1994) earlier comment about the fluidity of femininity in which women are no longer tied to hearth and home, but that this is an option amongst many that they can choose, and it should be just as valid as other expressions of femininity.



There are two points which need to be addressed in response to *Best* and *Bella's* perceived antifeminist content when they were launched. The first relates to issues around desire and the fantasy involved in reading about old fashioned skills rather than actually doing them, and the second point is that of a gap between theory and practice, specifically the comments of the middle class (post)feminists writing about *Best* and *Bella* in the media compared to the intended readers of the magazines, who may have different problems, concerns and lifestyles which the magazines are deliberately addressing.

Winship (1992) in her article on *Best* magazine, suggested that readers can enjoy the craft features without really having to make the dress or sew the cushion cover - readers keep the instructions and promise themselves they will do the patterns and as long as the intention is there, it assuages the guilt of not doing these activities. Why women should feel guilty about such things is partly down to expectations of femininity and the roles women are meant to take on as natural expressions of their gender (promoted in many of the magazines they read). Yet as Winship (1992) pointed out, it is ironic that the magazines should be promoting craft ideas when there was no longer a practical or ideological need for women to undertake these activities. The amounts of money saved are negligible and it is no reflection of the reader's femininity simply to go to the shops instead. Putting aside the financial aspect and the actual enjoyment of making things, it is more interesting to speculate why readers should fantasize about doing these craft activities and what it is in the magazines that raises a response in women. For those readers who collect the knitting or sewing or 'how to stencil' articles but never use them, it is as though they are attempting to live up to the myth of a superwoman who is the implied reader of women's magazines. Such a superwoman has it all - a husband, children, job/career and home, which she is expected to maintain, along with her own personal appearance. Although many women do manage to do all these things, others do not have the time or the skill to do these unnecessarily domestic activities which the magazines suggest. To imagine doing them, or to have the intention to the extent of saving the pattern and buying the material, is to fantasize about being that ideal woman who has the time to make rather than buy items for her home and family. 'Home made' has connotations of love, something toiled over with care. As Winship (1992) pointed out, it is to personalize and undo mass consumption, a bid for individuality against conformity. However, this is not to suggest that women



want to return to the domestic era of the fifties - it is precisely because (most) women no longer *have* to make these things that they become an object of fantasy, and just intending to do them is enough to project the reader into that fantasy of the ideal woman or other self. Therefore, to equate the magazines' focus on domestic matters with an implied antifeminist intention on behalf of both magazine and reader is to dismiss the appeal of such content and to ignore, in Winship's words, 'women's uneasy desires and their still prevalent feelings about the impossibilities of womanhood' (Winship 1992:86). As the material from my interviews illustrated, women do behave in this way with the magazines' craft articles, although I suggest that the importance of cost must not be overlooked. Particularly in *Take a Break*, there is an impression that the do-it-yourself features are taken note of because they save readers money, and this relates to the point I make below about the ideological gap between commentators who write about the magazines and the women who read them.

The second point to make is that of the different expectations which clearly affected the comments of the critics writing in the media about *Best* and *Bella*, and the producers of the magazines themselves. Writers such as Brown and Hanson seemed to be under the impression that women have equality with men and that the magazines should reflect this assumption, rather than including content which they felt located women firmly within the home. The editors' response to this assumption would be a flat denial that equality had been achieved - they believed in it, and expected it, but knew it was still a long way off.

We take it for granted, we don't start from a position of why can't women have more equality, we take it for granted that women should have equality. It isn't something that we try to defend, we assume that everybody feels that way and some people don't, of course. Our readers do, but quite a few of them aren't in the fortunate position of being equal and quite a lot of their menfolk don't want them equal. I mean, in great chunks of England there are still men who believe that women should be at home looking after the kids. Now, maybe women should be at home looking after the kids if they want to be. And we would never make them feel guilty about doing a job but a lot of them will be working mothers, but we also don't believe in making women who stay at home with their babies feel guilty for being a housewife. As far as we're concerned, if women are equal, they should make choices. I don't think any *Bella* reader would

be in any doubt that we're on their side, we are always on the side of women.

Jackie Highe, personal interview, April 1995

Jackie Highe did not want to alienate readers who had chosen to stay at home or those who had chosen to go out to work or those who had no option. The recognition that women are not fully equal with men in terms of choices and opportunities meant that *Bella* cannot subscribe to any ideas of postfeminism because most of its readers do not live in that particular kind of reality. The comments of the journalists when *Best* and *Bella* launched seemed to ignore the possibility that many women occupy a different social position to themselves, revealing a lack of knowledge about other people's lives. Their views identified them as liberal feminists who believe that if women are represented positively in the media, then those role models will encourage a change in the behaviour and expectations of women in general. Conversely, to show women in domestic roles will constrain other women from achieving their potential. But such a view alienates the readers who experience a wide gap between their own lives and media representations of women, and this is precisely what John Dale and Jackie Highe wanted to avoid. Maire Fahey of *Best* was rather more inclined to the aspirational view of women, aiming to provide positive role models for a readership more middle class than that of *Bella* or *Take a Break*, although not to the extent of patronising its readers with stories of women doing 'men's' jobs (see above section on the editors' encodings).

### Summary

In relation to the seven themes outlined earlier in the chapter, it is evident that each magazine emphasizes certain themes over others. None of the magazines can be said to operate in a particular feminist tradition, but that finding is not unexpected. Each editor has used the seven themes to some extent in their magazine's philosophy.

All three editors claimed to provide a forum for women to share their experiences for the benefit of other readers. Unlike the traditional middle class bias of the media (although *Best* was less focused on working class readers' concerns than the other two magazines), the magazines aimed to represent all readers, a philosophy particularly strong with John Dale of *Take a Break* and



to a lesser extent with Jackie Highe of *Bella*. Eager to defend the rights of working class women, Dale used the magazine to act on their behalf, championing various causes and giving ordinary women a voice. All three editors viewed women and men as different (*Take a Break* and *Bella* more than *Best*), although they saw women's concerns as universal to all women, as illustrated by their launch strategies. In *Take a Break* particularly, the nurturing capacity of women remained unproblematicized by Dale, whereas both Maire Fahey and Jackie Highe suggested via their use of language that women and men should share nurturing roles. For *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break*, men were seen as the main cause of women's problems, not just in personal situations but also in a more structured sense, for example the medical profession or in occupational organizations. However, the most consistent themes to run through all three magazines were the provision of knowledge - women read *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break*, the editors claimed, to be informed, updated, advised and reassured, both by factual content and other women's experiences; and women as strong, active people, taking control of their lives despite difficult circumstances. These themes seemed to me to be how the editors defined their feminism - although the other themes were present in varying strengths, and helped to illustrate the differences between the three magazines, the attempt to act as information sources for readers and to empower them with knowledge came through as the editors' chief concerns and their main feminist principles.

Given the editors' intentions for their magazines and their encoded messages about women's roles and the function of men in women's lives, the next chapter analyses the content of *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break*, remaining with the three areas of true life stories, health, and money, work and rights. The seven feminist themes discussed in the present chapter form a basis on which the editors' encodings can be assessed in the light of the magazines' content, and by analysing the content, the differences between the magazines will be made clearer, leading to the different uses of the magazines by readers, discussed in chapters five and six.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### The Content of *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break*

#### Introduction

In this chapter I will explore the content of the magazines, remaining with the three areas of health, true life stories and money, work and rights. The theoretical framework of Hall's (1980) model and Thompson's (1990) methodology of interpretation provide a means of analysing the content of media forms such as women's magazines, as discussed in chapter one. Taking a qualitative approach, I have assessed the content as it relates to the editors' intentions for their magazine and looked at the ways in which a supportive feminism is expressed in *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break*. In the previous chapter, it was seen how the editors and publishers construct the magazines in specific ways to encode deliberate messages which will then be decoded by the readers. This analysis of the content will illustrate how far the messages intended by the editors are realised in the text - do the editors' assertions of a supportive feminism come across in the health pages or the true life stories? Are the money, work and rights articles challenging existing notions of the expected nonfeminism of women's weekly magazines? How are women actually being presented in the texts? Are the magazines responding to the changing lives and circumstances of women in terms of work and family responsibilities? Once the content is analysed in terms of the magazines' representations of women and men and in relation to the intended feminism of the editors, and the seven themes outlined in the previous chapter, the interpretations made by the readers can be addressed in the next chapter. First, an overview of the literature on the content of women's magazines - there are few existing studies of true life stories or the financial and legal articles in magazines, but more work has been undertaken on the health pages and therefore the next section will focus mainly on health. (See Appendix 3 for a list of the magazines included in the content analysis).

#### Previous research

The content of women's weekly magazines has been researched in the past (Ferguson 1983; Winship 1987a; Ballaster *et al* 1991) but there is little on



*Best, Bella* or *Take a Break*. Although *Best* features in Winship (1990, 1992) and is briefly discussed together with *Bella* in Ballaster *et al* (1991), *Take a Break* has never been analysed for its content, even though it is the best selling woman's weekly in Britain today. The glossy monthlies and established weeklies like *Woman* and *Woman's Own* are the usual magazines chosen by researchers, possibly because these have always been the most popular, whereas now the more downmarket titles like *Take a Break* and *Chat* are reaching wider audiences.

The money, work and rights articles are sections of the magazines which could be regarded as potentially most challenging to the perceived antifeminist direction of women's weeklies. Depending on their topics of discussion, these articles could widen the domestic oriented ideological framework which links women to traditional femininity or alternatively, they could as easily narrow that framework with a focus on domestic aspects of money, work and rights. As will be seen, these features make up only a small part of the overall magazines (indeed *Take a Break* does not include any such copy) thus even if they are in some way feminist in their choice of topics and assumptions, their effect on the whole may be marginal. Nevertheless, the articles' content is worth discussing for its feminist potential and what it tells us about the editors' assumptions and beliefs about the readers. Also, the changing financial status of women should be reflected in these articles (for example, more women working, having education, being responsible for their own finances, either through divorce or choice). Like the true life stories, there is little existing research in this area of women's magazines, although Ballaster *et al* (1991) mentioned the articles on work in *Best* and *Bella*. Combining the two magazines under the title of 'the new weeklies', Ballaster *et al* suggested that the inclusion of a feature on paid work is a marginal part of each magazine. Furthermore:

If the range of jobs covered is broad, they are in general understood *as* jobs, rather than careers - an important distinction.

Ballaster *et al* 1991:153

Although Ballaster *et al* fail to distinguish between *Best* and *Bella*, despite the differences between them, their analysis of the work material in the two magazines is accurate - the focus is mainly on jobs, not careers. However, if

Ballaster *et al*'s comments are true, then they correspond to the editors' desires to address readers as they currently are, not as the editors might like them to be. In other words, it is not an aspirational tone set by the editors, but a more practical, down to earth emphasis, although 29% of *Best* readers see their work as *careers*, not jobs (*Best* media pack 1994) and so the expectation from *Best* is that both jobs and careers will feature in this particular slot (but see Maire Fahey's later comments on the representation of working women in *Best*). *Best* and *Bella*'s readerships differ and in relation to the topics they cover in the money, work and rights articles, their coverage of these differs too, as the content analysis will show.

The first section to be examined in the content analysis is the health pages - these occasioned much discussion from both the editors and readers. There is actually little research on the health sections of *Bella* and *Best* - the recent publication by Ballaster *et al* (1991) which included *Best* and *Bella* in its analysis, did not specifically address the health, and an article by Winship (1992) on *Best* focused on the fiction and fashion. The work that has been undertaken on health in other magazines found that the main issues covered related to nutrition, diet and exercise, thereby putting the emphasis firmly on appearance. Feig (1988) found in her study of *Woman's Own* that wider health topics such as environmental pollution or unemployment and health, were not covered. Although Feig did not discuss whether more serious health problems were dealt with in *Woman's Own*, Weston and Ruggiero (1985) reported that little attention was given to illnesses such as cancer, heart disease and strokes. They found that in a selection of six American women's magazines, high coverage was given to dieting, exercise and nutrition, moderate coverage to doctor/patient relationships, self-help, sexual problems, and pain, and low coverage to cancer, alcohol abuse, eating disorders and diabetes. The emphasis appears to be on individual health factors that women can control, rather than the more serious problems which in fact affect thousands of women. For example, in Britain more than 15,000 women die annually from breast cancer, which is half of all those diagnosed - Britain has the world's highest mortality rate for this disease (*Guardian* 1994).

Writing in relation to health and feminism in weekly magazines, Ballaster *et al* (1991) noted that:



Feminism has made a significant and observable impact [in] health. *Woman's Own*, in particular, has been very voluble in raising readers' awareness of the importance of cervical smear tests and regular breast examination.

Ballaster *et al* 1991:155

Although there are potential problems with screening tests and opinion is divided on the usefulness of such examinations, nevertheless the point is made by Ballaster *et al* (1991) that women's magazines can successfully disseminate feminist ideas to the wider population. The *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break* editors would claim that their magazines include such ideas but they may also be emphasizing women's familial duties in line with recent government thinking - a speech given by former Health Secretary Virginia Bottomly left no doubt about the role women should play in regulating their family's health:

Who is it who decides which doctor to use? Who decides if the family has a healthy diet? Who decides if the children should be immunised? Who encourages the family to take exercise and gives an example on smoking and alcohol? In disease prevention and health promotion, it is women who are the key to this success.

*Guardian* 1995:8

A coverage of children's and men's issues would place women in the position of guardians of everyone's health - their own, children's and partners'. The content analysis will illustrate how the articles in each magazine's health section are addressing readers in terms of responsibilities and assumptions.

## **Health**

Both the readers and the editors discussed health as an important part of the magazines and it is also one of my interests. What I want to examine specifically in relation to health is the kind of information which is being presented in the magazines; what sort of assumptions are being made about women's responsibilities; could the content be empowering or worrying for readers; do the magazines deal with a narrow or wide range of issues. Each magazine needs to be addressed separately in terms of health because their content and style are quite different.

### Bella health

*Bella* devotes about three pages per issue to health - a main article in which topics range from hypochondria to tinnitus, a *Doctor's Surgery, Medical Update*, readers' problems, and a *Feeling Good, Looking Good* section which deals mainly with diet, exercise and fitness. So there appears to be a range of health issues in *Bella*, which relates to both men and women and covers children's topics.

The articles in *Bella* are well written, clear and informative. Their style is to present as much information as possible, without medical jargon, so that all readers can understand. Indeed, Jackie Highe commented about the health:

I want somebody to explain to me in words that I can understand, without being patronised, and yet I want it in clear and not in code.

Jackie Highe, personal interview, April 1995

Thus, the emphasis is on straightforward facts and treatment, with added sources of information. For example, the articles on tinnitus, Meniere's disease and eating disorders all offered further contacts such as telephone numbers and associations for concerned readers.

However, there are a number of points to make about *Bella's* health content. Despite the wide range of topics covered, the inclusion of health information specifically for men and children indicate women's 'normal' responsibilities in these areas. Women are addressed as guardians of their family's health, an enduring ideology in women's magazines which is rarely questioned and which has recently been reinforced by the government (see above). The identification of women with family is illustrated in regular features called *Family Care* and *Family Doctor*, which deal with topics such as head lice and threadworm, both affecting children. Men's issues are also covered, although not as regularly as children's, and usually in the *Medical Update* column. For example, there is information on impotence, and paralysed fathers in the March 1995 issue. Although the majority of health articles are directed at women for themselves, a small proportion address women as carers and partners and assume their responsibility for others. As an illustration of this, a section in the March 1995 issue, called *Baby Care*, begins with the words 'As all mums know, weaning a



baby ...' and it is accompanied by a photograph of a woman feeding a very young child. But not all articles dealing with childhood illnesses or problems are directed at mothers - for example, in the September 1994 issue of *Bella*, it is 'parents' who are addressed in features on cleft palates and childhood hypochondria. Thus, *Bella's* health pages help to reinforce women's identification with family responsibilities (and in doing so resonate with the lives of many of its readers) and yet also offer an alternative via their use of 'parent' rather than 'mother' (see Illustration 2).

The tone of *Bella's* health features is intended to be sensible and reassuring - there is little to worry readers or confuse them. Indeed, it is possible to see the health content in a positive, empowering way, by looking at how it offers readers information they can then use to their advantage. The article on contraception in the July 1995 issue is a good example. Mirena is a contraceptive device which is 100% effective, with very few side effects, no impairment of fertility, and once inserted lasts for three years. I suspect that most women reading about Mirena in *Bella*, will (like myself) be unaware of it, despite the fact it was invented twenty years ago and has been in use for the last two years. By bringing Mirena to readers' notice, *Bella* is giving women information they can take to their GP, rather than the usual situation of the power of knowledge existing with the medical profession. In this sense, *Bella* is arming readers with information and acting as a source of advice, although it remains to be seen how and if readers recognise or use this information.

There are contradictions on the health pages of *Bella* magazine - on one hand, there is an attempt to portray parents rather than mothers, to give readers clear information, and to cover a wide range of topics with sensible advice and further sources of help. But on the other hand, the images show women looking after families, feeding children, and being the patient with male doctors. There is a discrepancy between verbal messages and visual images. This may be due to the expected format of a woman's magazine i.e. it is traditionally concerned with women and their association with nurturing and caring functions (which is what many readers may regard as natural and desirable) but in an attempt to challenge those expectations, *Bella* allows the verbal content to subvert the norms in its desire to portray women and men equally. *Bella* cannot go so far as to alienate more traditionally minded readers, thus it offers a combination of representations of women - the immediate visual

**ILLUSTRATION 2**

*Bella*

**3 May 1995**





# YOUR BODY —

## MEDICAL update

### Higher charges

Prescription charges have gone up by 50p from £4.75 to £5.25 per item. The cost of prescription 'season tickets' has also increased. A four-month season ticket has gone up from £24.60 to £27.20 and an annual one from £67.70 to £74.80. Prescriptions are still free for under-16s, pensioners and anyone on income support, family credit or disability working allowance.

### Improved coil

Tests suggest that a new threadless contraceptive coil is safer than previous designs. Up to 10 per cent of women fitted with a coil develop pelvic inflammatory disease (PID), the infection which can cause infertility. This is because bacteria in the vagina can pass from the retrieval thread fitted to conventional coils and spread into the uterus. In trials, none of the 99 women using the new coil for up to two years developed PID. Further tests are needed before it becomes available.

### Chinese medicine

If you care about endangered animals, think twice before using Chinese herbal medicines. Police recently raided Chinese herbalist and health food stores across the country because they were allegedly selling medicines containing ingredients from animals facing extinction — which is illegal. The ingredients traditionally used in Chinese medicine include bears' gall bladders, tiger bones and rhino horn, which are all illegal products.

### Eye problems

A booklet has been published to help parents cope when they find out their child is blind or partially sighted. *Getting Started* offers parents a step-by-step guide to understanding their child's eye condition and lists useful organisations. The booklet is free from the RNIB Education Information Service, 224 Great Portland Street, London W1N 6AA (tel: 0171-388 1266).

**A** kind-hearted aunt and sheer willpower were what it took to cure 18-year-old Zillah Myers of anorexia nervosa. Zillah had been on a starvation diet for three years. Typically, it consisted of a single Shredded Wheat for breakfast, three dry Ryvitas for lunch and a cup of tea or nothing at all in the evening.

Her weight fell to under seven stones. "I couldn't bring myself to eat anything I didn't plan," she recalls. "I'd burst into tears at the sight of a normal meal."

Her aunt offered support at the crucial time when Zillah, now 20, decided she wanted to beat anorexia. With help from therapists, doctors and nutritionists, the 5ft 6in-tall student now weighs nine-and-a-half stones — in the middle of the healthy weight range for her height.

Like most people with eating disorders, Zillah's anorexia was a reaction to distress. Although research has revealed a genetic aspect to some

Dieting...or starving?

A good appetite...

or bingeing?

Knowing the

difference could save

your child's health

# EATING DISORDERS

## Warning signs for parents

eating disorders, most experts think they are chiefly related to emotions.

Professor John Pearce of Nottingham University explains: "Typically, there is no single cause but a series of factors coming together. There may be family problems, like a marriage break-up, academic problems or bullying at school."

In cases of bulimia nervosa, the binge-purge syndrome, emotional factors such as abuse or bereavement act with behavioural triggers such as 'comfort eating' followed by dieting.

Anorexia usually starts in the mid-teens, often after a period of dieting, whereas bulimia is more common in women in their early to mid-20s.

Like anorexics, women with

bulimia are obsessed with the idea that they're fat, but they usually manage to keep their weight within the normal range. This is because their self-induced vomiting or laxative abuse is followed by binges on fattening foods.

Zillah describes her anorexia as a "protection from the adult world". She'd been unpopular at school and her family life was very unhappy. "The anorexia was easy," she says. "It was when I decided to get better that it became difficult. Then I had to face the adult world. My aunt gave me the reassurance and love I needed."

Zillah's condition took hold, she recalls, when a classmate remarked

on her 'good figure' when swimming. Zillah jumped at his approval.

"I thought if I lost more weight people would love me," she says.

There may also be physical influences behind eating disorders. Professor Pearce believes the hormonal surges of puberty may help to explain why anorexia affects 12 times more women than men.

"Oestrogen, the female sex hormone, is known to cause nausea and the increased levels at adolescence may help to explain why anorexia tends to start then."

Dr Pippa Hugo of the eating disorders clinic at London's St George's Hospital adds: "The portrayal of women in the media is certainly one of the factors that contribute to the illness. Studies do suggest that anorexia increases when thinness is more fashionable."

Anorexia can start slowly, so parents might miss the signs. And anorexics may deny they are trying to lose weight and that they aren't thin, even when they clearly are. "I didn't think I was thin," says Zillah. "It's only by looking at photos that I realise how unhealthy I was."

Eating disorders aren't just

### Anorexia — signals to look out for

- Denial of being on a diet.
- Denial of hunger or food cravings.
- Concealing weight loss with baggy clothes.
- An increased interest in food (eg, taking over the cooking).
- Eating slowly and finishing meals long after the rest of the family.
- A competitive need to eat less than other members of the family (especially a mother or sister).
- Food hoarding.
- Night-time eating.
- Fear of eating in public.
- Increased or obsessive exercise.
- Obsessions about schoolwork, work and relationships.

Zillah Myers needed help to recover from anorexia



imagery connotes women's role as carer, but the use of 'parents' undermines this association. However, the term 'parents', which denotes mother and father and the activity of looking after children, is placed in the discursive field of a woman's magazine health page - therefore, via the juxtaposition through which the message is conveyed (the visual images of women with babies; the nature of the magazine), the connotative level signifies mother. But at least there is an attempt to change the language used in *Bella*, and a move towards representing women and men sharing nurturing tasks. Winship (1992) noticed this use of language in relation to *Best*, where they occasionally address 'Mum and Dad' rather than the usual 'Mum' and together with other changes, she noted:

Singly, none of these points amounts to a shift but cumulatively their effect is significant in contributing to an ideological framework which binds women less to traditional femininity than that of *Woman's Own* where marriage, motherhood and heterosexuality provide the consistent reference grid.

Winship 1992:95

In relation to previous studies of the health content of women's magazines, *Bella* has a similar range of topics. In my sample, the main articles dealt with water retention; hypochondria; tinnitus; Meniere's disease; eating disorders; and cold remedies. In terms of Weston and Ruggiero's (1985) classification, *Bella's* coverage included only one topic which could be labelled as a serious health problem - eating disorders. The remaining topics are not life threatening in the same way as cancer or heart disease, for example. Weston and Ruggiero (1985) suggested that such a lack of coverage on the most devastating illnesses which affect women may be explained by the magazines not wanting to dwell too much on potentially depressing topics. Such a focus does not combine easily with their entertainment function. In the case of *Bella*, it may also be correct to suggest that the true life stories deal with fatal diseases such as cancer and therefore to address these issues in the health pages too would be overwhelming for the readers. Of course, the health coverage would be more factual and less emotional but nevertheless, the magazine does not want to present itself as potentially depressing - this might have an adverse effect on sales and advertisers. Another possible reason for the focus on less serious illnesses may be age - the majority of women who suffer from breast cancer are in their 60s and 70s, and they are not the core readers of *Bella* - the magazine's



median age for readers is 40 years. However, younger women do have this disease and their stories are often told on the true life pages of the magazine (for example, 1 November 1995). Furthermore, there is a preventative element in terms of self monitoring and diet which many younger women may find valuable.

Jackie Highe's comments about *Bella's* health are supported by my qualitative analysis - the articles are clearly written and informative, and offer additional sources of contact for concerned readers. However, in terms of portraying women and men equally; the assumptions of women's nurturing role; and the range of topics covered, it would seem that *Bella* is less feminist than one might expect, given Jackie Highe's intentions, although the desire not to alienate readers and to provide a supportive information service is evident. The readers' interpretations of the magazines' health will be discussed in the next chapter, but clearly there are contradictory elements within *Bella's* health pages, as indeed there are in the rest of the magazine. In relation to the seven themes outlined in the previous chapter, *Bella's* health clearly treats women as a homogeneous group, with a partial expectancy that they should share nurturing tasks with men, and with an aim to providing readers with information and advice.

### Best health

Like *Bella*, *Best* devotes about three pages per issue to health and this incorporates a main article; an *Update* column; a feature called *Health*; readers' problems; *Doctor's Casebook*; and *Alternative Treatments*. Other features also appear irregularly, for example *First Aid*; *When the Symptom Is ...*, and *10 Ways to Treat ...*. *Best* also includes a telephone helpline for confidential advice on a variety of topics each week, for example the July 1995 issue offered readers advice on genital herpes; menopause; HRT; heart disease; and stress and tension. The helpline is staffed by two female GPs. The health in *Best* covers a wide range of topics - in the sample used here, the six main articles dealt with a new directory of cancer specialists; bowel cancer; abortion; prenatal testing; the menopause; and diabetes. As Maire Fahey commented:

We have really informative health pages as well, which are really popular, erm, when we've carried a report about an issue, we've had really interesting postbags on it and people's



response, so I think it generates thought and discussion ... it's relevant.

Marie Fahey, personal interview, April 1995

Maire Fahey's use of the word 'relevant' is interesting, because *Best* does have an agenda of dealing with serious health problems. Such an agenda can be linked to the concept of risk and the needs of readers to be aware of potential health risks and how they can protect themselves against disease (see chapter six). Using Weston and Ruggiero's (1985) definitions, half of the six topics mentioned above are included in Weston and Ruggiero's low coverage themes. The emphasis is on information rather than entertainment, keeping readers up to date with medical developments and knowledge. The article in *Best* July 1995 about the cancer directory is particularly informative, with details of how to obtain the directory and how to use it. And the feature on bowel cancer (May 1995), a subject not often discussed, could conceivably prompt readers to visit their GP. Because the feature is written clearly and positively, and explains how examinations are undertaken, it helps to take away the mystery and stigma attached to cancer. In addition, a true life element is added for reassurance from a woman who recovered from bowel cancer. However, *Best's* health coverage is not always so clear and well written. For example, an article in the March 1995 issue on abortion and the NHS, although politically aware and challenging to the NHS, was so badly written as to make little sense. Quoting from 'top gynaecologist' David Painton, *Best* reports:

He says that women are as entitled to abortion services as we are all to free treatment for heart disease. "A heart attack is made more likely by irresponsible behaviour. But much of this behaviour is learnt in childhood and is hard to correct. So, people who as children were not used to talking about personal issues, are vulnerable to unwanted pregnancy and are entitled to sympathetic treatment."

*Best* March 1995

This is an example of the use of male 'experts' to add weight to an article, something which also occurs in *Bella's* health pages. But it is unfortunate that the abortion article is confusing, as *Best* is clearly aiming for a political edge to the feature. It criticises doctors and consultants for refusing to provide abortions, and points to the recent NHS reorganisations which give power to health service managers who may not see abortions as a priority. However,



*Best* does not discuss in any depth the moral or philosophical debates surrounding abortion, but this is not surprising - women's weeklies have little space to do justice to a complex issue and only skim the surface. The fact that *Best* is prepared to raise the issue in a political and critical way and to support abortion on demand is evidence of its particular feminist agenda and its desire to tackle issues other magazines might not feel comfortable in addressing. At the risk of alienating some readers, *Best* comes down firmly on the side of pro-choice in the abortion debate.

Occasionally, *Best* replaces the regular health features with a special, in-depth article, as in the November 1994 issue. This featured a four page menopause special by Miriam Stoppard, really an extended promotion for her new book. It was also an advertisement for HRT, which Stoppard claimed had 'alleviated [her menopause] symptoms almost immediately.'

Although the article is positive about old age, this outlook seems to depend entirely on taking HRT, which is a contentious issue for many feminists (Worcester and Whatley 1992). Stoppard advocates changing doctors until finding one who will prescribe HRT and she points out this may be difficult:

If your GP is unhelpful, Dr. Stoppard suggests asking to see a younger partner in the practice or a gynaecologist ... And if you don't feel up to arguing with your doctor, Dr. Stoppard says "Take your loudest friend, whom *he* can't ignore, or your partner - I hate to say it, but GPs tend to listen to men".

*Best* November 1994 (My emphasis)

Women should be free to make a rational choice about HRT but after reading this article which plays down the side effects and promotes HRT as some kind of miracle cure, readers would be getting only one side of the debate. Indeed, a letter from a reader in a subsequent issue (January 1995) complained that:

Miriam Stoppard's four page special on the menopause (8 November) depressed me. I just felt that it was one long sales pitch for HRT.

*Best* January 1995

However, to counteract this dissatisfaction, the next letter on the page praised the article:



I was familiar with some, but not all, of the symptoms. Thank you, Miriam, for a very informative article.

*Best* January 1995

The fact that *Best* is confident enough to publish critical letters illustrates its commitment to the readers - if they have a complaint, or feel that an article is misleading or worrying, *Best* will acknowledge this. It emphasises the ethos of the magazine as being *for* and partly *by* the readers, as a contrast to the older style of magazines which had a more didactic, us-and-them quality. For example, in the *Best* issue dated 27 June 1995 there was a reader's letter responding to the bowel cancer article (see Illustration 3):

I question the claim that a colonoscopy examination for cancer (2 May) isn't unpleasant or painful - I found it can be. It feels as if a chimney sweep is adding extra rods and pushing each one further up. Luckily, my 'chimney' was declared clear.

*Best* June 1995

In relation to how readers are addressed on *Best's* health pages, the majority of articles are aimed at adults, and many of them are gender-neutral i.e. the diseases could affect women or men (for example, cancer, diabetes, alcoholism, psoriasis, arthritis). There is very little aimed at caring for children and when they are discussed, it is usually in the *Update* column for short notes on new research (e.g. children and squash drinking) or in *Doctor's Casebook* (projectile vomiting). When the main topic is specifically about babies or children, as in the feature on prenatal testing in the January 1995 issue, it is 'parents' who are addressed:

Prenatal testing offers *parents* the assurance of the perfect baby.  
But does it cause more heartache than it saves?

*Best* January 1995 (My emphasis)

Like *Bella*, the language emphasizes the joint nature of caring by men and women, with no assumptions that women will automatically take this role. Overall, *Best's* health is straightforward information and facts with a political edge. There is little content that assumes women are caretakers of the family's health. The main health article in each issue is written by Jane Feinmann, the health editor, and the *Doctor on Call* column (for readers' problems) and the telephone helpline are both run by female GPs. *Doctor's Casebook* is written



**ILLUSTRATION 3**

*Best*

**2 May 1995**



## Doctor on call...



...whatever your worry, our own Dr Louise Williams is here to help

### Are these steroids bad for him?

I went out with a guy who was keen on keeping fit. He went to the gym, but told me he had injections to build himself up. He told me not to tell anyone, but I think it is illegal.

I finished with him, but am still his friend. Can you tell me what risks he's taking and about any side effects?



### What price power?

Muscle-building steroids can cause life-threatening conditions

Anabolic steroids are the ones most used to build muscle. They are a form of hormone, akin to testosterone. Some are made for animals, not humans. They increase muscle bulk, and the strength of bones.

They have dangerous side effects – these can include affecting the balance of hormones in the body, causing tissue damage, mental problems, life-threatening metabolic disorders, high blood pressure and liver damage.

The side effects are worse in female abusers, who may develop a deep voice, baldness and shrunken breasts. In men, they decrease the quality of sperm and can cause sterility.

Those who supply these drugs are breaking the law.

### Can acne pills help my cysts?

I have three cysts on my back, which have been

there for a few years now. I usually only get a few spots on my face. I've tried creams to dry them up, but they never go totally.

I read the best article about Roaccutane for cystic acne, and wonder if this might be the answer.

Severe acne can form cysts that lead to ugly scars. Usually, they form in spotty skin, rather than in a clear complexion.

A different but common type of cyst is the sebaceous cyst. This is a swelling just under the skin, which feels soft, and is filled with a creamy, greasy substance called punctum. They can become infected.

Sebaceous cysts are removed under local anaesthetic. The cut is small and the scar thin, but not invisible. Dermatologists perform this operation in outpatients, and many GPs also run a minor-ops lists.

### How can I get rid of my freckles?

I'm a 17-year-old girl and embarrassed about my appearance. I am covered in ugly freckles. I like the beach, but I refuse to go because I don't want anyone to see my skin.

I tried bleaching creams, but they didn't really help. Is there anything available to remove them?

It's a shame that you feel bad about your appearance. The teenage years are very difficult. Instead of trying to change, think about your strengths – many people envy your colouring.

Freckled skin does need care. It needs maximum protection from sunburn – damaged skin is most likely to develop skin cancer. Use a high-factor sun cream and cover up at midday.

Bleaching creams will produce a temporary fading, but you cannot apply them long-term. Cosmetic concealers such as Dermablend and Dermacolor can even out your skin tone.

Please send queries to Doctor Louise Williams at the address on page three. Doctor Williams is unable to answer your letters personally. If your symptoms are severe, see your GP straightaway

It's the second biggest killer in the UK...

# Bowel cancer – don't die of embarrassment

*The good news is that, if it's diagnosed early, bowel cancer is easy to treat. The bad news is that even doctors still miss the obvious symptoms. But new early-screening clinics are on the way...*



**Internal examination**  
Doctors use a flexible, fibre-optic endoscope to examine a patient's colon

When a TV show covered cancer treatment recently, it showed someone having a cervical smear and a breast examination. But when it came to the more common cancer of the bowel, there were no graphics and the presenter's voice sank to an embarrassed whisper. "There's no doubt about it – cervical and breast cancer

are emotive subjects, but bottoms are just rude," says surgeon Roger Leicester, whose concern that thousands of people are dying every year from embarrassment led him to put his own money into setting up an early-detection clinic in London. (Now, thankfully, fully funded.)

"The important thing is to get any problems in this

area looked at quickly. The simple examination we offer can save months of stress and illness as well as people's lives," he says.

Each year, over 19,000 people in the UK die of bowel cancer, making it the second highest cause of death, after lung cancer in men and breast cancer in women.

Provided it is detected early, it is one of the easiest cancers to cure – the colon being so long that you can chop out the diseased part without risk. Yet each year, a further 31,000 people are diagnosed as suffering from the condition – many of them tragically too late to prevent it spreading to more vulnerable organs. Once it has begun to spread, the cancer is difficult to control and is not responsive to either radiotherapy or chemotherapy.

Bowel cancer is thought to be caused by a combination of genetics and a typically Western diet.

### Who's at risk?

● Only 10 per cent of people who get bowel cancer have a history of the condition in the family. Anyone with one or two first-degree relatives who has died of bowel cancer has a higher than average risk of getting the disease. People at

### 'I'm living proof that bowel cancer can be cured'

At 37, Stella Tillson had a potentially fatal tumour growing in her bowel. Her GP, concerned about her anaemia and weight loss, referred her to the local hospital in Essex. She had two years of investigations before her GP referred her to a specialist in London.

"I saw a dietician who said I should eat more fibre, a gynaecologist who said there was nothing wrong with me and a surgeon who said I had irritable bowel syndrome. All the time, the tumour was growing."

She went to London's St Mark's Hospital, where she spoke to a medical registrar. "After one examination and a few questions, he told me I'd need surgery."

"My surgeon, Mr John Northover, explained I had



**Never giving up**  
It took three years for Stella's cancer to be diagnosed

cancer of the bowel and they'd cut out the bad part."

Later that year, the cancer spread to her liver and a large piece was removed – it was major surgery. Ten years later, Stella, 50, has been given the final all-clear. "I'm living proof bowel cancer can be treated," she says. "But if my GP hadn't referred me to a specialist, I'd be long gone by now."



## Update

## Fruit squash warning

The belief that it's cruel to give children just tap water to drink is causing an epidemic of diarrhoea, stomachache, anaemia and even stunted growth, Southampton doctors warn. Children are victims of squash-drinking syndrome, which occurs



when two- to four-year-olds get too much of their energy from very sugary soft drinks. They provide instant energy, but no essential nutrients.

**Why oestrogen protects women from heart disease**  
Oestrogen protects women from heart disease but, until now, doctors haven't known why. American researchers have now discovered that the female hormone encourages damaged blood vessels to heal themselves and may even stimulate the growth of new ones.

PHOTOS: ACE; BUBBLES; SCIENCE PHOTO LIBRARY; TONY STONE (POSED BY MODELS); ROBERT GRESHOFF

## Where to get help

● Bowel cancer hotline, St Mark's Hospital, London, tel: 0171-608 2323. Calls charged at standard rate. Anyone with a family history of bowel cancer should get regular screening. This could start as early as 25 years old. But the age at which you start depends on your risk. If you are in London, Leeds or Oxford, you can be referred by your GP to the Imperial Cancer Research Fund clinics - details from St

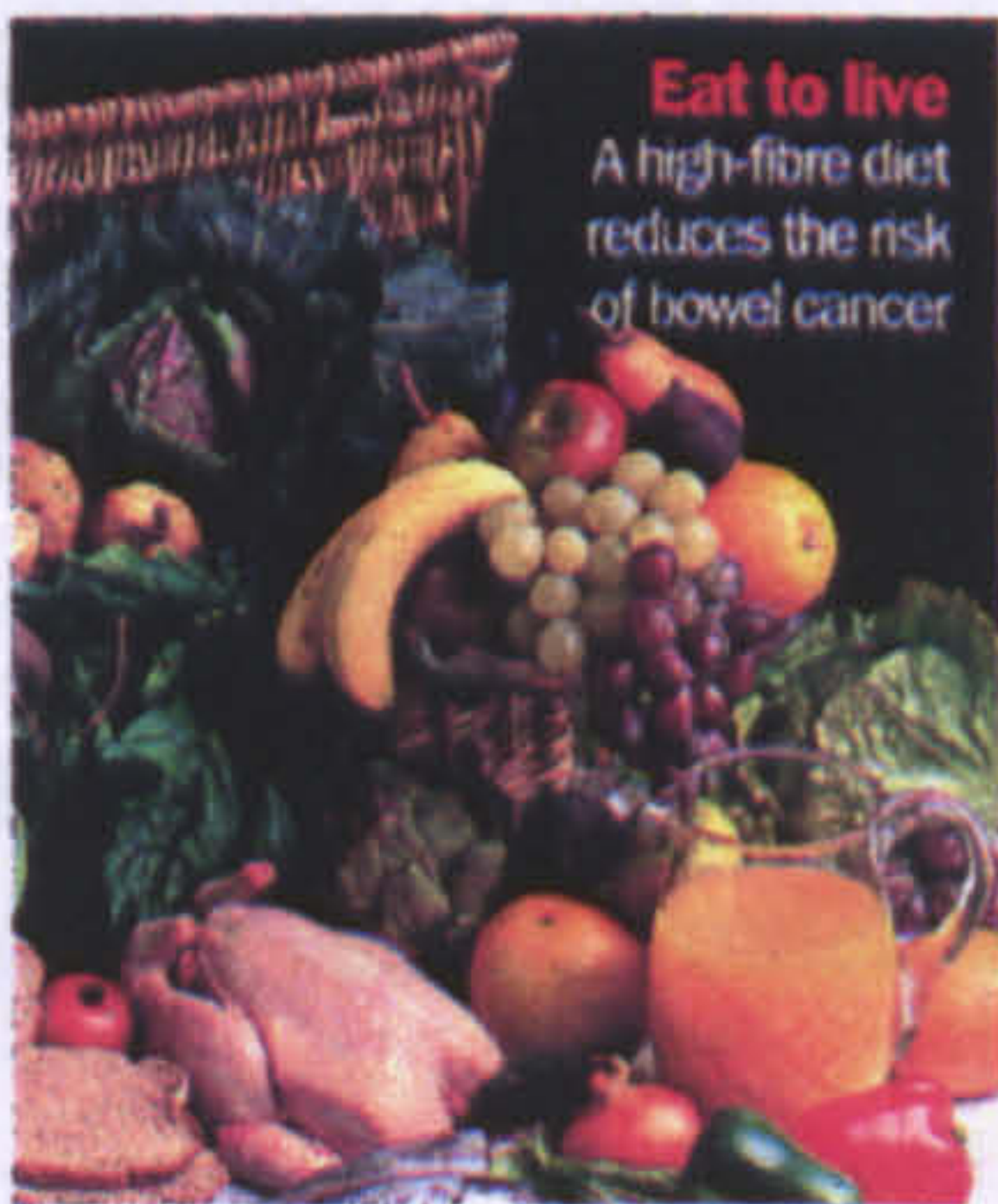
Mark's Hospital (number above) or the ICRF, tel: 0171-242 0200. Or obtain a referral to a local clinic via your GP. ● Anyone concerned that they have the symptoms of bowel cancer will be seen within two days at the Rapid Access Proctology Clinic at St George's Hospital in London, provided they have a referral letter from their GP. A full diagnosis can be made after the first consultation.

unpleasant and painful. They are not - at least if they are carried out by people who know what they are doing. Make sure you are referred to a consultant specialising in the diagnosis and treat-

ment of bowel cancer. ● Digital examination - the doctor inserts his or her right index finger into the rectum protected by a plastic glove. It may be embarrassing, but if you try to relax, this will lessen the pain. ● A sigmoidoscope is a hollow tube with a glass lens at the top to allow the surgeon to view the inside of the rectum. The tube is usually rigid - but sometimes a flexible sigmoidoscope is used for an extensive examination. ● A colonoscope is a flexible instrument inserted into

## Eat to live

A high-fibre diet reduces the risk of bowel cancer



greatest risk are members of a family where at least three relatives in two generations have suffered from bowel cancer, one of them being diagnosed before they were 50.

● The Western diet of fatty meat encourages bowel cancer. Research in South-east Asia confirms that people who eat more fish than meat are far less at risk. And there is evidence that eating more vegetables, fruit, beans and whole-wheat bread also reduces the risk of bowel cancer.

## Warning symptoms

Two main symptoms of bowel cancer, and of the precancerous condition, are:

- Bleeding from the bowel.
- Any alteration in normal bowel habits.

Anyone with these symptoms should be referred for bowel-cancer screening as quickly as possible. Yet too often that does not happen.

What goes wrong is that sufferers themselves don't go to the doctor, preferring to put their symptoms down to haemorrhoids. And those who do pluck up the courage to make an appointment can be fobbed

off by doctors who don't do a proper examination.

Now, however, things are changing. The first early-referral clinic has been established at St George's Hospital in London. Many experts are now campaigning to establish a national screening programme, similar to cervical and breast cancer screening, for all people over 55.

Evidence suggests that the programme would prevent 5000 cases annually and save 3500 lives a year.

## How doctors check for bowel cancer

Physical examinations for suspected bowel cancer are, wrongly, thought to be

## When the symptom is...

## pain on passing urine

- Cystitis - if accompanied by a burning sensation and a desire to urinate frequently. Antibiotics can often treat the condition. Or follow a strict programme of hygiene, drink more water and cut back on spicy foods and caffeine.
- Honeymoon cystitis - if it occurs after rough sex,

causing bruising. Try gentler sex and use lubrication.

- Thrush - if accompanied by vaginal discharge. Use anti-fungal cream or pessaries.
- Chlamydia - a sexually transmitted disease if it follows unprotected sex and causes inflammation and discharge. You need to take antibiotics.

## Can best help you with a problem?

For 24-hour confidential advice on coping with any of the following, dial the numbers below:

**Irritable bowel** ☎ 0891 787315 **Flatulence** ☎ 0891 336625 **Constipation** ☎ 0891 787312

**Stress and tension** ☎ 0891 200127 **Insomnia** ☎ 0891 200126

Advice is given by Dr Sarah Brewer MA MB BChir, who has six years' experience as a GP, and Dr Louise Williams MB ChB, a GP in Manchester.

Calls are charged at 39p per minute cheap rate and 49p per minute at all other times.

## Finding the tumour

To find a bowel tumour, barium sulphate, (showing up as light areas on this X-ray) is put in the bowel. The dark patch is a tumour



by a variety of doctors - in the sample of six issues, three female and two male GPs featured (the special report on the menopause replaced all regular health articles). Thus, the health content is mostly written by women.

Some of *Best's* health features can be repetitive and offer nothing new (for example, massage in September 1994; cellulite in November 1994) and the woman's magazine favourite, diet, occurs in many of the features. Because of the emphasis on information, there is little true life content in the health, although it is occasionally used for reassurance as in the article on bowel cancer (May 1995). And in a new series, a half page health feature which began on 25 April 1995 called *My Health Story*, readers report on how an illness has affected their lives. This slot later changed to *Living With ...* and then *Coping With ...* but the format remains the same.

As *Best* deals with serious health topics, it could be accused of needlessly worrying readers. Of course, its choice of topic could also be commended for bringing potentially fatal symptoms to readers' notice. Despite the lower median age for *Best* readers (38 years compared to *Bella's* 40) serious diseases which affect mainly older women are covered. This could be seen as worrying for younger women or as warning them. Interpretations of the health content will be discussed in the next chapter when the decoding stage of Hall's model will be addressed. But in terms of health, *Best* portrays a recognisably feminist agenda by dealing with serious issues in an attempt to inform readers and it manages to avoid only associating women with a nurturing, caretaking role. Rather, *Best's* health addresses readers as if they had achieved equality in terms of sharing caring roles. In this sense, Maire Fahey's intention to represent and treat women and men equally is evident, rather than seeing women and men as essentially different.

### Take a Break health

The health content in *Take a Break* is very different to the coverage in *Bella* or *Best*. *Take a Break's* health is always on the same two pages, with regular features laid out in identical order. Of the six issues in my sample, each contained a main article called *Real-life*, and then *My Operation*, *Real-life Doctor*, and *Dr. Knott's Question and Answer* column. The topics of the main articles included heart defects in babies; asthma during pregnancy;

osteoporosis; Alzheimer's disease; aplastic anaemia; and myasthenia gravis. All the articles centre on the experiences of real people and are presented with photographs. Really, the health pages are an extension of *Take a Break's* emphasis on true life stories and exist for entertainment as well as information, although there is a clear service element within the health - readers are given contact numbers and addresses where they can obtain further details of voluntary or medical associations. But because the features are always very personal, there is less explanation of facts than in the health articles of other magazines. And because of the reality factor, some of the health coverage inevitably features death or unresolved endings (although of course the articles are chosen by the editorial team and there is usually a mix of endings). For example, in the July 1995 issue, a couple lost their baby when she died of a heart defect (but they later had another, healthy baby); and in the January 1995 issue, a reader wrote about her 48 year old husband's early decline into dementia with Alzheimer's disease. Although this true life story doesn't end in death, it is a harrowing tale of disease and devotion and the reader is left disturbed - there is no happy ending or indeed any ending at all. Such an unresolved narrative is a change from the traditional 'triumph over tragedy' stories, where problems were resolved and readers given a satisfactory conclusion. In *Take a Break* (and indeed *Best* and *Bella*) the readers have to provide their own endings to the stories but how they actually resolve the lack of narrative closure in the true life experiences will depend on their situation. Winship (1992), writing about the 'oddball' fiction in *Best* (although her words may just as easily apply to the unresolved health and true life stories in all three magazines) suggested that:

the themes of ... women having little space or time to cultivate their own lives when bending themselves all ways to fit in with family interests; of being at others' emotional and domestic beck and call, but themselves being able to demand little; and over the years getting very weary of it all, can appeal to a much wider constituency than the domestic emphasis in these stories might first suggest.

Winship 1992:109

*Take a Break's* health, labelled on the contents page as *Our Health*, emphasizes its affinity with readers even more by having its health editor, Ann Kent, write about her laser surgery for myopia in the *My Operation* feature (January 1995) (see Illustration 4). This sharing of her experience places the *Take a Break*



**ILLUSTRATION 4**

*Take a Break*

**19 January 1995**



# My Operation

**Ann Kent, health editor of Take a Break, decided to have laser surgery to correct her short sight**



I told the specialist I was a bit squeamish about eyes, but he didn't seem to believe me. 'You won't need tranquillisers,' he said. 'They're not necessary for laser treatment.'

As I fidgeted in the waiting room, I realised I would have to arrange my own tranquilliser. After a double vodka in the nearest pub I got back to the clinic at Clatterbridge Hospital just as they called out my name.

A nurse put anaesthetic drops in my right eye. I waited in a side room with a blonde woman in her 50s.

'I'm about to have my second eye done — there's nothing to it. It's no worse than the dentist's,' she said.

By the time it was my turn, the effects of the vodka had worn off.

My right eye was propped open and I lay back on a reclining chair and stared into a green light. The doctor held my head steady and there was a click, followed by the smell of burning.

The doctor warned: 'This is the part which can be a little bit unpleasant.'

He began scraping away some cells from my right eyeball. I saw the scraper and what he was doing with it in magnification.

There was no pain at all, but I had to fight an urge to run away. I started to breathe

deeply and rapidly, and I was still hyperventilating when the laser was activated again.

A few seconds later the doctor said: 'That's it. Are you all right?'

I didn't really want to speak to him but he repeated the question and, in a small voice, I lied: 'Yes.'

As I recovered on a nearby couch, I asked the nurse if I had been more nervous than most people.

'You were fine,' she told me.

Back home I wondered what the blonde woman's dentist was like. My right eye felt like it was full of grit and my left seemed to close in sympathy. I spent the next two days dozing.

On the third morning I looked at the clock radio on the other side of the bed. It said 5.17am and I realised I could tell the time without my specs.

Only one short-sighted eye has been treated and I don't see quite as well as I did with glasses. But I can find my kids in the swimming pool now and people say that I look much better without my thick lenses.

Sometimes I still reach for my glasses when I wake up in the morning — and then I remember that I don't need them any more.

**Tell us about your operation.** Write to My Operation, Take a Break, 25-27 Camden Road, London NW1 9LL. We'll pay £25 for each one used.

## Real-life health

**Alzheimer's Disease doesn't just affect the elderly, as Barbara Green's husband John was about to tragically prove**

He glowered at his wife. 'You've taken my money,' John Green said. 'I left it on the table — and now it's gone.'

Barbara shook her head. 'Don't be silly,' she replied. 'It'll be where you put it.'

She began to look around. 'Here you are,' she said. 'It's on the mantelpiece. I sometimes think you're going senile. I knew I shouldn't have married an older man!'

Barbara was kidding. At 43, John was only two years older than her. But, when he kept forgetting things, it wasn't long before the joke wore thin.

Barbara, of Cliftonville Drive, Swinton, Manchester, soon started to notice other problems. The slightest thing made John agitated and he was becoming very argumentative.

Barbara had been a home-help for 14 years. Some of her older clients with dementia behaved the way John did. 'But he's too young,' she told herself. 'It

must be something else.'

John needed inhalers for his asthma and he'd been using them up far more quickly than usual. 'I think you should see the doctor,' Barbara said. 'You could be overdosing.'

John reluctantly paid the surgery a visit. 'I don't think it's the inhalers,' their GP said, 'but something's wrong.'

He referred John to a specialist at the hospital, where he was given a brain scan and intelligence tests.

If he didn't know the answers, John tried to cover up. 'I can't read the card without my glasses,' he said.

When the tests were complete, the specialist sat down with Barbara. 'I think you know what's wrong,' he said gently. 'We're pretty sure that it's Alzheimer's disease.'

Barbara had been trying to ignore the

signs, but now she faced the truth. 'Will it be different with him being so young?' she asked.

'It's possible the disease could progress faster,' he replied.

John worked for a firm that made batteries and the



The couple's wedding day

## Real-life doctor

# Mandy's thyroid

My partner was off sick and every seat in the surgery was occupied. The patients all looked miserable, and the only sound was coughing. It was going to be a long evening.

I had already seen a dad and son with athlete's foot, two toddlers with ear infections, three adults with coughs that would get better on their own, and a 12-year-old boy with an invisible flea bite.

'His football coach insisted we brought him, but it seems to have gone,' said his sheepish mother.

Now it was Mandy's turn. As she slowly wheeled her baby's buggy into my consulting room, I thought she looked thin and tired. It wasn't surprising. Many new mums

hardly know what's hit them when a demanding baby joins the family.

Mandy, 23, told me: 'I've got this funny feeling in my head. I think it's my ears.'

It sounded as if she was suffering from lack of sleep but I automatically reached for the otoscope and looked at both eardrums.

'They look fine,' I said. 'But how do you feel in yourself?'

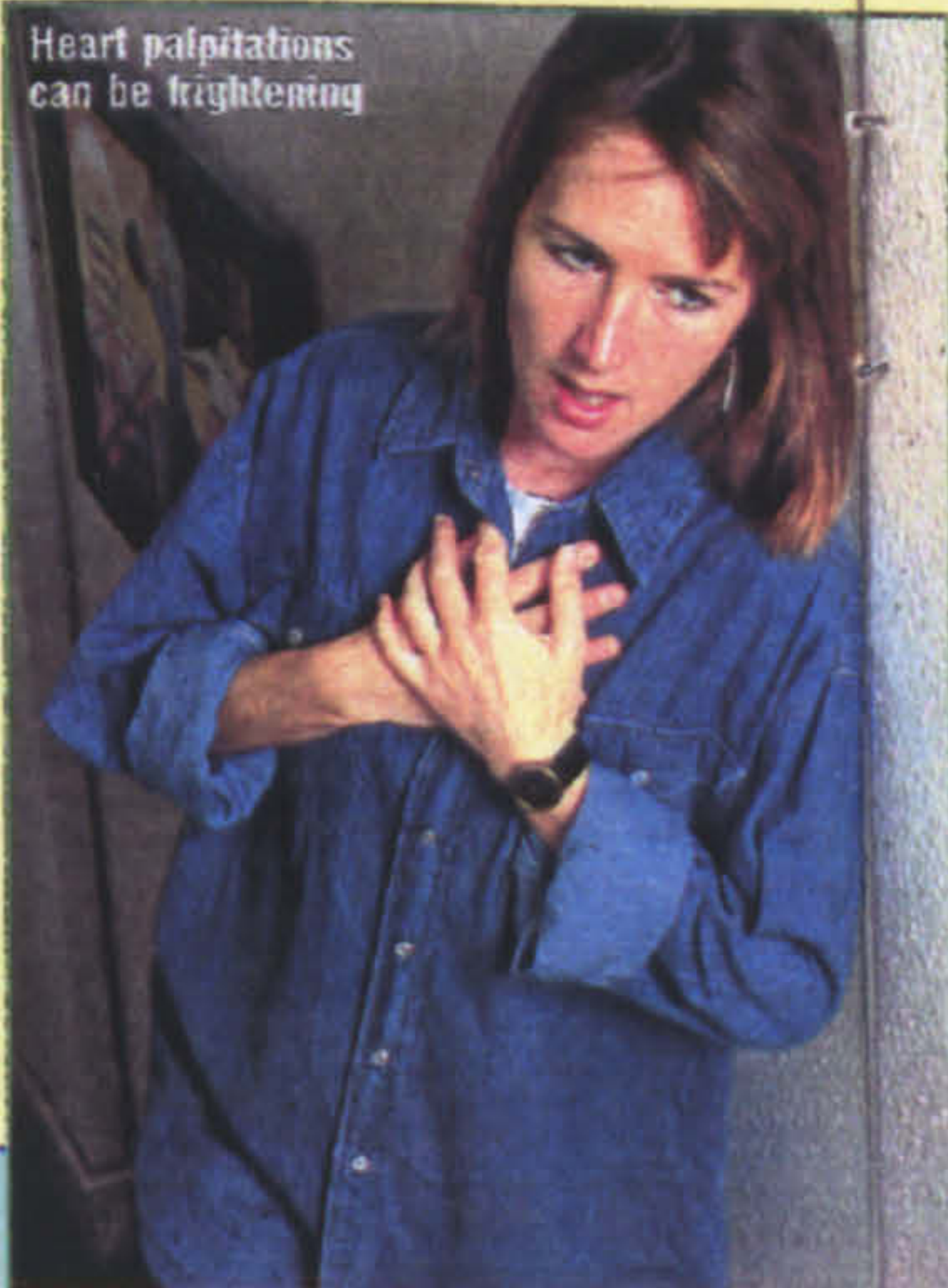
'All right... well, a bit hot and jittery. I suppose it's him.'

As Mandy pointed to her six-month-old son, I noticed her hand was shaking.

Warning bells rang and when I checked her pulse it was 140,

twice the normal rate.

Mandy went on: 'Sometimes when I'm just sitting



Heart palpitations can be frightening



team on the same level as their readers - it is a way of equalizing their lives and breaking down any boundaries between magazine and reader.

The photographs in the *My Operation* slot and in the main article on the health pages are of real people but in the *Real-life Doctor* feature, models are used, although the doctor her/himself is pictured. A letter from a reader in the issue dated 2 March 1995 queried the possibility of appearing in the health photographs:

I have noticed that on your health and problem pages you use photographs which are posed by models. I was wondering if it is possible for me to appear in one of these pictures - I would really enjoy it.

*Take a Break* March 1995

The editor replied:

We've received several similar requests. If you want to appear in *Dear Tricia* or *Real-life Doctor* send us a clear photo of yourself and/or a friend portraying one of the following emotions: anger, joy, passion, fear or despair. We'll pay £20 for each one used.

*Take a Break* March 1995

Another example of the editor's assertion that *Take a Break* is not only *for* the readers, it is *by* the readers too. But in relation to the supportive feminism claimed by John Dale for *Take a Break*, how does the health content support or challenge such notions? Although he did not specifically discuss the health pages with me, he did comment on the role or function *Take a Break* fulfils as helping people to understand their role in society, particularly in a community context. This portrays a different representation of women to that in *Best* and *Bella* - their role was ostensibly to portray women as equal to men, to give readers choices and options about how to live their lives and, especially in *Best's* health, to play down the expected association between women and the family. *Take a Break* would seem to be emphasizing family life, treating women and men as essentially different in terms of their capacities, and this certainly comes across in the health pages. The majority of articles encompass a family perspective - wives caring for ill husbands; brothers donating bone marrow to sisters; women with asthma risking their health and even their lives

to have babies; husbands and wives swapping traditional roles to allow him to stay at home because of his illness. Such a focus on the nuclear family is partly due to the real-life nature of the stories but nevertheless, there is a portrayal of family life that suggests without family support, people would not be able to cope. (This presentation of happy and supportive families is questioned elsewhere in the magazine, particularly in the true life story section which will be discussed later in this chapter). But as far as the health pages are concerned, the message is pro-family and women are portrayed as naturally suited to a nurturing, caring and caretaking role. It is assumed that families (and particularly women) will look after other members which really offers no choice to readers. This is contrary to John Dale's assertion that in *Take a Break* 'women are free to define themselves as they wish.' In relation to the health pages, only one option is presented. But if the health is taken in the context of the magazine as a whole, which is how it will be read, then it is possible that the health is presenting the family option to women whereas the true life stories are portraying the darker side of family life, and featuring women in more independent roles. This will be addressed in the content analysis of the true life stories later in this chapter.

*Take a Break's* health covers a wide range of topics all from a true life perspective. It is commensurate with the growth in other media of hospital dramas and documentaries, which seem to hold an endless fascination for readers and viewers alike. However, the family ideology in the health was strongly represented and within this framework women are portrayed as natural carers. The family is shown positively as a site of harmony, pulling together to overcome the disease or death of its members. Yet such a portrayal is questioned elsewhere in the magazine, particularly in the true life stories.

As the previous section illustrated, the health coverage in the three magazines is very different. In terms of the equal representation of women, *Best* is the most successful, managing to avoid pigeonholing women into a caretaking role. In its coverage of topics too, *Best* portrays a range of serious issues, not always well written but giving a political and critical perspective, something missing in *Bella* and *Take a Break's* health. The portrayal of women in *Take a Break's* health seemed traditional, oriented around family situations and the caring roles that families (i.e. women) fulfil. It is more an extension of the true life content than a separate section on health - the focus is on entertainment as



well as information. *Bella's* health is informative and very clearly written but covers a more narrow range of topics, focusing on less serious issues than *Best* and also partly portraying women in a traditional, caring role.

What are the possible reasons for these different approaches to health? According to the *Bella* editor, the magazine starts from a position of expecting women to have equality, but is well aware that many women are not in positions of equality in comparison with men. And so *Bella* is careful to avoid making any of their readers feel guilty, whether about going out to work or staying at home. The health pages reflect this dilemma and lack of choice in women's lives and thus aim to relate to all women by presenting various situations and using different language and images. In *Best*, there is a more aspirational expectation - according to its promotional material, the *Best* reader is interested in self-improvement and self-awareness and wants a wide range of editorial topics. *Best* has the highest proportion of AB readers of the three magazines (12.6% compared to *Bella's* 10.4% and *Take a Break's* 9.1%). It also has the lowest DE readership of *all* the women's weeklies, apart from *Woman's Realm* (28.9% and 28.5% respectively). *Best's* attitude towards the readers is to expect and assume equality and to address them with that in mind.

*Take a Break*, however, has no aspirational content, a high DE readership (38.1%) and a recognition that women are still struggling with achieving equality. Rather than assuming something its readers do not have, *Take a Break* deals with the particular 'realities' of the everyday lives of its readers and in terms of health, that includes women fulfilling a caretaking role within the family. The health pages reflect John Dale's intention to reach working class women and to address them in the terms of their lives *now*, rather than suggesting a different way of life and failing to relate to the readers. And because the health is all real life, the stories do feature the true experiences of some readers. However, this has the effect of endorsing women's traditional role within the family because of the acceptance of readers' situations.

### **Money, work and rights**

This section will focus on *Best* and *Bella*, as *Take a Break* does not include features or advice columns on these matters. Both *Best* and *Bella* have regular slots devoted to certain topics - in each of the six sample issues, *Bella* featured

a *Law and You* column and a *Money* column. It also included a *Women and Work* article in three of the issues. *Best* has a regular *Your Rights* feature, although in the May 1995 issue this was replaced by *Your Money*, and *Best* also occasionally included a *Workwise* section.

Taking a look at the topics covered by *Best* in its *Your Rights*, *Your Money* and *Workwise* columns, these included children's insurance; recompense for bad holidays; Christmas clubs; working at home; raising of women's pension age to 65; widowhood and finance; dry cleaning problems; direct debits; income protection; stealing stationery; homeworking; and readers' problems with their rights (see Illustration 5). These are giving readers information about useful subjects but the range of topics appears to be limited. There is little about work (be it jobs or careers) and much about the traditional feminine domains - children, working at home, holidays, laundry. Although *Best* does not include many articles on work, when women are portrayed in paid work it is in positions such as secretary (*Workwise*, Sept 1994), freelance writer (*Workwise*, Nov 1994), and student nurse (*Your Rights*, July 1995). The majority of *Best's* features are concerned with rights and money, informing readers what to do when things go wrong or goods are faulty (for example claiming compensation from dry cleaners and complaining about holidays). Occasionally, an article will address women in a more professional capacity, advising them how to protect their income against illness and making no assumptions that they will have a husband to fall back on (*Your Money*, May 1995). Indeed, husbands or partners are rarely mentioned in the money articles, unless they are directly relevant to the topic - out of eleven topics covered by *Best*, only one discussed men and this was *Your Rights* in the January 1995 issue which dealt with the problems faced by new widows *and* widowers with young children, giving information and contact numbers for further advice.

An article in the November 1994 issue addressed working at home, which was presented as the ideal solution for women with children - the reader describing the advantages of being at home stressed:

Home working is ideal for mothers like me who have very young children - in my case Calum, who's five and Ryan, three. You don't have any worries about childcare. During the



**ILLUSTRATION 5**

*Best*

**8 November 1994**



## Your Rights

# Postbag special

*This week, we ask our panel of experts to answer some of your questions and queries*

### Cruel confusion

**Q** I worry about whether products I buy are really cruelty free because the labels are so confusing. How can I be sure?

**A** As yet, there's no legal definition of terms such as Against Animal Testing and Cruelty Free used on cosmetics and toiletries, and just because a label states a product hasn't been tested



**Not Tested on Animals**

on animals doesn't mean its ingredients haven't been. It's no wonder you're confused.

Organisations such as the British Union For The Abolition of Vivisection (tel: 071-700 4888) and the RSPCA (tel: 0403 264181) both publish guides listing companies that sell approved products.

Meanwhile, the newly formed Cosmetics Industry Coalition For Animal Welfare (CICAW) is calling for all natural product manufacturers to adopt the same fixed animal testing policy. This is the Fixed Cut-off Date, which means the manufacturers will not use any ingredient tested on animals after an agreed date.

### That's my space

**Q** Our house is near a small shopping parade and cars constantly park right outside, so I have to park a long distance from where I live. Surely I have the right to make them move?

**A** Sorry, but however mad you feel about other people parking in 'your' place, you've no right to ask them to move unless they're blocking your drive or garage.

### Loan fear

**Q** A friend wants me to be the guarantor for a loan she wants and says I just have to write a reference. But what if she can't keep up the repayments?

**A** You'll be totally liable – so think twice. Agree only if you're very sure she can repay or are willing and able to do so yourself.

### Dish wish

**Q** A local shop is offering old-style satellite dishes cheap and, as there'll soon be more channels, I want to buy one. But my neighbour says I won't be able to tune into these channels with an old-style dish. Is she right?



**A** Yes – older style dishes won't be able to receive the new channels unless they are upgraded to receive an extended frequency range, which is why they're going cheap. If you've already installed one, ask a specialist about the possibility of upgrading.

### Must I serve?

**Q** My sole income is from the guesthouse that I run by myself. Last week, I received a letter calling me to jury service, but I've got guests booked in during the dates mentioned. I can't afford to lose business by cancelling. What can I do?

**A** If you're self-employed and your livelihood depends on your business, you qualify for exemption. Contact the juror summoning officer who sent you the letter. You may also be excused if you've booked a holiday, plan to marry or are sitting important exams.



**T**he car was ablaze and her two little daughters were trapped inside. Pam Grimsley ran out of the newsagent's shop and stared in horror. Where were her girls?

A badly scorched young man ran towards her carrying two-year-old Melanie in his arms. Her clothes were in flames. But four-year-old Amanda was trapped inside the burning car. They were too late to save her.

"I stood watching in an absolute stupor," Pam recalls. "This just had to be happening to someone else. I'd only popped into the shop to buy a newspaper."

Melanie was totally burnt, unrecognisable. Her hands and fingers were black and her pretty dark hair singed to a frazzle. And her face was burnt away.

The day after Amanda's funeral, surgeons spelt out the horrifying extent of Melanie's injuries to Pam and her husband William. She had lost all her fingers, her ears, her hair and her face. Her arms, one leg and one foot were also burnt.

It was difficult for Pam and William to imagine how bad Melanie's injuries were. But after weeks of operations, the truth stared them in the face when they saw their daughter naked.

"It was a sight we will take with us to the grave," says William. "I walked out of the room. I just couldn't bear to look. Raw flesh. A bit of skin graft. I simply could not take in that it was

my daughter, that this was my little girl, Melanie."

"One minute, you have a beautiful two-year-old girl," says Pam. "The next, she's someone you don't recognise. I must admit that there were times when I thought it would have been better for her to have died."

Their heads reeled with questions. How would they help Melanie cope? Would it be kinder to protect her from public gaze? Should they keep her hidden at home or should they take her out and treat her as just a normal child? There were no easy answers.

"The day after she came home, I took her out for a walk in the buggy," says Pam. "She was still red, raw and sore looking. I knew she was going to get looked at. But I also knew it was the only way she'd get accepted."

Even so, Pam was still shocked by other people's reactions when they saw Melanie. "People actually turned away. I told them to look at Melanie. No one said a word but they didn't have to. Their faces said it all... and I shrank from the pity and the shock."

The assistants in the local grocery openly wept when they saw Melanie. Other people tried to avoid her. But Pam stuck it out. Every day, she took her out in her buggy and gradually people began to relax in her presence. Eventually, some even smiled and chatted.

The day Melanie started primary school was another

**'There were times when I thought it would have been better for her to have died'**

### Not a typical family photo

At a quick glance, the family looks like any other – mother, father and daughters Melanie, Elaine and Bethany. But then you look twice at Melanie in the middle of the group – just like most people do. 'They don't appreciate how hurtful it is,' say Melanie's parents Pam and William.





weekends, I have a part-time hospital job and leave the kids with my mother.

*Best* November 1994

Although this is putting the full responsibility for childcare on women's shoulders, it is also a practical but *individual* solution to childcare problems for mothers. The concept that women continue to care for children and work full-time is accepted as 'natural'. Although home working is a more flexible way to work, unless men are prepared to do it too, the association between women and caring will never be challenged and the provision of state childcare will not be forthcoming. In addition, the exploitation frequently associated with homeworking is not addressed (for example, low pay, repetitive workload). Given *Best* editor Maire Fahey's assertions of a more aspirational feminism, one might expect an article such as this to appear in *Bella* rather than *Best*. This feature would illustrate perfectly *Bella* magazine's attempts to make women's lives easier *now*, rather than trying to challenge the accepted status quo - women juggling various roles need practical solutions, according to *Bella*'s Jackie Highe, not aspirational content which assumes a level of equality which many women do not yet experience. Yet such an expectation of equality is what Maire Fahey intended although evidently it does not come across in this *Best* feature on homeworking.

*Best*'s money, rights and work sections are small articles, only taking up about a third or a half of a page each. On average, they occupy less than 2% of each issue. Occasionally, they include snippets of information in addition to the main topic, for example the November 1994 issue included a main article on saving with Christmas clubs together with a box of contact numbers and addresses for information on the raising of the state pension age to 65 for women. Three free booklets were offered, but there was no discussion in the magazine of how the new age limit will affect women. It seems that *Best* sees its role as a *provider* of information in the areas of money, rights and work, rather than as a forum for discussing or challenging existing expectations.

Thus, Ballaster *et al*'s (1991) comment that *Best*'s articles on work centre around jobs rather than careers is justified, although *Best* does not feature *Workwise* regularly. The articles that Ballaster *et al* were discussing no longer appear in the magazine - they wrote:



*Bella* and *Best* both offer weekly columns on paid work, usually consisting of a spotlight on a particular job, but marginal in the context of the publication as a whole. Coverage often takes the form of an interview with a woman about her job, together with some factual information.

Ballaster *et al* 1991:153

*Best* has dropped this kind of coverage which may be due to the influence of Maire Fahey, who made it clear that she regards portraying women in unusual work roles as patronising and demeaning, yet she would also object to showing women in stereotypically feminine roles. Therefore, *Best* is focused on offering relevant information concerned with aspects of money and rights rather than with women working - the latter is not an integral part of the magazine. The information it does include covers mainly domestic issues which do not especially refute the unfeminist accusations levelled at women's weeklies. However, this is not to deny the usefulness of the information, which deals with topical issues and matters which are relevant to many women's lives. In the money and work articles then, *Best* has adopted a more supportive feminism, giving advice and information similar to that of *Bella*, rather than Maire Fahey's intended aspirational feminism.

*Bella's* articles are named *The Law and You* and *Money Matters* (both regular features) and *Women and Work*, which appeared in three issues of the six samples. *The Law and You* takes the form of readers' problems whereas *Money Matters* is always three topics, although occasionally this column is in a question and answer format. *Women and Work* also has two formats, either an article or readers' queries.

The readers' problems, whether under the *Law* or *Money* features, take a familial direction - maternity leave, maintenance payments, money and divorce, elderly parents, husband's debts, inheritance, wills, and family business. Women occasionally write in on behalf of family members, for example 'My daughter recently crashed her car ...', 'My husband is soon to leave the army ...' (May 1995), but usually they want advice for their own problems, particularly regarding maintenance - this topic cropped up in four out of the six issues. The subjects of the articles are more wide ranging than the readers' problems and include investment, credit ratings, insurance, home security, TV licence discounts, direct debits, joint savings accounts, and divorce and no claims



bonus. The emphasis is on information, making sure readers know their rights and where to contact for further details. There is a concern to protect readers' interests from possibly unscrupulous ex-husbands, for example in the July 1995 issue, the headline in the *Money Matters* column read 'Hang on to that No Claims Bonus!' *Bella* warns women who are getting divorced that if the family car is taken by the husband, the no claims bonus goes with it, which would cost women hundreds of pounds in future car insurance. The advice is for women to maintain their separate insurance policies throughout marriage.

The *Women and Work* articles, although not regular features of *Bella*, include interesting subjects and provide useful information. Although they no longer feature readers discussing their particular jobs (or careers), as Ballaster *et al* (1991) found in their content analysis of *Bella* and *Best*, they do cover what I would call feminist-oriented topics. The *Women and Work* slot in the January 1995 issue dealt with returning to higher education for mature women:

You're looking ahead, hoping this is the year you'll be going to college or university to get that extra qualification or skill that will raise your future job prospects. The only problem is ... money!

*Bella* January 1995

The article described ten possible sources of income for students and how to access them. Despite its use of the word 'job' rather than 'career', and the assumption that any woman returning to education will have to sort out childcare responsibilities, there is no expectation that women will have a husband or partner to rely on financially - the article addresses readers with an assumption that they will be financing themselves. Indeed, the illustration portrays a mature woman sitting at a dining room table, presumably writing an essay, while two young children play next to her - there is no mention of partners, either verbally or visually (see Illustration 6).

The *Women and Work* feature in the September 1994 issue is concerned with equal pay for women and men. Again, the focus is on jobs rather than careers - the comparisons discussed included male porters with female kitchen assistants, and warehouse workers with supermarket checkout staff. Nevertheless, the article debated unequal pay in some detail, looking at why it persists and what employers and employees can do about it. As an individual



**ILLUSTRATION 6**

*Bella*

**18 January 1995**





Could it be magic? "Yes!" says Lynda

**Real Life**

tickets for Barry's concert on 25 October, the day before she went into hospital! And, on the night, she didn't let her down.

"Barry was amazing, as usual," says Lynda. "He sang all my favourites, like *Can't Smile Without You* and *Mandy*."

But the thought of her operation — and the fear that she might not be allowed out to see Barry again — was like a dark cloud hanging over her. On the 26th, Lynda nervously checked into the hospital. "As soon

didn't know if she'd be allowed to go to the concert!

Finally, during the afternoon, the doctor gave her the go-ahead. "You can leave at 6pm," he said, "but make

**'He's better than any anaesthetic!'**

sure you're not back too late!"

The words were music to her ears! "I could have

jumped for joy," she says. Slipping out past the other patients to meet Kevin, she was walking on air.

That night, with her best friend Jill Gear, another ardent fan, she had the time of her life. "We had seats near the front and when Barry came on, we just went wild," says Lynda.

"He looked sensational and the show lasted two wonderful hours. When he thanked everyone for coming along, I felt like shouting: 'Little do you know what I've been through to get here, Barry!'"

"It was a magical night — topped off to perfection by going to the Barry Big Fan Club party."

At 11.30pm, Jill drove Lynda to the hospital, where she had to sneak back to her ward through casualty — the main doors were locked.

"As I got into bed, I felt nervous about the next day," she says. "But I dreamed about Barry all night!"

The following morning, Lynda had her op without any problems. "I felt very groggy when I came round," she recalls. "But as soon as I could, I asked the lady in the bed next door if I could borrow her personal stereo — to listen to Barry's new album!"

Lynda is now convalescing at home with her husband and daughters Helen, 11, and Jennie, five.

She says: "If the doctors had said I couldn't go to the concert, I don't know what I'd have done. I'm just glad things worked out as they did!"

"I'd have hated to miss him. Barry's better than any anaesthetic!"

**Rachael Williams**



Left: Lynda (right) and Jill, thrilled to rub shoulders with one of Barry's backing singers, Craig A Mayer

**NEXT WEEK: 'The home movie we couldn't show'**



**WOMEN & WORK**

*Raising the money*

*You're looking ahead, hoping this is the year you'll be going back to college or university to get that extra qualification or skill that will raise your future job prospects. The only problem is...money!*



The cost of tuition and exam fees, books, materials, fares and childcare — not forgetting loss of earnings if you're currently employed — make finding financing a major need. Here's where to look — and do begin early if you're hoping to have everything arranged for a September start.

**Local education grants**

The main area of help for full-time students comes in two forms: *discretionary* awards from local government funds and *mandatory* ones from central government. Each Local Education Authority operates a different policy, so contact your own.

**Loans**

Career Development Loans come from banks and can be expensive because of high interest rates. But the Department of Employment and Clydesdale, Barclays and Co-operative banks have joined together to provide loans where no interest is charged until three months after the course ends — when repayments of both capital and interest must begin. Call Freephone 0800 585505 for details.

**Charities**

These also provide financial assistance, but usually only enough to cover incidentals. The *Charities Digest* is a book listing all companies who have their own trusts for

would-be students. Your reference library should have a copy.

**Scholarships**

It's difficult to obtain information about these because they are quite low-profile. But the registrar at your proposed college or university should be able to supply details.

**Training agencies**

These provide a way to train and be paid at the same time. Employment training is aimed mainly at particular job areas to produce a specific relevant qualification. As well as receiving unemployment benefit, the trainee gets a £10-a-week training allowance. Childcare allowances and travelling expenses may be covered, too. Ask at your Jobcentre.

**State benefits**

A complicated area, but anyone who has been unemployed for three out of the past six months, is getting unemployment benefit, sickness benefit or has been on a YTS or ET course is eligible for income support.

**Access funds**

Made available by the Government to universities and colleges to reduce

some of the financial pressure on students. They're not large but can be of help with minor expenses.

**21-hour rule**

This entitles people over 18 who've been getting unemployment benefit, sickness benefit or income support for a total of three months to study part-time for 21 hours a week without it affecting benefits. All students receiving income support must be prepared to forgo their course should a suitable job be found.

**Trade unions**

If you're working and a member of a trade union, you may find they offer scholarships for full-time study at certain colleges. Ask your union rep.

**Year-round help**

Many people starting an Open University course, working mostly at home, may be eligible to receive all-year-round income support. Depending on your financial situation, you may be entitled to housing benefit and council tax relief.

For more information about entitlements, ring the DSS's inquiry service: 0800 666555 for England, Scotland and Wales and 0800 616757 for Northern Ireland. Calls are free.

**Christine Green**

David Lane (posed by models)



solution, there is a contact number for women who feel they are not being paid the same as a man for work of equal value. Collectively, the article advises workers to put pressure on their unions who can then challenge employers.

Like *Best*, *Bella's* emphasis in its money, rights and work articles is on providing information to make women's lives easier, and as a source of advice for readers' problems. The articles are fulfilling the role envisioned by the editor - readers can turn to the magazines for helpful, accurate advice and information, a responsibility that Jackie Highe takes very seriously. *Bella* does have an agenda of dealing with topics other than domestic matters and thus the money, rights and work articles could be said to be challenging the assumed antifeminism of women's weekly magazines. The topics in *Bella* do cover a wider range than those in *Best*. The article on no claims bonuses discussed above (July 1995) offers very clear advice to women to maintain a separate identity during marriage and to fight for their rights. Indeed, this article was one of only two out of 14 topics covered by *Bella* which addressed or mentioned men - the second feature was a one paragraph slot on joint savings accounts. On the other hand, there is an expectancy that women will be caring for children *and* working - whether this is through choice, divorce or other circumstances is not clear. Certainly from the prevalence of queries about maintenance payments and the lack of men portrayed or involved in the subjects chosen for discussion by both *Bella* and *Best*, the role of men seems to be marginalised into one of paying for their children, rather than being actively involved in family life, and thus men are either presented as problems for women or not presented at all.

The magazines are suggesting via their money, rights and work articles that men are not particularly necessary in women's lives and when they are present, they may well be the cause of acrimony. The focus of the articles is on women - the obstacles they face in everyday life, what to do about them, where to turn for information, and how to avoid potential problems. Although the articles discussed jobs rather than careers and constantly reminded women of their childcare responsibilities, the assumed independence from men incorporates a feminist agenda and emphasizes that the magazines often see men as the cause of women's problems. Unlike the more visual and (supposedly) feminist glossy monthlies, women are not portrayed in high powered careers with chic business suits and nannies but rather as coping with everyday situations on



their own. Whether this involves returning faulty goods to the dry cleaners or going back to full-time education, the message from *Bella* and *Best* is that women can and do work and care for children without any obvious assistance from men. From this perspective, they have a feminist message to offer, that is women do not need to be dependent on men to survive. But on the other hand, the magazines do not provide much aspirational content for their readers - it is more a case of making the best of what you've got rather than aspiring to something better. With one or two exceptions, the magazines see the ambitions of their working class readers as within reach in their current lifestyle, rather than as a distant goal which is unreachable without fundamental change. The magazines offer their readers feasible aims (sort out the dry cleaning, hang on to that no claims bonus), whereas the glossy monthlies, aimed at a middle class readership, explicitly aim to change readers' lives. So although *Best* and *Bella* are reliable sources of information and advice, as far as portraying women on equal terms with men is concerned, their money, rights and work articles are limited in their representation of equality. For *Bella*, this focus on information is intentional and emphasizes Jackie Highe's claims to offer support for readers in terms of providing the knowledge needed to make their lives easier. For *Best*, Maire Fahey intended to address readers with aspirational content, assuming shared childcare and career mobility, but this message did not always come across in the articles. Like *Bella*, the emphasis was on practical advice to make current circumstances easier. But whatever the articles were intended to achieve, and however useful the information provided for readers, if the money features emphasize woman's role as consumer and indeed neglect to question this role, then the magazines reinforce it in a powerful way by their very assumptions. Accordingly, woman's traditional identity as guardian of the purse strings is reproduced without comment, placing the reader in a particular position. Again, such a position may well resonate with the lives of many readers. Similarly, women's seemingly natural aptitude for childcare is left unquestioned, the alternatives to mother care being the care of grandmothers or childminders, but always the mother's own responsibility.

A range of messages, then, come out of the articles on finance, employment and legal rights. The magazines attempt to portray women as independent, with men simply as problems to be sorted out with sound advice from the resident expert. Useful information is offered to the reader, aiding her in her independent lifestyle and acknowledging that women now deal with all aspects



of finance in addition to the housekeeping. Yet it is the unspoken assumptions left unchallenged by the magazines, particularly the expectation of childcare, that reduce the impact of the more enlightened features and continue to bind women to the ideology of the family. In this sense, the editors can sit on the fence and avoid alienating readers, whatever their interests and requirements from the magazines. The encoded messages from the editors are deliberately mixed, allowing for ambivalent interpretations of these articles.



## True life stories

A true life story is an article from an ordinary person (i.e. not a celebrity) either sent in to the magazine or solicited by the magazine. For example, the magazine journalist may follow up a story from the national or local press, or a freelance may bring a story to the magazine. The topics of the true life stories are varied but they often include a traumatic event such as murder or life threatening illness - indeed, they are sometimes known as ToTs - triumph over tragedy stories. They may be written in the first person as a confessional type of article ('He betrayed me with my best friend', 'Should I tell her that her husband's gay?') or the event can be written like a story ('Sacked for a cigarette', 'No second chance'). The magazines invite readers to send in an outline, from which the journalists construct a story, complete with photographs. To help the *Take a Break* readers with their outline, instructions are printed in the magazine with suggested headings and prompts. The readers are paid, usually between £150 - £250.

*Best* had, on average, 5.8 true life stories per issue, *Bella* had 6.6 and *Take a Break* 7.6. *Take a Break* in fact included more than this average suggests, as it began a new feature on 13 April 1995 called *Readers' Reality*. This section incorporated a varying number of short narratives from readers, some of them only one third of a page long, but most with photographs. Unlike the other true life stories, the *Readers' Reality* slot was in the form of letters, spread over two or three pages, and edited by a journalist (although the by-line was in very small print, and positioned up the side of the page, giving the impression of *no* editing). Because of their brevity and lack of detail, it was inappropriate to code them in the same categories as the other true life stories, therefore they are not included in the following table. However, they will be discussed as part of the true life story analysis because they feature what could be termed as a supportive feminist content.



	<i>Take a Break</i>	<i>Bella</i>	<i>Best</i>
relationships	9	8	5
children	3	3	2
family	2	1	0
death	9	6	9
health	3	5	5
abuse	3	1	4
appearance	0	3	2
work	1	4	1
money	2	2	6
combination	1	3	0
other	13	4	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>35</b>

**Table 3. True life story topics in *Take a Break*, *Bella* and *Best***

*Take a Break* true life stories

Of all the three magazines, *Take a Break* had the most eclectic range of topics in its true life stories. In fact, because of this, the most frequent category was that of 'other'. This is not very satisfactory in terms of my analysis but without it there would have been 13 additional categories. The topics of the stories coded under 'other' included: imprisonment for possession of drugs; woman of 72 writing her memories of the war; needing equipment for a charity pub crawl; neighbourhood watch; opposition to a new brothel; getting trapped inside a car wash; and the theft of a parrot. However, looking at the remaining categories, it was clear that both relationships and death were the most frequent topics for true life stories which partly supports my initial understanding of *Take a Break* as full of gloomy stories with depressing subjects. But as a challenge to my first impression, the endings of the stories were in favour of happy rather than sad endings, although the category 'unresolved' in five of the true life stories tended to indicate sadness more than happiness, but without any narrative closure. For example, 'Who will look after the boys?' (January 1995) really did not have a conclusion - the brothers, all



suffering from a degenerative medical condition, were adopted by their young stepmother but their future remained uncertain. Some of the stories were clearly intended as light hearted, fulfilling *Take a Break's* aim to entertain as well as inform its readers, although others had the potential to offer support and information to readers because of their topic (for example, several cautionary tales of women being abused by their violent partner, emphasizing that men are often the cause of women's problems).

The true life stories in *Take a Break* dealt mainly with white people - of all the stories where the characters' ethnicity was known, 39 were white and one story involved black and white characters. The National Readership Survey does not include a category for ethnic status in its magazine readership survey, therefore the proportion of readers in terms of ethnicity is not known. However, given the lack of ethnic diversity in *Take a Break* it might be expected that the readership is mainly white, and certainly John Dale did not discuss aiming for black readers or the representation of black women in his magazine, although he claimed to be concerned with all working class women. Of the single true life story to portray black characters, this was a feature about a steel band playing its first Notting Hill Carnival (November 1994). This focus on white women in *Take a Break* will be discussed in the next chapter on readers' reception of the magazine.

The age of the characters in the true life stories was usually mentioned and if not, it was judged from the accompanying photographs. The only true life story not to include reader photographs was the *Reader Confidential*, which portrayed models. The age of the characters in the true life stories was mixed - although *Best* and *Bella* had a noticeable majority in their thirties, *Take a Break's* were more varied, emphasizing their appeal to a wider audience. Stories with a mixture of ages or characters in their thirties represented the two most frequent categories. This range of ages reflected *Take a Break's* family appeal - from children to grandparents it claims there is something in the magazine for everyone and the stories emphasized this. Thus, unlike in many women's magazines, there is no focus on youth - older women are frequently portrayed and furthermore, these are women who look their age. They are not the token older celebrities like Joan Collins who maintain a youthful appearance. *Take a Break* shows women as they really are, with no airbrushing



or cosmetic enhancement. In this sense, it is one of the few forms of media in which readers can see ordinary women like themselves and so is unlike the glossy monthlies, whose readers admit to feeling inadequate when confronted by images of thin, young models (Shaw 1995). And because there is no beauty content apart from the reader makeover and readers' problems, the only models to feature in *Take a Break* are on the fashion pages and in the advertisements. Even the covers always feature readers rather than models.

In terms of class, *Take a Break's* true life stories are mainly from working class readers - 71.7% from working class, 6% from middle class and the remainder from retired readers or not specified. Class coding was based on the characters' occupation and education, and if these were not mentioned, the class category was recorded as unknown. *Take a Break's* core readership is identified by the magazine in traditional terms as C1C2 women under 44 thus the composition of the stories reflected the class distribution of the readership and John Dale's intention to represent working class women (although mainly white) was realised.

Forty of *Take a Break's* true life stories were of a serious nature, with only six having a humorous tone. The humorous stories included two women meeting their future partners in a supermarket, complete with *Take a Break's* guide to spotting single shoppers; a bride suffering an allergic reaction to her wedding ring and being taken to casualty; a man who absorbed his wife's HRT hormones by mistake and became obsessed with sex; factory workers needing pompoms for a charity pub crawl; a woman whose mother-in-law moved to a flat in the same road; and a couple who married and divorced three times then married a fourth time. Unlike the other true life stories, these were light hearted and amusing, but deliberately so. Occasionally, a serious article would have elements of black humour in it, which readers might pick up on, although not to the extent that Richards (1994) suggested. In a *Guardian* article comparing the newly launched *Eva* to *Take a Break*, Richards implied that the *Take a Break* stories were unintentionally hilarious and although I agree that many of them are inadvertently humorous, the readers do not always share this interpretation. Therefore, when categorising the true life stories, I coded them as humorous only when they were obviously and intentionally so. *Take a Break* maintains a balance of light and more serious stories which allows the



magazine to feature a variety of topics and prevents the overall tone from becoming either too frivolous or too dark. The concept of humour will be addressed in the next chapter on the reception of the magazines.

Thirty five of the true life stories came from single people, usually women, five from couples, four from friends and two from families. Women do make up the majority of *Take a Break* readers and because many of the stories centre on relationships, children and families, it might be expected that women would be writing the stories as these are traditionally their areas of concern, something emphasized by the magazine in its portrayal of the seemingly essential differences between women and men. But men also read *Take a Break*, and wrote in, along with their partners or alone, in ten of the stories. However, most of the stories were by and about women - 30 stories had women as their main character, two had men and 14 had both men and women as the central characters. *Take a Break* is identified as a woman's magazine, giving a voice to women who are not usually heard in the media, and so a focus on women as the originators and central characters of the stories was entirely appropriate and corresponded with John Dale's aims.

The last five categories were concerned with the representations of women and men in the stories. Although first impressions might lead to an image of men being portrayed negatively, that is as weak and/or violent, there were actually 15 positive and 13 negative representations of men. In 12 of the stories, men did not feature and in 6, there was a combination of good and bad behaviour, or a portrayal of both positive and negative men. John Dale had emphasized in his interview his readiness to show men in a negative way and a third of the stories illustrated this, something which *Take a Break* readers noticed (see chapter five). Whether men were portrayed positively or negatively, they were invariably polarised into one of those positions, although a male character could change from one to another. But there was no neutral status for men - masculinity was identified as two opposites, with nothing inbetween.

Women were defined in terms of their family status in 41 of the stories - only in three was this information not given (in two of the stories the category did not apply, one because the feature was about a steel band, and the other because the main character was male and no females featured). In the three cases where



women were not defined as wives, mothers, partners etc, one concerned a homeless girl; the second was about women raising money for charity via a pub crawl; and the third was about a woman whose pet parrot had been stolen. When women were defined, it was sometimes superfluous to the story. For example, a true life experience in the May 1995 issue of *Take a Break* related how a woman was trapped and injured in a car wash. Until the last paragraph, her identity was as a supervisor for a marketing company, but then both her age and marital status (divorcee) were given, adding nothing to the story. Interestingly, the only feature to be exclusively about a man's experience, 'Make my hay, punk' (May 1995) made no mention of the man's marital status, simply identifying him as a solicitor. Such an emphasis on grounding women's lives in the family fits with John Dale's focus on community and family ties and his positioning of women as the mainstay of the family. However, in terms of his intended supportive feminism, it adds little to the stories unless the details are directly relevant (see the section below on 'It's all lies, Sharon', a typical *Take a Break* true life story which revolves around the central character's family ties).

John Dale claimed to portray strong women in the true life stories and this was supported by the status of the female characters and their demonstration of strength. Out of 46 stories, only 15 included main women characters as victims, either of men or of other circumstances like health, but 16 were portrayed as strong in relation to overcoming bad experiences such as abuse or loss of children. A woman could be portrayed both as a victim and yet strong, for example in the March 1995 issue, 'The price of parenthood' (sic) related how a woman had stood up to drug dealers and as a result, her children had been bullied. This proved too much for her eldest son, aged 16, and he committed suicide. So she was a victim in the sense of being attacked by dealers and losing her son, but strong in standing up to them and refusing to ignore their activities. The majority of women in the true life stories, though, were neither particularly weak or strong, but just getting on with life and coping with everyday problems like relationship misunderstandings (September 1994), marriage difficulties (July 1995) and illness (March 1995). Again, the portrayal of the everyday struggles of working class women were intended as giving strength to readers in similar situations and as providing a means for women to articulate their experiences.



### *Readers' Reality*

The *Readers' Reality* feature in *Take a Break* was differentiated from the other true life stories by its style and appearance. *Readers' Reality* was written in white letters on a black background and on the magazine cover the individual story titles (or one line summarising the story) were presented in the same style. The black and white imagery connoted seriousness, in stark contrast to the other colourful headlines and photographs on the cover.

*Readers' Reality* had a mix of stories - in the May 1995 issue, there were three short narratives, one a harrowing tale of abuse and violence; one of death from cancer; and one about a schoolgirl crush which ended in a knife attack on a teacher. There was actually no apparent reason why these stories should be placed in the *Readers' Reality* slot - many of *Take a Break's* true life stories were as serious as these. Because the narratives were short, the *Readers' Reality* features presented tragic events even more matter of factly than *Take a Break's* other stories - there was no space for elaboration or sentiment. Also, the verbatim conversation was largely cut out and the impression that a story was being constructed by a journalist from a reader's outline was missing - the stories were presented as if written entirely by the reader (although of course they are edited).

The story of abuse in the May 1995 issue was a tale of desperation, of the power of men to control their wives by violence, and the difficulty women have in escaping such situations. In this particular story, Donna and her children ran away from her abusive husband with the help of a social worker and Woman's Aid Refuges. She advised readers who may be in a similar relationship:

I want to say to anyone suffering from such violence to get out while you can. Get in touch with Women's Aid on 0117 963 3542. It's hard to make that first break but once you do, you'll never look back. You can start afresh and forget the past.

*Readers' Reality, May 1995*

Whether the past is so easily forgotten is debatable but *Take a Break* was clearly supporting women's action in escaping violent partners and giving them the contact number to instigate that break. Women's dependence on men in financial terms was not discussed but implicitly it was in the narrative - Donna explained that Women's Aid paid her fare to the North of England, indicating



her lack of material resources. This story is an example of *Take a Break's* willingness to expose the dark side of family life, although the magazine is eternally optimistic - Donna meets another man whom she plans to marry. Thus, marriage and family are written of approvingly, but there is no hesitation in telling readers that often things do go wrong, and the message is to leave that particular relationship and try again. In some of the true life stories and *Readers' Reality* letters, women are continually in a chain of bad relationships, nevertheless hoping that the next one will work. There is also a realisation that perhaps women would be better off being alone but in many of the stories women lurch from one violent relationship to another. Yet there are happy endings, like Donna's above (but even this is uncertain - the experienced *Take a Break* reader knows that men often change for the worse when they marry). Donna's narrative perfectly illustrates *Take a Break's* polarisation of masculinity into good or bad men. In the sense of its subject matter and message to readers, then, *Readers' Reality* is no different to the rest of *Take a Break* in stressing family life but with an awareness of its potential hazards.

#### Bella true life stories

Like *Take a Break*, *Bella's* most frequent topics of its true life stories were relationships and death, followed by health, work and other. Again, this indicates a morbid tone to the magazine, yet there were many more happy endings (16) than sad endings (7). The high number of unresolved endings (14) reflected the open narrative of many of the stories and also the confidential nature of the confession type articles. For example, the September 1994 issue included a sad story of a transsexual man living as a woman and not wanting her boyfriend to find out, although it was only a matter of time. This ending was unresolved because there was no ending, just a dilemma with which the main character was struggling. Similarly, another unfinished story related to a woman's fight for compensation after being sacked for smoking (November 1994). The event had not yet arrived at any conclusion. Another true life story (March 1995), which has been the subject of an *Inside Story* documentary on television, concerned Caroline Beale, imprisoned in the USA for allegedly murdering her new-born baby. Again, the situation is unresolved, with Caroline's parents fighting for her release. Thus, *Bella* has a contemporary feel,



reporting stories which are currently happening and which are as of yet unresolved.

The sad endings of the stories often related to death - of a fiancé (September 1994; November 1994), daughter (November 1994; May 1995) or son (January 1995). The readers' response to such unhappy accounts will be addressed in the next chapter but it is appropriate here to suggest a connection between Ang's (1985:72) 'tragic structure of feeling' evident in *Dallas* and the tragic narratives of death and drama in the magazines. Ang identified *Dallas* as an emotionally real text structured at the level of feeling, and what is recognised as authentic by the viewers is the rollercoaster of emotions in each episode. The structure of feeling is tragic because of the idea that happiness is precarious in a world alternating between misery and joy, and the experiences of the characters like Sue Ellen. The magazines too have this reality of emotion, particularly evident in the stories of death where the recognition that tragedy can happen at any time, often with no warning, intensifies the uncertainty of happiness. The situations in which the tragedies occur might be bizarre or unlikely to happen again, but it is the emotional responses of the characters which is more real than the actual cause of those emotions, and it is these responses to which the readers can relate. Although *Dallas* was fiction, and the true life stories in the magazines are factual, the same intensity of emotions is apparent in both, but the stories do not have the same potential for escapism as *Dallas*, with its rich, powerful, beautiful characters. Nevertheless, both have an emotional realism which, although tragic, allows those viewers or readers with a certain cultural competence to enjoy the melodrama of the text (see chapter five for readers' interpretations of the true life stories). The emotional ups and downs of the stories, then, are an important part of the magazines and form a deliberate part of their attraction to readers.

In terms of demographic characteristics such as class, race, age and gender, *Bella* shares certain elements with *Take a Break*. Out of forty true life stories, three incorporated black characters, 36 white, and one unknown. Black women are not well represented in *Bella* - of the three stories, one concerned a black woman who attacked her copy cat friend for 'stealing' her boyfriend (September 1994); a black eight year old girl, adopted at birth, who would like to meet her biological mother (January 1995); and a black woman whose



(white) partner died of cancer just before their wedding (November 1994). Such portrayals are not particularly positive and the first two especially serve to reinforce popular images of black woman as more violent than white women and as more fertile yet reckless in abandoning their babies. Jackie Highe's commitment, then, to representing all women in the magazine seems to falter when it comes to the representation of black women, as does *Take a Break's*. Historically, black women have never been a part of the weekly magazine environment, either on the pages or editing, and it was not until 1995 that a mainstream weekly, IPC's *Woman's Realm*, was edited by a black woman (Narayan 1995). Black women remain underrepresented in *Bella*, *Take a Break* and *Best*, in common with all women's weeklies, and the three editors appear to be making little effort to attract black readers. As the editors regard all women as sharing the same interests and experiencing similar situations, there is no necessity to change the apparently successful formula of the magazines to represent black women. However, the readers did not always agree with the magazines' claims to be representative of all women, an issue that will be discussed in chapter five.

The age of the characters in *Bella's* true life stories was usually mentioned, and the range was concentrated in the 20s, 30s and 40s but most frequently in the 30s. All true life stories included reader photographs except for the confidential articles which used models, although these models looked like ordinary women and are often older than conventional magazine models. Older women are portrayed in *Bella* but not to the extent to which they are pictured in *Take a Break*. Again, the image of ordinary women in *Bella* is widespread, due to the frequency of true life stories, and so like *Take a Break*, the emphasis is on showing women as they really are, regardless of age.

In terms of class, *Bella* had a higher class profile in its true life stories than *Take a Break* - 16 featured middle class characters, 14 working class and eight not known, with one retired and one student. *Bella's* readership in terms of occupation comprises 67% ABC1C2, with the core readership being 28% each of C1 and C2. Thus one would expect the characters in the stories to be evenly distributed between working class and middle class backgrounds, allowing Jackie Highe to claim she represents women from different areas of life.



The number of true life stories with a humorous tone to them was approximately equivalent to those in *Take a Break* - five out of 40. The stories in *Bella* were not as ambiguous in terms of humour as those in *Take a Break* - *Bella's* humour is more straightforward and obvious. For example, the dilemma of an overweight plumber stuck in a loft opening (September 1994); a woman trying to shame her husband into losing weight by putting up posters of him in the local chip shop (November 1994); and a woman in hospital awaiting a hysterectomy sneaking out to a Barry Manilow concert (January 1995). However, the majority of features in *Bella* were serious and dealt with heavyweight topics such as death, illness or accidents - they did not incorporate the ambiguity or unintentional hilarity of *Take a Break's* true life stories. The balance in *Bella* comes from its editorial such as beauty features, fiction and fashion, which even out the serious content with the lighter material whereas with *Take a Break*, the majority of its features are true life and therefore the balance has to be between the stories themselves. In *Bella*, the true life stories frequently offered a supportive feminist content, for example women overcoming illness, traumatic childhoods, sexual abuse and violence, the message being one of triumph over adversity, giving hope to others in a similar situation, as Jackie Highe intended.

Most of *Bella's* true life stories were written by single women, although 13 came from couples or families. Occasionally, stories have men as their central characters but even these are normally sent in by their mothers, wives or partners. For example, the parents of a man who died from Creutzfeldt Jakob Disease wrote in with details of his decline and eventual death aged just 30 years (January 1995). Out of the 40 true life stories, three were sent in by men - one describing a father's gradual loss of vision and his distress at missing his daughters' childhood (November 1994); the second from a man having an affair with a woman (January 1995); and the third from a caterer whose competitor sabotaged his sandwiches (September 1994). Thus, men write about areas of concern more traditionally associated with women - family and relationships, although the catering story was located in the man's place of work. *Bella's* male readership is reflected in the number of stories (seven) about, or from, male characters, although appropriately women remain the central players in the true life stories as the magazine intended.



The remaining categories in the analysis of the true life stories were concerned with the representation of women and men in the stories. With one exception, women were defined in familial terms - the exception concerned a tale of neighbours cleaning up their street and the main female character was not defined as anyone's wife or partner (May 1995). In every other story which featured women, they were identified in terms of their family position. However, the men were also placed within a family setting - the caterer was pictured with his mother and sister; the father losing his sight was shown with his two daughters; and the adulterous man was pictured in profile with photographs of his wife and lover. Because many of the stories were concerned with family matters such as relationships and children, it might be expected that they locate characters within the family, whereas *Take a Break* included more off-beat and quirky stories about unusual events which had no connection to family status. Almost half of *Bella's* true life stories (47.5%) concerned women as victims, often of men. For example, a woman who was abused in care and in hospital (November 1994); a woman who was attacked and left for dead (March 1995); and a woman murdered by her jealous ex-boyfriend (May 1995). Despite their position as victims of men, some of these women had the strength to fight back, either because of love for their children or a desire to see justice done in terms of compensation for their ordeal. One woman, abused as a child by her father, reported her policeman brother for sexually abusing young girls, determined that nobody should suffer as she had, despite being torn between family loyalty and duty (March 1995). Indeed, in 23 of the stories, the female characters were portrayed as strong women, either in terms of their coping with situations like illness (May 1995); running a business at the age of 20 (March 1995); or fighting for their children (January 1995). Men were portrayed positively rather than negatively, with 16 of the stories involving positive male characters, five with both positive and negative characters, and only seven with negative portrayals. Unlike *Take a Break*, *Bella* dealt less with the dark side of family life and more with traditional triumph over tragedy stories, that is women overcoming events or injustice, or relating their current struggles which are as yet unresolved.



### Best true life stories

*Best* has a slightly different image to that of *Bella* or *Take a Break*, which is reflected in its true life stories. Of course, *Best* began in 1987 with no true life stories but gradually changed its formula after a decline in sales and the success of its competitor *Bella*, which incorporated a strong true life theme. Now, *Best* has an average of nearly six true life stories per issue, which is only marginally less than *Bella*. An examination of *Best's* true life stories using the twelve categories will illustrate the nature and difference of the stories compared both to *Bella* and *Take a Break*.

The topics of *Best's* true life stories focused mainly on death, money, relationships and health. Such an emphasis on death indicates a less upbeat side to the magazine. For example, a young woman died from a brain haemorrhage after one year of marriage (September 1994); a 35 year old woman with four young daughters died from cancer (November 1994); two young siblings died from kidney disease (July 1994); and a young woman was murdered by her jealous boyfriend (November 1994). All these stories were categorised as having sad endings, which made up one fifth of the stories - eleven had happy endings and 17 were unresolved. This high figure for the latter category was due to the frequency of articles in the confessional style, of which *Best* seems particularly fond. For example, the regular *In Confidence* and *Inner Conflict* features are both anonymous articles dealing with a reader's current dilemma or unresolved incident from the past. In the July 1995 issue, the *In Confidence* slot related a woman's guilt over letting a colleague take the blame for her mistake; and the *Inner Conflict* was from a woman who had seen her friend's husband in a gay club and did not know whether to tell her friend. In the latter article, a panel of four *Best* readers offered their opinions on how the writer should proceed. This gives all readers a chance either to agree with the advice given or make up a different scenario, rather like the traditional problem page. It also makes *Best* look more reader friendly and gives it an air of reader participation. However, one third of the true life stories did have happy endings, which acted as light relief after the stories of cancer, illness and death. These happy stories usually involved women overcoming problems like agoraphobia (July 1995) or changing their appearance via dieting or surgery (September 1994).



*Best's* second most frequent topic for its true life stories was money. This occurred in 6 of the 35 stories and related to lack of money caused by divorce (September 1994); dealing with a mother's will (January 1995); an Englishwoman whose ancestor owned Manhattan (March 1995); the National Lottery (May 1995); a woman whose husband was deeply in debt (May 1995); and a pools win (July 1995). Such a focus on money differentiates *Best* from *Bella* and *Take a Break* and reflects *Best's* self-proclaimed image in which readers are supposedly more aware of financial considerations and are rather more up-market than other readers. Demographically, *Best* does have a slighter higher class profile than the other two magazines, which might be expected to show in the stories. Indeed, there was an equal number of working class, middle class and unknowns in the stories, with one unemployed and one retired character. And like *Bella* and *Take a Break*, black women were mostly absent. The frequency of unknowns in both the class and ethnicity categories was due to the anonymous type articles discussed previously, in which identifying details are kept to a minimum and the photographs are posed by models. Like *Bella*, the majority of characters in the true life stories are in their 30s which corresponds to *Best's* median age for readers of 38 years. *Best's* low number of male readers was reflected in the gender of the main characters - three stories involved men only, although eight featured both men and women as the main characters. Therefore, like *Bella* and *Take a Break*, *Best* was concerned to give women a voice in the magazine. The true life stories featuring male characters were concerned with the Carl Bridgewater case, as presented from the perspective of Michael Hickey's mother (September 1994); the murder of a Catholic man in Northern Ireland, as told by his niece (September 1994); and two young brothers, both suffering from cystic fibrosis (January 1995). But the majority of stories had women as their central characters and these women were portrayed in terms of family status in all but three of the stories. However, the majority of stories in *Best* are situated within the family domain and the status of the woman is usually an integral part of the narrative, or at least relevant. The stories involving men also place them within a family perspective and define their status.

Out of the 35 true life stories in *Best*, 18 featured strong women characters - these women were strong in terms of overcoming illness, accidents, abuse or violent partners. A woman could be portrayed both as strong and yet also a



victim, for example a story in the July 1995 issue related how a young woman struggled through a difficult home life with an abusive stepfather, developed agoraphobia, became pregnant at 15, yet surmounted all these obstacles and managed to go to university to study law, eventually becoming a lecturer. Often, women overcame their own problems to help others, for example setting up a self help group for anorexia sufferers (July 1995) or raising money to help others who are also differently abled (March 1995). Women in the true life stories who were portrayed as victims were victims of either men or illness (or sometimes both and occasionally of other women) but their success in overcoming these situations are classic triumph over tragedy stories. Consequently, men were portrayed negatively in 12 of the stories, although in 11 out of the remaining 23 the category of male character was not applicable. Thus, the overall image of *Best's* true life stories is of strong women, weak men, and much illness and death, offering support for Maire Fahey's intention to show strong, active women as some kind of role model or example to her readers, but not necessarily in the way advocated by a traditional liberal feminist perspective (i.e. as succeeding in traditionally male roles).

There was a possibly voyeuristic feel to some of the articles because of their subject. For example, a particularly distressing story appeared in the November 1994 issue about a young girl badly burned and disfigured in a fire. And a feature in May 1995 on euthanasia described in detail the slow and painful decline and eventual death of the writer's mother. This emphasis on distressing topics is part of the serious nature of *Best's* true life stories - only three out of 35 enjoyed a humorous tone. Hence, although *Best* has claimed not to cover sensationalist or tacky stories, or to stoop so low as *Bella* and *Take a Break* (Longrigg 1994), it nevertheless features some rather distressing topics, although other magazines such as *Eva* cover similar subjects with less explanation. Where to draw the line between voyeurism and human interest, though, is a difficult issue. Readers instinctively labelled *Eva* as unpleasantly voyeuristic but this term was never applied to *Best*, *Bella* or *Take a Break*, despite my own slight unease at some of *Best's* stories. Reading the stories in *Best*, even the ones I labelled as distressing in my own mind, I could see their supportive function to others going through a similar situation. With the stories in *Eva*, there was little possibility of others experiencing the same circumstances - for example, *Eva* included stories called 'Werewolf woman's



horror op', 'Our lift love-in gave him a heart attack' and 'Patti's present to her dying dad - her own heart' (all from *Eva* 2 November 1994). Interestingly, the werewolf story was also featured in another IPC magazine, *Woman's Own* (3 October 1994). Where *Bella*, *Take a Break* and *Best* feature stories which relate more to common experiences and therefore reach a wide audience, *Eva's* stories have a shock value which few other readers could possibly identify with, although as discussed earlier, the emotional realism in the magazines does not necessarily depend on the situation, but on the behaviour of the characters involved.

As the above analysis showed, the true life stories in the three magazines have slightly different emphases. *Best* incorporates many tragic tales which have unresolved endings, the latter partly because of the *Inner Conflict* and *In Confidence* features. There is little humour, intentional or inadvertent, in *Best's* stories. *Take a Break*, on the other hand, incorporates a humorous article in most issues and as previously discussed there is often a black humour which readers may or may not perceive. *Take a Break's* stories involve quirky, off-beat events but also more heavyweight articles about death and relationships - it has an eclectic range of topics. *Bella* is presented as more steady in its choice of stories, emphasizing ordinary families struggling through death or health related issues, or fighting injustice at work. All three magazines are prepared to show the dark side of family life, including abuse and violence, and they all show strong women overcoming such circumstances, particularly related to men. All women are seen as sharing similar problems - the common experiences of illness, relationships, divorce and children bind women together as a homogeneous group engaged in a continuous battle to understand men and live harmoniously with them, frequently unsuccessfully.

Now that the general view of the true life stories in *Take a Break*, *Bella* and *Best* has been examined, it might be helpful to take a typical story from each magazine and analyse it in more detail, both for its portrayal of the supportive feminism the editors intended and for what it tells us about women's concerns and experiences in Britain today. A typical story is one that incorporates all the most frequent features from the 12 categories and thus represents the image of that particular magazine. As a regular reader of *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break* for nearly three years, I have unconsciously constructed the elements of a



typical story for each magazine - in *Take a Break*, this consists of an individual to whom many unfortunate things happen but they manage to struggle through. In *Best*, the emphasis is on tragedy which can often appear voyeuristic, and without any narrative closure or resolution and in *Bella*, the focus is on ordinary, everyday events with which women have to struggle and which often involve injustice. These characteristics which I have absorbed from reading fit the profile of the magazines as discussed above in the content analyses and therefore represent an accurate picture of each magazine's stories during the timespan of my research. (See Appendix 4 for the three true life stories).

#### 'It's all lies, Sharon' - *Take a Break's* true life story

The story I have chosen from *Take a Break* appeared in the May 1995 issue number 18, and was featured on the front cover. 'It's all lies, Sharon' is a typical *Take a Break* feature - it is spread over two pages, has six photographs, and follows the narrative style of setting up the story by going back in time to Sharon and John's first meeting as teenagers. Like many of the central female characters in *Take a Break*, Sharon becomes pregnant at a young age (16), marries John and quickly has a second baby. But money is tight and after rows and arguments John leaves. Sharon meets another man and, in the words of the story, 'she tried to make her new relationship work. She gave birth to three more children.' But this relationship fails and Sharon returns to live near her mother. It is now ten years since she and John parted but Sharon remains in contact with his mother and sister and from the latter she finds out John has been accused of rape and jailed for six years. Determined to help him, Sharon begins to study law books in the local library and concludes that the judge had misdirected the jury in his summing up. A solicitor takes over the case and John is freed. Sharon and John then resume their relationship.

*Take a Break's* true life stories are all presented in a similar style - the outlines sent in by the readers or gathered by journalists are transformed into 1200 word narratives that use short sentences and paragraphs, are punctuated with verbatim conversation, and separated by boxed quotes and posed photographs. 'It's all lies, Sharon' is no exception to these conventions and indeed the story begins in a familiar way when the reader is introduced to the two working class teenagers from Co. Durham who are 'going steady'. *Take a Break's* use of



language is oddly reminiscent of *Jackie* and other teenage magazines - Sharon is the envy of her 'mates', who have a 'crush' on John, she and John both have nicknames (Shaz and Tinky) and they are 'going steady'. The photographs too remind one of *Jackie's* photostories, with their obvious poses and explanatory captions. Such photos were often sources of amusement for some of the middle class women I interviewed about the magazines.

In *Take a Break* code, 'going steady' inevitably leads to pregnancy, a situation accepted happily by Sharon (although John's feelings are not recorded). *Take a Break* euphemistically refers to their 'overwhelming passion', rather as in the genre of romantic fiction. Indeed, marriage and motherhood are Sharon's goals - she leaves school at 16 without qualifications, although clearly intelligent as the story later shows. Sharon would have been 16 in 1979, a time when unemployment was high and therefore motherhood may have seemed an attractive and safe option. Of course, the story does not discuss such issues, merely quoting the young Sharon who says 'what's the point of stupid lessons? I just want to be with my husband and have his children.' But the choices and opportunities for working class girls at that time, without qualifications, would have been limited. The story is replete with recognisable codes which place it in the stereotypical location of working class readers - writing on the bus shelter, disco dancing in the local hall, teenage pregnancy, early marriage and no qualifications, although not confined to a working class location, are nevertheless immediately identifiable as such.

As the knowing reader will expect, the marriage fails and John leaves, only to move in with another woman after a matter of weeks. Sharon is resilient, caring for two young children alone - no mention is made of paternal involvement or support. A relationship with another man fails, despite their production of three children. This is an interesting element in *Take a Break's* stories - babies are used to cement relationships or to show commitment to one's partner. It is almost as though without children, a relationship is not sealed, although having children is no guarantee the relationship will succeed. But the characters are quick to give birth - in one recent story, a couple's baby was conceived two days after they met (5 October 1995).



Sharon is now alone with five children to raise and living on social security but she nevertheless finds time to keep in touch with John's family. Such a kinship network is common in *Take a Break* - Sharon has returned to live near her mother, and she remains in contact with her mother- and sister-in-law. Men do not have this role and easily lose contact, which perhaps was not as strong to begin with. There is no relationship between Sharon's family and John (see chapter six for a discussion of kinship and community).

Throughout this story, Sharon is portrayed as a strong character, resilient, loyal and intelligent. John, on the other hand, is shown as weak and rather foolish, albeit charming and attractive. Indeed, both the men in Sharon's life have let her down and abandoned their children but this is not the focus of the story. Such behaviour from weak and/or violent partners is a common occurrence in the true life stories of all the magazines and is mentioned almost casually in 'It's all lies, Sharon'. It is women who hold the family together in *Take a Break* and who pick up the pieces after the men have left. Sharon copes well without any men and the message is that men are not a strictly necessary part of the family once children are born. However, in this story, John returns to the family which is obviously a safe option - outside the family he finds himself accused of rape and imprisoned. So although Sharon not only copes without John and rescues him, she does not really need him. He, however, would seem to need Sharon.

'It's all lies, Sharon' is necessarily one-sided. There is no input from the girl John is accused of raping and we only have John's word for what happened. Occasionally, stories have appeared in *Take a Break* which have prompted follow-up stories from the injured party giving *their* version of events (for example, a true life story in the 15 June 1995 issue was followed by another story in the form of a reply in the 17 August issue, which in turn prompted a reader's letter in *Take a Break* 26 October 1995). But in Sharon and John's case, no response appeared, thus the reader is not given an alternative account. However, this also means the reader is left with a conventional happy ending, emphasized by the photo of Sharon and John embracing. The narrative reaches a satisfactory conclusion, the family (although now much bigger) is complete.



This story supports the editor's intentions to portray strong women struggling both with everyday problems and weak men. But it is also a moral story, with John returning to resume his family role and duties. However, Sharon is the moral one, keeping her family together, despite the lack of men - she makes up for John's lack of responsibility towards the family. The loyalty of Sharon is without doubt although John's behaviour is not as straightforward because his motives and desires are not explained in the narrative. What is interesting about this story, in addition to the character of Sharon, is the way other traumatic events are dealt with so briefly i.e. the second relationship which brings three children; the violent partner; the return of John to the family home; and his relationship with the five children. All these are glossed over or dismissed in a few words as so ordinary they are not worth discussing. This is revealing about the expectations and experiences of women's lives in contemporary times - a true life story needs more than these 'everyday' events to make it worth telling in *Take a Break*. But the narrative of Sharon encapsulates everything John Dale attempted to encode in the true life stories - a strong central female character, the importance of family, a man that the magazine is quick to portray as rather foolish and weak, and in the end a successful relationship (or so the reader hopes), all presented as an entertaining yet potentially empowering story for any reader in a similar situation.

#### 'You're incapable of love' - *Bella's* true life story

The typical story from *Bella* featured in the November 1994 issue number 45. 'You're incapable of love' tells the story of Liz and her unhappy childhood which continues to have repercussions in her adult life. The narrative is spread over one and a half pages with five photographs - it is designated as 'story of the week' and as such appears on the front cover. The whole life of Liz, from age four to now, age 38, is covered in 1200 words. It is a sad story of abuse, illness and compensation, which remains essentially unresolved. As a four year old child, Liz was taken into care because her family were travellers, and put into a children's home where she was treated harshly. Leaving the home at 15, she was unable to cope and admitted herself to a hospital for psychiatric care and help. Here, she was again abused, this time with drugs, and not given the help she needed. At 19, she left the hospital for London, where she met and married Alan. But after the birth of their first baby, Hazel, Liz suffered post-



natal depression and the baby was fostered and, against their will, eventually adopted. Despite having three more well-adjusted children, Liz and Alan were unable to get Hazel back. Last year, Liz was awarded £50,000 compensation for her time in hospital but remains estranged from Hazel, who is now 17.

*Bella's* style of narrative is colder and more factual than *Take a Break's* - there is little verbatim conversation, no colloquial teenage slang, and the sentences and paragraphs are longer. But the presentation is similar to *Take a Break's*, with break out boxes of quotes and various photographs to lighten the text. The photographs are not posed as action shots - they are old family snapshots and two current ones of Liz, one with her three children. The main picture shows Liz looking sad, frowning at the camera, her face partially shaded. She appears older than her 38 years, which is unsurprising given her past experiences.

The narrative begins in the middle of the story, at her final meeting with Hazel when the child was seven. This sets up the circumstances of why Liz and Hazel are separated, and returns to Liz's childhood to explain her life in care. The harrowing tale is told calmly and matter of factly, with little apparent embellishment. Liz lurches from one ordeal to the next, receiving no help from the relevant authorities. It is only when Alan, her husband, comes into her life that she finally feels happy. But this happiness is short-lived, as baby Hazel is taken away. Here, the reader only has Liz's side of the story, thus it is not clear why social services felt it necessary to make Hazel a ward of court. Liz and Alan's visits to their daughter are gradually reduced and Hazel is finally adopted by her foster parents.

Throughout the story, Liz is portrayed as an unwitting victim, abused and maltreated by the authorities. First she loses her family simply because they are travellers, then she loses her childhood, then she loses her child. The most positive element to the story is her relationship with Alan, to whom we assume she is still married, and their remaining three children. But despite her terrible experiences, Liz is strong, determined to fight for compensation, although nothing can compensate for losing Hazel. Indeed, the story is framed and written as though Hazel has died - the headlines and captions point the experienced reader to that very conclusion. The story is given a doomed



feeling from the start, particularly emphasized by the faded photograph of Hazel as a young child and the story outline at the top of the page:

Liz Kidd was determined to give her daughter all the love she herself had missed out on as a child - but she never got the chance.

'You're incapable of love', November 1994

As Liz is clearly alive, it is Hazel's death which is the likely explanation for such a story. And although Hazel does not actually die, her estrangement from Liz is so complete that to Liz, Hazel is lost forever. Strangely, no mention is made of Hazel's possible tracing of her biological parents when she is older, leading the reader to suspect there might be more to the story than is related by Liz, although of course we only read Liz's account.

The strength of Liz's character comes across strongly in the narrative - her success at overcoming distressing circumstances and her decision to sue the local authority in whose hospital she was mistreated is evidence of her determination to be believed and compensated for her ordeals. The story partially ends on a positive note with her award of £50,000 from Grampian Health Authority in recognition of her suffering. But this success is tempered by Liz acknowledging that no amount of money can compensate for losing Hazel. Thus the ending remains unresolved because of her estranged daughter and Liz's continuing wish to be called Hazel's mother. The injustice of losing Hazel through no apparent fault of her own remains with Liz, despite the compensation.

At first reading, this story simply seems like a sad account of a woman's unfortunate childhood and the loss of her daughter, followed by a long struggle for justice. But on closer inspection, doubts begin to surface - why did social services make Hazel a ward of court? How could she be adopted without Alan and Liz's signatures on the adoption form? Why did Liz and Alan let the situation get so out of hand? After all, Hazel was fostered for six years - why wasn't she allowed to return home during that time? At this point in the narrative, Liz comes across as weak and helpless, unable to challenge the decisions made by social workers regarding her suitability as a mother. The lack of resources on Liz's behalf, although not explicitly mentioned in the story,



compared to the power of the social services, undoubtedly made it difficult for Liz to fight successfully the decisions made against her, but nevertheless the story has many rough edges and gaps. Possibly these factors help to make the account more interesting - different readers will interpret the story in various ways because the text is open to ambiguity and discussion. One's empathy with or alternatively suspicion about Liz will depend on one's circumstances and experience of agencies such as social services or adoption procedures, although I would suspect that the inconsistencies in the story are not articulated at a first reading - it is only on subsequent analysis that such doubts come into focus, and it is unlikely that readers will utilise an analytic approach to the true life stories. Indeed, it is often the case that the stories are not necessarily read with such attention to detail - they are often skimmed or partially read. Other readers, however, do read the true life stories with more attention, and this will be discussed in the next chapter on the reading of magazines.

Thus, *Bella's* typical true life story is sad, unresolved and rather sketchy, potentially leaving the reader with more questions than answers. It is a tale of individual suffering and no attempt is made to locate the story within a more collective framework of structural inequalities such as class, even though class implicitly underlies the very meaning of the story. As with many of *Bella's* stories, Liz's ordeal remains unresolved but her account of the traumas she has overcome make it a strong narrative of (partial) triumph over tragedy, ultimately leaving the impression of a strong and courageous woman. The story, however, is gloomy, not as entertaining either in style or substance as *Take a Break's* and without the happy ending. Yet the possibility of identifying with Liz (or Hazel) gives the story the potential to be useful to readers, as Jackie Highe intended, although the potential to entertain, also intended, seems remote.

#### 'Missing Mummy' - *Best's* true life story

The *Best* true life story I have chosen appeared in the number 44 issue, November 1994. Again, it is a cover story and the four girls are pictured on the front of the magazine together with the coverline 'We really miss you, Mummy.' This immediately sets up the reader for a tragic tale - women rarely



leave their young children voluntarily. And, as expected, the mother in this case is dead - from cancer, at the age of 35.

The narrative begins in the present, with Richard James reading a bedtime story to his six year old triplets, Sarah, Nichola and Katherine. But after they settle down to sleep, the house becomes quiet and this is when Richard misses his wife Lynda most of all. Then the story returns to their first meeting, when Lynda was just 19 and a talented athlete. They married, had a daughter, Rachael, then in 1988 had the triplets. All went well until 1991, when Lynda found a lump in her breast. It was malignant but after treatment she recovered. Again, all was well until January 1994, when Lynda was diagnosed as having cancer of the lungs, stomach, hips and head. Despite chemotherapy, she died six months later. Now, the girls are cared for by a childminder during the day and Richard cares for them in the evenings and at weekends. He says 'without the children, I would not have a purpose in life.'

This is a typical *Best* story - appealing, tragic and sad, but with an element of stoicism in it. The photographs used are very attractive - the triplets with their elder sister, Rachael; the four girls baking with Richard; a family snapshot; and a photomontage of Richard and Lynda's life 'in happier times'. As expected, the style of writing is emotional and dwells on the details of Lynda's decline and death and how this affected the children.

The story is told by Richard (although obviously edited by journalist Geraldine Sheridan, whose by-line appears at the end) and focuses on Lynda's roles as wife and mother. Lynda is portrayed as the perfect mother, concerned more for her children than herself, and as a selfless wife, supporting Richard in his career ambitions. The only reference to Lynda's life as an independent person in her own right comes at the beginning of the narrative, when Richard recalls what a talented athlete she was when they first met. No mention is made of her job or career before (or after) marriage, and her existence is confined to the family domain.

Lynda's role as mother, and her stoicism in the face of her illness, are emphasized in the text. The reader learns that even though Lynda was steadily growing weaker, she continued to take the children to school and when her



hair fell out, she wore a headscarf. Her concern was not for herself, but for Richard and the girls - when she found out she was dying, Richard recalls her words 'I don't want to die. I have four children ... You're going to need some help. Don't worry about me' (to Richard). But the selflessness is also partly Lynda's strength - she is determined to get better for the sake of her family. And her strength is emphasized in her earlier ability to cope with triplets and a toddler, albeit with Richard's help, and recover (although temporarily) from breast cancer. But finally, she becomes a victim of cancer, unable to fight it any longer.

Throughout the story, Richard is portrayed positively - caring, sharing and supportive. Yet the narrative emphasizes his weakness as a man, unable to replace Lynda in domestic tasks such as buying new shoes and clothes, and putting the girls' hair in bunches. As a result, the girls now have shorter hair to make it easier to manage. The reader is given the impression that had it been Richard who died, rather than Lynda, the events would not have merited such interest. Many women are bringing up children alone - it is the gender reversal in this case that makes an appealing and relatively unusual story. However, Richard's lifestyle has not changed drastically (although of course the loss of a partner cannot be overestimated) - a childminder cares for the girls during the day (presumably this means before and after school and in the holidays) and Richard continues to work as a financial adviser. As I was reading the story and looking at the pictures of the girls, I noticed a curious omission in the story. No mention was made of Richard or Lynda's families in terms of being in contact with the girls, or helping to bring them up. One might expect grandparents and aunties and uncles to take an increasingly important role in the girls' lives, but no references were made to kinship networks, or indeed neighbours.

The story is sad and the photograph of Richard baking with the four girls (an activity traditionally undertaken by mothers) emphasizes his attempts at being both mother and father to his daughters, yet serves to highlight the apparent differences between men and women and their taken-for-granted natural capabilities. But the subject matter, i.e. a young woman dying of cancer, illustrates perfectly the criticisms of many readers that the true life stories can be worrying and depressing. Breast cancer is largely a disease of older women



but a story like 'Missing Mummy' gives the impression it is a young woman's disease. No attempt is made to reassure readers that Lynda's case is unusual, for example by giving statistics on breast cancer broken down by age. Hence, the story is ultimately depressing, both in terms of the girls' and Richard's loss, and the potential worry factor to readers over cancer. It is difficult to get a sense of supportive feminism from such a story unless the reader herself/himself is in Richard's position, and can see how he has come through the traumatic situation. Or the story may encourage young women to see their GP earlier than they might have done. But from the way the narrative is presented, it is more likely that women will identify with the character of Lynda and feel worried rather than empowered by the article. Readers' varied interpretations and reactions to such stories will be discussed in the next chapter but as far as *Best* is concerned, this true life story is a good example of its portrayal of tragic events, often involving illness and/or death, all written within the domain of the family.

### Summary

In this chapter I have explored the content of the three magazines, looking at how they are divided into various features, and then undertaking a closer analysis of the health, money, work and rights, and true life stories. From this analysis, it is clear that *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break* are reader-oriented, particularly *Take a Break*, and that all the magazines have slightly different emphases and images, even though they might appear indistinguishable to the unfamiliar reader.

The content of each of the magazines comes across as contradictory which corresponds to Winship's (1992) appraisal of *Best*. Although the general perception of women's weeklies has been as traditional, antifeminist, domestic publications, they do incorporate a supportive feminist content - their concern with independence via financial and legal matters; their portrayal of strong women overcoming great odds in the true life stories; their recognition of the dark side of family life; their appreciation that readers are not all size ten; their concern to keep readers informed, especially in health matters; and their use of language to divide the responsibilities of parenting between mothers and fathers, rather than just mothers. Yet the more domestic content remains - the



traditional 'womanly' areas of cookery, sewing, knitting, childcare and consuming; the focus on relationships as women's work; concern with appearance and weight; women as responsible for their family's wellbeing; and also an attempt to entertain readers, as well as inform them. Such content, however, is only contradictory if one expects the magazines to have a clear and consistent stance on feminism, like *Everywoman* for example, or alternatively to ignore feminist ideas. Although the editors identified themselves as feminists, the magazines do not have that identity. Rather, it would appear that each magazine incorporates feminist ideas in terms of how they represent women and men, what they expect of their readers, and their role as providers of information and help. In terms of the seven themes outlined in the previous chapter, the magazines are inconsistent. Although each magazine in differing degrees clearly offers advice and information to readers, sees women as strong and active, treats women as a unified group, regards men and women as essentially different (although *Best* minimizes differences) and identifies men as the main cause of women's problems, the intentions to represent all women within that group and to suggest that men and women should share nurturing roles were less successful (although *Take a Break's* stance on the last point was always ambiguous, given John Dale's emphasis on the family). And so the intended feminist messages were evident in some parts of the magazines but not in others. In addition, the competing ideologies of production affected the content - different aims and emphases between publishers, editors and advertisers resulted in a magazine that incorporated more than one identity. Therefore, the magazines are open to ambiguity - although a supportive feminism is present to differing degrees in each title, it is diluted (but not completely obliterated) by the overall style and expectations of the woman's weekly magazine and by a desire to appeal to all women without alienating any readers.

The intentions of the editors to offer a supportive feminism in the content of their magazines is realised, although not always clearly and coherently. It remains to be seen in the next two chapters whether the readers decode the magazines in the way intended or whether *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break* are read for other reasons. The responses to the magazines will be addressed in the terms of Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model although I will extend the



three positions of accept, negotiate and oppose to take into account further decoding positions adopted by the readers.



## CHAPTER FIVE

### Decoding the Message: Readers Interpret *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break*

#### Introduction

In the previous chapter I presented and analysed the content of *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break* and suggested that the magazines do have the potential to offer feminist oriented messages, although to differing degrees and with rather different meanings of feminism in each magazine. The claims of the editors were clear in some of the health features, stories and images in the magazines and particularly in *Take a Break's* case, where John Dale's intention to enable women to learn from others' experiences and the occasional campaign was evident. Because of *Best* and *Bella's* more contradictory content, their dominant message was rather ambiguous, alternating between assumptions of independence in the money, work and rights articles, and the traditional women's magazine fare of counting calories and losing weight. *Take a Break's* content also varied, shifting from assumptions about women's caring role to declaring their right to independence. Nonetheless, the possibility of decoding the magazines in some feminist code of reference was evident, particularly with regard to the health and true life stories (and also the money, work and rights features, although this content was not discussed in as much detail by many of the readers). Thus, the focus in this chapter, like the content analysis, will mainly be on the health and the true life stories, and also on the money, work and rights features.

This chapter, then, will explore how the readers interpreted *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break*, whether they decoded the magazines in the ways intended by the editors, and what sociological factors affected decoding. Using the decoding stage of Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model, the readers' responses will be classified within the three topic themes according to three categories: accept, negotiate, oppose. It will be necessary to expand Hall's positions to account for further responses to the magazines and this will be discussed later in the chapter. Before looking at individual decodings, however, the question of what readers are actually decoding needs to be addressed to clarify the remainder of the chapter. What was the dominant message the readers were decoding? What



ideas did they have of the editors' intentions? Did they all recognise the intended supportive feminist content? If not, what were they decoding? Taking Hall's three hypothetical responses (accept, negotiate, oppose) to media forms, I will address what the editors saw as their dominant message i.e. that of a supportive feminism, and examine readers' interpretations of that meaning within their decoding of the magazines generally. If readers did not recognise the editors' intentions, their responses can still be analysed in terms of what they *thought* was intended. As all readers construct an understanding of the encoded messages (whether 'correct' or not), their responses to the magazines will be based on that understanding and therefore it is important to discover whether the readers have recognised the editors' intentions. Each magazine, as illustrated in chapter four, carries contradictory messages and it is not always clear (unless one knows the editors' intentions) what the dominant message is meant to be. Having undertaken a content analysis, I found the magazines to be a mixture of feminist messages, assumptions about women's role in the family, and expectations of behaviour from women, all wrapped up within the confines of a woman's weekly magazine. Often, the dominant meaning is clouded or undermined by other content such as advertisements or even editorial. It follows from this characterisation of the dominant meaning that some readers may not recognise it and indeed this was the case. Given the inconsistent nature of the editors' intended message, one might question whether a supportive feminism is the dominant meaning in the magazines and to this I would answer yes, but that it continually jostles for a place amongst the other meanings which are available, such as entertainment, commercialism and a more traditional view of femininity. By analysing the readers' responses to the magazines, it can be established whether they recognise what the editors are trying to do, and then their positions following from either recognition or non-recognition can be discussed. To further complicate the decoding process, readers may also interpret different sections of the same magazine in contradictory ways, meaning they cannot be classified easily into accepting, negotiating or opposing the dominant message in the magazines. Analysing the way readers respond to *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break*, then, is clearly not going to be a case of simply slotting them into accepting, negotiating or opposing positions, although some readers do fit into these categories, but it calls for more flexibility from the encoding/decoding model than the three positions Hall originally suggested. Therefore, I will draw upon the alternative methods of analysis discussed in chapter one.



First, before looking at how the readers decoded the magazines, it might be useful to return briefly to the debate about feminisms which was discussed in chapter three. The majority of women I interviewed had no understanding of feminism as informed by academic writing but this is not to say they failed to comprehend feminism - it meant different things to different women. For example, the bank clerks regarded feminism as meaning to put men down, to be derogatory about them, whilst the beauticians understood it as women not staying in the home. So trying to get a shared understanding of what feminism means was difficult (and probably unhelpful) and partly explains why many readers denied the possibility of feminism in the magazines, because the editors' encoded definitions of a supportive feminism did not match theirs. In the interviews with readers, I was aware of the possibly negative connotations of the word feminism and only used it when I thought it might help to clarify or explain how the readers interpreted the magazines - I may have used it inappropriately because sometimes it confused the readers (for example, the beauticians and the bank clerks). Generally with the readers who accepted the magazines as intended, a supportive feminism was implicit in the conversation and reflected the editors' encodings. Readers who opposed the feminist messages usually did so from a perspective of identifying *themselves* as feminist and either accused the magazines of not going far enough; or failed to see how the magazines could be interpreted as feminist at all; or held a different understanding of feminism. The confusion over what feminism means in the readers' understandings served to reflect the current academic debates over the meaning of feminism, as discussed in chapter three. Indeed, given the various media representations of feminists, and the way in which the term has varied in public consciousness from positive to negative connotations, it is unsurprising that the readers held different conceptions.

To follow the themes of the previous chapter, the readers' interpretations of *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break* will be discussed within the topics of health, the money, work and rights features, and the true life stories. First, the readers' decodings of the health pages.

## **Health**

The health pages of the magazines were generally very popular, with many readers identifying them as part of their favourite content. With the younger



readers (for example, the bank clerks), health tended to be associated with beauty, which partly follows the style of the magazines, as they often combine the two in features or articles. The health content was cited by a number of readers as empowering and important, offering them knowledge to supplement their doctor's information; to allow the reader to ask specifically for certain treatments seen in the magazines; and to gain from others' experiences.

Nora Green and her friend Lynn Barstow, both home wardens in their mid fifties, cited the health as potentially empowering because of its true life element. Both regular readers of *Take a Break* and occasionally of *Bella*, they acknowledged the appeal of *real* health:

Lynn: If you read something like somebody what's in the same situation you know that you're not on your own, don't you. There's other people the same.

CJO: Do you find that reassuring?

Lynn: Yeah, because they're helpful aren't they, like, erm, they might know the treatment that you haven't heard about. And it's done them good so then you try it, don't you. To see what benefits they offer you.

Nora: If you go down to our doctors, oh no, no.

Lynn: You have to tell them what's a matter with you and ask 'em what to give you. Say give me this and you'll be all right.

Nora Green and Lynn Barstow, home wardens

There are a number of points being made in this conversation. First, a reassuring element of not being alone in one's illness or predicament - others are going through similar experiences. In this sense, the message portrayed is a supportive one and central to a general tenet of feminism which emphasizes the importance of support amongst women in terms of sharing knowledge and experiences. Second, new information is brought to the reader's attention - information that she has not come across via other sources, such as her doctor, friends or family. Third, the fact that a treatment or cure is not presented in an abstract way - real people have benefited, proving that it works. And fourth, this new knowledge can be assimilated and presented to the reader's doctor, potentially altering the balance of power in the doctor-patient relationship in favour of the patient. Lynn illustrated this last point nicely:

Lynn: Yeah, well I did once, 'cos I were coming off some tablets what they give me for my back and I were really bad



with 'em and er, they give you the name of a book in one of the magazines to get, and I did actually get it and it did help me get off these tablets. That *Bottling It Up*, they called it. And then they made me have, my hormones were all dodgy, and then I read about these progesterone suppositories. So I asked my doctor for them and within a week I were different altogether. So that did help.

Nora: I think they are good these. 'Cos they're all true stories, people's own experiences, aren't they, with different things. They have been tried.

Nora Green and Lynn Barstow, home wardens

The usefulness and practical application of the magazines are clearly illustrated in the above conversation. Nora and Lynn took from *Take a Break* information to which they had no other access, and which was relevant to their particular situation. Their location as working class women (little formal education, low paid job) marked out the available discourses they could use to discuss the magazine and why it was necessary to them. For Nora and Lynn, *Take a Break* was a resource to be used. Such an empowering function of the health was also recognised by other readers, for example a group of older women I spoke with who meet once a week as a Friendship Group. Aged between 60 and 81 (with the majority in their seventies), this was a friendly, chatty group of seven women from a large council estate in Sheffield, some married, some single and others widowed, all socially active and all keen magazine readers. In relation to the health, they commented:

Norma: She had a bad ear, you were ever so ill, weren't you, really?

Elsie: Yes, well/

Norma: Funnily enough, it came out in this, so you could read about it and find out. And those are the things that are interesting.

CJO: Was that on the medical page?

Freda: Yes, there was an article about what's wrong with me as well.

Friendship Group

This illustrates the additional information that people do not necessarily get from the medical profession but which helps them to understand their condition. Further:



Freda: We like the health 'cos most of us have got something, you know.

Mary: Yeah, healthwise, if we see, ooh, that's what I've got then you start to read it.

Norma: No, but there's lots of times when you don't understand it what you've got, and you'll see it come in there and you'll think, ooh, I remember that, and you'll get a much better, I was trying to think of one that's a perfect example. And it came in one of these.

Joan: Marian's sister. She had lupus. One of these books did an article on lupus. I mean, when I heard she had lupus, I'd never even heard of it or anything. But I read an article in one of them/

Norma: And it's so clear, isn't it? I forget what it was I was trying to find, oh, I know what it was, what do they call those spots that come up on your head?

Polly: Shingles?

Norma: Shingles! And that was in there, that was it. And my friend Jenny, she got it very, very badly, she was very ill, and, er, we couldn't, you know, we knew what it was but we didn't understand it, but an article came in there and it was absolutely perfect. It was clear, it was absolutely superb. Same with Elizabeth when she had her last baby and I was really worried with this, what do they call that injection you have in your back?

CJO: Epidural?

Norma: That was it. I was really worried because she'd had it the first time and she was thinking of having it for this last baby and just before she was having it somebody was talking about it and they'd had it and 10 days afterwards it had paralysed the bottom half of them. And, you know, I was in a stew about it, and that came in one of these books and I'd kept it specially for her, and I said read it. That's exactly what happened to you with your first baby. That baby could have been brain damaged. They messed about so much.

CJO: Mmm. So it's very useful?

Norma: That was very, that's why, I mean by those medical things, not just because they're medical but because very often they hit us. And they are, they're really clearly written.

Friendship Group

Not only does this illustrate the knowledge that can be gleaned and then acted upon from the magazines, but also it shows how women will look out for the health of their family and friends, taking the responsibility for the wellbeing of others. In addition, the necessity of such information suggests that women are



not getting the explanation and information they need from their doctors. For older women, who may have more health problems than their younger sisters and perhaps less available means of knowledge, the magazines are an ideal source of easily digested information. But for all readers, the magazines can bring news of recent developments, as I suggested in the previous chapter in relation to the example of Mirena, a 'new' contraceptive for women:

Carol: I think they're useful for up-to-date health information, that sort of thing. If there's anything new like contraceptives or breast screening, they're usually quite good on that. Otherwise you wouldn't get to know, you wouldn't get to hear about it.

North Access Course

The acceptance of the health content as discussed above indicates that the readers' decoding positions relate clearly to the editors' intended messages. All the women who accepted the health as encoded by the editors (i.e. as empowering, informative, as a source of strength or reassurance) were able to relate to the characters in the health because of their own experiences. They held the appropriate knowledge to recognise and empathise with the situations in the magazines, not just in the health but often in the true life stories too. These readers quoted above were all working class women, without much formal education, who saw in the magazines an understandable level of writing with clear information that they could use. Not having access to other forms of medical material, the magazines filled a gap in their knowledge, particularly noticeable for the older women. In the Friendship Group, for example, Norma was able to give advice to her daughter about intervention in childbirth, even though it was something she had been worried and unsure about before reading the relevant article.

Not all readers had the required knowledge to use the magazines in this way and in fact amongst the middle class women I interviewed it was more acceptable to be ignorant of such situations. Knowledge indicated a familiarity with the problems of others from which some readers wanted to distance themselves. There are parallels here with research on soap operas (Hobson 1982; Brown 1994) where researchers found that some viewers appreciate the characters and situations, but are aware that such an ability is looked down upon, although to a certain extent this is no longer the case with some soaps (*EastEnders*, *Emmerdale*), which have recently become more trendy. But



weekly magazines still provoke such a reaction - for example, the library staff showed their surprise at Juliet's knowledge of *Bella*:

Juliet: In the health section, there's a good health section as well as problem page and there's *You and Your Child* as well. That's on the same level. It's only a small section.

Sharon: You study it, don't you, you know a lot about it.

Juliet: Well, I've been buying that for about six years.

Library Staff

Among this group, it was seen as undesirable to know so much about women's weekly magazines, given their low cultural value, and Juliet explained her superior knowledge by virtue of the length of time she had been reading *Bella*. In the rest of the library staff's focus group, the concept of weeklies as devalued had not been made explicit but it was clear from the above exchange how some of the women regarded weeklies. There were two separate but related areas of knowledge about the magazines - the first concerned the experiences of the characters in the stories and features, and the second was about the magazine itself, its usual content, the layout, the size of the features and so on. To be knowledgeable about the first showed an appreciation of the situations of others and possibly their relevance to oneself, and the second demonstrated a familiarity with a particular magazine. Neither of these attributes were rated highly by most of the staff in the library, even though they all (with the exception of Jennie) read magazines regularly. For the library staff, who have so much information at their fingertips, the weeklies are used as entertainment and time fillers, not to fill any gaps in knowledge. Thus, it is the reader's professional discourse that renders *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break* as irrelevant in some ways (information, medical advice) yet useful in others (entertainment, shared reading at work). This point was emphasized in an interview with a nurse, discussed in the following section.

The health content of the magazines was also criticised and interpreted as worrying rather than empowering. The health, as pointed out in chapter four, was a part of the magazines of which the editors were extremely proud, particularly Jackie Highe of *Bella*. In the content analysis, I suggested that some health articles might prompt readers to visit their doctor, for example the *Best* feature on bowel cancer. Intended to be informative and reassuring, aspects with which many readers agreed, nevertheless other readers took



exception to the health content, particularly the women in a north Sheffield Mother and Toddler group:

Sandra: Well, that's probably why I don't read them now because I look at them and think what a load of rubbish, you know, or that's not very clear. And some of them are just too panic making, I mean, my mother-in-law reads things, then she's dying from all sorts. She's had skin cancer about ten times because of reading these.

CJO: So you think people are worried when they read the health pages?

Sandra: Yeah, but unnecessarily sometimes, I think it makes them scared to go to the doctor. Because something they've read about, they'll think, ooh, I've got that and I don't want to know. I think sometimes it can be very, very frightening instead of informative.

North Mother and Toddler Group

Sandra's point, coming from her perspective as a nurse, was that information, when presented without adequate support from a trained medic, can easily be misconstrued, causing worry and confusion. This is particularly relevant to readers who may not have the knowledge to sift through information or the necessary reading skills to understand the medical terms:

Sandra: Especially for people like my mother-in-law who's not that highly educated. I mean, my mum, she'd read it, sift out information, but my mum-in-law, she can't. Her reading's not brilliant to start off with, she's in her seventies and, er, she just can't work it out, she just sees long words and if she can't read it, she puts in what she thinks it was meant to be. She's on her own, you see, she's a widow. So she does tend to read them at night when she's in on her own. And I think she's scared to death.

North Mother and Toddler Group

This criticism of the health pages was reinforced by the rest of the group:

Rebecca: Yes, I mean, like on the problem pages, if you're tired and stuff, they tell you to have all sorts, blood tests and things. You just think the worst automatically.

North Mother and Toddler Group

Sandra's interpretation of the health, which seemed to lead the others in the group, came from her knowledge of nursing. Thus, unlike the readers quoted



earlier (Nora, Lynn, Carol, Friendship Group), Sandra utilised an additional discourse with which to discuss the health and her location as a nurse (although she was without formal educational qualifications) meant that she was able to access medical information in her job. This finding cuts across class as a determining factor in the decoding process and emphasizes the too rigid boundaries of the encoding/decoding model, opening it up to a more local analysis of readers' interpretations.

Although this critical view of the health content was quite unusual (most of the regular readers found it at least useful and some like Lynn Barstow felt it actually empowered her relationship with her GP), other readers also shared Sandra's interpretation. The social workers, for example:

Sara: Ha, look at this one - 'Breast cancer, are you at risk? Young, pregnant, with a breast lump.' I mean, it's just, they make you worried. I think if I read enough I would be worried.

Social Workers

The social workers disliked the health pages because of their 'scaremongering' aspect, and articulated a middle class, distancing position from both the magazines and the knowledge they offer. Such a position was based on their higher education and professional roles in which a particular understanding of feminism allowed them to critique popular culture. Thus, the social workers and the women in the Mother and Toddler group reached the same verdict on the health, but from different positions. The Mother and Toddler group, however, took their analysis of the health a stage further. Linking it to the true life stories, Sandra pointed out the negative associations between the two:

Sandra: I think they ought to, like, give the positive side of going to your doctor and not just the negative side. I mean, you see it every day, 'My wife died of breast cancer and left me with two young sons.' So then once they've read that headline, then they put about facts and figures about breast cancer and what to do if you find a lump, when they've already read that! So they're going to think, well, I don't want to know.

Alice: I think if the stories were really positive stories then that might be better, but it just seems, you see such a lot of stories with really negative themes, I think it's upsetting.

North Mother and Toddler Group



Accordingly, it is the combination of the true life stories and the health which conveys a negative and worrying message to readers. The Mother and Toddler group were quite accurate in their analysis of the content - the true life stories are often about women dying from cancer or other diseases, leaving behind partners and children, and in turn the health does deal with the medical side of such issues. As the content analysis illustrated, *Best* especially deals with serious topics on its health pages and also features stories such as 'Missing Mummy' (November 1994) about a young woman dying of cancer. Putting the two together means that the accent is on the worst case scenario, although to be fair to the magazines, they do include stories with a positive element in them (see chapter four). And the Mother and Toddler Group tended to group all weeklies together in their criticism, whereas there are differences in the content of *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break*, as illustrated in chapter four.

The magazines attracted a substantial amount of criticism in their coverage which dealt with the issues of dieting and other eating disorders. As noted in the content analysis, both *Bella* and *Best* discussed dieting as part of their health remit, although this was not an issue covered by *Take a Break*. And despite Jackie Highe's protestations to the contrary, the readers did not pick up *Bella's* intended appeal to all women, regardless of size - only *Take a Break* was applauded for its lack of emphasis on thinness, both on its health pages and in its fashion features (see Illustration 7):

Kate: I don't like the constant emphasis on diets and how to keep your man. Because again that's presuming that women have all got to be size tens.

Jilly: If she's supposed to be frumpy, how many people are going to look at that and think, well, I look like that, I must be frumpy.

Sara: Or I don't even manage to look as good/

Kate: One thing I've got recently is the Oxfam catalogue and that's got models sized like 14, 16 and 18, I think that's far better and they look good in the clothes they're modelling.

Social Workers

This interpretation of *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break* as promoting a culture of thinness was echoed by a group of north Sheffield Access Course students, who took a similar view of the magazines:



**ILLUSTRATION 7**

*Take a Break*

**30 March 1995**



FASHION TO WIN • FASHION TO WIN • FASHION TO WIN • FASHION TO WIN •



# Smarty pants

*We're not pulling your leg! Whatever your height or size, we have trousers to suit you*

◀ **SHORT CUT TO SUCCESS**  
*Specialist ranges for smaller women are on the increase. These collections get the proportions just right.*

**Marva thought she was too short and curvy to wear strong colours or patterns. These madras burnt orange check trousers helped convince her otherwise.**  
 Check cotton narrow trousers, £40; burgundy cotton

knit top, £30, both sizes SML, French Connection. Brown suede loafers, £39.99, Faith.

**Maria loves jazzy pants in fun shades. Up to now, with her petite measurements, they've been thin on the ground. She couldn't believe we'd found her a pair that fitted!**  
 Rose-print cotton jeans, sizes 26-34, £40, Modzart. Orange viscose cropped top, sizes 10-14, £11.99, Miss Selfridge. Diamanté bracelet, £30, Monet. White lace-ups, £39.99, Faith.

**FOUR OF THE BEST** ▶

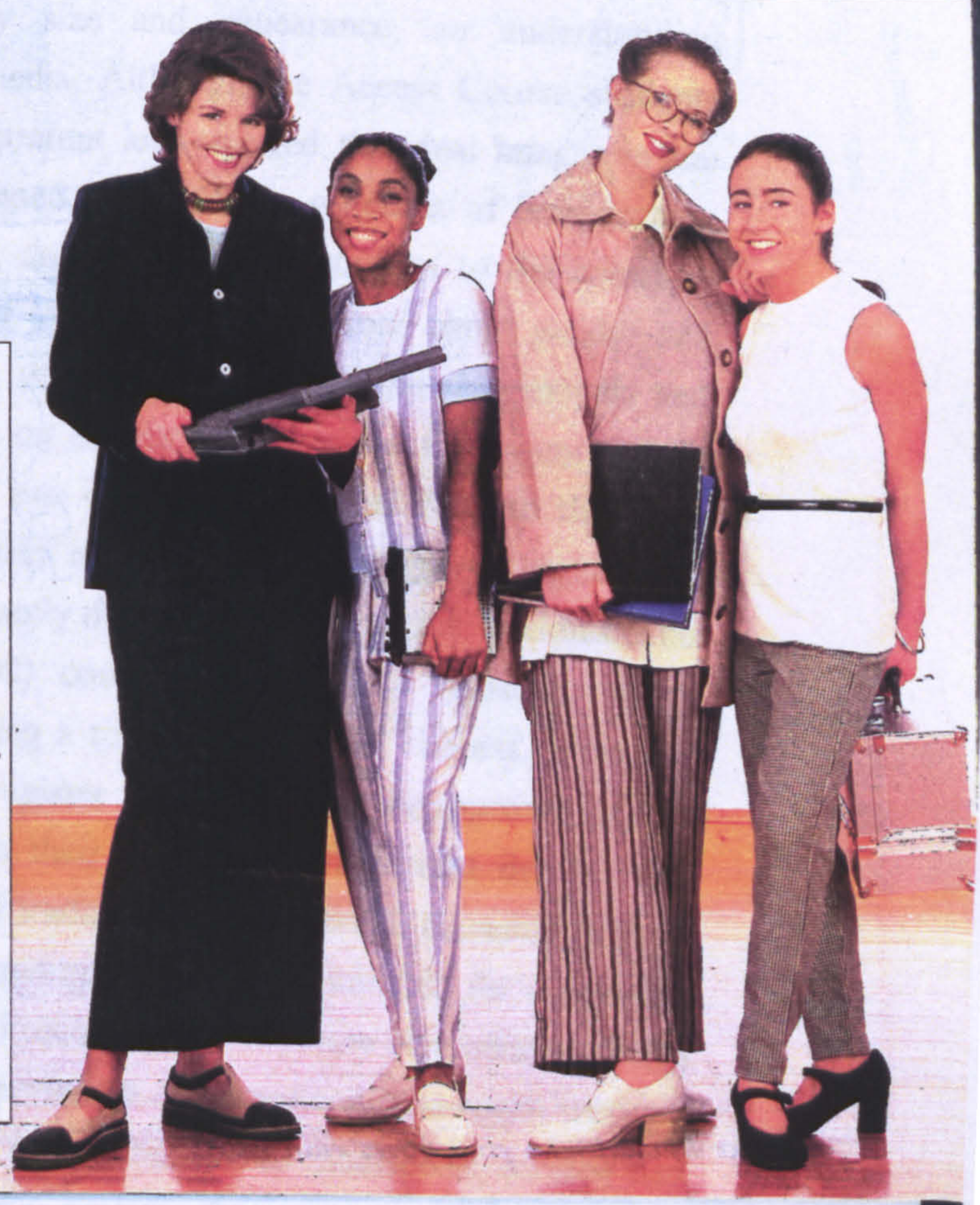
*Four different trouser shapes give four casual but classy looks.*

**Catherina's height means she can carry off wider pants with ease.**  
 Navy wool-mix dungaree flared trousers, £79.99; matching fitted jacket, £54.99, both sizes 10-14, Naf Naf. Pastel green lambswool/angora sweater, sizes 10-16, style WU77913, £17.99, Freemans. Glass and thong choker, £3.65 for kit, The Bead Shop. Sandals, £55, Camper.

**With vertical striped trousers and matching waistcoat, Marva's dressing along the right lines.**  
 Striped cotton easy-fitting trousers, style EV5002, £19.99; matching waistcoat, style EK3897, £14.99; blue cotton top (worn underneath), style YB7695, £13.99, all sizes 10-16, Littlewoods Home Shopping. White cotton mesh top, sizes SML, £19.99, Mexx. Silver rope, £3.99, Bow Bangles. Loafers, £39.99, Faith.

**Wide drawstring pants worn with layers are both flattering and comfortable for Nicky.**  
 Striped wide linen drawstring trousers, £24.99; taupe cotton rib jumper, £19.99; white linen shirt, £29.99, all sizes S-XL, Hennes Big is Beautiful. Buttermilk suede jacket, sizes 10-16, style CS36053, £185, Complete Essentials. Specs, Nicky's own. Suede lace-ups, £39.99, Shellys.

**Thanks to her small figure, Maria can check out gingham with confidence.**  
 Gingham stretch Capri pants, sizes 6-14, style M59517, £34.99, Next and Next Directory. Cream sleeveless polo, from a selection at Debenhams. Black patent narrow belt, £18.50, Otto Glanz. Shoes, £39, Miss Selfridge. Case, photographer's own.





Denise: All the things that were in the magazine were nothing to do with me or my world. Even the fashion, because I'm an 18 in size, erm, so it didn't really relate to me.

Helen: As you can see, I'm a size ten [*sarcastically*].

[*laughter*]

Helen: It's nothing to do with us, though, is it? I mean, it's just size ten stereotyping, which is what they're all about really, trying to keep you to conform.

Anna: Yeah, you should be permanently on a diet.

North Access Course

Such a focus on dieting and body shape was seen as unfeminist by these readers, who resented being told they should be trying to lose weight. Having just taken a course on media representations, their new discourse allowed them to critique the magazines for this perceived bias towards thin women. Both the Access Course students and social workers criticised the magazines from a particular understanding of how media representations can affect women in terms of expectations of body size and appearance, an understanding originating in education about media. Although the Access Course students said they ignored the slimming content and rejected the ideal images in the magazines (but the images continued to serve as a reminder of how women *should* look), the social workers, despite their protestations to the contrary, remained partly within the web of ideological expectations about gender and appearance. Having criticised the magazines for portraying thin models and diet information, they then went on to discuss strategies for losing weight before a forthcoming wedding of one of the group. In addition to this, they were all readers of women's monthly magazines, and it might be argued that their images of women are significantly thinner than those in the weeklies. This example illustrates Frazer's (1992) concept of discourse registers, where readers can swap ways of discussing a topic according to context. Thus, the social workers used a feminist register to show their disapproval of the magazines, a register grounded in their knowledge of current debates and academic learning. This shifted to a traditional, heterosexual, romantic register when the same concept of weight and appearance was invoked for a personal discussion of brides and outfits, and revealed how separate academic concerns are to the social workers' actual experiences and practices. The social workers felt the magazines to be harmful to others, but not to themselves, as they had the knowledge to see through and analyse the magazines' content, and ostensibly to reject it. Their genuine concern was for readers who might be



adversely influenced by the images, and in this sense they invoked the idea of a passive reader, absorbing uncritically the thin models. Although the images are there in the weeklies to a certain extent, and act as a reference point for the way women are supposed to look, readers do not automatically accept them (and indeed the theories and arguments around eating disorders and media representations are unclear and incorporate many other factors, for example see Giddens [1991]).

In the focus group discussions with the Access Course students and the social workers, there was a recognition that *Take a Break* was attempting to portray models closer to the average size. Originally, the social workers had grouped all three magazines together but as they read them more closely, it was decided that *Take a Break* could be differentiated from other women's weekly magazines by both its images of women and its lack of dieting content:

Jilly: Actually, in some of these magazines, the models are older and not as skinny as in the magazines for younger women. So I suppose that's quite good. You're not aiming for unrealistic sort of looks then, are you?

Social Workers

And from the Access Course:

Anna: And also *Eva* doesn't have heavy fashion and you must diet and you must do this and that, it's not like that. It's not like centred on fashion and health and diet which is something that makes a change.

CJO: Mmm, do you think most women's magazines are centred on that kind of stuff?

Anna: A lot of it is, yeah. But *Take a Break's* not too much like that.

North Access Course

Thus, there was recognition and support for John Dale's attempts to portray women more realistically and not give his readers impossible images to strive for. But *Bella* and *Best* were seen as unfeminist magazines because of their use of thin models and their inclusion of diet and weight loss articles. Other readers, for example Kath, a library assistant, did not think that any of the three weeklies went far enough in their challenge to expected norms in appearance:

No, I still think the majority of women nowadays still like believe that looking a certain way is the be all and end all of



their life. And so by reading magazines in a way, they're going to say, oh, well, we'll look like this or we'll attempt to look like that. And that's why I think the main editors or the people at the top that actually put money into magazines, I would think are men, yeah.

Kath Price, library assistant

Thus Kath remained opposed to all the magazines, rejecting the notion that the editors were trying to challenge expectations in appearance. For her, the weeklies were indistinguishable and all sent out damaging messages to their readers (see Illustrations 8 and 9) but like the social workers, she believed that these did not affect her own sense of identity.

Most of the women I interviewed had clear ideas about the health, as illustrated above. Only a minority took what could be termed a negotiating position, in that they acknowledged the usefulness of the health information but did not relate it to themselves. Delia Wilson, for example, made the interesting point that children may find women's magazines useful, or at least more useful than she herself finds them, not being a regular reader:

I think children are able to pick the bits out. I think actually they're more concerned with all the health and the children's stuff, you know, whether it's truancy or bullying, they'll read things because they actually directly involve them. Whereas if I read them I'm just a third party to it.

Delia Wilson, homemaker

Leading a very outdoors kind of lifestyle, with animals and land to look after, meant that Delia did not see much that was of use to her in the magazines. Also, if she ever had any spare time after caring for three young schoolchildren and the animals, she preferred to walk outside rather than curl up by the fire with a woman's magazine. Hence, the magazines did not fulfil any needs or gaps in her busy life, although she had read them when she worked for a short time in a shop, using the magazines to fill in the spaces between serving customers. For Delia, magazines were only appropriate when there was time to fill - as a full time mother to three children, such time was now scarce. Thus, her previous occupation facilitated magazine use, although it did not appear to alter her perception and decoding of magazines like *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break*. They were still regarded as something to read when nothing else was available and pockets of time needed to be filled, for example at her mother-in-



**ILLUSTRATION 8**

*Bella*

**12 July 1995**



## Fashion

### ◀ Lilac days

Seersucker was a definite fashion favourite in the Fifties — and these duo-tone pants are the updated version, looking smart worn under a snappy belted jacket. Add your choice of retro accessories to complete the stylish look. Capri pants £35, s-l, French Connection. Linen-mix jacket (with belt) £99, 9-14, Kookai. Top (underneath) £17.99, one size, Ego. Jewellery, Marks & Spencer. Shoes, Office. Bag, Debenhams.

### ▼ Candy girl

Dress up your casuals by combining beautifully cut Capri pants with a narrow belt — this season's essential accessory — and patent dolly shoes. Finish with a candy-stripe shirt tied with a knot at the waist. Capri pants £34.95, 10-16, Laura Ashley. Shirt (M58174) £26.99, s-xl, Next Directory. Belt, Otto Glanz. Earrings, Janet Coles Beads. Shoes, Ranger.

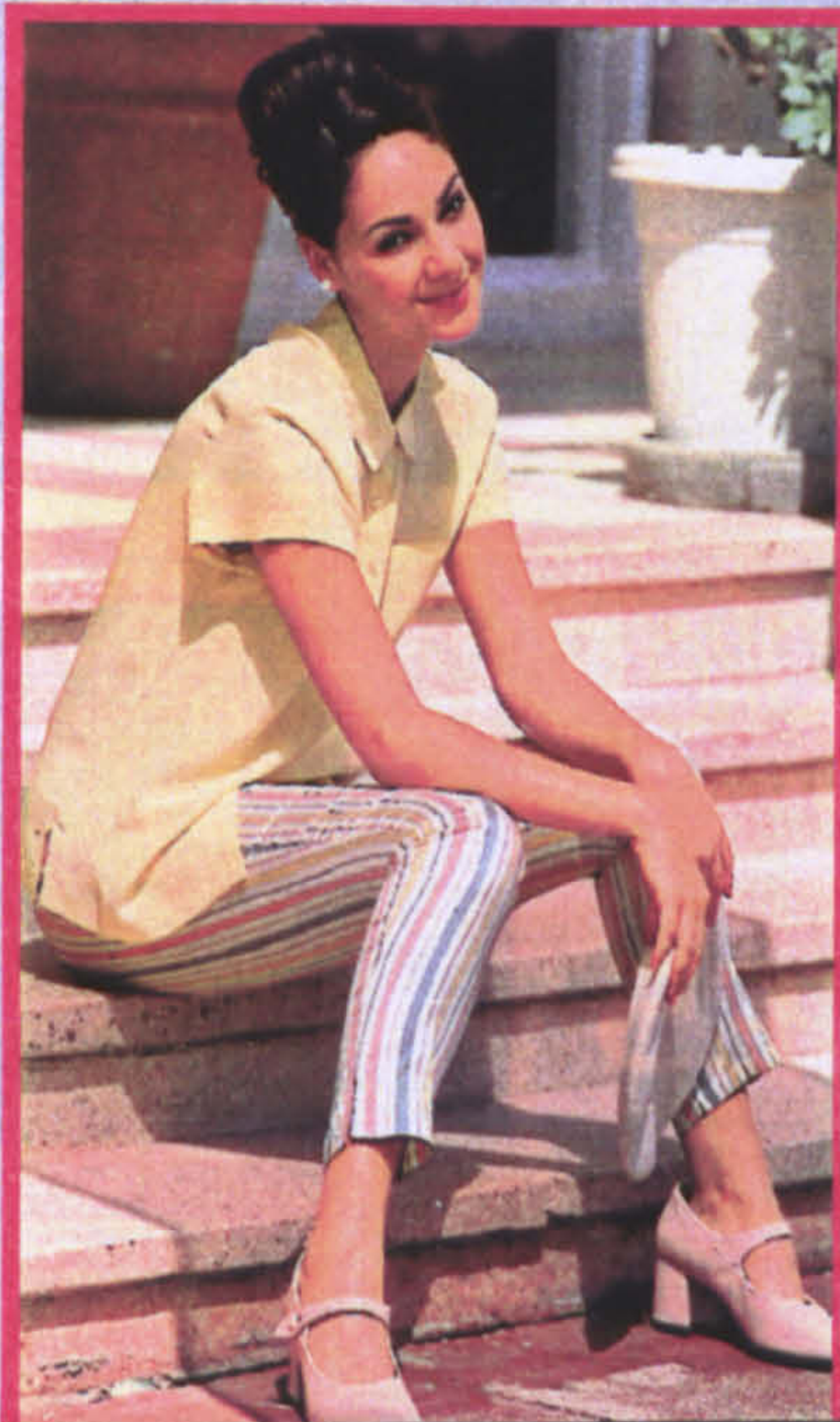
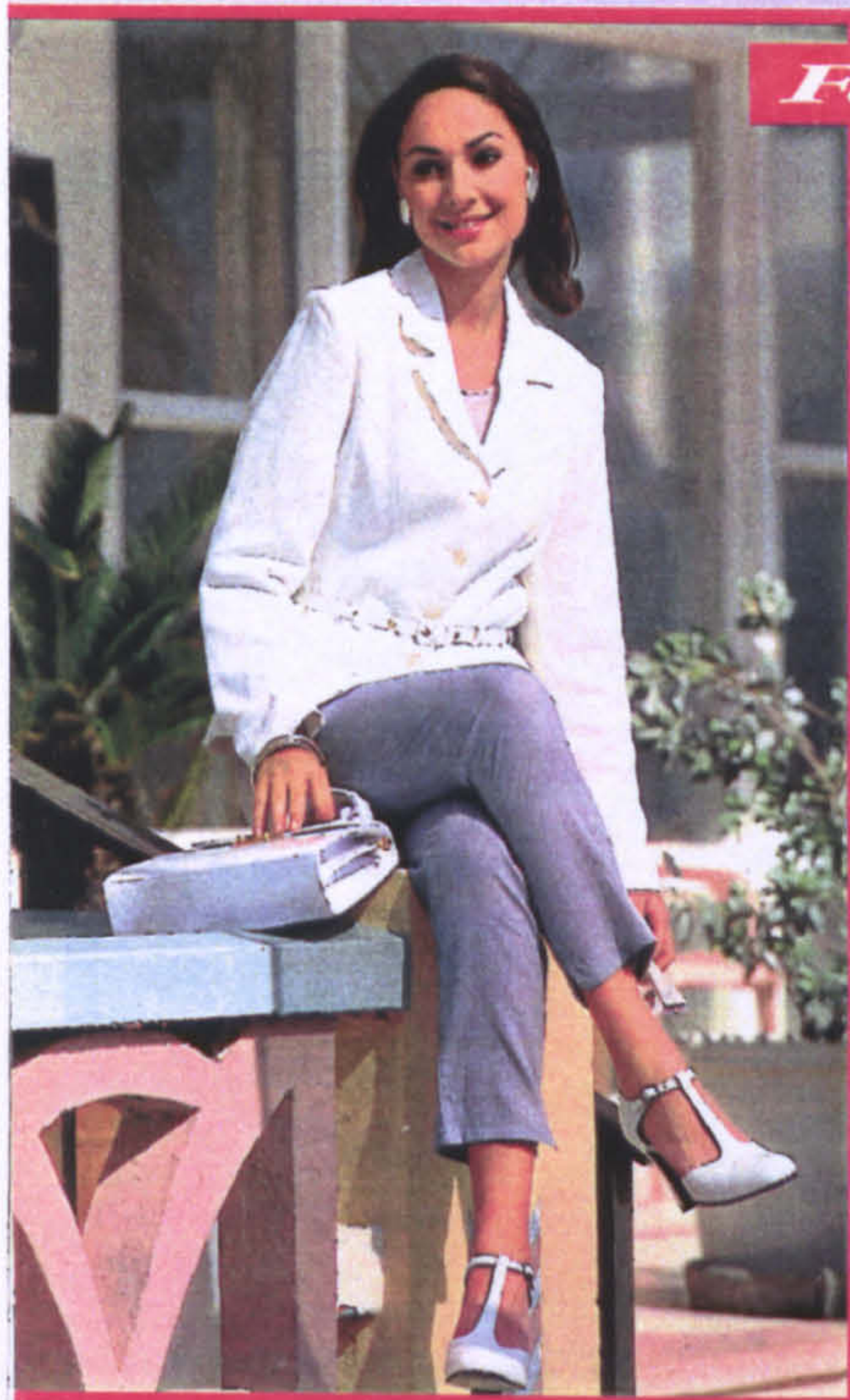
### ▼ Silk sensation

For a touch of luxury, try these subtly striped silk pants — complete with the authentic ankle slits. Great for evening with high heels and your hair up, or wear them in the day with flat ballet pumps and a tunic top. Capri pants £60, s-l, French Connection. Silk blouse £24.99, 10-14, River Island. Earrings, Adrien Mann. Beret, Kangol. Shoes, Ranger.

### Check chic ▶

Eat your heart out, Doris Day! Fresh cotton gingham gives Capri pants a go-anywhere feel. Team them with a Fifties-style tie-front shirt and plimsolls and you're set for the whole summer.

Capri pants £29.99, 8-14, Miss Selfridge. Tie-front blouse £19.99, 10-14, River Island. Earrings, Janet Coles Beads. Plimsolls, Keds.



### THE GENUINE ARTICLE

★ Authentic Capri pants are side-zipped, ankle-length and often have an ankle slit.  
★ Capri pants got their name from the fashion designer Emilio Pucci of Capri — he of the loud prints. They were fairly revolutionary when he designed the first pair in 1949 and went on to be the fashion favourite of so many sexy starlets, from Sophia Loren to Brigitte Bardot.





**ILLUSTRATION 9**

*Best*

**11 July 1995**



*Add lots of jewellery to this button-through dress for a sophisticated evening look.*

Dress, 10-16, C&A, £19.99. Shoes, Jones Bootmakers, £29.99. Glasses, from a selection at Anglo-American Eyewear. Watch, from a selection at Tissot.

**Best buy**  
**£19.99**

*To show off a trim waist, knot this shirt and team with a pair of tight-fitting pants.*

Shirt, s-xl, £44.99; shorts, s-xl, £39.99, both Part Two. Earrings, Accessorize, £3.99.



*Wear this smart waistcoat with a loose granddad shirt and wide linen pants for an elegant effect.*

Waistcoat, s-xl, Part Two, £49.95. Skirt, 10-14, Ego, £19.99. Hat, from a selection at Accessorize. Watch, from a selection at Tissot.

# Summer stripes

*Stay cool when the sun is beating down with our crisp, stripy cotton and linen separates*



law's house. Hermes (1995) found that readers frequently used women's magazines in this way, and she characterised this aspect of magazine use as easy to pick up and just as easy to put down again. In my own research, the readers usually had more to say about the magazines than the fact they could be picked up and put down easily, although this was a part of their attraction and contrasted with reading novels, which demanded more attention and time.

Looking at the readers' interpretations of the health content in the three magazines, it would seem that the features are either accepted as empowering, useful and relevant, or rejected as worrying and depressing, although I would not go so far as to suggest readers saw them as *disempowering*. I think a disempowering notion of health would be to suggest a medicalisation of women's bodies, whereas readers who criticised the health did so from a perspective of the magazines offering insufficient information or linking 'sad' true life stories with medical issues. Such readers often had some knowledge of health and/or women's issues already, for example Sandra was a nurse, the social workers considered themselves to be up-to-date with the debates around eating disorders and representations, and the north Sheffield Access Course students had recently addressed images of women in the media as part of their studies. Such insider knowledge enabled them to criticise the magazines in a way that other readers could not. However, this is not to say that all the women to whom I spoke who had some familiarity with health issues interpreted the magazines in a similar way. Diane Harrison, a nurse who was now a full-time mother to three young children, had nothing to say about the dieting features in women's magazines, instead focusing on the features about children's eating habits and recipes. But as she ruefully admitted, she had been 'out of circulation' since her eldest son had been born in 1990 and her focus of interest had shifted from medical to family matters. Therefore, the women who criticised the health pages in the magazines as unnecessarily worrying were articulating other discourses to which they had access and which informed their positions. As discussed in chapter one, discourses are constructed from the reader's knowledges, prejudices and resistances, and informed by social and institutional positionings (Moore 1993). Thus Sandra had access to a particular medical discourse in her professional capacity as a nurse in addition to a family discourse which located her as a concerned daughter-in-law, both contributing to her response to the magazines. The various discourses in play for each reader will structure their interpretations of the media as Morley



(1980) found in his study of the *Nationwide* audience. The socioeconomic location of viewers and readers affects the choice of available discourses but within these limits, certain discourses are accessed and serve to structure media response, as illustrated by Sandra above. It would seem that education also plays a key role in the discourses used in the interpretation of magazines, a factor which drew together the responses of the social workers, Kath Price and the students on the Access Course, all very different in traditional socioeconomic terms of occupation, but linked via their common educational discourses to critique the weeklies.

Other readers obviously appreciated the health content, using it to empower their relationship with their GP or to obtain knowledge they had previously lacked. However, I should make a distinction here between readers *feeling* empowered and actually *being* empowered by the magazines' content. I used earlier the example of Lynn Barstow, given the information by *Take a Break* to request certain treatment from her doctor. In this particular instance, Lynn was able to take the initiative in her doctor/patient relationship and she felt empowered in this encounter by her possession of certain information. Yet whether her relationship with her GP actually altered after this episode was unclear. To investigate more closely whether readers like Lynn were really empowered by the magazines is outside the scope of this thesis, although it is clear that they felt empowered.

The reassuring element of not being alone in one's illness or of reading about others who have recovered was an important factor in the appeal of the true life health, particularly in *Take a Break*. Not having access to any medical discourses, these readers used the magazines to keep them informed and up-to-date, appreciating the straightforward language and accessible style of the features (although, as we saw above, not all readers were able to understand fully the language used by the magazines). It saved them the trouble of looking through a medical dictionary or family health encyclopaedia:

I find the health page quite interesting because like this cousin I'm talking about with the heart attack, her mother had cataracts done last year. And just by coincidence at the same time there was an article about the cataract operation, you know, and I passed it on for her to read. And George [*husband*] suffers from gallstones and so they're all things you relate to yourself, aren't



they? Not being a reader of doctor's books and things, these are just all right.

Sheila Strong, retired

Sheila, who had no medical knowledge, found the level of information in *Best* entirely suitable for her particular needs and those of her family. Sometimes, women's traditional role as provider and nurturer of others was reinforced by the health features, as readers gathered up knowledge for friends and relatives, always on the lookout for relevant information. This function of the magazines as purveyors of information served to facilitate women's friendship and kinship networks, a theme which came out strongly from the interviews, and which will be discussed in the next chapter.

The health content, therefore, was mainly decoded in two possible ways - it was either accepted by the readers or rejected by them. The first position confirmed the editors' intentions for the content, the second position took an oppositional stance. Of course, there were other readers who did not discuss the health pages, either from disinterest or because they read the magazines for other reasons. These readers will be discussed later in this chapter.

In relation to sociological categories, which were discussed in chapter two, can any conclusions be drawn about the way different readers interpreted the health in *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break*? It would appear that the magazines can help to fill in the knowledge gaps for those readers who may not have the cultural capital of education or professional discourses. Readers such as Nora Green and Lynn Barstow, for example, used the magazines in this way. Both these working class, middle aged women had little education and worked in a low paid job of home warden. They both suffered from injured backs and other ailments from constantly lifting elderly people, and so the medical information in the magazines actually increased their knowledge and enabled them to deal with their problems in a practical way. For other working class readers, the health information was not seen as useful because their professional identities allowed them to be better informed than the material the magazines could reasonably include on two or three pages of health. Sandra, in the north Mother and Toddler group, was well-informed as a nurse and could dismiss the health in the weeklies as misleading and worrying. However, for Sheila, who was retired, and Carol in the north Access Course group, the only way they



could obtain current medical news or developments was through the health pages. The magazines are aiming to inform readers such as Carol, Sheila, Nora and Lynn, who do not have access to other forms of easily understood health material. In this sense, the factor of age seemed to have little to do with readers' decodings of the health, as women from a wide range found them practically useful and relevant, although older readers did have numerous illnesses and therefore might have gleaned information more frequently than younger readers. However, age did seem to be a factor in the general appreciation of the weeklies, and this will be addressed in the second half of this chapter when the true life stories will be discussed.

The interpretations of readers discussed above complicates Hall's three neat decoding positions and the model's emphasis on class. The use of discourse was necessary to analyse the readers' responses, which could not be reduced solely to socioeconomic position as Morley (1980) found but which supports the concept of the subject as constructed by social discourses and cultural practice (Alcoff 1988; Ang and Hermes 1991), making sweeping class generalisations potentially misleading. To suggest that all working class or middle class women read the magazines in a particular way omits more local factors which are peculiar to each reader, although class may be used to indicate the potential cultural capital of the readers and thus their needs which the magazines might fulfill.

### **Money, Work and Rights**

As suggested in the previous chapter, the money, work and rights articles, according to the editors, are an important part of *Best* and *Bella - Take a Break* does not feature these topics unless they arise within a true life story or a campaign (for example, the short series of features on women getting good service at garages; the rights of women to breastfeed in public). In the content analysis, I suggested that the articles could be seen to represent a feminist agenda in their assumption of women's independence and their ability to cope, although this agenda was tempered by its location in a woman's magazine. However, the presence of the money, works and rights articles, I hypothesized, would be a key factor in readers' assessments of the magazines, given their subject topics and modes of address. But readers had very little to say about this part of the magazines' content and I got the impression that few women



actually read these articles - they were never described as favourite content or as the first part of the magazine to be read. One or two readers did mention them briefly when discussing the content but the topics or advice were never raised as empowering or even as something of which to take note. Dianna Hartley commented briefly on *Bella's* law section:

I like this section, *The Law and You*. You know, because I always like to think I'm a law abiding citizen [*laughter*]. I like to do the right thing, so I always read that bit.

Dianna Hartley, teacher

Dianna's comments were slightly tongue-in-cheek - her reasons for reading *The Law and You* were perhaps more to do with the column's size and style than its content, as she later mentioned that on the first reading, when she has just bought *Bella*, she will read the little articles (the problem page, the law feature, the doctor's advice column) and then a few days later return to the magazine to read the longer articles. Dianna's stressful job as deputy headteacher of a nursery school meant that she preferred the reading she did for relaxation and enjoyment to be undemanding to contrast with her more academic reading, particularly as she was working on a part time PhD. For Dianna, the level of writing and topics in *Bella* were at a very easy level, ideal for reading before bedtime to 'switch off' from the day's work. If useful information was found in the content, this was a bonus to the main reason for reading *Bella*, that of relaxation.

Kath Price, the library assistant I interviewed twice, initially mentioned the *Best* rights and legal features during the focus group as innovative and as broadening the remit of women's magazines, but in her subsequent individual interview she qualified her earlier comments by suggesting that women's magazines, despite these small changes, continue to pigeonhole women and to incorporate traditional, domestic features:

Personally, I'd rather read a newspaper at weekends. 'Cos I'm more interested in things like, it sounds a bit, no, I'm more interested in things to do with like books, theatre, and I like to read about politics. That's why I'm saying I think that sometimes, no matter what women's magazines are trying to say now, they think, oh well, we've got to break some new ground, we're gonna have a feature on motoring, gardening or the law, fair enough, so I suppose it's broken a bit of ground from, say,



five, ten years ago, I still think they're relatively, you know, like they're in a little box, aren't they? And I still think they pigeonhole women.

Kath Price, library assistant

Yet the *Bella* and *Best* editors commented on the money, work and rights articles as particularly important to the magazines in offering a service to readers on which they could rely. Kath's position, however, coming from her location as an informed, educated woman (with A-levels), was slightly at odds with the rest of the library staff who accepted the magazines' representations of women as unproblematic and not worthy of comment. Her interest in political issues and current affairs, combined with a lack of interest in domestic matters meant that her use of magazines was limited, although she did use them to pass the time in lunch breaks and as topics of conversation with the other library staff (see chapter six). Therefore, Kath differed from her colleagues, emphasizing the instability of occupation as a sole means of grouping readers in a uniform response to media. Although united by occupation, the library staff were divided by education, with Kath questioning the magazines in a way the others did not.

The breastfeeding campaign in *Take a Break* did merit a mention by a few of the readers, although this was not always favourable. Kim Carter had noticed the campaign but thought it 'seemed a bit out of place' - she did think it was a good thing, however, but unusual for *Take a Break*, as she perceived the magazine's content as more lightweight and humorous. Louise Tyler appreciated the campaign more, as she herself worked as a waitress in a small cafe:

Yes, I did, I noticed that, I thought it was good, I thought that was a good idea, you could actually, you could see people open their eyes and realise, the letters, the feedback that the editors get, I mean, I know in the cafe that I work at, we'd already got a sign in our window before the campaign even started.

Louise Tyler, student and part time waitress

Thus, *Take a Break's* breastfeeding campaign attracted more comment than the regular slots in *Best* and *Bella* on rights, money or work. This may have been due to the prominence given to the campaign by *Take a Break* - it featured on the cover, ran over several issues and was given high visibility. Whereas the



money, works and rights articles only make up a small proportion of *Best* and *Bella* and are often tucked away in the corners of pages or along the bottom of a page. Only the social workers discussed a feature that was similar in style and address to the money, works and rights articles, and this was a feature on how to change an iron flex. Although not strictly in any of the three categories, it was aimed at empowering women in an area not usually associated with women's magazines, albeit the appliance was a domestic one, something not lost on the social workers:

Jilly: And this is an interesting article on how to replace the flex on your iron [*laughter*]

Kate: That sounds useful.

Jilly: Actually, it probably is. It's not telling you to go and get a man to do it, it's/

Kate: No, but it's about a female thing like the iron, isn't it. It's not how to change a plug in general, it's how to fix this on your iron.

Jilly: And it's *your* iron, isn't it? As if it's the woman's iron, rather than the man's.

Social Workers

The social workers criticised this feature on the iron flex from their particular feminist locations, but when asked if they thought the magazines contained any empowering content, they returned to this example:

Kate: Some of the stuff is quite empowering, like the how to change the flex on your iron, it's quite empowering because it means they don't have to wait until their husband comes home/

Sara: Have you ever wanted to change the flex on your iron?

Kate: No, but you might need to.

Jilly: I bet you'd go and buy a new one, wouldn't you?

Sara: No, just wear clothes that don't need ironing.

Kate: Yeah, that'd be more empowering.

Social Workers

The social workers, therefore, recognised the attempts of the editors to include empowering material but disliked the domestic connotations, which from their position they felt negated the impact of the iron flex article.

Therefore, what I had categorized as one of the most potentially empowering aspects of the magazines because of its information in areas not usually associated with a woman's weekly, its assumed independence on behalf of



readers from men, and its attempts to blur gender roles and instruct women in men's traditional tasks, (and of which the editors had been very proud), was not particularly interesting to the readers I interviewed, many of whom did not comment on these articles. Yet many women obviously do use the magazines as a source of information in the areas of work, money or the law, as illustrated by the published letters and problems asking for advice. This seems to be the real role of the money, work and rights articles, at least in their question and answer formats - to act as a source of advice for individuals, rather than being generally useful or applicable to other readers. Because of the nature of the problems readers write in with, they are individualized issues, which are not especially interesting for others. The problems are also perhaps less entertaining than the traditional problem page and therefore do not merit the same level of engagement.



### True life stories

Out of all the readers I interviewed, few articulated the supportive feminist role of the magazines quite so effectively as Pat Evans, a part time cloakroom attendant. Pat, married to a works manager and in her mid fifties with two grown up children, worked three days every week, cared for her elderly mother each weekend, and looked after her three grandchildren two afternoons a week. In addition, she knitted clothes for the grandchildren, had several hobbies, and enjoyed an active social life with her husband. In other words, Pat represented many of the women I spoke with, who were relied upon by elderly parents and adult children with their own offspring to look after both old and young. Such a reality for many women was coped with uncomplainingly, indeed it was viewed as an expected role and one which they looked on as an extension of their mothering identity.

Pat began to discuss the relevance of the true life stories in answer to a question from me about the sadness of the stories, replying that:

Yes. Er, I always think you never know when you're going to be in that position yourself. And there are certain articles that would lift you and think, well, they've got over it, then maybe I can as well.

Pat Evans, cloakroom attendant

She followed this with a personal account of a situation that had happened to her own family, and this situation had been reflected in a true life story in *Take a Break*:

You know, it's er, everybody has their problems and I've had a few in the past, but that's all by the way, but I found that reading *Take a Break*, which is the main one that I do read, er, there's been people in the same circumstances as I have. For one instance, when my first grandchild was born, er, somewhere along the line we had a fall out and I never saw my grandchild for nine months. It was heartbreaking. And during that time there was a letter from a grandma and it lifted me and I actually wrote to *Take a Break* but I hadn't got the guts to post it. And reading that letter, I thought at that time there was only me that it could happen to, and when you speak about it, there's thousands and thousands of grandparents who somehow, I don't



know, what's happened. Yes, yes. Through no fault of ours at all. And, er, I'm not a domineering mother-in-law, or, you know, and now there was this lady who rang up, er, sorry, who wrote to *Take a Break* and her story was published. In fact, I would have liked to have written to that lady personally, you know, and let her know my feelings to share it with somebody. Because I bottled it all up.

Pat Evans, cloakroom attendant

Pat's account illustrates the intended role of *Take a Break* as helping ordinary women who are trying to deal with their lives - the portrayal by the magazine of situations and events that befall women are taken note of by other women reading these narratives, who can then draw strength from the knowledge that they are not alone in their predicament. It is not inconceivable to suggest that such knowledge fosters a sense of community amongst readers, linking them symbolically via their common experience and therefore continuing the editors' attempts to promote a supportive feminism within the magazines (see chapter six for a fuller discussion of community). The stories also allow the reader to learn from other women's accounts and perhaps mistakes. In Pat's case, the strength came from knowing she was not the only grandmother to lose touch with her grandchildren and reading the story gave her a reason to write down her experience in a letter, although she didn't post it. The posting of such a letter seems almost irrelevant - as Pat said, she had 'bottled it all up' but the story supplied an outlet for her feelings. However, she did feel regret at not contacting the author of the true life story, both to show her appreciation and to share her experience with a sympathetic other. The effect of writing down one's problems and its therapeutic value is referred to by Letherby and Zdrodowski (1995) who used correspondence as research data for their projects on involuntary childlessness and being overweight respectively. Many of their respondents appreciated the opportunity to put their experiences on paper, either because of an inability to tell family and friends or because the people around them were tired of hearing their story. Pat had felt reluctant to tell people close to her of this family rift - grandparents, and especially grandmothers, have a traditional role in society. There is an expectation of unconditional love, time, support and enjoyment between grandmothers and grandchildren, and certainly of pride on behalf of grandparents. Admitting to a breakdown in this relationship is tantamount to failing as a mother. In Pat's words, it was 'heartbreaking' and something not to be discussed or admitted to.



She could only discuss it now because it had been resolved. And in her position as mother-in-law and grandmother, Pat was able to use *Take a Break* to help rebuild the relationship with her family, by saving cuttings and articles from the magazine to give to her daughter-in-law for her college course.

In addition to using *Take a Break* as a source of reassurance and strength, and to enable her to be useful to her daughter-in-law, Pat also recounted a further use of the magazine, but on behalf of a relative. Specific advice from the 'agony aunt' (or 'uncle' as it is now) was requested by Pat's cousin in relation to a family problem:

In fact, a relation of mine, she had trouble with her daughter, and she wrote to *Take a Break*, and my cousin doesn't have the magazine and all the names were altered. But I read that. She wanted, she was desperate, and she wanted a reply. And I read it and I picked it out straightaway.

Pat Evans, cloakroom attendant

In this instance, the magazine itself is used as a source of advice, rather than the experiences of others related in the true life stories. *Take a Break* has a policy of replying to every letter sent in to its problem page, either personally or in the magazine. Thus the reader can be assured that it is not only salacious or dramatic problems that receive an answer, although it may be the case that these are the ones featured on the page. Pat's cousin obviously received her reply via publication in *Take a Break*, as it was read (and recognised) by Pat.

Pat never articulated her experience with *Take a Break* by using a feminist discourse - indeed, the term feminism was not mentioned in the conversation. Yet her experience with the true life stories illustrated editor John Dale's commitment to providing a supportive feminism in *Take a Break*, specifically to allow readers to benefit from other women's (and men's) experiences. Dale's definition of feminism was articulated around the struggles of working class women in everyday life and his efforts, through *Take a Break*, to help alleviate these struggles. By this definition, *Take a Break* succeeds as a feminist publication - readers like Pat articulate their involvement with *Take a Break* in a similar frame of reference to that used by the magazine - neither use the term feminism but both understand each other in their intentions i.e. their encoding and decoding positions. Pat decoded *Take a Break* in the way intended by John



Dale, and as a working class mother, without other channels or discourses to draw upon to articulate or explain her situation, which she felt was too shameful to discuss, the information in the magazine was important to Pat to enable her to make sense of her family circumstances.

The interview with Pat was undertaken in an individual context within a workplace situation. One of the focus groups I interviewed also offered similar views to those of Pat in terms of their acceptance of the intended messages in the magazines, but this time in relation to *Bella*. The focus group took place in a Job Club in a small Derbyshire town and featured four women, all unemployed, without academic qualifications and in their late teens/early twenties. The women had a mixture of reactions to magazines, ranging from disinterest, to negotiating, to accepting the feminist content. Tracy, a married woman in her early twenties, directly related her own life to the experiences of women in the true life stories:

CJO: Do you find that some of the stories in the magazines are about the same sort of things that you're going through?

Tracy: Yeah, I do. Yeah, all sorts, that's why I like to look through them and see what's going off and things like that. A lot of 'em are about babies and you know, like if they've lost, there were one about six weeks ago, it were about a woman who'd had a baby and she'd had her about eleven days, and, er, she were ok, next thing had to rush her to operating theatre and give her an operation and she didn't pull through, you know, ever so sad, some of the stories. Terrible.

Job Club

Tracy told me how she had been trying for a baby for five years and so any true life stories on this topic held immediate relevance and interest for her. Her desire to keep up to date and see what was happening in the field might possibly give her important information about her own infertility but also give her hope when reading about other couples who had conceived after years of trying. Women's weeklies proved to be a valued source of material, giving Tracy information which she did not know how to access elsewhere. But the true life story recalled by Tracy above offered neither hope nor information, instead being a sad tale of a baby's death. All the examples recalled by Tracy were of sad stories, showing a fascination with the misfortunes of others and demonstrating the tragic structure of feeling (Ang 1985) discussed in the



previous chapter. Tracy's competence in understanding and enjoying such stories illustrated her ability to appreciate the uncertainty of happiness and to take pleasure in the emotional contrasts between misery and joy in the stories. Other women I spoke with (for example, Beryl, Rene, Louise) specifically cited such stories as making their own lives seem better in comparison. Hermes (1996) also found that readers enjoy melodramatic stories because they provide solace at the expense of the unhappiness of others - readers of gossip magazines gave Hermes examples of how the misery of famous people made them feel better about their own lives, or allowed them to have a good cry over some sadness or frustration they could not articulate. There is also the possibility for readers of identifying with the experiences of ordinary characters in the true life stories, more so than with the celebrities in the gossip magazines, although of course some experiences are seen as universal and can provide the reader with material to test such a scenario were it to occur in her own life (for example, divorce, motherhood, illness). The universality of emotion is all important. As Hermes suggested:

When you are faced with understanding motherhood, it doesn't matter that the other is a queen: the moral community of gossip scales down such differences as well as exploits them when that is more appropriate.

Hermes 1996:12-13

Such experiences can happen to anybody, regardless of celebrity status, but readers may find it easier to empathise with others from similar backgrounds rather than the rich and famous. Certainly for the readers I interviewed, the attraction of the magazines was their focus on the true lives of ordinary people, not celebrity lives. However, different magazines cater for ordinary and celebrity stories, and many women read a combination of both magazine genres, obtaining different (but perhaps overlapping) pleasures and information from each.

As well as Tracy in the Job Club focus group, Kelly also took an accepting position in relation to the editors' intentions for their true life stories in the magazines. Without identifying a specific magazine (various titles were mentioned, for example *Eva*, *That's Life*, *Bella*), Kelly related an instance where, like Pat, a particular true life story had held special relevance for her:



Kelly: Like, there were one about this lass who couldn't read and write, and that's like me, know what I mean?

Tracy: Just like dyslexia, isn't it?

Kelly: Yeah, I get embarrassed but she just like brought it all out. Let everyone know about it. And I feel more relaxed, more confident about it, like it's not me, it's everybody, isn't it? People think oh, she's right thick, she doesn't know what she's doing, she's not right in the head, but I think that's stupid.

Tracy: Yeah, I do, it's like prejudice, isn't it?

Kelly: I just think, if you can't take who I am, that's it.

CJO: So that was helpful to read about somebody else going through the same/

Kelly: Yeah, makes you feel more, I don't know, feel more good about, and she got picked on, things like that. And I, you know what I mean, it all come back.

Job Club

Kelly had assumed that the other women in the group were all competent at reading and writing and remarked to Michelle:

Kelly: I mean, you're all right aren't you, reading and writing.

Michelle: Me, I can't write to save me life!

Job Club

Michelle had not mentioned her poor reading and writing skills, but had joined in the conversation about reading magazines, albeit with problems in pronouncing the titles, for example *Woman's Realm* was pronounced 'Woman's Reelm', *Prima* as 'Peer something'. However, the point is that Kelly was given reassurance and confidence to acknowledge her literacy difficulties, and this had helped her come to terms with it, seeing it as a problem in others' perceptions of her, rather than her own problem.

Such an unequivocal acceptance of the true life stories as discussed above, in the way intended by the editors, was not widespread amongst the readers. Many of the women I spoke with adopted a negotiating position to the magazines. This meant that they acknowledged the potential of *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break* to relate some kind of feminist message to readers but this message was irrelevant to themselves, although they could understand how others might need such information. Some of the readers had already considered the possible relevance of the stories or health to themselves and



agreed that perhaps in the future such information might be useful to them. Other readers, however, had obviously not considered such a possibility and it was only when I suggested that the content of the true life stories might be read in this way that these readers acknowledged that others would find them useful. Both responses involved a process of the reader distancing herself from the information available. Some examples from the interviews will illustrate these two positions - first, Jane from the Job Club:

CJO: The reason I ask about the true life stories is that there's quite a few where people have gone through traumatic experiences. Do you think they could ever be useful in terms of your own life? You know, if you ever came across something that was similar to what somebody else had gone through/

Jane: Yeah, I think then it would be good because the person's got over it, it shows they've coped with the situation and they've come through it. So often, if it tells you how they've coped with it, it can strengthen you, if you are in a similar situation, then you can benefit from trying to apply things that they've done.

CJO: Has that ever happened to you so far with the stories?

Jane: No.

Job Club

Although Jane had yet had no reason to use the true life stories in any way, she was open to the possibility that they may be useful in a supportive and informative sense if ever she found herself in a similar situation. But for the time being, she was content to read them as entertainment. Louise, also from the Job Club (but interviewed separately), took a likeminded view of the true life stories:

Louise: And you can relate to it or understand what that person's going through at the time. Because you can actually relate to it, that's probably why it makes it interesting to read.

CJO: Do they ever write about things that have happened to you?

Louise: No. But you can recognise the sentiments behind the emotions that the person is actually going through. If somebody is frustrated because of the lights that are coming on from the next door neighbour in the middle of the night waking you up, you can recognise how frustrated they'd be, being woken up at that time in the morning. Or if you've got some lunatic that's nicking stuff or continually breaking in, you can recognise that,



people can be so frustrated and annoyed by this and you can recognise that, even though it hasn't happened to yourself.

Louise Tyler, student and part time waitress

Both these *Take a Break* readers recognised the potential feminist content in the magazine and sympathised readily with the characters' situations. They decoded *Take a Break* in a similar frame of reference to the editors' encoded messages, although not to the extent of Pat or Kelly in actually relating the stories to themselves. Rene King, too, interpreted the true life stories from *Best* and *Bella* in this negotiated way:

CJO: And you mentioned the true life stories - do you prefer those to fiction?

Rene: Yes, definitely. Because they're true life and it's really happened. Erm, I mean, sometimes I think, as I do when I read the problem pages, has it really happened, but then I think they can't really print anything that they say is real life and it's fiction. So, I more or less think, well, this probably happened and I find it interesting because, it's interesting to read about someone else's life and what they're going through, whether it be good or bad. And sometimes you compare it with your own life as well.

CJO: Erm, when I went to see the editors of *Best* and *Bella*, they said that their magazines are really supporting ordinary women who are trying to struggle through every day life - do you get a sense of that from the magazines?

Rene: Yeah, I do, actually. I do. I mean, one of the reasons I choose *Best* and *Bella* is because you could see it happening, I mean, when you read some of the stories, because you listen to the news, something like that has happened to a person in real life. And I always think it's interesting to read these things because it gives you an insight into what could happen, it might not have happened to you, but there could be signs there. You know, like you think, oh, it sounds like what could happen, I mean, you don't get neurotic about it but I think it makes you more aware of what could happen in real life and it makes you more aware as a person of the different things that happen to different people. And sometimes it makes you think how lucky you are that that's never happened to you. And what's nice is also that if, erm, I mean, I'd never write up to a problem page, 'cos I don't really think that, erm, I'm that type of person and I don't think I have such problems as such that I have to write to a magazine, to be quite honest, 'cos I've got a supportive family and we all rally round each other. But some people haven't got a supportive family or supportive friends, they need, they're



probably too shy to go to their doctor's or to go and see a professional person, it's always nice to remain anonymous, to write to a magazine and get an insight into what a professional person would think about their problem. So I think that's a good thing about it. You know, because you can remain anonymous and you can look at it and think, ah, right, that's their viewpoint. So I think it's helpful in that respect.

Rene King, nursery nurse

Rene distanced herself from the need to use magazines in the way the editors suggest they might be used, but was aware that others, without a supportive family or friends, may well need the magazines for this purpose. This perspective contrasts with that of Julie Irving and Anne Lane, who had never considered *Bella* or *Take a Break* (their two favourite magazines) in this light. In response to my question about the possible supportive and empowering nature of the magazines and whether they themselves use them for this purpose, they replied:

Julie: I don't know whether I would or not, really because I don't think I've ever come across a situation that I've thought of doing that. No, I haven't.

CJO: No. But then, you're not on your own, you've got each other/

Julie: No, probably if you were, you don't know really, do you?

Anne: We just confide in each other, don't we?

Julie: Yeah, cry together.

Anne: I think probably you would if you were on your own/

Julie: Yeah, I mean, obviously people do/

Anne: They want the satisfaction, don't they, of knowing they're all right/

Julie: Yeah, a bit of advice. I sometimes wonder if it is only advice but I sometimes wonder if it's, if they get the answers they really want. They probably don't sometimes, but ... 'Cos I read 'em sometimes and I think, oh, I'd tell him where to get off, or different things, yet they can be quite sympathetic towards 'em, you know. Or I think/

Anne: Sometimes I think they write to see whether they do get printed/

Julie: Yeah, yeah, and I think, ooh, she's a fool, fancy letting him do that to her and but they do, don't they. Wipe floor with 'em sort of thing.

CJO: But do you get any impression of the magazines being there to help people?



Julie: Oh yeah. Yeah, I'm sure they do, yeah. (5)

Julie Irving, unemployed, and Anne Lane, shop assistant

Their lack of interest in this particular function of the magazines was obvious - not requiring it themselves, they were prepared to accept others might, but had not given it much thought until I raised the supportive and empowering nature of magazines. Like Rene, their confidence and security in their friendship and family networks insulated them from needing such support. Also, Julie and Anne only addressed part of the magazines' role, that of provider of advice - they did not mention the possibility of readers gaining strength or reassurance from the true life stories. Kim Carter, a *Take a Break* reader, did acknowledge this latter point, but only after thinking about the magazine:

CJO: It's interesting when you say *Take a Break* is more lightweight than the others because according to the editors, they're very keen on the role their magazine fills in helping people and advising people and tackling serious kinds of issues. Have you ever noticed anything like that in the magazine?

Kim: Not really. Unless you could say from the point that, you know, all the women who are shown are shown being strong. If they have violent husbands they're shown as being able to leave them. Maybe women in that kind of situation could sort of see, well, it's not only me who suffers in this way. Erm, maybe it's just that my life hasn't yet come across any of the problems it could have. I think it depends who's reading it, doesn't it?

CJO: Mmm, mmm. The *Take a Break* editor was talking about the breastfeeding campaign they had in *Take a Break* over the last few months, it's tailed off a bit now.

Kim: Mmm, I think that was a bit of a one off with *Take a Break* though. I mean, it seemed to sort of do that, 'cos I did notice it in it, and I thought, well, maybe are they doing that because they've had criticism? For being too lightweight because it didn't seem to fit in with the rest of the magazine. 'Cos it was, I mean, it probably was a good thing, you know, it was doing something good, but it just seemed a bit out of place. With all these stories about, you know, dogs opening fridges and whatever it is they have [laughter]. Maybe if you didn't have anywhere else to turn it would be but I can't see myself or anyone else I know who reads it as being in that position of not having anywhere else to turn to. I don't know if there are people who are like that, I can't really speak for them.

Kim Carter, student



Having had the question of the function of *Take a Break* as a provider of support and advice put to her, Kim allowed that campaigns such as the breastfeeding articles and features might help readers, but that it was unusual for *Take a Break* to run such a campaign, given the rest of its content. The implication being that *Take a Break* is primarily for entertainment, a lightweight magazine, in which any overtly supportive content is noticeable and out of place. However, Kim did recognise the strength of the women in the true life stories, something which came out in the content analysis and which was noticed by another reader:

Anna: That's why I like *Take a Break*, there's loads of, like, women getting revenge on men [*laughter*]. And women have always got the upper hand, haven't they? In the majority of them. It's like the women getting their revenge because the man had an affair, or whatever.

North Access Course

But Kim's view of *Take a Break* as lightweight contrasts with that of Pat discussed in the previous section, where *Take a Break* was considered to be a magazine obviously intended to be supportive, albeit with light, entertaining features such as the competitions as well as the more serious content. Readers taking a negotiating position, like Kim and Rene, recognised the magazines' potential to be supportive but their own circumstances precluded them from needing this, at least in terms of the true life stories, and they both appreciated the health information, although they had never felt the need to use it. An understanding that they might need it in the future again underlines Ang's (1985) tragic structure of feeling discussed in chapter four, where readers know that things do go wrong, that happiness is uncertain, and that one day particular information may be needed because circumstances change. There was a sense, then, of readers building up facts or emotional learning for future use, something Hermes also (1995) found, and she accounted for this as readers investing in a fantasy of an ideal self who is in control and always prepared. My own feeling, from talking with readers, is that the true life stories gave them an insight into others' problems which they intended to use to avoid those same problems themselves. For example, nursery nurse Rene King pointed out that reading the true life stories enabled her to be aware of certain warning signs which, if ignored, might lead to a difficult situation, especially with regard to relationships with men. A sense of being forewarned, then,



rather than a fantasy of being in control, seemed to be a reason for taking seriously and learning from the mistakes and experiences of others in the stories. Thus, the negotiating position consisted of readers who acknowledged the usefulness of the content although as yet they did not require that support or reassurance themselves, but they were also aware of others who might. When readers have problems that they feel are too shameful to share with family, or if family *is* the problem, then it is in these situations, like Pat Evans, where the magazines can offer that support and reassurance normally provided by relatives.

An oppositional element to readers' interpretations of *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break* was apparent in relation to the true life stories - many readers were scathing about the potential of the stories to provide reassurance or strength. Readers regarded the stories as depressing, although many of them do have happy endings. In fact, some readers viewed the stories as exploitation of women rather than empowerment. These readers tended to be women who had not experienced any of the situations written about in the stories, and who did not have friends or family in such situations either. This may indicate that the stories involved problems which were not as common as the editors would like to believe, and hence not quite as useful to other readers as they claimed - the implication here is of a more commercial reason for publishing certain stories, rather than a supportive feminist one (although the editors never denied their commercial pressures or aspirations). Therefore, these readers did not believe that such things actually happen, and were unconvinced that writing about them would help others going through similar experiences. When I suggested that this was how the editors intend the stories to be interpreted, they were dismissive:

Jilly: Yeah, but they're exploited, aren't they, you know, it's like selling your story to the newspaper, you might get something for it or some recognition or whatever but/

Kate: It's also quite boring. No, if you were sat in the doctor's surgery and a woman next to you started to tell you all her stories you wouldn't want to know.

Social workers

The social workers were being slightly disingenuous here - no reader expects all the stories to relate to her own experiences and indeed this would be



practically impossible. Yet even if no particular story is directly relevant, there may be themes which readers pick up on, for example the importance of family life, the untrustworthiness of men, the struggle people have just to get through each day, the emotional realism. However, Kate and Jilly were not alone in their assessment of the magazines - Dianna, a married deputy headteacher in her early 30s, saw the true life stories in *Take a Break* as mere fillers for the competitions, with no intrinsic worth of their own, but also as exploitative, taking advantage of people's need for money:

Sometimes I think it's quite sad these people have been forced to, er, by whatever means for whatever reasons, to sell their story. You know, it's like your Sunday newspaper type of thing, isn't it? The tabloids, you know. That people are so desperate they sell their story. Erm, you know, that, er, magazines are making money out of people's tragedies, if you like.

Dianna Hartley, teacher

Stories do not just come voluntarily from readers, for whatever personal reasons. They are also solicited by the magazines, who follow up stories in local and national news. One woman in the north Sheffield Access Course group related personal experience of this process:

Peggy: My sister's fiancée died three weeks before they were due to be married and these people [*Take a Break*] wrote to her within a week of him dying, offering her £150 if she'd tell them about it. And it was just, I don't know, it was just below the belt. And so it sort of made me, what's the word I want, just totally thought that was just so, the lowest of the low, to do that sort of thing. Because you always presume that people have written in, offering the story, don't you.

North Access Course

A belief in the 'niceness' of *Take a Break* was widespread amongst the readers, with most of them assuming, like Peggy, that the stories were offered to the magazine. Yet the Access Course group, some of whom had heard Peggy's story before, had turned away from *Take a Break* at this information, putting their trust and belief in Peggy's sister's account instead - she was seen as a more reliable source because of the close personal connection. Some of the group continued to read *Take a Break* but as light relief from their studies and not as a source of knowledge or reassurance. But for many readers, a belief in



the niceness of *Take a Break* fits in with the magazine's carefully cultivated image as *for* the readers and *by* the readers. Yet it is primarily a commercial operation and to be successful it needs interesting stories - it cannot afford to wait until they are offered. *Take a Break*, like the other magazines, relies on journalists for nearly half its stories (40% from journalism, 60% from readers' letters). John Dale made the point that journalists who work on *Take a Break* are 'three times as good' as those on rival magazines. The adjective 'good' when applied to journalists implies tenacious, hence its coverage of topical issues and traumatic stories like Peggy's sister. However, all three magazines cover such stories, it is just that *Take a Break* has more than *Best* or *Bella* and is perhaps more downmarket in its choice of topics (see chapter four).

In addition to the exploitative elements of the true life stories, the social workers also thought that the female characters were not talking about their own achievements enough - the stories centred on the activities of their partners or children rather than celebrating women's own achievements:

Jilly: 'My Paul's Mistress'.

Kate: 'My John's Superglued'. Well, also, I should think all the sorts of things that are written about are their children or their husbands, they're not about their achievements. And like there's a section of beautiful babies. And pets as well. There's nothing fantastic about something they've done themselves and sort of enjoyed.

Social Workers

Of course, this is not strictly accurate - there are true life stories where women overcome great odds to achieve health or happiness or recognition but the social workers are right to suggest the majority of features focus on women's families, rather than on the women themselves. The social workers could be criticised for ignoring women's achievements in bringing up children - this could be seen as a major achievement, given the social and financial difficulties in which many of these families exist. In their critique of the magazines as antifeminist, the social workers had no recognition of the different understandings of feminism, and how its limits are defined by personal experience and situation. Kath, the library assistant, articulated this understanding well:



In the end I think it depends on the person as well that's reading the magazines. Like I was saying that Sharon at work, she doesn't believe true life stories, because she doesn't actually, her reality, she's never come into, erm, contact with people that have problems, you know what I mean, so she may not believe it.

Kath Price, library assistant

Kath herself was quite prepared to believe the stories, but not to attribute any reassuring or strengthening function to them. She categorised them as mere gossip, fulfilling a role that used to be taken by more face to face encounters over the garden fence:

Yeah, in a way with these true life stories, I can probably see why people might be interested in those, because it's probably just like an extension of the old, you know, like 20 years ago it was like over the wall gossip. You know, if something happened to somebody, er, probably it's just that same idea behind it all. That it's, it's a bit of scandal. You know what I mean, like at one time probably more people actually went and talked to neighbours and had a good gossip, whereas now, I think probably people don't do that any more.

Kath Price, library assistant

Such women's talk was devalued by Kath and by the same token the true life stories were devalued too. This poor image of women's talk, defined in a derogatory way as 'gossip', has been documented by Tebbutt (1995) who noted that men's talk is never categorised in this way. Gossip, she explained, is talk about other people's activities and behaviour, something which men do but which is exclusively attributed to women. To discredit talk as gossip is to belittle it, to deny its importance, and by implication the importance of the women who use it. Tebbutt argued for a recognition of the relevance of gossip in playing a formative role in the shaping of social values and in the establishment of an arena for moral and political debate. In addition, she related how women who kept themselves aloof from their neighbours missed out on the gossip and therefore the 'reassurance of knowing that other women shared the same troubles' (Tebbutt 1995: 93). However, she also acknowledged that the traditional venues for gossip are disappearing (the corner shop, over the garden wall) but suggested gossip is now served by various media, particularly women's magazines and soap operas. With the rise



of true life stories, I would agree with this suggestion and also with Kath's analysis of the stories' function as gossip, although not in a derogatory way, but as a positive element in helping to define personal expectations and boundaries of behaviour and foster a sense of community, both in terms of promoting an imagined community in which readers have access to the news and gossip about others via the magazines, and also as encouraging face-to-face interaction in which readers can discuss the stories (see chapter six). On a lighter note, gossip is also an extremely pleasurable activity and keeps the participants up to date with others' behaviour. The university students took a similar view to Kath in their assessment of the true life stories:

Lisa: All these stories, I wouldn't gain anything from reading them. I'd rather read like in *Elle* and *Marie Claire*, they have like we went to look at this tribe in Africa and this is what we found, and that's so much more interesting for me, it's actually fact, I mean, half these things aren't even true, I think. Especially in *Eva*. But I'd so much rather read about factual things where I'm going to learn about other people, other women's experiences or whatever.

CJO: But they are about other women's experiences.

Lisa: But I don't gain anything from them, they're just gossip. So, right, ok, fine, you know, she's married him and he's had affairs.

University Students

Lisa's recommendation of *Marie Claire*'s factual and worldly articles, which usually appear as the first main feature in the magazine, is not shared by others - McRobbie (1996:191) questioned the 'regular tribal women slot' in which non-Western women are scrutinized for their otherness in a language of barely disguised colonial fantasies. There is a suggestion that such articles are there to give the magazine a semblance of intellectual seriousness but that nobody actually reads them (Chunn 1993). The university students' assessment of gossip, on the other hand, was that of scandal, passing on titbits of news or events, but without any real purpose. The women from an Access Course group in the east of Sheffield agreed with this assessment of the true life stories:

Kay: All far fetched stories.

Diane: They are full of rubbish most of the time.



Michelle: I've read that one, is it *Take a Break*? We have it in the staffroom at work and it's always about somebody fancying somebody else/

Linda: Or affairs and that.

Michelle: They always seem to repeat themselves.

East Access Course

Given this view of the true life stories, Kath was very surprised when I told her of the editors' intentions for the true life stories and expressed incredulity that readers would actually take note of others' situations and experiences - the thought had obviously never occurred to her. She herself felt no desire to learn from magazines:

CJO: Don't you need that kind of advice, though, that magazines have?

Kath: No. [*laughter*] No, I don't, no. I mean, what can they tell me, really, that I don't already know? Well, ok, if somebody handed me down 20 magazines, I could honestly say that in those 20 magazines, I don't think I'd learn that much. That might sound a little bit all knowing, but no, it's true, what do you learn?

Kath Price, library assistant

For Kath, magazines have no function beyond entertainment, filling in an empty lunch hour at work or providing amusement at the expense of the true life stories. Although she read magazines (mainly *Best* and some monthlies that colleagues brought into work, or passed on from her mother), she found them slightly irritating because of their contradictory content and the emphasis on thinness. Such contradictions like recipes for fattening food then stories of women who have managed to lose lots of weight, or articles telling readers they do not need to change, just be themselves, contrasted with a feature on the next page telling you how to get rid of cellulite, led Kath to suggest that the editors do not really care about their readers at all - in fact, the contradictions show the producers have little regard for their readers, otherwise they would not confuse them with conflicting advice. Also, the level of content was unsatisfactory - too trivial, narrow and self-indulgent. Kath wanted more from her reading, hence her preference for newspapers over magazines. This feeling that women's magazines are ultimately unsatisfactory is understandable - every magazine ends with a preview of next week's or next



month's issue, indicating that there is always more to say on the perfect diet, the best fashion, or the most sensational true life stories. In the magazine world, women are not allowed to rest on their laurels - being feminine is hard work. But all this makes for an unresolved read which some readers regard as insubstantial. The postgraduate students articulated this by comparing weeklies (and specifically the true life stories) with junk food:

Emma: I would never seek them out and I don't know whether it's because I read them like that, because I just read them when I've got ten minutes but I always feel vaguely kind of irritated when I've finished reading them. Kind of like, it's a bit of a waste of brain power or something.

Gill: I mean, I sat down the other day and read four or five *Bests*, *Bellas* and *Take a Breaks* and I was really getting oh, da di da, turning the pages after the first two, oh, for god's sake, how can you write, what are you on. A kind of, it's that junk food almost, you know, it's that kind of cheap, quick, fast but it makes you sick quite quickly.

Emma: Yes, yes, you're looking for something a bit more substantial, more interesting, you can't find it/

Gill: And you feel full, like you can't read any more, but you're not sated at all, I felt a bit dirty, a bit cheap/

Emma: I think it's like the junk food thing, you look at it and think, ooh, great, it looks sort of lurid and you think I wish I hadn't eaten that, I'll have to go and exercise now, that kind of thing. I want to go and read something improving [*laughter*].

Postgraduate University Students

The students were quite happy to read monthly magazines, but the sheer number of true life stories in the weeklies completely overwhelmed them. The implicit connection made between the magazines and class via the junk food analogy was quite clear - individuals in a working class environment are more likely to consume junk food and more likely to consume these magazines. The students distanced themselves from this market by articulating their dissatisfaction with the magazines - they reacted with disbelief to some of the situations described in the stories and felt they were akin to Radio One disc jockey Simon Bates' slot called 'Our Tune', a sort of audio *Letter From the Heart*. The students were making use of a mass culture discourse to discuss the magazines, a discourse which enables criticism of media forms from the perspective of their commercialism and low intellectual demands (Ang 1985) and which reflects dominant social attitudes to the magazines. However, this is



not to say the women who interpreted the magazines in a more positive way did not also use a discourse, but in their case it was a populist discourse which was used to identify with women with similar concerns to themselves. Thus, both sets of readers used discourses to interpret the magazines, but different ones. The fact that some women recognised the editors' intended messages does not make them more enlightened than other readers. Emma and Gill, from their combined subjectivities of academia and high culture, critiqued the magazines as trashy and shallow, and as insufficient to hold their attention. This is not to suggest their opinions of the magazines were invalid or somehow incorrect - the students justified their view from a particular intersection of discourses and acknowledged that other readers in different circumstances might find the magazines more appropriate or useful, although not specifically the true life stories. The appeal of the magazines to others was felt to be in the style, particularly the short articles which allowed *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break* to be easily picked up and put down by readers with constant demands on their time from children, something the postgraduates had not experienced themselves.

Further opposition to the true life stories was articulated by some of the older readers of magazines, who felt that the stories focused too much on sex:

Rose: Things are more open now than what they used to be, aren't they.

May: 'The day I was a prostitute', well, I don't think things like that should be in. 'My real life love affair'.

Amelia: They don't cover anything up now.

May: I think they're always more sexy now than they used to be.

Rose: We're old fashioned, aren't we.

Ruby: Makes you wonder what they'll be like in another 20 years, doesn't it?

Women's Library Group

The women felt it was unnecessary to include stories about infidelity or sexual activity, which they viewed with a slight weariness - given their age, they felt they had seen it all before:



Jean: It's nothing new, I don't know why they need to write about it.

Nell: More repetition, like.

Women's Library Group

The women in the Library Group opposed the true life stories, but without recognising the intended supportive feminism the stories were meant to offer - their opposition, therefore, rested on a different aspect of the stories. The intended dominant meaning was not picked up by this group at all. On the whole, the women in the Library Group ignored the true life stories and read the magazines for other reasons, mainly practical or social. For the women in this group who read the more old-fashioned weeklies like *People's Friend*, the appeal of these titles rested on their uncomplicated view of romantic, heterosexual love, written as fiction rather than true life. Such stories were felt to be 'nice', rather than the crude realism of more factual accounts with their open sexuality which, to the older women, was regarded as rather shameful. Other readers also ignored the true life stories, but for different reasons. For example, Nora Green, who had been so appreciative of the health content in *Take a Break*, claimed not to believe the stories:

Nora: The only reason I read *Take a Break* is for the competitions, I don't read all those silly stories. I think they're stupid.

[laughter]

CJO: You mean the true life readers' stories?

Nora: Yeah. I just can't believe things like that happen. I suppose they do but I don't believe it.

CJO: And you never read any of them?

Nora: I might do, that's why I know that they're stupid.

Nora Green, home warden

Nora dismissed the true life stories as unbelievable, although with an element of doubt - she allowed that the situations might just happen but she wasn't going to believe them anyway. The stories obviously had no connection to her own situation or experiences and thus she was able to disregard them, although with the occasional perusal to support her initial assessment of them as stupid. Even though she was able to get a lot out of *Take a Break*, particularly the health content which she had found useful, the stories were regarded as different and remained unrelated to any supportive function. Nora was able to



speak of the stories in a discourse register (Frazer 1992) of mass culture, in that she criticised them because of their commercialism and low intellectual demands (Ang 1985). Like the postgraduate students discussed above, Nora put down the magazines, although only as far as the stories were concerned. Her main reason for reading *Take a Break* was for the competitions and also the practical content. Other readers too bought magazines mainly for their competitions and/or practical content, and I will return to these readers in the next chapter.

### Other content

Many of the women I interviewed had nothing to say about the potential empowerment of the magazines, either in the health, true life stories, money, works or rights articles, or any other part of the content, because it was not something with which they associated the magazines. They discussed the practical content, the fiction, the humorous articles and the consumer advice but nothing concerned with the strengthening or reassuring function of *Bella*, *Best* or *Take a Break*. If I suggested during the interview that the magazines could be interpreted in this way, I was met with blank looks, confusion, a request for clarification or an assumption that weeklies were 'just for women'. Such non-recognition of the supportive feminism meant that these readers were selecting other parts of the content to read. The bank clerks, for example, when I asked whether they thought the weeklies had any feminist elements in them:

Angela: No, but they don't set out to try and undermine men, do they?

Joan: They don't put anything in for men.

Helen: I think main sort of thing you get is like things like sexual harassment stories at work or something like that.

Celia: Yeah, you get them in *Bella*, don't you?

Angela: But I don't think it is like sexist at all, not really.

Kelly-Ann: Just aimed at women, isn't it, that's why it's called *Woman* or *Woman's Own*, it's aimed at a woman.

Bank Clerks

This was really a conversation at cross purposes because of the clerks' understanding of feminism as putting men down, but even so the notion that a weekly like *Bella* would be useful in any kind of way other than beauty advice



or nice recipes was not on the agenda. Although they came up with the sexual harassment example, this was not seen as particularly supportive or even worth mentioning until I asked. It was also seen as a very infrequent part of the magazine. There was an implicit assumption that women's magazines contained suitable material for women and there was no need to question it - when I asked about the appropriateness of the magazines' focus on domestic matters like cooking, child care and also beauty, the clerks were puzzled:

Jan: That's what interests women mainly, isn't it?

Angela: Just like an assortment of everything, isn't it, really.

Jan: Cindy Crawford has, er, powder put on her eyelashes to make her eyelashes look thicker, that's what I got out of magazines. I thought, ooh, I'll try that, you do pick some things up, I suppose.

Bank Clerks

While not wanting to deny the importance of Jan's final comment about looking good, which I see as a confidence issue, although I am aware that women are judged on their appearance in a way that men are not, it might appear that the bank clerks are so caught up in the ideology that equates femininity with domesticity that they are unable to articulate any resistance to it or recognise its construction. The association between the two has become so naturalized that there is no sense in questioning what seems to be a taken for granted assumption. And even though the magazines do focus on issues such as cookery and childcare, there are attempts in the features to problematize the construction of femininity as necessarily equated with these tasks (see chapter three for a discussion of 'trade press'), which the clerks appeared not to have noticed. Therefore, they both characterised the magazines as aimed at women, and saw this realised in a particular way, which to them seemed acceptable in a woman's weekly magazine. Monthlies, on the other hand, were seen as 'feminist' and this was also acceptable. It appeared that like Frazer's (1992) *Jackie* readers, the bank clerks were able to swap discourses, in this instance according to the magazines they were discussing, and see both weeklies and monthlies as unproblematic, and also relate parts of each to their own lives. Generally, there was no questioning of the weeklies' perceived equation of femininity with domesticity, although this is not to suggest that the clerks necessarily lived their own lives this way, but that was their perception of



women's weekly magazines like *Bella* and *Best*. Other readers, for example the beauticians, took a similar perspective:

CJO: Do you think any of the magazines have any kind of feminist elements in them?

Carol: Er, no.

Cheryl: Definitely not.

CJO: Do you think they're more traditional, concerned with relationships, appearance, that kind of thing?

Carol: I don't really know what you mean.

CJO: Well, do you think they tend to put women in a housewife position?

Cheryl: No, they don't, no.

Beauticians

There was some confusion here, with Cheryl saying the magazines were not at all feminist, but neither were they addressing women as housewives. I think what she was trying to articulate was that weeklies are not one or the other - they address women with issues that women are interested in (a similar perspective to Angela and Jan above), which is simply normal and expected. So *Take a Break* was seen as a neutral magazine:

Cheryl: *Take a Break* is for normal, everyday women, I can read it and I'm still at home, on my own, but you [*Carol*] read it and you're a married woman.

Beauticians

Thus, *Take a Break's* content was not viewed as being potentially feminist or not, it was simply accepted as a magazine, partly for its competitions and partly for its text. There was no recognition of its potential feminism and hence no critique (or defense) of its editor's intentions. In other words, these readers were not addressing the dominant meanings as expressed by the editors in *Take a Break* (or *Bella* or *Best*). Instead, they focused on the other available meanings within the magazines, for example entertainment, practical information, beauty advice - that is, the discourses of femininity rather than feminism (but see chapter six for an assessment of the potential use of such features). Such a process of selecting the magazines' material might be seen as negotiation of the content, although not necessarily a negotiation of the editors' intended dominant message. Readers such as the beauticians and bank clerks appreciated the magazines for certain information which they actively sought,



recognised and selected as useful to themselves, disregarding the content in which they had no interest. The discourse of feminism, so habitual to the more educated and academic readers (however it might be articulated), was unfamiliar to the clerks and beauticians and thus the magazines were never read in this way. However, if a true life story did have relevance for them, as in the case of Kelly from the Job Club discussed earlier, then the magazines might have been seen differently, but this clearly was not applicable to these particular readers.

A function of the magazines which could span all areas of the content was discussed by the women in an east Sheffield Mother and Toddler group, who felt they gained knowledge from the magazines which they could then use. Kathryn, a keen reader of *Best* and *Bella* and the monthlies, was positive in her opinion of the magazines' contribution to her knowledge:

{ Kathryn: But I'm always commenting on them, it comes up in conversation and I'll say, well, I've read in a magazine somewhere. You feel like you're learning a lot from the magazines you read.

East Mother and Toddler Group

Kathryn was talking about magazines in general but also specifically about the little campaigns or informative features in *Bella* and *Best*. This use of magazines reminded me of Radway's (1987) romance readers, who explained that part of the pleasure they get from reading a devalued literary form is to show the books have educational worth, often related to travel and geography, and used to justify their reading to family members. The women in Radway's study stored up facts which they were then able to bring out in conversation. As a young mother, caring for her baby all day while her husband, a builder, was out at work, Kathryn felt the need to justify the usefulness of her reading habits and stressed how they gave her conversational topics to discuss in company. Susan, one of the bank clerks, also referred to this useful role of magazines but in relation to *Cosmopolitan*, not the weeklies. The bank clerks as a group felt that the weeklies had nothing in them to provoke discussion or argument (weeklies were never intended to fulfil such a role, they decided) unlike *Cosmopolitan*, with its contentious, feminist articles which provided food for thought:



Susan: I mean, it's something to talk about as well, I mean, I can read a really good article in *Cosmo* and go out on Saturday night and say, ooh, I was reading this on so and so and I, it can throw a discussion out, 'cos they're so intense, aren't they, the articles, especially like men versus women, 'cos like I said it's definitely feminist.

Bank Clerks

So magazines can be a source of feminist information (what is defined as feminism by the magazine itself) but according to the bank clerks, only monthlies fulfil this function. However, the clerks' definition of feminism was to put men down, or make derogatory comments about them, something the weeklies tend not to do. For other readers, weeklies can provide useful information which fills an educative role. But in relation to the editors' intentions for the magazines, certain readers do decode them as encoded by the editors, justifying the latter's claims in providing a valuable, supportive role to women who may have nowhere else to turn. However, not all women saw the magazines in this way. For the social workers, finding something positive to say about the magazines always got turned around because the articles and features never went far enough for these readers - they also wanted to see more stories exposing the dark side of family life, which they felt was invariably presented in an ideal way:

Sara: You see, like this article here is about being attacked by strangers at night and what weapons you can carry. And it says right in the first sentence, it says 'Home Office figures show 61% of rapes are committed by people known to the victim rather than strangers' and then goes on to tell you how to protect yourself from a stranger instead of saying, how do you protect yourself from these other people/

Jilly: Your partner/

Sara: Your partner or whoever. So the whole article is about carrying a gun just in case some stranger attacks you. They never, like family life is sort of sacrosanct, isn't it, you know, there's no articles about wife batterers or baby batterers or sexually abused sons.

Social Workers

Despite what the social workers thought, there are a number of true life stories about the dark side of family life, about abuse and violence and emotional torture, so I would disagree with them about their analysis of the magazines'



content. But they have a point about the features or stories stopping short of potentially empowering material, at least for *themselves* - for other readers, content such as that discussed above might be a step towards independence or confidence, which is no minor achievement by the magazines. Evaluating the editors' encodings, I suggest that they are not attempting to offer the kind of content that would interest readers such as the social workers in a supportive sense - the aims of the editors seem to be more modest and directed towards readers who might be in need of a basic level of support. As John Dale stressed, *Take a Break* is aimed at making the lives of working class women easier - this does not mean addressing the well articulated desires of social workers who require a stronger feminist commitment from their magazines.

In general, the magazines were rejected as feminist for a variety of reasons, some specific and others vague. The bank clerks, with their particular understanding of feminism, rejected the weeklies as feminist publications but described monthlies like *Cosmopolitan* as feminist. The north Sheffield Access Course students identified weeklies as trivial and gossipy, although this was the very reason some of the students enjoyed them. But more specifically, criticism was levelled at *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break* for not representing a variety of women, in particular black women. This point was mentioned by a number of readers who were either black themselves and/or in some kind of educational environment. The most outspoken of these was Denise, a 29 year old black student from the north Sheffield Access Course group:

Denise: I used to do *Take a Break* but not now, not really, I can't relate to them at all, it's not my world, my culture. I think they portray, those magazines portray black women in a very negative light.

North Access Course

In this focus group, we were looking at a selection of weeklies and the only magazine to include an image of a black woman was *Take a Break* (5 January 1995). As the content analysis illustrated, there are few black women in the three magazines. However, as Denise was quick to point out, this image in *Take a Break* was on the health page and although it was used to illustrate an article on hypertension, the black model was shown being victimised by two 'jobs'. Denise was angry that a black woman was shown as a victim of both



illness and what she saw as racist attacks, which she felt perpetuated negative images. She agreed with another member of the group who thought magazines were patronising in their stereotypes:

Jo: I think they're pretty patronising, with their diets and what you're supposed to be like and everything.

Denise: Some are. I remember looking at a magazine years ago, not long after it came out and I looked at this article on black skin and make-up and it made the person look like a clown. Erm, orange eye shadow and things like that. I know people wear make-up to enhance the way they look and it's like projecting everybody who's black should be like Rusty Lee, which is far from the truth. Jolly, gay, golliwog attitude image.

North Access Course

So for Denise, mainstream weeklies failed to address either her culture or her size, making magazines doubly inappropriate and insulting her with their expectations of how she should look. But not all the black women I interviewed held this view of the magazines. In the Friendship Group focus group, one of the elderly women was black but she had nothing to say about the magazines' lack of representation of black women:

Polly: I buy *Take a Break* every week but I buy other ones. I think it's the competitions and the true stories in them.

Friendship Group

This difference in Denise and Polly's responses to magazines can be attributed to age and environment, and the discourses to which they had access. Denise was taking a course (which includes the study of media representations) and may decide to go to university - she was obviously very politically aware of the importance of images and consequently had stopped reading magazines such as *Take a Break*, the implication being that she had read it *before* coming on the course (this also applied to other members of the group, whose reading habits had changed). Thus, Denise used a political discourse with which to interpret and talk about the magazines, and this reflected the more general attitude to women's weeklies as trivial (although in another sense also important because their content obviously mattered, otherwise Denise would not feel so strongly about them). Polly, whose reading and writing were not too good (she struggled to complete the questionnaire), seemed to be unaware of any



political element to the magazines, enjoying them for the competitions and stories, thereby using a discourse of pleasure. This discourse, as suggested by Ang (1985) situates Polly as consciously negotiating her own position within an ideology which labels mass culture as inferior. Although some readers did negotiate with an awareness of the poor image of weeklies, I suggest that Polly's position was closer to what Ballaster *et al* (1991) noted as a lack of reflexiveness in a group of 'pensioners' they interviewed. They suggested:

It may be that they [*the pensioners*] do not consider that reading magazines is an activity that requires explanation, whereas the others, aware that in feminist and critical circles it may be disapproved of, adopt a more defensive position.

Ballaster *et al* 1991:135

Polly's location was rather different from that of Denise's, and so was the location of Rene, a nursery nurse I interviewed, who was also black. Although she recognised the lack of representation of black women in *Best* and *Bella*, this was not a problem for Rene:

Health, yes, beauty I don't really relate to as much because to be quite honest, I don't think they feature much on black beauty products. So I skim over beauty. But occasionally, they might, say, erm, choose a make-up for your colouring, and they occasionally have a black model in. But then, erm, more often than not, it's more European people so I'm not really interested in that.

Rene King, nursery nurse

There was no feeling here that *Best* and *Bella* should include images of black women - there was an acceptance from Rene that mainstream magazines would concentrate on white models and make-up. But Rene and her sister did buy what she called 'black magazines' like *Black Beauty and Hair* and *Ebony*, when they wanted particular advice on make-up and hair or articles on black celebrities. These were seen as completely separate from the usual weeklies and as fulfilling a different purpose - *Best* and *Bella* were read for the true life stories, particularly those to do with relationships or weight problems. The 'black magazines' were used specifically for the content which is unavailable in other women's magazines. So unlike Denise, there was no real criticism of the weeklies because of their lack of representativeness - this critique was picked



up instead by the social workers and by Kath, the library assistant. In answer to my suggestion that the magazine editors feel they are representing real women, the social workers disagreed:

Kate: Yeah, if they're saying that's reality, there's no black people in there, there's no gay people in there, so it's not representative of today's society even though that might be reality for only a select few people. Well, it's not reality for my life.

Sara: Yeah, it's not reality for me.

Jilly: They ought to be giving people other ideas.

Social Workers

And Kath also commented on the narrow range of women portrayed in the magazines:

I know once actually they did an article in a woman's magazine, saying would most readers prefer more realistic images of women in a magazine like fatter, older, different colours, different shapes, sizes, but a lot of women said no, we like to see women looking a certain way.

Kath Price, library assistant

Kath herself would prefer to see a variety of women, feeling that the magazines only represent a tiny minority i.e. slim, tall, white women, which is presented as the ideal. Like Denise, Kath felt that magazines failed to reflect today's multicultural society. But for other readers like Polly and Rene, this was not seen as an issue. None of the other readers I interviewed mentioned the lack of diversity in the magazines.

So far, this chapter has covered Hall's three decoding positions - accept, negotiate and oppose, and for many of the women I interviewed I was able to categorise their responses in these three ways, although not as neatly as the model perhaps suggests. For some women, their responses to one magazine involved more than one decoding position - for example, Nora Green accepted the health features and opposed the true life stories. This was quite unusual, as most readers took a consistent stance towards each magazine as a whole. But for other women, their decoding positions appeared to fall outside Hall's categories. Although this discussion will not refer specifically to the three



themes I have been using, as the women made more general readings of the magazines, nevertheless I felt it was important to illustrate how interpretations of *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break* can vary widely, despite the intentions of the editors.

### **Additional decoding positions**

These women, then, usually identified themselves as non-readers, although this does not mean they never read women's magazines, but read them in certain locations. As one of these infrequent readers pointed out, how else would they be able to criticise the magazines in an informed way unless they read them? Two such readers, a retired woman in her 70s and her friend, a retired deputy headteacher, agreed to be interviewed about magazines despite their obvious dislike of them. Their attitudes were extremely disdainful of mass culture:

I only read magazines when I'm waiting at the hairdresser's. I think they're rubbish - the content is made up, they're trivial. All the problems are just fiction to sell the magazines, I cannot imagine why anyone would want to write in. If I had problems, I would confide in a friend, I wouldn't dream of writing to a magazine. Now this (*Take a Break*) is just too bitty, it's gaudy and jazzy. I've never read anything quite so stupid.

Irene Dickens, retired

I find people who read magazines, they're reasonably intelligent but not highly intelligent. I won't say they're thick, it's unfair to say they're thick, I just think that they're at a level that enjoy it.

Maureen Steel, retired

Irene said that none of her friends read *Bella*, *Best* or *Take a Break* and she claimed not to have heard of *Take a Break*, saying she thought it was a television programme. Further, she pointed out how all the big prizes in *Take a Break* like cars, holidays and money go to 'nice areas' like Berkshire but other prizes like *Supermarket Grab* go to places like Holyhead (implicitly undesirable compared to Berkshire). Having said this, Irene rested her case against weeklies - she obviously felt there was no need to say any more. She did admit to reading weeklies at the hairdresser's and had read both *Best* and *Bella* before. Maureen also admitted to reading weeklies at her friends' houses and having weeklies passed on from friends, but said she 'can't get rid of them



quickly enough' - she would rather read *The Guardian*. Maureen used magazines as a way of visiting friends and neighbours, specifically to take them magazines which had been given to her. Although she did not read them in any depth, the magazines were nevertheless useful for this social function and therefore Maureen continued to accept them from friends so she could pass them on to others (see chapter six for a discussion of magazines and community). There may have been an element of disdain in Maureen and Irene's view of women's magazines because of their age. Weeklies have never enjoyed a particularly high status as reading material and when they first came out (in the 1930s for *Woman* and *Woman's Own*), they were strongly aimed at housewives in an effort to help them successfully look after husband and family. Maureen's own mother had read *Woman* every week, and as a child Maureen had become familiar with the magazine. Thus, having associated titles like *Woman* and *Woman's Own* with an ideology of 'trade press' (see chapter three), such an image of weeklies remained with Maureen from over fifty years ago and she had never been inclined to change that view. Like Irene, she articulated a discourse of mass culture in which women's weeklies have little credibility or status. In using this discourse, both Maureen and Irene emphasized their identities as educated (Irene) and feminist (Maureen) women who would not be interested in such culture. However, not all older women shared this view of magazines and in fact Irene and Maureen's perspective was unusual amongst such readers. Only Joan, in the Women's Library group, articulated a similar position, and she too was a retired teacher. Again, the factor of class, or more specifically education, is relevant in terms of how the magazines are decoded or more generally perceived. The relationship between age and education, and the women's presentation of a particular (middle class) identity, meant that the magazines were dismissed by these readers as irrelevant, uninteresting and, in Irene's words, as 'rubbish', a perfectly acceptable viewpoint and one which fits with the general perception (and to a large extent the academic position) of weeklies as trivial, time-wasting publications.

Two more women who shared the perspective of Irene, Maureen and Joan were interviewed informally at a social event - Debbie Forster, a trainee solicitor, and Christine Lee, a primary school teacher, both in their late 30s and married with young children. Having asked me about my research, they



volunteered to help, assuming that by 'magazines' I meant monthlies - when I asked them if they read *Bella*, *Best* or *Take a Break*, they were shocked:

Debbie: Certainly not. Because they're trivial and portray women in a very old fashioned way. These magazines are for working class women.

Christine: Magazines like these are for women with low intelligence, who wouldn't be able to read *The Observer*.

Debbie: Look, after all women have worked for, equality with men, for these magazines to appear and place women back in the home is appalling. Women who read these magazines should be made to read George Eliot instead.

Debbie Forster, solicitor, and Christine Lee, teacher

Christine and Debbie took a modernist, high culture approach to the media, clearly defining magazines as low culture and traditional literature and broadsheet newspapers as high (although they did read the weeklies in doctors' and dentists' waiting rooms, ostensibly to confirm their prejudices). Their blanket dismissal of the magazines suggested a lack of appreciation of other women's lives. In a sense, both women were articulating a middle class post-feminist position (if not post-modernist in their attachment to cultural divisions), assuming that women now had equality with men, and that there was a danger, promoted by such magazines, of slipping back into the bad old days of domesticity. Of course, what this denies is that many working class women perceive the 'reality' of their lives to be in the magazines. Debbie and Christine clearly experienced a different 'reality' and their extreme reaction to the magazines illustrated this. Like Irene, Joan and Maureen, there was an attempt to distance themselves from mass culture. The weeklies generally do tend to have a poor image, especially compared with the monthlies which may be *seen* as more intelligent and more feminist, and the above readers' rejection of weeklies illustrates how they have adopted this view. Such a position is not somehow incorrect or inappropriate, even though it is not how the editors intend their magazines to be read. Rather, it is a common (if at the extreme end) reaction to weeklies and makes use of an easily available and accessible discourse in which weeklies are put down largely by non-readers.

This opposing position, therefore, was based on the women's perceptions of culture as high or low, and the content of women's (weekly) magazines as



trivial. Having taken this view, they had no need to discuss the content in detail - a general accusation of antifeminism or too much domesticity was enough to explain why these women only read the magazines occasionally, just to confirm their prejudices. And their casual reading meant they could not be specific about the content anyway - certainly to know too much about the magazines would be undesirable. Thus, these women who identified themselves as feminist had no conception of the supportive feminism meant by the editors - they did not recognise the intended dominant meaning in the magazines and criticised the publications as a whole.

The remaining women I interviewed were non-readers, in as much as any woman can be said not to read magazines. They might flick through them in waiting rooms but really showed no interest in them - although they occasionally picked up a *Best*, *Bella* or *Take a Break*, their level of engagement was minimal. Unlike the women discussed above, they did not read magazines in order to criticise them. These women had other things to do with their time:

I mean, it's the newspapers, erm, I will read [*magazines*] if I have time, it's just these, it's like anything that's not terribly important, I mean, they're nice if you've got time to sit down, but they're lightweight. I mean, they don't make an awfully big difference. I mean, you read and you forget.

Delia Wilson, homemaker

Thus, Delia might occasionally thumb through a *Take a Break* or *Bella* at her mother-in-law's house but only if she had 'nothing better to do'. Unlike the women in the previous categories, Delia was not actively reading the magazines to confirm her prejudices, or for pleasure, or for information, or even as a regular time filler - indeed, she had no opinion on the magazines, and in fact little interest in them. Some women in the focus groups took a similar perspective:

Jackie: I've seen them, but this sounds awful, I don't like the gossip, I like to read, like I said, I found that really, in that, it doesn't attract me, but I can't do with that for me.

East Mother and Toddler Group



Jackie did not read women's magazines, they contained nothing of interest for her. Given her age and family circumstances (20s, mother of a toddler, married to a builder, with O-level education) she seems to be an ideal reader of the weeklies, matching their readership profiles. But some other practices or discourses in her life reduced the need for and attraction of weeklies, although without more detailed interviewing, it is difficult to know why Jackie holds such a view of the magazines. However, she had lumped them all together as gossipy publications, which doesn't really apply to *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break*. Another respondent had made the same assumption:

Rebecca: What these put on is all stuff about soap operas. These *Take a Break* and that sort of thing. They seem to be, I mean, personally, I'd rather have something like world issues in it, like *Marie Claire*.

CJO: Actually, it's funny you should say that because *Take a Break*, *Bella* and *Best*, they hardly ever mention soap operas.

Rebecca: Oh, I tar them all with the same brush, I'm afraid. I thought that's what *Take a Break* was, I thought they were all similar sort of things.

North Mother and Toddler Group

Rebecca's engagement with the weeklies was insufficient for her to have grasped any differences between them and she clearly was not interested in their respective contents. She did, however, feel confident enough to label them as trivial, implicitly comparing them to a publication like *Marie Claire* which she thought was more worthwhile. In this sense, she was articulating a high/low culture perspective, both from a desire for distance and a lack of interest in weekly magazines - they were seen as irrelevant to her. As the wife of a solicitor and mother of two young children, but without formal qualifications, the rejection of weeklies in favour of monthlies might be seen as an attempt to leave behind the more 'trivial' concerns of the former for the more 'serious' and upmarket content of the latter.

The view of magazines as irrelevant was largely echoed by a group of Catholic women in Doncaster. These women had busy lives - as well as working (voluntarily) for the church and looking after domestic matters at home, some of them also had jobs outside the home:



Pam: I think time's a lot to do with it. We haven't got time to read.

Mavis: Well, one of the reasons why I don't read the, erm, magazines is because we don't get the time. I'm out on the Self Advocacy, I'm always at meetings, erm, and at the moment I'm in a play. And then there's choir Fridays.

Pam: I think television stops you as well, I mean/

Mary: I think that's probably played a part.

Tricia: Well, they got dearer, didn't they? They were tuppence when we were/ *[laughter]*.

Catholic Women Voluntary Group

The women in this group were aware of *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break*, indeed some of them read these magazines, but on the whole they displayed a lack of engagement with magazines generally, citing time and expense as the main factors. They did find time to read other publications, especially charity magazines or church newsletters, which indicated their priorities - there was a slight impression from some of the women that women's weeklies were rather a waste of time, not because of their content particularly, but because free leisure time to read magazines meant not being busy enough. So this group was fairly uninterested in women's weeklies, having the largest number of non-readers of any of the focus groups.

Some of my other interviewees did not read women's magazines, either preferring books, or magazines about sport or other particular topics. Jean Howard, a retired nursing lecturer who was one of the individual interviewees from Manchester, had agreed to talk about women's magazines but in fact hardly read any - her favourite publication, in which she thought I would be interested, was a quarterly magazine called *Grace*, a quasi-religious combination of anecdotes, stories and verse. She had never heard of *Take a Break*, and only looked at women's magazines like *Hello*, *My Weekly* and *People's Friend* because they were passed on to her from friends. Jennie, in the library staff focus group, also had a particular favourite, which was the *Steelers* magazine, all about the Sheffield ice hockey team. She preferred this to women's titles, only occasionally glancing at them in the library.

Despite *Take a Break's* position as market leader amongst the weeklies, a number of women I interviewed, like Jean above, had never heard of it. At



first, this surprised me, but then I realised that *Take a Break* rarely advertises or promotes itself, except in its sister magazines, *Bella* and *That's Life*. So one would have to be a magazine reader already of these two titles to be aware of it, or to have seen it in the newsagents or had it recommended by friends. This explains why some women were oblivious to it, despite their allegiance to other women's weeklies like *Woman's Own* or *My Weekly*:

Nell: What is the most popular women's magazine?

CJO: It's *Take a Break*.

Nell: *Take a Break*? I've never heard of it.

Dilys: Never heard of it.

Maggie: I thought it was a biscuit.

Women's Library Group

Two women who were regular readers of IPC titles like *Woman* and *Woman's Own* had either not noticed *Take a Break* in the newsagents (going straight for their usual magazine) or had assumed *Take a Break* was a television listings magazine like *TV Quick*:

Maybe I just tend to pick up the ones I know. I think it's because I just go in and I think, oh, I'll just get a magazine, I don't tend to browse, I just tend to pick up.

Pamela Cooper, homemaker

Diane: I don't tend to, erm, buy the things like the TV magazines or anything like that.

CJO: That's *TV Quick*, *TV Times*, things like that?

Diane: Yeah, *Take a Break*, that sort of job. Don't really appeal to me.

Diane Harrison, homemaker

Pamela, a full time mother of two young daughters in her early 30s, had become so used to the more established magazines like *Woman* that she never looked at the other titles on the newsagent's shelves. And Diane, also a full time mother, but with three boys under five, had been 'out of circulation' as she put it, since her first son was born, and thus she had missed the launch and subsequent rise of *Take a Break*.

The women in this section had no real interest in *Bella*, *Best* or *Take a Break* - the magazines were not a part of their lives. This was not always a conscious



decision, as some women had just never noticed them, whereas others were vaguely familiar with the magazines and gave them an occasional cursory glance. Others read alternative weekly magazines like *Woman* or *Woman's Own*. But *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break* played no role in the women's daily routines, their acquisition of knowledge or their own discourses of feminism or femininity.

### Summary

In this chapter, I have explored the many ways in which women interpret *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break*, mainly in relation to the health, money, work and rights features, and the true life stories. Such an exploration has raised issues both about Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model, and the success of what the editors are trying to do with their magazines.

Taking Hall's model first, its three hypothetical decoding positions were insufficient to account for all the varied responses of the women I interviewed. Its emphasis on class as the determining factor in readers' interpretations was too rigid to deal with the flexibility of reading magazines. For example, women in different socioeconomic positions may have had more in common than women sharing the same position. The Access Course students and social workers, both differently located in terms of traditional socioeconomic position, critiqued the weeklies for their focus on white, thin, heterosexual women and these views came from their education. Both groups (to varying depths) were aware of media representations and feminist writings and these discourses crossed those of occupation to affect the interpretations they made of the magazines. Similarly, women from a working class position did not always decode the magazines as intended by the editors because of their access to certain discourses which contradicted the content. Sandra, for example, in the north Mother and Toddler group, read the magazines first and foremost as a nurse. However, access to professional discourse, like class, does not work in isolation. Diane Harrison, also a nurse, did not read the magazines in the same way as Sandra. Diane's identity as a mother to three very young children had more influence on her magazine use than her identity as a nurse. The intersection of different discourses produces different readings, placing class as



an important factor which might govern access to discourses, but which does not completely negate or override them.

The ability of readers to occupy one decoding position for certain features or articles, and yet another position for other content, also problematizes the model. Nora Green, for example, decoded the health as intended by the editors but dismissed the true life stories as impossibly ridiculous and unbelievable. The encoding/decoding model is too inflexible to allow for such a 'messy' reading of a text and cannot explain it. To explore such a response, the researcher needs to go beyond the model and draw upon alternative methods of analysis such as repertoires or discourse registers. These can account for difference, apparent inconsistencies and the messiness of people's media use. Without such alternatives, the temptation is to gloss over difference and to make sweeping generalizations, but these offer a distorted analysis of women's readings of *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break*. Applying the encoding/decoding model encourages a too general picture, hiding inconsistencies and making things too neat.

The crossing of discourses means it is important to look more closely and more locally at readers' lives. Only by a detailed ethnography can the nuances of education, occupation, age and race be accessed and explored. The situating of research within the everyday lives of readers, then, would seem to be a logical and necessary shift in cultural and media studies. This would allow the researcher to locate readers' understanding of magazines in a more detailed and complete way. In this sense, the developments in feminist writings on postmodernism and post-structuralist theories can help exploration of the readers' subjectivities and free them from notions of stable and fixed identities which would obscure their multi-faceted lives. For example, library assistant Kath Price had a different interpretation of women's magazines from her colleagues. The common factor of occupation, as Morley (1980) found, was not always a sufficient means of categorising and explaining readers' or viewers' use and decoding of media messages, and prohibited the finding of difference within categories, as well as between. Dianna Hartley, as a deputy headteacher, might not be expected to read *Bella*, yet she had her own reasons for enjoying the magazine, unlike Irene Dickens, another deputy headteacher (now retired), who disliked all the weeklies. Both Irene and Joan (another



retired teacher), and Maureen, a widow whose husband had been an accountant, had little time for women's magazines yet the majority of older readers, who had no formal education or profession, enjoyed and used the weeklies, although the new titles of *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break* proved to be too racy and sexually explicit for some members of the Women's Library group.

As far as the aims of the editors are concerned, their desire to provide a supportive feminism did not always go unchallenged, and neither was it always recognised. However, from the readers' responses discussed in this chapter, I suggest that the magazines are reaching their intended audience. These are women who, like Pat Evans, Lynn Barstow, Nora Green, Sheila Strong, Carol in the north Sheffield Access Course group, the women in the Job Club, and the members of the Friendship Group, take information, support, advice and comfort from the magazines. What these women share (to different degrees) is their lack of access to discourses that make the magazines unnecessary to their well-being. For example, the magazines allowed Carol to keep up-to-date with important health information, Pat was able to resolve her family problems, and Kelly in the Job Club articulated her own difficulties via the true life story of someone in a similar situation. For other women, this function of magazines was not necessary because they had alternative sources of support or information, such as supportive friends or family, professional discourses for information, or feminist or cultural discourses that allowed them to criticise the magazines. The readers who used the magazines in the ways intended shared a class position (working class) which affected their access to other discourses, but not all working class readers responded in the same way.

How women interpret magazines is important in terms of their knowledge, expectations and norms, yet another aspect of magazine reading came out of the interviews. This was the social environment of reading - the sharing, passing on, discussing at work, habit and routine of women's magazines, which some women discussed as much as (if not more than) the content. This aspect of media use is not addressed by Hall's encoding/decoding model, although of course it has been developed to a certain extent by other writers, particularly Morley (1992), Radway (1987) and Hermes (1995). Given its importance to the readers themselves, I would suggest that any researcher investigating media



use cannot ignore the social context to reading, and how this might affect the decoding process. Therefore, chapter six will address the social considerations of reading *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break* - what women do with their magazines, when and where they read them, and how magazines facilitate kinship and friendship networks.



## CHAPTER SIX

### Gift Relations, Community and Trust

#### Introduction

The previous chapter focused on the way readers responded to the intended feminist content encoded by the editors - it was illustrated how readers interpret the content differently according to the discourses available to them and their experiences. Yet even for those readers who accept the editors' dominant message, the magazines still have far more to offer, and this is demonstrated by the comments and interest shown by many of the readers (except those who read to confirm their dislike of the magazines). In fact, the social role magazines play in friendship and family networks was one of the main themes to come out of the interviews with readers. A second main theme was that of the practical use of *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break*, the recipes, consumer advice, beauty tips, diets and so on. This practical use is the aspect of women's magazines that ostensibly deals with feminine, rather than feminist, discourses and for many women, it seemed to be more important than any (recognisable) feminist content. However, this is not to say that the practical and social elements of the magazines are necessarily at odds with the editors' supportive feminism - the encouragement of a sense of community within networks of readers, and the facilitation of everyday mundane tasks such as shopping can reasonably be related to the more overt feminist messages. Such practical articles like crafts or make-up hints are the staple features of women's magazines, although *Take a Break* includes less in these areas than the other magazines. As discussed in the content analysis, *Bella* and *Best* are more traditional, with frequent and regular articles on practical topics.

In this chapter, I shall look more closely at the social side of magazines, specifically placing what women do with *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break* in the context of gift relationships and the notion of community. Such a social function of magazines leads to face-to-face interaction but in addition the magazines facilitate mediated interaction (Thompson 1995). Therefore, two kinds of community are instigated by reading *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break* - a real, immediate community and an imagined, distanced one. I shall further



discuss and bring out the links between these two and then go on to explore the idea of trust generated by the magazines in relation to the practical service they offer to readers and the way they construct themselves as the reader's friend. First, theories of gift relationships and reader interaction, illustrated with examples from readers, and then the practical content in relation to mediated interaction and trust.

### **The importance of gift relations and community**

When I carried out the interviews with readers of *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break*, I was surprised at how strongly the theme of sharing magazines was expressed by the women. Having been prepared to consider it as a factor in reading magazines because of Radway's (1987) findings with romance readers, I nevertheless did not expect it to be so important. Hermes (1995), in the only published study of the ethnography of magazine use, did not emphasize this side of women's magazines (although references to it are apparent in some of her interview transcripts). Indeed she reported how the participants in her research were eager to give their magazines to *her*, because they did not want to throw them away yet wanted to be rid of them. Allowing Hermes to take the magazines off their hands solved the problem and meant the magazines were not wasted. Yet sharing or passing on was mentioned again and again by the readers in my study and towards the end of the interviews, I was surprised if the women did *not* buy in pairs/share/pass on their weekly magazines to family, friends and colleagues. Of course, this aspect of magazine reading is connected to the practical content, as readers wanted to pass on or share with others the knowledge they found in the magazines, either recipes, beauty hints, health news or any features or articles they felt would be appropriate. But in a sense, the social dimension to magazine reading was also a separate activity, as some women used the magazines purely as a network device and barely read them, skimming through the pages before passing them on.

In the first part of this chapter I will explore the sense of community encouraged by the magazines, not in terms of the content (see the second part of this chapter), but in relation to the readers' behaviour around the magazines, in particular their use of the magazines as gifts. There is very little previous research on magazines in this area and so I will draw upon the writings about



gift exchange in other areas of social life, especially Finch's (1989) work on kinship and obligations, and classic studies by anthropologists. First, I will briefly clarify the terms I will be using: 'gift' covers a wide range of meanings - it may be financial assistance, practical help such as babysitting, letting a friend use the spare room, or in the case of this research, the passing on of women's magazines. 'Exchange' refers to getting something back in return for one's gift, although the nature of this return gift is not always clear - it may be subtle and indirect, making it difficult for the researcher to identify. The gifts may also be of unequal value, implying that 'exchange' may have varying meanings according to context. 'Reciprocity' is similar to exchange but it indicates a flow of gift giving over time involving a number of people. However, there are two kinds of reciprocity - balanced reciprocity, according to Finch (1989), is where an equivalent gift is returned immediately, and generalized reciprocity, which is a vague activity, in which there is no specific expectation about when or how the gift will be returned, or even whether it will be returned at all (although not to return the gift ever belies the term 'reciprocity'). Balanced reciprocity sounds very much like the exchange of an equivalent gift. It follows from these definitions that generalized reciprocity may sustain a one way flow over a length of time but balanced reciprocity indicates a two way flow over a shorter period.

With only a few exceptions, gift giving has largely been studied in the context of non-Western cultures. The exceptions include Titmuss's (1970) investigation into blood donation; Cheal's (1988) look at giving on special occasions like Christmas; gifts and kinship by Finch (1989); and Komter's recent study of gift exchange in the Netherlands (1996). None of these take into account the frequent and routine exchange of giving, which is the feature of sharing women's magazines, a practice perhaps so taken for granted and ordinary that it is not thought about very much by those who do it. As Komter pointed out in relation to other normalised gift exchanges, 'without being conscious of the exact rules, we know how to play the game' (1996:313).

How can the gift be accounted for in contemporary western societies, and how does it relate to the idea of community? According to Mauss (1950) gift giving acts as the moral cement of society, because *mutual* giving facilitates alliances and communications with others. The gift can be a form of reciprocity in which



the honour of both giver and recipient is at stake. Taken from the anthropological writings on potlatch, the gift is characterised by the three linked activities of giving, accepting and reciprocating. Obligations created by gifts promote mutual reciprocity between giver and receiver and Mauss made the point that all gift giving has to be paid for - there is no such thing as a free gift. In Douglas's words, 'a gift that does nothing to enhance solidarity is a contradiction' (Douglas 1992:155). However, Malinowski (1922) suggested that the reciprocal nature of giving differed according to the depth of relationship involved - the obligation for family or good friends to respond is lessened (but not entirely redundant) because of the existing close social ties. Finch's (1989) study of kinship groups supports Malinowski's suggestion and as I will show with magazine readers, the level of reciprocity differs according to family or friendship relations. Giving cements social relations and involves degrees of obligation, functioning to create relations or to reinforce existing ones. Giving promotes feelings of gratitude, linking people to others and motivating more giving in return.

Finch's (1989) study of family obligations in western society deals with the concepts of exchange, support and reciprocity. Although it is focused on these concepts as they relate to emotional and physical support between kin, nevertheless it is relevant to how family members negotiate obligations and how these are balanced. Therefore, her findings can be used to examine the role that gift giving fulfils amongst kin, and how it differs amongst other givers and receivers who are not linked by family ties. Given that many of the participants in my research passed magazines on to both family and friends, but particularly family, Finch's study is useful for its insight into why women take the trouble to pass on their magazines.

Before looking at the function of magazines, it is relevant to note that women have a stronger commitment to sustaining kin relationships than men. As Finch puts it, 'the whole area of kin relationships is women's business more than men's' (Finch 1989:40). Men's role in family life is limited compared to women's and their responsibilities are likely to be defined in a different way, both by themselves and others. How can this difference between women and men be accounted for? Chodorow (1989) offers an explanation which attempts to understand the division of labour between genders. Drawing on



psychoanalytic theory, Chodorow points to women's mothering role - women are the primary socializers of both girls and boys, which produces differing capacities for close relationships in adult life. Women grow up in an environment of women, where the adult female role is learned from social interaction and personal relationships with other women (mother, aunts, grandmothers), spanning generations. Boys, on the other hand, need to differentiate themselves from their mothers, denying their feminine attributes and constructing anti-relational qualities, developing a rigid ego boundary. Women have more flexible ego boundaries, defining themselves relationally to others and being less insistent on self-other distinctions. These two patterns of socialization for girls and boys result in women potentially having richer emotional lives than men, with greater capacities and needs (although substantiating the claim that men differ to women in this way would be difficult). But because men find it difficult to provide the nurturing women require, women turn to other women to get that emotional support. Hence, women need each other for the mothering that men cannot give, although women of course give that kind of support to men.

Chodorow's (1989) theory of male/female relationships is not without its critics (for example, see Sayers 1982) but it provides a possible explanation of why kin relationships are seen as women's work and why men rarely become involved in family life to the same extent as women. It also helps to account for the ties which are evident between mothers and daughters-in-law, many of which were mentioned by the readers I interviewed, and in which magazines were used to forge and sustain relations. With mothers and daughters, a bond already existed and the magazines were used in an everyday context to maintain that bond - the slightly more precarious in-law relationship was nurtured with, amongst other things, women's magazines.

The practice of passing on magazines to other women is an example of the system of gift giving which connects women of all ages and classes. It is an illustration of the importance of the gift in contemporary times, locating the practice firmly in modern western culture. The fact that *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break* are exchanged with such regularity also belies their throwaway look and image, so commonly associated with weeklies but not monthlies. My research with readers demonstrates the relevance of exchanging magazines for social



relations, the strong networks women build between friends, relatives and colleagues, and the supportive nature women show to each other, especially in circumstances of illness or unemployment. Magazines as gifts can cement social relations or they can act as expressions of pre-existing kin relationships or friendships, depending on the circumstances of those giving and receiving.

The link to the community ethos intended by the editors is apparent in the context of gift relations - women use *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break* as a social facilitator, as a practical means, via gifts, to cement social relations and forge (or sustain) friendships. In this sense, then, the magazines play a dual role - addressing an imagined community of readers via their content, and encouraging a real community via the network of exchange. I will explore the imagined community aspect of the magazines' content later - first, some examples of how *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break* are used as gifts, discussed primarily as a financial consideration made by readers, but developing into an account of the sharing and exchange of magazines.

Saving money was an important consideration for readers in their purchase of a woman's magazine and in the amount of content consumed by the reader. Although some readers tended just to flick through their magazines, perhaps spending half an hour at most on each one and not feeling they have to read the whole content (for example, the more middle class readers such as Dianna Hartley, Diane Harrison and Pamela Cooper had this approach), many women mentioned wanting to get their money's worth from the magazines, which meant reading them from cover to cover. These readers were mainly those without jobs, on a tight budget, who felt that to justify the expense of a magazine they ought to read it all. There was an opinion that magazines passed on from other people were better value, presumably because they were free in a financial sense, but this did not mean they could be skimmed through - they were still worth reading thoroughly. Indeed, the pleasure of getting something for 'nothing' (although the magazines would probably have been part of an exchange or a reciprocal relationship) made these magazines even more attractive than those the reader bought herself and seemed to have more to read in them:

Dilys: My sister takes *Bella* and she passes it on.

Nell: I said that, there's more good when they're passed on.



Dilys: When you've had it passed on.

Women's Library Group

One of the above group, Nell, was following a knitting pattern whilst we were talking, and it was from a *Woman's Weekly* published in 1978. When I expressed my surprise, she said 'Well, I've had it given me.' Getting value for money from a magazine frequently included using old patterns or recipes, important if the reader did not have much spare money to spend on new magazines. The women in the Job Club even re-read their weekly magazines, many of which had been passed on anyway:

CJO: Do you read the true life stories?

Michelle: Yeah, read it from cover to cover.

Tracy: Yeah, I do.

Michelle: Get your money's worth.

Tracy: That's it.

Michelle: 'Cos you can go back and read 'em again though, can't you, them stories.

Tracy: You can, yeah.

Job Club

Carol: It's just, you read all the others and it's very light hearted and you get to *Letter From the Heart!*

Anna: And it's a bit too heavy going. Yes, I usually miss that out.

Carol: Yeah, but I want to get my money's worth from *Take a Break* so I have to read it.

North Access Course

Even when a particular feature is disliked, some readers would not want to ignore it, as this would mean not getting value for money from the magazine. One obvious way of saving money was to share the cost of the magazine with a friend, or for each reader to buy a different magazine then swap them over:

May: As I say, I used to take several, *Woman's Weekly* I've taken, I took it in my teens until about two years ago. Then the friend I used to share it with said she was stopping because it had gone up such a lot. And she said I don't want to bother taking it any more. 'Cos she used to buy it one week and I used to buy it the following week. But when she stopped taking it I stopped as well and I've never bothered with it since.

Women's Library Group



It would be about two or three years ago because how I got to read it [*Take a Break*] was a friend who used to live further up the road, she always had *Take a Break* and I always had *Woman* or *Woman's Own*. And then when we'd finished reading ours, we'd exchange them.

Tricia Hallam, homemaker

Both May and Tricia had changed their reading habits since their respective exchange buying relationships had ended - although there was no reason for May to stop buying *Woman's Weekly* every fortnight (or even every week), indeed it was her favourite magazine, the reason for its purchase had disappeared with her friend's decision not to buy. Clearly, the sharing was the primary motivation for reading *Woman's Weekly*. Now, May bought *Bella* every week. Tricia too had changed magazines, from her original *Woman* or *Woman's Own* to *Take a Break*. When her neighbour moved away, Tricia's regular supply of *Take a Break* had stopped and because she had enjoyed this more than the titles she bought, she had begun buying *Take a Break* for herself, and abandoned *Woman* and *Woman's Own*.

These two examples show how the cost of buying magazines is an important factor, both in how many different magazines a reader can afford and which titles she chooses, and also how women negotiate a buying routine built on exchange. Although weeklies seem to be very cheap (*Best*, *Bella*, *Take a Break*, *Woman* are all currently 57 pence, the older weeklies slightly cheaper), not all readers could afford them and some would have liked to share the cost but had nobody to share with. In particular, older readers had built up a network of sharers because their limited incomes meant they had to if they wanted to read more than one magazine a week. Here, it seemed as if financial considerations might be the main reason for sharing magazines, and the consequent social benefits of sharing came as a bonus to the following readers:

Nell: I mean, we're all an old group and, er, all pensioners really, and so we pass things on.

Rose: Because I buy one and a friend buys one.

Dot: We haven't enough money to buy a lot.

Women's Library Group



Another older woman, who was working as a childminder and whom I interviewed in the East Mother and Toddler Group, emphasized how important it was to be part of such a gift network from a financial perspective:

Anthea: You got real value for your money in that [*Woman's Weekly*].

CJO: But you don't read any at the moment?

Anthea: I can't afford them, they're too expensive.

CJO: Do you get them passed on from anybody?

Anthea: No, but I'd like to. These ones like *Bella*, they're comparatively new, aren't they?

East Mother and Toddler Group

Anthea's example quoted above supports Komter's (1996) findings that informal giving is ruled by reciprocity. This indicates that gifts are usually followed by return gifts. Therefore, women who give the most magazines as gifts receive the most in return and reciprocity works in a beneficial way for them. However, women who infrequently or never give magazines, receive few or none in return, such as Anthea above. Reciprocity, therefore, can act as a principle of exclusion, isolating those who do not (or cannot) give much as the poorest receivers. But certain circumstances overcame expectations of reciprocity and meant that women who were unable to give continued to receive. Some of the readers I interviewed were particularly keen to share magazines with a friend because of personal circumstances, and this sharing was one way of showing support and friendship. Two readers who used to buy different magazines were Julie and Anne, but when Julie lost her job, she could no longer afford to buy her *Bella* weekly:

Julie: I read *Bella* and *Take a Break* after Anne, I'm afraid, now.

Anne: *Take a Break* and *Bella* mostly.

Julie: I used to buy 'em myself when I were working.

Anne: She has to wait until I've finished.

Julie: Now, if I went to buy 'em myself, if Anne didn't buy 'em, I dare say I would go and buy 'em.

Anne: Well, you used to buy *Bella*, didn't you? And then you stopped buying and I said, well, you may as well have 'em off me. 'Cos I buy 'em every week.



Julie: And she pinches all the special offer vouchers, ten pence off this [*laughter*], she does. 'Cos she buys the book, she thinks she's entitled!

Julie Irving, unemployed and Anne Lane, shop assistant

There was a lot of humour in this conversation but there was also the issue of Anne helping Julie out because of the latter's change in circumstance. From the conversation, I got the impression that Julie was slightly embarrassed at having to accept Anne's old magazines and she spontaneously returned to the issue later in the interview:

Julie: Yeah, I think I, I mean, I'm not being funny but I think if I didn't get *Bella* off you I'd buy it, you know.

Anne: Mmm, I've got some more at home yet.

Julie: Yeah, you know, I'd just, er, perhaps I ought to buy a different one and give you mine. I could buy *Woman's Weekly*, you know.

Julie Irving, unemployed and Anne Lane, shop assistant

Julie was obviously unused to accepting anything from Anne without giving her something in return and this worried her. This situation is a clear example of Mauss's point about the expected reciprocity in gift relations, the obligations and ties that are created by exchanging material goods. Julie's response to Anne's gift of magazines illustrates this expectation that Julie feels she should offer something to Anne, preferably another magazine - Julie obviously feels she is in Anne's debt, hence the former's suggestion that she could buy *Woman's Weekly*, even though she cannot really afford it. The 'balance of debt' (Schwartz 1967:8) in Julie and Anne's relationship has shifted towards favouring Anne, although because of their close ties and longstanding friendship, this imbalance is likely to continue to favour first one then the other. According to Schwartz, the balance of debt must never be brought into equilibrium because a perfect level of distribution is typical of the economic rather than social relationship. A continuing balance of debt, alternating between Julie and Anne, ensures the relationship will endure as gratitude constitutes part of the bond which links them. But for now, Julie has no option but to accept Anne's gift of *Bella* and *Take a Break*, although Anne lessens their value by tearing out the coupons and recipes and special offers, and by handing them on after a delay of weeks. This does not take away from the fact



that Anne is happy to give Julie her old magazines and that Julie is willing to accept them, although with some twinges of conscience. Because Julie is unemployed, the circumstances are special - if she worked, there would be an equal and alternate exchange of magazines, not simply a one way gift.

Questions of finance, status, friendship and reciprocity are all interwoven in the above dialogue between Julie and Anne, and if my research intention had been to look at this particular role of magazines in detail, then it would have been possible to probe more deeply into the two women's relationship. However, as I discussed in chapter two, magazines as gifts came out of the interviews and was not something I had deliberately intended to research in great detail. Thus, my data on this aspect of magazines is not as rich as I would have liked, given its importance to readers. But even within these limitations, there is enough material from the readers to convey what a central role women's magazines play in their social lives.

When other readers discussed passing on magazines or sharing them with friends or family, they usually meant an exchange unless, like Julie and Anne above, there were particular reasons why the relationship was unequal, or the ties were close enough to enjoy a generalized reciprocal relationship. Thus, the women in the Friendship Group eagerly awaited their 'ringleader', Joan, who always arrived with a selection of weeklies which had been passed on to her from various sources - the reason Joan ended up with these magazines was because they were given to her by younger women who looked upon her as a 'poor relation' (this was said tongue-in-cheek but there was a grain of truth in it. Joan was the poor relation compared to the younger women, although within the Friendship Group she was comparatively well off, as her husband was still alive - many of the other women were widows):

CJO: You get a lot of magazines, Joan, are they all from different places?

Joan: Well, no, they all come from the same source. Er, my daughter-in-law's sister, yes, she's no relation to me but she's only a young woman but she's quite ill and she can't get about. And, er, not only does she buy them herself, but her sisters buy them for her and eventually they all end up with me. And then I always bring 'em here and anybody that wants 'em takes 'em home. Mind you, I'm getting into another circle because it's



funny about this conversation because, er, my daughter-in-law and her friend and my daughter, this is three young women, were all talking about this and magazines, and her friend says, oh, I always send mine round my sister's but I'll get them back and I'll send them on to Joan, 'cos, you see, I'm the poor relation.

Friendship Group

Not only does Joan get the women's magazines because she's seen as poor, but the younger women feel they are doing her a good turn by saving their magazines for her. And so the magazines get well used and give pleasure to a lot of women before they eventually get donated to a hospital to be read in the waiting room. The support network between friends and fairly distant relatives (the sister of her daughter-in-law) was clearly visible in Joan's quote above, illustrating my comments at the beginning of this section on the community spirit fostered by the sharing of women's magazines. Women are happy to help others who can't afford magazines - Rene, who shares buying *Best* and *Bella* with her sister, remembers her friend who is on a low income:

And what we do is, we don't throw them away, we hang on to them and pass them on to friends. I've got a friend, who, she doesn't subscribe to any magazines and she's got two children, and, erm, she always says, you got any magazines and we just pass them on to our friend. I mean, she sometimes passes them on to a friend as well, so they get passed around, yeah.

Rene King, nursery nurse

In addition to the financial reasons for passing on magazines, which are in any case bound up with the rules of friendship and family networks and not just money, some of the women I interviewed had another agenda when passing their magazines to others. The magazines became a way of staying in touch, a reason to visit a friend or get out of the house. The reader who particularly evoked this aspect of the magazines' social function was an elderly woman called Lucy Brown, a recently bereaved widow with one grown up son. Lucy read all the women's weeklies but bought only one - *Take a Break*. She was in a 'magazine circle', a small, local community of women linked primarily by their exchange of women's magazines. This was not a simple two-way exchange but a more generalized reciprocity where Lucy gave and received magazines from one woman, passed them on to another, who in turn passed them on again:



There's your *Best, Bella, Woman, Woman's Own, Chat* and I suppose because I pass them on they pass 'em to me and then I pass 'em to someone else. So we're all doing us a good favour, it's economic. The lady I give these to lives on Green Lane and, erm, she lost her husband two years ago and so I pass them on to her, you know. It's something to do to have a walk over and take them. It's an initiative to get me out the house in the day, I'm all right at night but I like to get out during the day.

Lucy Brown, retired

Lucy's husband had died two years before the interview and she had come to rely on friends and her son more than when her husband was alive. She had also come to rely on *Take a Break* itself to a large extent, in addition to using magazines generally as a social facilitator. As Komter (1996) suggested in her study of gift giving in the Netherlands, the more people give, the more they receive, and Lucy is an example of this, as she herself acknowledges. Introduced to *Take a Break* by her daughter-in-law on holiday after her husband had died, Lucy immediately took to the magazine. Not being particularly fond of watching television, Lucy preferred to read and listen to the radio and *Take a Break* fitted in perfectly with this arrangement:

*Take a Break* has been a very good help to me. In fact, I think if that hadn't cropped up, I don't know, I'd have been, I probably would have started to feel very sorry for myself. And I think that started me to think about other things, you know. It really has done me, given me a lot of help. We were always together, shopping or whatever we did, we were always together, you know, and I think that's when it's hard. So that's why I ... [*pats Take a Break*].

Lucy Brown, retired

The competitions helped to give Lucy something to occupy herself with in the long evenings after her husband died, as well as giving her a reason to go to the shops to buy the magazine, post her competition entry every week, and visit friends to carry out the gift exchange.

As a way of staying in touch with her family, student Kim Carter received women's magazines from her mother and stepmother who both lived in Liverpool. Kim had no family in the Sheffield area and did not pass on her *Take a Break* to anyone. There was no obvious exchange with her mother or



stepmother for their gifts to her. I would argue this illustrates the point made by Finch (1989) that in kin relationships, there may be a generalized reciprocity, which can be sustained one way over a length of time, and does not necessarily need to be returned (making the 'reciprocity' part rather a misnomer). Kim's receiving of magazines also emphasizes the financial aspect to giving and the status involved. As a student, Kim had little money and her family expressed their pre-existing kin relations by giving her magazines so she did not have to buy them:

I mean, me mum used to read 'em so I always used to read hers. And then when I left home I started buying 'em myself. 'Cos my mum and my step mum both read 'em but they get lots themselves. Whenever I see my stepmum she gives me a load 'cos she buys every one on the market.

Kim Carter, student and part time shop assistant

Although there was no point in giving her stepmother her *Take a Breaks*, as she bought them all anyway, Kim could have swapped with her mother but this did not happen. Kim's *Take a Breaks* stayed in a cupboard - like Hermes's (1995) respondents, she was waiting for a suitable way to dispose of them without throwing them away, but had nobody to give them to.

A further example of generalized reciprocity was related by Tracy from the Job Club. Speaking of her grandmother who had just died, Tracy told how she used to dole out women's magazines to her extended family:

Tracy: Yeah, I like *Bella* and *Best* and *Woman's Own*. My grandma had 'em but she passed away. She used to pass 'em all the way round the family, you know. Save everybody buyin' 'em, she just used to pass 'em round. And, er, my mum's carried on, she's havin' 'em now, but they're quite good. When my grandma were alive, she used to collect 'em and leave 'em in big piles.

Job Club

As with Kim's situation above, the financial aspect of giving magazines comes out clearly in Tracy's quote, and also the status of giving - in Tracy's family, the matriarch appears to take on the gift giving role, passing on women's magazines to the rest of the family.



It was unusual to find a reader of the magazines who did not pass on her *Bella*, *Best* or *Take a Break* to another reader. Only Kim Carter and Diane Harrison kept all their magazines and the latter explained this was because her sisters lived in other parts of the country, making it impractical to swap magazines. Pamela Cooper exchanged glossy monthlies, but threw away her weeklies, a telling action which demonstrated how she viewed weeklies as throwaway magazines. But most readers had some kind of sharing network in place, usually with family (especially mothers with daughters and daughters-in-law), neighbours or friends. The magazines formed a regular link with others, even if those who received the magazines did not particularly read them in detail, but just flicked through them. They nevertheless accepted the magazines and passed them on to other friends. So there was an assumption that all women would be interested in receiving magazines, indicating a community of shared interests and knowledge which was common to all women, whatever their age or social circumstances.

The women's magazines enabled readers to engage in face-to-face interaction, a concept described by Thompson (1995) to differentiate such interaction from more mediated kinds. In an attempt to define various kinds of interaction, he proposed that in an increasingly mediated world, there are three kinds of interaction - traditional face-to-face, mediated, and mediated quasi-interaction. 'Face-to-face' is characterised by participants sharing the same spatial-temporal location and was discussed in the first part of this chapter - readers used the magazines both as gifts and as topics of conversation, two elements of face-to-face interaction which are not necessarily always done together; 'mediated' is when participants are located in different contexts such as in letter writing or telephoning; and 'mediated quasi-interaction' is that established by the media of mass communication. For the latter interaction, the flow of communication is predominantly one way and it creates a social situation in which individuals (in this case readers) are linked together in a process of communication and symbolic exchange. However, Thompson's characterisation of mediated quasi-interaction does position the audience as rather passive, accepting the flow of information from the media without necessarily responding - I will critically address this characterisation later in the chapter. The magazines also enable readers to participate in mediated interaction due to the opportunity to enter into a dialogue between the two parties, whereby readers can write to the



magazines and receive a reply, either published or personal. In addition, the magazines facilitate mediated interaction between readers by forwarding letters addressed to those who have appeared in the true life stories. Therefore, whereas most media only enable mediated quasi-interaction to take place, women's magazines are able to promote all kinds of interaction between themselves and readers, indicating their importance in a media-saturated environment.

The kind of interaction enabled by the magazines is connected to the *public* and *private* contexts of reading. Women who take magazines into work and share them with colleagues, reading them in the lunch break or during quiet spells (for example, the library staff, bank clerks, Pat Evans, Beryl Fraser), use the magazines to facilitate face-to-face interaction. The magazines are discussed, laughed at and swapped, encouraging a sense of community in the workplace. Articles can be discussed without necessarily exchanging the magazines themselves, or the magazines can actually be read as a communal activity. Having the same opinions as one's colleagues and criticising the same articles promotes a feeling of camaraderie between women, reinforcing a group identity. Hobson (1990) documented this phenomenon in her study of soap opera - not only did colleagues discuss the previous evening's episode, the programmes were used as a way of broaching more personal topics which women wanted to discuss with colleagues but did not always know how. Hobson found that a woman could gauge her friends' reactions by displacing her own personal situation on to the soap characters. Although I did not find readers using the magazines to this extent, the magazines still fulfilled an important function in the workplace:

Juliet: I bring a lot in here, I bring quite a lot.

Kath: It's funny, because I've brought some in today.

Sharon: We would discuss the magazines, wouldn't we, because you say have you seen this?

Kath: Yeah, like those, you know, those true life stories, I think because they're so ridiculous, some of them. I think people, you know, you just tend to have a laugh about them and things. It's a bit over the top, far-fetched, but I don't think you'd pick them up and look at beauty or fashion, it's more like true life experiences that you can, er ...



Sharon: We pass 'em round, we go, have you read this, this can't be true!

Library Staff

The bank clerks showed a similar response - they too brought magazines into work and left them on the staffroom table for all to read at lunchtime and people were free to take them home at the end of the day. Both the library staff and the bank clerks used the magazines as generalized gift giving and as topics of conversation, the two elements of face-to-face interaction. (Of course, the content of the magazines can be discussed without giving them as gifts at the same time). Women reading their magazines in a private location, usually the home, enjoyed more mediated interaction with their magazines, although face-to-face interaction may occur *before* or *after*, when the magazines are passed *from* or *to* other readers or discussed with others. Even though the home is also a site of work for women, it is an isolated location, and the breaks and lunchtimes enjoyed by women in more formal work situations have to be constructed by women at home. Leisure time is blurred with work as women take responsibility for household chores:

Within the ideology of 'the family', these duties and obligations are the woman's by 'natural' right: she carries them out of love for her family, her reward being their comfort and happiness. This has implications for the quantity, quality and individual understanding of leisure time spent in the home by men and women.

Gray 1992:43

From the material in the interviews I carried out with readers, I agree with Gray's assessment of how leisure time in the home is an ambiguous concept for women. Identifying reading magazines as a time of leisure, much like watching soaps or reading romances, meant that it took second place after household chores and women felt guilty if they read a magazine during the day when they 'should' have been working:

Beryl: I mean, you can spend all morning with a magazine, if you're sat, couldn't you, you know, oh, I could be doing this, I could be doing that, you know. I don't feel as guilty if I'm having a break, when I get home, er, I finish here at one, I get home, make a sandwich, have a sit down and read it then because I think, oh, this is like a dinner hour, I'm entitled to sit



and read it. I mean, sometimes a magazine can outlive your meal, your sandwich. And you think, I'd better get something done, you know.

CJO: Do you have all the housework to do when you get home?

Beryl: Yes.

Beryl Fraser, cloakroom attendant

Beryl worked part time outside the home and thus read magazines in both locations. For women who worked full time in the home, there was still guilt about taking time out during the day (or evening) to read a woman's magazine:

I've not looked at it [*Take a Break*] yet today, though. Because I know if I do, if I once start, that'll be it. I shall be sat down, and I shall start a competition, and I shall be doing that and I wouldn't get anything else done, so ... No, I'm just going to leave it now, until after tea.

Tricia Hallam, homemaker

The most successful of the readers who had organised her reading around a particular routine was Pat Evans, who had a weekly ritual which involved *Take a Break* and Friday nights. Pat was part of a community of magazine readers, both passing on and receiving magazines, but her private reading of *Take a Break* gave her great pleasure:

Friday night, when it's the end of the week, and I just sit and relax at night and that's the first thing I do. Turn to my *Take a Break* straightaway. Unless I'm having the grandchildren then it has to wait until Monday or Tuesday. I usually go in the bath and have a nice session in there and read it. Oh, yes, I love that Friday night. I can't describe but I love that Friday night. I curl up on the settee and do my puzzles.

Pat Evans, cloakroom attendant

The intimate, face-to-face interaction, discussed earlier in the chapter, is characterised by reciprocity, ties and obligations - in other words, it encourages a real sense of community which is founded upon sharing, belonging, a common experience and social exchange. But it is also an exclusive community because those who do not give many gifts are the poorest receivers. To take part in the reciprocal relations, women have to give magazines, unless they are in special circumstances. However, they can



participate in more mediated forms of interaction, which is not between readers, but between the reader and her magazine.

### **Mediated interaction, imagined community and trust**

The interaction a reader has with her magazine is different to that based on sharing and networking with other readers, as it is not reliant on face-to-face interaction. I want to address the reader/magazine relationship through the practical knowledge in the magazines, because this aspect of the content was enjoyed by so many of the readers I interviewed and it has relevance to the feminist intentions of the editors. Looking at the magazines from this perspective illustrates Thompson's (1995) mediated interaction, Hermes' (1996) imagined community of readers, and Giddens' (1991) notion of trust.

Readers excluded from the reciprocity of exchange were nevertheless able to participate in the mediated interaction with the magazines. *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break* deliberately identify themselves as the reader's friend, who can be trusted to give advice, sympathise, entertain and inform. They achieve this by constructing an imagined community in which a non-reciprocal intimacy is generated - in Thompson's (1995) concept, a mediated quasi-interaction. Although Thompson used the word 'interaction' here, he envisaged the action as communication mainly on the part of the magazine, rather than being a two way process, and thus 'imagined community' might be a clearer phrase to use. Here, the community is sharing the same symbolic territory without the restrictions of time-space constraints, face-to-face interaction or dialogical exchange. Thus, as Meyrowitz (1985) noted, community involvement has moved away from public participation to private consumption following the collapse of space-time distinctions due to the evolution of the mass media. Physical presence decreases in significance, resulting in a combination of mediated and interpersonal communication, rather than the previous focus on interpersonal communication. The magazines can address readers without knowing exactly to whom they are talking (although their market research gives them a fairly accurate picture as their respective media packs illustrate) and without expecting all the readers to reply. So the tone of address is in certain ways monological, although of course there is a large amount of feedback from readers, both published and unpublished material. John Dale,



editor of *Take a Break* remarked that the magazine receives 2,000 letters per week.

According to McRobbie (1996), an imagined community of both producers and readers is constructed in the pages of women's magazines. The ideal reader is identified through a language of lifestyle and outlook and the magazine staff identify themselves in a similar way. The readers represent 'an extended community of the producer's own circle of friends and acquaintances' (McRobbie 1996:180). Although she was discussing more trendy monthly magazines here, I think this applies to the weeklies too. As illustrated in chapter four, the magazines blur the boundaries between themselves as producers and the readers as consumers, particularly *Take a Break*. The effect is an imagined, shared community of readers and producers who inhabit the same world and who have the same concerns, interests and experiences. So in this sense of community, there is an aspiration to common interests to which many readers respond, although of course others do not. It is not quite the empty rhetoric of large scale community, nor is it a reality invested with sentiment attached to concrete practices of kinship or friendship (Cohen 1985). Rather, the magazines' intended community is a knowing, appreciative readership which shares a common experience and interpretation of *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break*.

Another sense of community, what Hermes (1996:11) calls an 'extended family repertoire' draws a wide circle of characters into the readers' lives, creating a further imagined community populated by the families and friends portrayed in the true life stories, health, beauty and so on. Rather than the readers being drawn into the producers' network of friends, the readers themselves are adding to their own community, extending it with other people's experiences. Although this is easier to conceptualise in relation to gossip magazines (as intended by Hermes) where the characters are celebrities and readers read about their private lives over and over again, nevertheless it also applies to *Bella*, *Best* and *Take a Break*, because readers become familiar with the intimate details of the lives of other ordinary people like themselves. As Hermes suggested, on an imaginary level this creates a friendly, easy kind of community, but she also posited a different kind of community, based on the repertoire of melodrama. Here, community comes into being when readers are



indignant or shocked by what they read in the magazines, and need to discuss such content with others. By articulating their disapproval or compassion, readers appeal to shared meanings and standards, constructing accepted levels of morality and validating their own experience. Therefore, contrary to Thompson's (1995) rather one way notion of mediated quasi-interaction between mass media and its audience, the readers do interact with the magazines' content - with the magazines, the distinction between mediated interaction and mediated quasi-interaction is blurred, and not particularly useful. Readers communicate back to the magazines by practical means such as writing letters but they also communicate on a more imaginary level with the characters in the stories, and with the editors, who deliberately cultivate such a response. Hence, the rather restricted quasi-interaction, which might well be more applicable to other mass media such as radio, has the effect of obscuring the extent of the interaction between reader and magazine.

For keen readers, the magazines provide a genuinely common experience, both drawing them in to the editor's world, as McRobbie (1996) suggested, and extending their own community to encompass the characters portrayed in the magazine, as Hermes (1996) found. If community is characterised by belonging (Williams 1958) then readers know they are a part of the magazines' network of advice, entertainment and information and it is in this way that the magazines address their readers.

One way to illustrate the readers' perceptions of this community is through the practical content in the magazines, which many readers enjoyed. The practical features (cookery, crafts, tips, consumer information, advice) offer certain knowledge to the readers, much of it from other readers like themselves. Of course, this knowledge is not always acted upon, even though the intention may be there, but the important point is that many though not all readers trust this information to be in their best interests. It is similar to receiving information from a friend who has found a great new mascara and wants to share it with other friends. The weeklies have that trusted feel, partly because the women who test out products are either other readers or the magazine staff themselves.



Before looking at how the readers actually use the practical information in the magazines, a discussion of trust is necessary to explain why it is so important. According to Giddens (1991), knowledge is no longer simply local or learnt by face-to-face interaction, due to the acceleration of time-space distancing, and so it is inevitable that other, more learned institutions or individuals have to be trusted with the expert knowledge they hold. Therefore, trust underpins many of the day to day decisions taken by individuals. Trust is a condition of late modernity which itself is characterised by many systems of expert knowledge. To get through everyday activities, the individual needs to place her trust in these 'expert systems', that is, systems of knowledge constructed by experts in all aspects of social life - medicine, nutrition, transport, architecture and so on. For example, *Take a Break* ran a short campaign about women being exploited by garage mechanics - without technical knowledge, the women had placed their trust in the garage staff, experts in their field. Some (male) mechanics had taken advantage of the women's lack of knowledge, overcharging them and carrying out unnecessary 'repairs'. *Take a Break* attempted to restore the women's trust by recommending reliable garages or by suggesting readers might take car maintenance classes to increase their own knowledge and thereby empower themselves to deal with garages. But there remains the necessity of relying on and trusting others who have expert knowledge - it is not possible for an individual to be expert in all the necessary fields to be completely self-sufficient.

I would argue that women's magazines can be seen as 'expert systems' because of their particular knowledge and the trust readers place in them. In addition, magazines help to guide their readers through the multiplicity of lifestyle choices available, another characteristic of late modernity. So many options exist that need to be decided upon - as Giddens remarked, 'we have no choice but to choose' (Giddens 1991:81). Magazines have a recognisable role to fill here and one that they have enjoyed since the 1950s, when the consumer boom widened the choice of goods available and women relied on the traditional weeklies to guide them through. The choices remain but with the added ingredient of risk - currently, risks include the questions over baby milk formula; doubt over beef; the long term affects of artificial sweeteners; the dangers of passive smoking, and so on. The secrecy of abstract expert systems denies first hand knowledge of these dilemmas (and the government adds little



reassurance) so the individual has to rely on trusted sources of information. Although risk has not increased in all areas of life, for example death in childbirth is going down in western countries, new technology complicates matters by offering more risky potentialities and increasing the choices individuals have to make. Douglas (1992) has suggested that the language of danger has now turned into that of risk and this new scientific language puts the responsibility for choosing onto individuals and away from institutions. The magazines, friendly and ostensibly with their readers' best interests at heart, can help individuals by guiding readers through the debates about the safety of prenatal testing to the best moisturiser for sensitive skin. The magazines can offer the pros and cons of certain choices and steer the reader through her chosen option. Providing women with knowledge so they can be informed is a vital function of the magazines (and one of the elements of the editors' supportive feminism discussed in chapter three), and I shall illustrate how readers recognised and appreciated this, using the magazines as a source of information in relation to the practical content. All three magazines incorporate practical features (see chapter four) and most readers were keen followers of the tips or the recipes or the consumer guides. In the next section, I will address the readers' responses to the content which they explicitly trusted to give them reliable, up-to-date information to be used in their everyday lives. Therefore, I will focus on the consumer guides and the tips sent in to the magazines by readers.

A favourite feature of the magazines, and one which relates closely to the role traditional women's magazines were fulfilling in the 1950s, is that of consumer guide. This is an important service that magazines offer to readers - helping them to find their way through the plethora of domestic products, cosmetics, foods and personal items. By taking a selection of different brand names and supermarket names for the same product (for example hair spray; cornflakes; body lotion; tights) the magazines score the products for an appropriate range of criteria and identify the best one for the readers. And in *Best and Bella*, it is the readers themselves who test the products, whereas in *Take a Break*, which usually restricts the products tested to foodstuffs, a fictional, hard-to-please family called *The Grumps* offers its verdict in a humorous and entertaining, but informative, way. However, *Take a Break's* beauty editor also tries out various beauty products for the readers.



The readers' responses to this consumer advice varied - younger women tended not to read the food comparisons, but liked the cosmetics ones, whereas older readers appreciated the advice on food and more basic personal essentials like tights. A few readers responded cynically, believing the comparisons were just another form of advertising but generally, those who mentioned these features tended to take notice of them. The following readers explain their liking for the consumer comparisons:

Anne: I look at 'em and I look at/

Julie: You know, these makeovers/

Anne: You know, with ticks for the best ones. I look at all those.

Julie: Which make-up to use/

Anne: I don't go and buy 'em/

Julie: Which'll improve your skin for your age/

Anne: I don't use a lot of make-up. But they're nearly all expensive ones that they recommend, aren't they?

Julie: Not always, sometimes, I've found that they'll have an ordinary Boots No. 7 or Bodyshop's.

Julie Irving, unemployed, and Anne Lane, shop assistant

Sheila: If I read, you know the things like, erm, a survey on tights, for example, and it said that Marks and Spencer's 40 denier opaque were nine star as against Savacentre's whatever. I would find that sort of thing interesting. And I'd think, oh I'll try those.

CJO: You'd go out and buy a pair of top rated/

Sheila: Yeah, that's right. I like those sort of things.

Sheila Strong, retired

Sheila took the comparisons at face value, and enjoyed the knowledge which allowed her to make a choice between all the possible brands of tights she could buy. The comparisons do not always bring new information to the readers insofar as telling them about new products, although occasionally they will discuss a product which has suddenly become popular, for example the new AHA skin products which became the latest innovation in skincare in 1995. But for the most part, the products discussed are already well known items and things that readers will use. The value comes in alerting the reader to new brands of established products and in the comparisons between brands. Cosmetics, for example:



Joan: Well, we have *Bella*, which I quite like, and actually, I find I'm quite interested in these little bits where they have these consumers where they're testing make up. I quite like that, and it wouldn't be the first time I'd gone out and bought these things.

Friendship Group

Having done the same thing myself (i.e. taken note of a top rated mascara and then bought it on the strength of a magazine's recommendation), it was interesting to hear another perspective on the trust women place in their magazines - that of the beauty consultants who sell the make-up from behind the counters in a large department store. They had noticed this trust in women's magazines before:

Hannah: It's surprising how many customers come in that have read the articles, and say oh, this was in such and such a magazine, so it does work for customers, we're always being asked, especially like when magazines do comparisons between the other houses and they listen to those, because they know that it's not an advert, they do believe the magazines in that respect, don't they? They just buy it straightaway, don't they. If they see it in a magazine and it's got stars they just come in and say, I'd like one of your mascaras, you've got such and such. They trust certain magazines, don't they?

Beauticians

As we saw from the quotes above, readers will believe the ratings in the magazines and as Hannah says, will trust them. This is a major part of the magazines' chummy image, portrayed as friends to their readers and, in *Take a Break's* case, with little apparent differentiation between producers and consumers. Readers expect the magazines to give them honest information, although one of the women I interviewed was deprecating about her own belief in the magazines' comparisons of different products:

Nora: There's er, what was in this week? Is it cheeses, or something? They have all these top named things, don't they, who's got the best, you know, so many out of ten and that.

CJO: The comparisons?

Nora: Yeah. I always look at them.

CJO: Do you take any notice of that? I mean, the/

Nora: Yeah, I do.



CJO: Ones that get the most stars - would you go out and buy one of those?

Nora: I mean, it's probably me that's stupid doing that, I don't know. And it surprises you sometimes. Because you think, oh, Marks and Spencer, they've got, should be best, don't you, because they're the most expensive but they're not usually. Co-op, even.

Nora Green, home warden

Unlike the other readers, who accepted the comparisons at face value, Nora Green wanted to show how she was aware that the identification of the top product could be a clever marketing ploy, a covert advertisement, and that she was being gullible by taking notice of the magazines' recommendations. Other readers were openly grateful for the magazines' advice, given the plethora of choice available for most consumer products. And in an uncertain world, where knowledge is continually contested and changed, those without the appropriate expertise need a reliable source of information:

As I say, tips on the right food to eat because you don't always know what is right these days, do you? Find out things that you thought were right are wrong.

Beryl Fraser, cloakroom attendant

Often, the cheaper items are recommended as the top buy, as noted above by Nora Green. This was appreciated by the readers, giving an added sense of validity to the comparisons or consumer features because the magazines did not automatically choose the most expensive brand:

I always read the beauty tips and any sort of article they might have, erm, and in some instances, I may take things on board and try things out. Erm, and what I like about the magazines [*Best and Bella*] is they don't, the suggestions that they make aren't necessarily going to cost you a fortune.

Dianna Hartley, teacher

I now want to discuss the readers' tips in the magazines that many of the women I interviewed mentioned as useful. The tips were identified as an interesting part of the magazines, bringing to the reader's attention ways of saving money or time, or making something useful out of nothing. As a reader of *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break* myself, I had always found the tips amusing,



especially those in *Take a Break*, and assumed (wrongly) that other readers would share my view. A newspaper article by Richards (1994), in which he compared *Take a Break* to the new *Eva*, focused on the humour in the former, likening it to *Viz*, the adult comic. He too saw humour in the tips, both because of the perceived strangeness of them and the idea that some people must take them seriously. He gave examples:

*Take a Break's* tips can be disgusting ("Custard powder added to fish batter gives a golden crispy finish"); obsessive ("Damp cotton buds are ideal for cleaning between calculator keys"); mean ("Save the fluff from tumble drier filters for stuffing soft toys"); and almost Zen ("To make pickled onions more spicy simply add spice"). Tips of this quality aren't in every issue but you forgive a three-week loss of form when the fourth brings you "Jif micro liquid will clean five years of stains off gravestones".

Richards 1994:17

Richards was discussing only *Take a Break* but *Best* and *Bella* also include readers' tips, although not in quite the same league as those quoted above - they tend to be more straightforwardly domestic hints, for example from *Best* (11 July 1995): 'If you're painting window frames or doors with glass panels, smear some petroleum jelly near the frame. When the paint is dry, any drips can then be wiped away, along with the petroleum jelly.' And from *Bella* (3 May 1995): 'When juice from fruit pies overflows during baking, sprinkle some salt on to it. The juice will burn to a crisp, making it easy to rub off.' Readers appreciated these useful hints:

He [*husband*] thinks it's all right, I mean, he's read some of these tips and he thinks, oh, that's a good idea. My neighbour, she's actually used, done some of them. I think one she liked best is putting a little dot of margarine on top of your gravy when you're boiling it up and it doesn't, and it stops it from simmering, going over, boiling over.

Tricia Hallam, homemaker

Tricia was discussing *Take a Break*, her favourite magazine (with one of its more straightforward tips). The knowledge in the tips, which is always from other readers, can make the everyday tasks of life just that little bit easier, and they tap into the money saving ethos of *Take a Break* in particular, linking the



tips to other features such as *Boot Sale Tales* and budget cookery. But to return to one of Richards' examples quoted above, the Jif/gravestones tip was appreciated without irony by two readers I interviewed, and myself and Dianna (the daughter of one of the interviewees who was present) assumed a different reading to the other two women:

Julie: Blimey, have you read that? "I've discovered Jif micro liquid will clean five years of stains off gravestones. No effort needed."

Dianna: It springs to mind, doesn't it? Ooh, I'll try this on the gravestones.

CJO: That's what I mean about the humour of the magazines, sometimes they're bizarre, aren't they? Or maybe people don't think they are.

Annè: We used to spend ages cleaning me grandad's gravestone.

Julie: Yeah, it'll be handy for somebody, won't it?

Julie Irving, unemployed, Anne Lane, shop assistant, and Dianna Hartley,  
Julie's daughter

As Dianna and I were laughing at this particular tip, both Julie and Anne were considering it seriously, with no humour whatsoever. Clearly, I misread the situation by assuming that others would find the tips as amusing as I did. My response to the tips, coming from a cultural background of not having to economise particularly on household management, and with a knowledge of the parody of tips in *Viz* magazine, meant that I interpreted them differently to other readers, for whom the tips were incorporated into their lives and found very useful. I had categorised many of the tips to myself as examples of meanness, and from my perspective they were. But for other readers, the tips offered valuable information, recognised by *Take a Break* as something in which their readers were interested. With the Jif example, keeping a gravestone clean is very important for many people, as Anne and Julie recognised, and it is in a sense one of the few gifts that can be sustained in such a relationship. One reader, Louise Tyler, had tried sending in tips of her own to *Take a Break*:

It's just these little interesting bits, you know, the stories and the tips, sometimes they're very good ideas. And I've tried sending me own tips in and I've got nothing back.

Louise Tyler, student and part time waitress



Often, the readers would see a tip and claim to have known about it already, which irritated them because they had never thought of sending it in to the magazine. But this recognition served to validate the other tips, which could potentially be as useful:

Anne: Yeah, see, things like that, when you go on holiday, always pack your holiday brochure. I nearly always do. Because you can say, well, it says here this, that and the other, can't you.  
 Julie: I could do that. I could've sent that up. You know, er, plastic dustpan, I've done that with me freezer, scooped it out. And when your dad gets snow on the car, I get it off the car with a plastic dustpan, off the windows.

Julie Irving, unemployed and Anne Lane, shop assistant

None of the women I interviewed, with the exception of Dianna quoted above and Kim Carter, a student, saw any humour in the magazines' tips from readers. Kim agreed that *Take a Break* can be very funny:

A lot of the top tips are. I mean, there was one that I read, it was, erm, if you're worried about getting creases on your forehead, erm, when you're at home on your own you can put a piece of sellotape on your forehead and you won't frown, and I thought, do people seriously do this.

Kim Carter, student and part time shop assistant

It is this idea that other readers might actually be doing these things, as Richards pointed out, that makes *Take a Break's* tips in particular so humorous, whereas a comic like *Viz* is simply (but successfully) imitating the style without actually being taken seriously by its readers. But the tips in the magazines were appreciated by readers and seemed to gain credibility because they had been tried and tested by other readers, and were therefore trusted. There are clear similarities here with the health content, which was discussed in the previous chapter, and which many readers trusted because of its true life element. The tips from other readers helped to create the imagined community of readership, with the magazines acting almost as intermediaries for readers to pass on their own money saving or labour saving ideas to others. In the same way as the magazines serve to inform readers about true life events or 'gossip' (as some readers characterised the true life stories), they also serve to distribute useful information between women, who know what tips other



women will find useful. There is a sense of camaraderie, then, of all women being in a similar situation (coping with family, work and relationships) and a desire to share knowledge which may make life easier for other readers.

The information that readers get from their magazines is not always relevant all of the time - at certain stages in their lives, readers will require specific information. However, this need was expressed by buying monthly magazines which had a particular article or salient feature (for example, one of the postgraduate students bought *She* because of its cover story about reaching 30) or particular titles devoted to certain topics, such as *Practical Parenting*, bought by one of the North Access Course students when her children were small. If weeklies do contain appropriate information, it is often more by regular reading than deliberate purchasing that readers see this information, and they will pass it on to interested relatives or friends:

But her [*daughter-in-law's*] mother sometimes passes *Take a Break* on to her, for tips for the children, er, any baby care, and they have a doctor's page and if there's anything concerning the children she finds it very handy. And *Take a Break* does help. They [*son and daughter-in-law*] came the other week and I'd got a pile of magazines and she looked through them for something that a child can talk about, child abuse but what the child itself can talk about, what they've been going through. And she did find, er, she was a little older than she wanted it, though, but she did find something, yes.

Pat Evans, cloakroom attendant

As magazines can be more useful at certain times than others, some of the women I interviewed felt they had grown out of the weeklies, now preferring to read other women's titles or different reading matter altogether. These readers may also have stopped reading *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break* because of changes in their educational circumstances:

Helen: No, I don't buy magazines, I used to. But since I've been coming on this course I've stopped them. I like things that are a bit more important. I find magazines a bit trivial. I just want to read something a bit more, well, I want to read a magazine to find something out, for knowledge or whatever.

Irene: I used to buy *Take a Break* and magazines with competitions in, I used to just do all the competitions and now I



haven't got time, I keep up with things in the papers, concentrate on that sort of news.

Helen: Before I'd probably buy something like *She* but I think it's very middle class and stereotypey, erm, I might have bought *TV Quick* [*sister magazine to Take a Break*] but I don't like that any more, erm ...

North Access Course

Kay: I used to buy them a couple of years ago but I think I'm more interested in different things now, you know, now I've been at college, I think I'm looking for more things.

CJO: Is that the same for everybody else?

Dianne: Mmm, probably.

Linda: Yeah, it is me.

East Access Course

Thus, for a number of reasons these readers had moved away from their usual reading matter - because of the new knowledge they were gaining on the access courses, their lack of time, their need for different kinds of information, and their revised opinions of women's magazines as stereotypical, the information within them no longer filled any kind of need in these women. However, some of the Access Course students did have a place for a women's magazine like *Take a Break* in their lives, but its purpose had changed - now, *Take a Break* was seen as light relief, entertainment and amusement, something to read after all the heavy textbooks on their course, to relax with. It was viewed in a new light and the circumstances of its reading had altered.

From talking with women who were ex-readers of the magazines, it would appear that a change in educational circumstance (doing an Access Course, going to college) had altered their opinions of *Bella*, *Best* and *Take a Break*. The magazines had not changed, and therefore the perceptions of these readers clearly had. I suggest that women like Helen and Kay quoted above had adopted an academic feminist stance to the magazines, seeing them as regressive purveyors of stereotypical images and domestic trivia, rather than as the magazines they used to enjoy. An attempt to distance themselves from women's magazines seemed to be happening, a desire to disassociate with the downmarket, working class image of weeklies. Bourdieu (1984) discussed such distancing in relation to culture, commenting on the class-influenced construction of taste and linking cultural practices to educational capital. Like



Ang's (1985) study of *Dallas* viewers, in which both fans and those who disliked the programme expressed their views in a rhetoric of mass culture, the ex-readers of magazines explained their position by recalling a familiar ideology of trivia, lack of importance and, by virtue of their lack of time to read magazines, identified them as unworthy of attention. Such views reflect the general perception of women's magazines, weeklies in particular, and provide an accessible discourse in which to discuss magazines. As Ang (1985) pointed out, it is perhaps easier to express dislike of mass culture than to show pleasure in it, the latter often requiring more explanation. The ex-readers quoted above did not feel as though their lack of enthusiasm for weeklies needed much elaboration, as they were appealing to a popular discourse which was almost self-explanatory (see also chapter five for a discussion of women's dislike of the magazines). The idea of a community ethos generated by *Bella*, *Best* and *Take a Break*, activated both through the content and the networking of readers, was not interpreted as such by the ex-readers (and I am unsure whether they used the magazines in this way when they were readers). The women were difficult to interview because they had left the magazines behind and there was a distancing effect, both with time and social circumstances.

The practical content of *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break* was used and enjoyed by many of the readers I interviewed and indeed readers related to this aspect of the magazines more than they used or appreciated the intended feminist messages. But I suggest that the practical content is not unrelated to the supportive feminist ethos the editors are intending to incorporate in their publications. Because of the sharing of information and ideas, the tips and hints passed on from readers in the magazines to other readers constitute a shared community of women with relevant knowledge and appreciation of women's role in life. If a reader advises other readers on how to save time when doing household tasks, it is with a recognition that women take responsibility for such activities and any easing of the daily chores is welcome. Therefore, like the other feminist content in the magazines, the emphasis is on the here and now - no innovative ideas about sharing the housework between women and men, but an attempt to make the woman's responsibilities less onerous and to make her life easier within the confines of her expected role. The magazines expected their readers to be fulfilling a dual role of work both in and out of the home, and in this the readers were complicit. Although the editorial in the



magazines, especially *Bella* and *Best*, sporadically attempted through the use of language to assign women *and* men a caring role, the tips tended to be from women to other women and to operate within commonly defined gender roles.

The practical content of the magazines, I suggest, has two purposes - first, to make women's lives easier by giving them knowledge which will facilitate their role as caretaker of the home and family, or knowledge which helps them to make the most of their health and beauty; and second, to address them as an imagined community of *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break* readers who belong to the magazines' world of shared experience. The tips, from one reader to all the other readers, are mediated by the magazines and passed on; the comparisons give the reader extra information courtesy of the editorial team. The result is a deliberately constructed cosy world of intimate revelations and feminine discourses, where readers are encouraged to see the magazines as a trusted friend. But within this world the knowledge is of practical use, helping women successfully to get through their everyday lives.

### Summary

The social dimension of magazine use forms a major part of their attraction to readers and I would suggest that the community ethos continues the sense of supportive feminism intended by the editors, but activates it through a network in which women support and look out for each other. John Dale, *Take a Break's* editor, suggested in his interview that 'communities are breaking down' and it was part of his intention to rekindle a sense of community through the magazines. From his comments I would suggest that he had the content in mind rather than the social activity of reading, but as I pointed out earlier, both are intertwined. Therefore, the importance of community is emphasized by the editors' intentions and the readers' responses, and it relates directly to the feminist agenda of the magazines. The magazines directly promote face-to-face interaction between readers and also mediated interaction between reader and magazine, encouraging a distanced community of readers which has access to the knowledge and information published in *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break*.

In this respect of networking and support, I would argue that women's magazines have a similar function to other 'women's' media, particularly talk



shows and soap opera. Both Brown (1994) and Hobson (1982) emphasized how soap operas act as a pivot, gathering women together because of their common liking for certain soaps. Even women who did not like them made an effort to keep up with the story lines so they would not be excluded from this particular community (Hobson 1982). In Brown's (1994) research, women taped episodes of favourite soaps for friends who were away or unable to watch, a practice similar to passing on magazines. Both soaps and magazines can act as a social facilitator, providing a topic of conversation most women can access, and which can help to remove the isolation many women feel when they are at home with small children. Talk shows (both on television and radio) function in a similar way to that of the true life stories, offering a mediated interaction where reassurance, information, help and comfort can be obtained by viewers and listeners. Livingstone and Lunt (1994) pointed out that viewers of talk shows like *Kilroy* and *Oprah* identify with others' problems, learning from the programmes and discussing them with family and friends in face-to-face interaction. And although I have focused on *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break*, I am not suggesting that these are the only magazines women exchange or use as gifts, but I have no information on the use of other magazines in this role. Most weeklies have readership figures per copy of between three and four, giving an indication that they are read by more people than simply the purchaser, but these figures in no way illuminate how the magazines are exchanged or passed on between readers. Given *Take a Break's* emphasis on competitions, it might be expected to have a lower rpc figure than other weeklies, but it actually has an average of about 3.5, similar to *Woman* and *Woman's Realm*.

To return to *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break*, the way that readers are constantly taking note of information which is relevant to friends and family and passing it on; their concern to share magazines with friends who are unemployed; their reading of magazines at work which promotes a sense of solidarity between colleagues; their use of the magazines as a source of strength in times of personal difficulty; and the trust readers invest in their magazines, all these elements of magazine use substantiate the editors' claims for the relevance and importance of their publications. And these aspects of magazine reading, which to the readers are an integral part of this activity, have only been accessed by talking to readers and watching how they use their magazines.



To summarise, I have shown how the editors' intentions for their magazines can be realised not only in the content, but also in what women actually do with their magazines. Therefore, the everyday activity of gift exchange, even if the reader does not appreciate the intended feminist *content*, is encouraging a sense of togetherness and support, which is what the editors wanted to achieve. I would suggest, then, that when looking at how consumers decode their media forms, it is not only the content that needs to be taken into account - situating the magazines in their everyday context illustrates the further potential of *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break* and adds to their repertoire of uses by readers.



## CONCLUSION

### Introduction

When I began the research on *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break* it was with the intention of discovering both why and how women read these magazines, whether they read them as the editors intend and what functions the magazines fill in readers' lives. As I noted in the introductory chapter, this was quite a broad research question but one increasingly asked in relation to other media such as romantic fiction (Radway 1987) and soap opera (Brown 1994). I also felt an affection for magazines and a recognition that they had been largely dismissed by feminist academics. My research was, like Hermes's (1995) study, an intervention on behalf of magazine reading because I thought women's magazines had been neglected regarding the pleasure they give and their other positive functions.

### Research findings

#### The feminist identity of the magazines

My first research find was the editors' perceptions of their magazines. I had expected John Dale, Jackie Highe and Maire Fahey to see *Take a Break*, *Bella* and *Best* as more than cheap, trivial publications vying with other similar titles for a share of the competitive weekly market. I had also expected them to use the interviews with me as a public relations exercise, as an opportunity to dismiss the competition. But what I got from the editors, although partly a 'selling job' on their magazines, was an impression of how much readers rely on them for information, advice and reassurance. Although they are commercial enterprises aimed at financial success, the magazines nevertheless were not intended as just entertainment. As the editors explained, they fulfil a much wider and more important role than that, one which the editors were willing to label as 'feminist'.

Now, the idea of women's weekly magazines as feminist publications was a radical one. As Hermes (1995) pointed out, women's genres as a whole are consistently denigrated and magazines (and their readers) are no exception to this general rule. Ferguson (1983) labelled women's weeklies as promoting a



cult of femininity, Tuchman (1978) suggested magazines were successfully narrowing readers' horizons to marriage and domesticity. To argue that women's *weeklies* (for weeklies are seen as even less culturally valuable than monthlies) might be intended as feminist publications was indeed a departure from most writings about women's magazines. Can such a view be sustained? I believe it can, but that the feminism in the magazines has a particular meaning, which I labelled 'supportive feminism'.

Supportive feminism implies an attempt to support readers through their everyday struggles with partners, children, health, money and so on. The way the magazines achieve this support is to provide information readers may not be able to find elsewhere, particularly health and financial. The magazines, then, see themselves as a resource for readers, both in terms of providing information and advice, and letting all women share their experiences via the true life stories. Through these two strands, and including articles and features aimed at making the repetitive tasks of life easier (for example quick recipes to save time, practical tips from other readers to save money, product comparisons to facilitate shopping and so on), the magazines aim to help readers make the best of what they already have. Most of these areas of content are clearly not meant as life changers. Rather, they are intended to make women's lives less arduous within the boundaries of their current existence. The editors were not condoning women's circumstances, neither were they particularly attempting to change them. What they intended was to provide advice and information for readers without necessarily challenging the circumstances in which they exist. And by showing women in the true life stories who have overcome personal difficulties, the magazines act as reassurance for readers in similar situations.

#### Responding to the supportive feminism

The supportive feminist messages available in *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break* were decoded as intended by some readers, although not all. Women read magazines for a variety of reasons, not all of them to do with the content, and they approach magazines from different perspectives. Contrary to the magazines regarding women as a homogeneous group (a strategy evident in the way the magazines were developed and launched), the readers reacted in various ways to the magazines. My second research finding, therefore, was that



some readers do actually decode *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break* as the editors intend, recognising and using the supportive feminism. Although these readers would not describe themselves or their favourite magazine as feminist, nevertheless the editors' intended feminism was recognised as relevant to their own lives and the lives of friends and relations.

In the production and content analyses in chapters three and four, I demonstrated that a supportive feminism was available but this did not necessarily indicate that actual readers would interpret the magazines this way, as the feminism was juxtaposed with other meanings to do with entertainment, more traditional weekly magazine concerns like recipes and a commercial content illustrated by advertisements and advertorials. Many readers looked at *Bella*, *Best* and *Take a Break* for this other content rather than any feminist messages. Like Hermes (1995), I hold the view that it is not possible to know the characteristics of an audience from the text, as readers bring their social and cultural backgrounds to texts all within the context of other media use. Although an individual reader herself may not necessarily change her opinion about one magazine on a day to day basis (but over longer periods of time she may grow out of a magazine or begin to find it irrelevant to her lifestyle) different readers will vary in their opinions. The potential for more than one meaning in a text, although there may be a dominant one intended by the producers, means that reception analysis is crucial to any understanding of media use, particularly when readers use the media for purposes outside the text (see chapter six).

The readers who recognised and used the magazines' supportive feminism had experienced or were experiencing similar situations to those women in the true life stories or health pages. The narratives represented their own lives, with all their concerns, problems and experiences. To see these in print offered reassurance, advice and information, as my interviews with readers illustrated. The fact that actual readers could relate to the magazines on this level indicated to me the very real problems that women continue to face in everyday life. The true life stories might seem unbelievable to some readers (particularly the middle class women I interviewed) but the accounts of the characters in the stories reveal a state of gender inequality in society that is depressing. The magazines serve to highlight this inequality while simultaneously resisting the opportunity to analyse the underlying reasons for



women's precarious position. *Take a Break* and *Bella* both have a concern not to alienate their working class readers by suggesting that they should change their lives, or that they should be more aspirational, although *Best* has an aspirational philosophy as it is aimed at a higher class profile and therefore expects more of its readers. *Take a Break* and *Bella* do not expect their readers to experience a high degree of equality (although the editors feel strongly that gender equality should be experienced by all) and address the readers with this in mind. This strategy avoids the effect that many magazines (especially monthlies) have of making their readers feel uncomfortable and inadequate and indeed *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break* do not tell their readers what to do, but deliberately blur the boundaries between readers and producers.

### Magazines in the community

My third research finding was when I realized how important women's magazines are to their readers' kinship and friendship relations. Magazines had never before been considered in such a way. Previous research had always made the content the focus of inquiry, not what women actually did with their magazines. The community aspect was apparent both in the face-to-face and mediated interaction promoted by *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break*. The sharing aspect of women's magazines was an extra element which expanded Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model. In Hall's model, the analysis is limited to the reception of media messages but as Morley (1986) showed, audiences do not just read or watch television for the content. Often, the media fill other roles, as in Morley's study which addressed how television watching in the home is used by men to exert their authority in the family. To understand the attraction of a media form, it may be necessary to look beyond the text and explore how magazines or soap operas, for example, have an extra-textual function. Radway (1987) found that in her study of romantic fiction readers, the act of reading was important because it signalled the reader's private time, away from the demands of her family. Such a finding would not have been evident from textual analysis alone. However, the social use of magazines could be seen as unrelated to the different ways in which they are interpreted, and therefore not particularly relevant to Hall's model. Is the use of a magazine related to its decoding by a reader? Does the fact that *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break* are shared, passed on to be read by secondary and tertiary readers, affect how they are interpreted? In chapter six I explored and analysed the interaction



generated by the magazines but it was never clear from the interviews whether such activity related to a reader's acceptance, rejection or negotiation of the editors' messages. Sharing magazines and the various roles they fulfil (alleviating loneliness for Lucy, marking the end of the working week for Pat) were undoubtedly key factors for readers, as I discovered, but in relation to Hall's encoding/decoding model they might be seen as peripheral. It was clearly not the case that the women who received *Best*, *Bella* and/or *Take a Break* from other readers would be keen readers themselves, or would read the magazines in a certain way. I suggest that more research would help to clarify the interaction between decoding and using magazines in a social setting.

The women I interviewed almost without exception shared their magazines with family and/or friends. In chapter six I suggested this sharing reinforces the editors' attempts to generate a sense of community with the magazines and pointed out how passing them on encourages social contact between women. John Dale in particular was keen to promote a sense of female solidarity through *Take a Break* and his aims for the content extended to the gift giving of magazines. From my research with readers, *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break* were very much a part of the giving and exchange between women, but whether other magazines have a similar function is not clear. I wondered whether the cheaper, more downmarket publications like *Eva* were also exchanged and if so, this might imply it is not the actual magazine that is important, but its potential exchangeability or use as a gift. All weeklies may be regarded as equal value in the practice of giving or there may be a hierarchy based on the popularity of each title. From my research, I suggest that the title is probably less important than the actual act of giving and that one weekly is treated very much like another (again, more work is needed on how magazines are used).

In addition to the three research findings about the intentions editors have for their magazines; the readers who recognise and use such meanings; and the extra-textual role of *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break*, I found that using Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model to investigate magazines raised a number of questions. It was necessary to modify the model and I have discussed its appropriateness for use with magazines below.



## Encoding/decoding

Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model was developed with television news programmes in mind, a media form which has a clearer dominant message than women's weekly magazines. Because most magazines have a number of themes existing side by side, it was difficult to identify one dominant meaning. A general view of women's weeklies is that they are domestic publications, with horizons of hearth and home and personal appearance (see chapters one and three). They entertain with fiction, letters and humorous articles, they may even have a little serious content, but primarily they are viewed as existing to support readers in their domestic endeavours. *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break* do include such content but an additional meaning, stressed by the editors, was the supportive feminism. All these meanings, then, were available in the magazines for readers to interpret and I took the supportive feminist message as the main one that the editors wanted readers to decode. The other meanings were trademarks of the weekly genre and as such something that readers expected to find in their magazines.

In the interviews, I found that Hall's three decoding positions were insufficient to account for all the responses from readers. There was no difficulty in identifying readers who accepted the supportive feminism but the areas of negotiation and opposition became rather blurred. Some women read to be critical and justify their opinion of weeklies as trivial; others did not recognise the supportive feminism, reading for different reasons; others only engaged with the magazines on a superficial level; and some recognised and rejected the supportive feminism. Negotiation was either from a position of distancing or selection of other content to read. Opposition and negotiation were not always easy to separate. More ambiguously, some readers occupied more than one position in relation to the whole magazine. With a genre like women's weeklies, the content is often so varied and contradictory that it can actually be misleading to assess readers' responses in the way suggested by Hall. Such a categorisation process hides the overlaps between different positions and obscures the possibility of readers occupying more than one at a time. Readers also change their opinions of magazines over the years as they gradually grow out of one genre and into another. However, as the way readers interpret magazines had never been researched in any depth, identifying decoding positions was a useful exploratory exercise which revealed the extent of the



variations in response to *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break* and challenged the myth that such magazines can only be interpreted in one way. By looking at the editors' intentions and the magazines' content, I was able to refute general assumptions about the triviality of weeklies and by extension the women who read them.

### **Implications for further research**

The research findings discussed above offer a great deal of information about women's weekly magazines that was previously unknown. How women use their magazines in relationships with family, friends and colleagues supports findings that other cultural forms are used in a similar way. The work of Gray (1992) on watching videos, Radway (1987) on romantic fiction and Brown (1994) on soap opera indicates that gift relations and exchange networks are common practice amongst women, although little is known about men's use of magazines. Men do not have comparable publications to *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break* but they do have an increasingly wide choice of monthly titles and it would be informative to research their social practices around such magazines (and indeed the whole area of men's magazines, from production through content to reception).

To return to women's magazines, this thesis has concentrated on *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break*. The intentions of the editors of other weekly magazines like *Woman*, *Eva* and *Woman's Own* are unknown. A different approach in marketing and content between British and German owned titles, as discussed in chapter three, might also extend to differences in editorial aims. My approach to the research and subsequent findings might serve as a model for use with other publications and address the problems I found with Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model.

My research also raised questions about the role and place of feminism in contemporary society. I found a mixed response to the term (see chapter five) and some confusion over its meaning, although of course I did not expect a unitary definition as none exists. Certain middle class readers, who were proud to identify themselves as feminists, could not see any feminist relevance in the magazines at all, in fact quite the opposite, and I found this slightly worrying in their assumptions of achieved gender equality. The feminist movement has



often been accused of a white, middle class bias in its approach (Barrett and Phillips 1992) and this was evident in some of the interviews. Such a finding left me uneasy about the lack of recognition for the current struggles of working class women, something *Take a Break* in particular is attempting to address in its self-appointed role as the 'champion' of the working class woman (Longrigg 1994), although this role seems to have been largely overlooked by feminists.

### Summary

*Bella*, *Best* and *Take a Break* are not magazines which have an instantly recognisable feminist identity or agenda. The women who read them would not classify either themselves or their favourite magazine as feminist. And yet the presence of a supportive feminism, discernible in the true life stories, health and information features, suggested a new dimension to the weekly magazines. Not for all readers, though, as many read weeklies for a variety of reasons which has little to do with any feminist meanings. But for those readers who are experiencing similar situations to the characters in the true life stories, or who can relate to the health information and use it to feel empowered in their relations with the medical profession, *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break* can be more than weekly treats of trivia for the busy woman. The magazines can be important providers of reassurance, advice and information to women who may have nowhere else to turn. The quote from *Spare Rib* in the introductory chapter about the magazine representing women's lives in all their diverse situations; allowing readers to recognise themselves in its pages; and providing a vehicle for women's writing and images, seems a suitable description for part of what *Best*, *Bella* and *Take a Break* aim to achieve, and the response of some readers illustrates that the three magazines have succeeded in their particular feminist aims.



## **APPENDIX ONE**

### **Magazine Questionnaires**



**MAGAZINE QUESTIONNAIRE**

Dear Reader,

As part of my work as a student at Sheffield University, I'm carrying out a survey of magazine readers. I've placed questionnaires in a number of magazines in various newsagents in the hope of getting as many responses as possible from different people to find out what they like about magazines. I'd be very grateful if you could help me complete this survey by answering this questionnaire (it only takes a few minutes to fill in). All the information from the questionnaire will be treated in the strictest confidence.

Thank you - Caroline Oates, Dept of Sociological Studies, University of Sheffield.

Office use  
[       ]

1. For how long have you been reading Bella? (Please tick one box)

- |                  |                          |                 |                          |                          |
|------------------|--------------------------|-----------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Less than 1 year | <input type="checkbox"/> | 1-2 years       | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3-4 years        | <input type="checkbox"/> | 5 years or more | <input type="checkbox"/> |                          |

2. What do you like about Bella?

- your husband or partner (but no children)
- your husband or partner and dependent children
- just with your children
- other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

3. Have you regularly read any other women's weekly magazine(s) in the past?

- No       Yes

[   ]



4. Do you currently read any other women's weekly magazines? If no, please go straight to question 5.

Chat  My Weekly   
 Me  Woman's Weekly   
 Best  Woman's Realm   
 Take a Break  Woman   
 Woman's Own

Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

[ ]

5. Apart from women's magazines, do you read any other magazines?

No  Yes  If yes, please name up to 3.

1 \_\_\_\_\_

2 \_\_\_\_\_

3 \_\_\_\_\_

[ ]

6. Do you live with ... (please tick only one)

your husband or partner (but no children)

your husband or partner and dependent children

just with your children

other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

[ ]

7. Please give the ages of any children living with you all or most of the time.

Number of children

Their ages \_\_\_\_\_

[ ]



8. Do you have a paid job?            No [ ]            Yes [ ]            [ ]

If yes, what is your occupation? \_\_\_\_\_ [ ]

Do you work part time (16 hours per week or less)  
or full time?            Part time [ ]            Full time [ ]            [ ]

9. What is your highest academic qualification?

No formal qualifications            [ ]            [ ]

O-level/CSE/GCSE            [ ]

A-level            [ ]

Degree            [ ]

Other, please specify \_\_\_\_\_

10. Are you ...            Male [ ]            Female [ ]            [ ]

11. In which of the following age groups are you?

Under 15            [ ]            [ ]

15-24            [ ]

25-34            [ ]

35-44            [ ]

45-54            [ ]

55-64            [ ]

65 or over            [ ]



Thank you for your help in completing this questionnaire - when it's filled in please could you return it to your newsagent in the envelope provided.

As an additional part of my project on women's magazines, I hope to carry out some informal discussions with readers. If you would be willing to talk to me about Bella magazine, please fill in your name and address below (in block capitals, please), so that I can contact you. All information will be treated in the strictest confidence.

<p><b>NAME</b> _____</p> <p><b>ADDRESS</b> _____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>
--

Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire.

2. For how long have you been reading the magazine?

Less than 1 year

1-2 years

3-4 years

5-6 years

over 6 years

(please say how many)

3. How regularly do you read it?

Every week

Two or three times a month

Once a month

Less than once a month



## MAGAZINE READER QUESTIONNAIRE

As part of my work for a student project at the University of Sheffield, I am doing a survey of magazine readers to find out what they like about women's *weekly* magazines. I'd appreciate it if you could take a short time to fill in this questionnaire about your favourite woman's weekly. All the information you give will be treated in the strictest confidence. The questionnaire will not take you more than about 10 minutes. Most of the questions can be answered by placing a tick in the appropriate box.

Thank you - Caroline Oates, Dept of Sociological Studies, University of Sheffield.

### SECTION A - ABOUT YOUR FAVOURITE MAGAZINE

For  
official  
use

Other...  
Other...  
(please specify)

#### 1. What is your favourite woman's WEEKLY magazine?

If you don't have a favourite, write down the weekly you are most familiar with.

magazine? Please tick one or more

\_\_\_\_\_

[ ]

#### 2. For how long have you been reading this magazine?

I read mostly in the morning [ ]  
During lunchtime [ ]  
While travelling to and from work [ ]

Less than 1 year [ ]

1-2 years [ ]

3-4 years [ ]

5-6 years [ ]

over 6 years [ ]  
(please say how many) \_\_\_\_\_ years

[ ]

#### 3. How regularly do you read it?

Every week [ ]

Two or three times a month [ ]

Once a month [ ]

Less than once a month [ ]

[ ]



**4. Which part do you usually read first?**

[ ]

---

**5. Which features do you always read, sometimes read, and never read? Please tick one for each feature.**

	<u>Always</u>	<u>Sometimes</u>	<u>Never</u>
Beauty			
Competitions			
Cookery			
Fashion			
Fiction			
Health			
Horoscopes			
Problem page			
Readers' letters			
Showbusiness			
Travel			
True life stories			
Other.....			
Other..... (please specify)			

**6. At what time of the day do you usually read your weekly magazine? Please tick one or more.**

- I read mostly in the morning [ ]
- During lunchtime [ ]
- In the afternoon [ ]
- While travelling to and from work [ ]
- In the evening [ ]
- Other (please specify)

[ ]

---

**7. Do you save certain features for specific times?**

- No [ ]
- Yes [ ] If yes, please say which features you save and for what time (for example, the fiction for bedtime).

[ ]

---



**8. Do you ever follow advice in your weekly magazine?**

No

Yes

If yes, please say which advice (for example beauty hints, health tips).

---

**9. Where do you obtain your weekly woman's magazine?**

Newsagent

Supermarket

Passed on to me by friend/family

Other (please specify)

---

**10. What do you do with your old copies?**

Keep them

Pass them on to family/friends

Throw them away

Other (please specify)

---

**11. Why do you read it?**

**12. Do you read any other women's magazines? (weeklies *and* monthlies).**

No

Yes

If yes, please name them. \_\_\_\_\_

---



---



## SECTION B - OTHER MEDIA

### Television

13. Do you watch any of the following TV programmes? Please tick.

- |                   |                          |
|-------------------|--------------------------|
| Brookside         | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Coronation Street | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Country Practice  | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Eastenders        | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Emmerdale         | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Home and Away     | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Neighbours        | <input type="checkbox"/> |

[ ]

14. What is your favourite television programme?

[ ]

---

### Radio

15. Do you listen to the radio?

No  If no, please go straight to the next section on Newspapers.

[ ]

Yes

16. What is your favourite radio station? \_\_\_\_\_

[ ]

### Newspapers

17. How often do you read a newspaper?

- |                       |                          |
|-----------------------|--------------------------|
| Every day             | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Every other day       | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| More than once a week | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Once a week           | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Less than once a week | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Never                 | <input type="checkbox"/> |

[ ]

If never, please go straight to the next section on Books.



18. Which newspapers do you read? Please name them.

Daily newspapers: \_\_\_\_\_ [ ]

Sunday newspapers: \_\_\_\_\_

### Books

19. How many books do you read per month?

none [ ] If none, please go straight to the next section on [ ]

1-2 [ ] General Media.

3-4 [ ]

more than 4 [ ]

If more than 4 please state how many \_\_\_\_\_

20. What kind of books do you *most* prefer? Please tick only one.

Classics [ ] Crime fiction [ ] [ ]

Romance [ ] Science fiction [ ]

Biography [ ] Non fiction [ ]

Horror [ ] Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

### General Media

21. Apart from women's magazines do you read any other magazines?

No [ ] [ ]

Yes [ ] If yes, please name them. \_\_\_\_\_

22. Of all the media, which do you think is the best source of news?

Please tick only one.

Newspapers [ ] [ ]

Magazines [ ]

Radio [ ]

Television [ ]



**SECTION C - DETAILS ABOUT YOURSELF****23. In which age group are you?**

- |            |                          |                          |
|------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Under 15   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 15-24      | <input type="checkbox"/> |                          |
| 25-34      | <input type="checkbox"/> |                          |
| 35-44      | <input type="checkbox"/> |                          |
| 45-54      | <input type="checkbox"/> |                          |
| 55-64      | <input type="checkbox"/> |                          |
| 65 or over | <input type="checkbox"/> |                          |

**24. Are you ...**      Male       Female      

**25. What is your highest qualification?**

- |                             |                          |                          |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| No formal qualifications    | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| O-level/CSE/GCSE            | <input type="checkbox"/> |                          |
| A-level                     | <input type="checkbox"/> |                          |
| Degree                      | <input type="checkbox"/> |                          |
| Other, please specify _____ |                          |                          |

**26. Do you have a paid job?**      No       Yes      

If yes, what is your occupation? \_\_\_\_\_

**Do you work part time (16 hours per week or less) or full time?**    Part time     Full time      

**27. Do you live with...** (please tick only one)

- |  |                          |
|--|--------------------------|
| your husband or partner (but no children)      | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| your husband or partner and dependent children | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| just with your children                        | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| other (please specify) _____                   |                          |

**28. Please give the ages of any children living with you all or most of the time.**

Number of children   
 Their ages    —    —    —    —    —

**29. If you have a partner, what is their occupation?**

\_\_\_\_\_

**Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire.**



**APPENDIX TWO**

**List of Informants**



## APPENDIX 2

All names and identifying details have been changed to protect the confidentiality of the women interviewed. I have included relevant sociological information where possible and how the women participate in the exchange of magazines.

### List of Informants

#### Individual interviews:

**Lynn Barstow**, a white woman with no formal qualifications. She is a home warden in her mid 50s, married with one grown up son. Lynn was having a morning coffee with her friend, **Nora Green**. Lynn reads *Bella*, *Best*, and the *Take a Break* Nora passes on to her, which she then passes on to her son's girlfriend. Lives in a council house in a small village on the outskirts of Sheffield.

**Lucy Brown**, early 70s, a white woman, who had been a full time mother and homemaker, now a widow with one grown up son and two grandchildren. Regular reader of *Take a Break* and also other weeklies passed on from friends, which she in turn passes on. Responded to a questionnaire I put in *Take a Break* in her local newsagents. Lives in a large, modern, semi-detached house in Sheffield.

**Kim Carter**, age 21. University student and part time shop assistant living in a student house in Sheffield. Single, white woman. Reads *Take a Break* regularly and other magazines passed on from relatives. Contacted through a questionnaire in *Take a Break* in the University bookshop.

**Enid Collins**, age 78. A white woman who is a widow, Enid lives in a large, detached bungalow in Manchester and has two grown up children. She has been a homemaker and mother since marriage. She reads traditional weeklies and craft style monthlies, also her daughters pass on magazines. She is a friend of **Maureen Steel**.



**Pamela Cooper**, early 30s, white woman, full time homemaker, married to a civil servant with two daughters aged five and eight, lives in Sheffield. Irregular reader of traditional weeklies and occasionally glossy monthlies, the latter passed on from her mother-in-law. She responded to a letter requesting women's magazine readers which I handed out to parents at a school where I used to work.

**Irene Dickens**, age 74. A retired deputy headteacher, Irene dislikes women's magazines, only occasionally reading them at the hairdresser's. White and single, she lives in a detached bungalow in Manchester and is a friend of **Enid Collins**.

**Pat Evans**, age 56. Part time cloakroom attendant, no formal qualifications, white, married to a work's manager, two grown up children and three grandchildren. Regular reader of *Take a Break* but also reads most weeklies at work. Met her while she was at work and she agreed to be interviewed. Lives in Sheffield.

**Debbie Forster**, late 30s. A white woman, trainee solicitor, divorced with two young children. Dislikes weeklies but reads monthlies. I met Debbie with **Christine Lee** at a social event. Both live in Sheffield.

**Beryl Fraser**, early 50s. A white woman without formal qualifications, she works as a cloakroom attendant with **Pat Evans**. Married with two adult children, lives in Sheffield, husband is a steel shearer. Reads most weeklies, especially *Chat* and *Take a Break*, both at work and home.

**June Gray**, late 40s, part time shop assistant, white, lives in a small terraced house in Sheffield. Divorced with one grown up son. Reads all the weeklies, especially *Best* and *Chat*. Works in one of the newsagents where I placed the questionnaires.

**Nora Green**, a home warden in her late 50s, white, married with one grown up son. Nora responded to a questionnaire I put in a *Take a Break* in her local newsagents. Lives in a council house in a small village on the outskirts of Sheffield. Was interviewed with her friend, **Lynn Barstow**, to whom she passes her *Take a Break*.



**Tricia Hallam**, late 40s, a white woman, married to a painter and decorator with two teenage children, full time homemaker. Regular reader of *Take a Break*. Contacted via a questionnaire in her local newsagents. Lives in a small terraced house in Sheffield. Used to share buying magazines with a friend, now buys her own.

**Diane Harrison**, a full time homemaker in her early 30s, white, used to be a senior nurse, married to a doctor, has three young boys. Reads most of the traditional weeklies. Responded to a letter I gave out at a school where I used to work, asking for women's magazine readers. Lives in Sheffield.

**Dianna Hartley**, age 30, a white, deputy headteacher of a nursery school, who is doing a part time PhD. She is married to a university technician. Dianna is an old colleague of mine, and she reads various weeklies including *Bella*, *Best*, *Take a Break*, *Woman's Realm*. Lives in a new detached house in Rotherham. Dianna is the daughter of **Julie Irving**.

**Jean Howard**, a retired nursing lecturer age 63. White and single. Occasionally reads traditional weeklies passed on from friends but her favourite magazine is *Grace*. Lives in a small modern flat in Manchester and is a friend of **Maureen Steel**.

**Julie Irving**, unemployed, white, in her mid 50s and married to a welder with two grown up children. A keen reader of *Take a Break* and *Bella*. Lives in a semi-detached house in Doncaster and was interviewed with her best friend **Anne Lane** who gives her magazines. Julie is the mother of **Dianna Hartley**.

**Rene King**, age 32. A black woman with O-level qualifications, Rene lives with her parents in Sheffield and works as a nursery nurse. Reads *Best* and *Bella* and magazines aimed at black women, which she shares with her sister then passes to a friend. Single. Rene is an old colleague of mine.

**Anne Lane**, a white woman, is a shop assistant in her mid 50s. Regular reader of *Take a Break* and *Bella*, which she then passes on to **Julie Irving** with whom she was interviewed. Married to a bricklayer with two grown up children and one grandson, Anne lives in a semi-detached house in Doncaster.



**Christine Lee**, late 30s. A teacher, Christine is a white woman married to a university lecturer and has four young children. I met her at a social event with **Debbie Forster**. Dislikes women's weeklies but reads monthlies. Christine lives in a large terraced house in Sheffield.

**Kath Price**, a white woman age 34. Left school with O-levels but later took two A-levels at night school. Library assistant, lives in a spacious terraced house in Sheffield with her male partner who is a welder. Every year, Kath takes a few months unpaid leave from her job and travels to different parts of the world. Reads *Best* and other magazines brought into the library or passed on from her mother, and participated in the **Library Staff** focus group. Kath is an old friend.

**Maureen Steel**, age 72. Widow with one grown up daughter, she is a white woman who lives in a small modern flat in Manchester. Has no formal qualifications. Worked as a clerical assistant after her husband, an accountant, died thirty years ago. Has various weeklies passed on from friends and in turn passes them on but is not a fan of women's magazines. Maureen is the mother of a friend of mine.

**Sheila Strong**, age 61. A white, retired woman, she lives with her retired husband in a 1950s semi-detached house on the outskirts of Sheffield, has one grown up daughter to whom she passes her magazines, and one grandchild. Is a regular reader of *Best*. I contacted Sheila using a questionnaire in *Best* via her local newsagents.

**Louise Tyler**, A-level student hoping to go to university, and part time waitress age 19. Single, white woman, she lives at home with parents. A regular reader of *Take a Break*, which is shared round the family. Contacted via the Job Club. Lives in Chesterfield.

**Delia Wilson**, a white woman in her late 30s, full time homemaker, married with three young children. Responded to a letter I gave out at a school where I used to work, asking for women's magazine readers. Lives in a large house with land in Sheffield. Reads women's magazines occasionally at her mother-in-law's.



Focus group interviews:**Bank Clerks:**

Angela, 19, <i>Woman, Bella</i>	Celia, 21, <i>Cosmopolitan</i>
Helen, 25, <i>Woman, Woman's Own</i>	Jan, 20, <i>Look, Me, Chat, Best</i>
Joan, 52, <i>Bella</i>	Kelly-Ann, 23, <i>Me, Woman</i>
Susan, 40, <i>Cosmopolitan, Prima, Chat, Best</i>	

All white women. All single except Susan, married to a steel worker with two young children and Joan, married to a stock control manager with one grown up daughter, and Helen, married to a sales manager without children. Except Helen, who has A-levels, they all have O-level education. All live in Sheffield and work in a bank in which I used to work.

**Beauticians:**

Alison, 55, <i>Hello!</i>	Bet, 49, <i>Hello!</i>
Carol, 29, <i>Take a Break</i>	Cheryl, 26, <i>Take a Break</i>
Hannah, 28, <i>Hello!</i>	Julie, 32, <i>Hello!</i>

Mostly readers of *Hello!* magazine, but both Cheryl and Carol read *Take a Break*. All married except Cheryl. Alison has A-level education and is married to an engineer, the rest have O-levels. Hannah is married to a car dealer, Carol to a policeman. All white women. Contacted via a social visit to a local department store, where one of the beauty consultants offered to talk about magazines with her colleagues.

**Catholic Women Voluntary Group:**

Joan, non-reader	Dilys, non-reader	Irene, non-reader
Doreen, <i>Bella</i>	Marie, <i>My Weekly, People's Friend</i>	
Marjorie, <i>Take a Break</i>	Mary, <i>People's Friend</i>	
Pat, <i>Take a Break</i>	Pam, <i>People's Friend</i>	
Olwen, non-reader	Tricia, non-reader	Mavis, non-reader

Mixed ages, mostly in their 50s but Mavis in her late 20s. All white, all married with older children except Mavis. Not very keen on women's magazines, although a few weekly readers. The non-readers sometimes looked at



magazines in waiting rooms or the hairdresser's. This group was really too big for a successful discussion. All live in Doncaster.

**East Sheffield Access Course Group:**

Diane, Jenny, Kay, Linda, Michelle, all non-readers.

Aged between early 20s and early 30s, all white women with young children. Only read magazines occasionally - used to read before starting further education, but now have no time for magazines except on holiday or occasionally at work. This was the shortest focus group for two reasons. First, the women were not readers and second, their children were very noisy, having just been let out of the creche. Contacted through a colleague who works at the Centre where the Group is based. Live in Sheffield.

**East Sheffield Mother and Toddler Group:**

Anthea, any weekly	Ellen, <i>Prima</i>
Jackie, non-reader	Julia, <i>Essentials, Prima</i>
Pattie, non-reader	Sharon, <i>Bella, Take a Break, Eva</i>
Kathryn, <i>Bella, Best, Woman, Woman's Own</i>	

All young, white women in their early 20s/mid 30s, except Anthea who is a childminder in her early 50s, and who joined in the focus group at the end. Ellen has O-levels, is married to a works manager and has two small children. Kathryn, Jackie, Sharon and Julia are all married to builders, all have O-levels, and a toddler, although Sharon also has a baby. Pattie has two small children, degree level education and is married to a teacher. A mix of readers - Kathryn and Sharon are keen readers of various women's magazines, the others read them occasionally and Pattie rarely. Contacted through Pat from the North Sheffield Access Course group, who runs the Mother and Toddler Group. Live in Sheffield.

**Friendship Group:**

Elsie, <i>Bella</i>	Freda, <i>Best</i>	Joan, <i>Bella</i>	Norma, <i>Take a Break</i>
Mary, <i>Bella</i>	Pamela, <i>Woman's Weekly</i>	Polly, <i>Take a Break</i>	

All older women, without qualifications, aged between early 60s and early 80s. Polly is a black woman, the others white. All widows except for Joan and Mary



who are married. All live in Sheffield and all read magazines, sharing them within the Group, mainly supplied by Joan. I contacted them via a colleague who teaches at the Centre where the Group is based. All retired.

**Job Club:**

Jane, *Take a Break*                      Kelly, various weeklies

Michelle, *Eva, That's Life*        Tracy, *Bella*.

All white, unemployed women in their early 20s without formal educational qualifications. All women's magazines readers, especially the weeklies. Jane and Kelly are single, the other two have partners, both unemployed. No children. Contacted via Derbyshire Job Club co-ordinator. All live in Chesterfield.

**Library Staff:**

Amanda, 26, all weeklies        Jennie, 44, non-reader

Kath, 34, *Best*                      Lynn, 44, *Good Housekeeping*

Juliet, 42, *Bella*                      Sharon, 49, *Chat, Take a Break*

All the library staff are married except Kath, who lives with her partner, a welder. Amanda is married to a mechanic, Jennie and Juliet to sales managers, Lynn to a fitter and Sharon to an export sales manager. They all have grown children except Kath and Amanda. Kath has A-levels, the others have O-levels. The women read magazines at work, both monthlies and weeklies (except Jennie who only reads the *Steelers* ice hockey team magazine), and Juliet is a regular *Bella* reader, Sharon a *Take a Break* reader. All live in Sheffield. Kath is a friend of mine who was also interviewed individually (see **Kath Price**).

**North Sheffield Access Course Students:**

Anna, *Take a Break, Eva*        Jo, *Bella*                      Pat, *Prima*

Denise, non-reader                Helen, non-reader        Peggy, non-reader

Carol, *Woman, Woman's Own, Take a Break*

All aged in their late 20s/early 30s except Pat, who is in her early 40s. Denise is a black woman, the others are white women. They all have O-levels. Anna and Denise are single parents each with two young children, Carol is married to a watersports assistant with no children, Helen is married to a postman with four



children under ten, Jo is single, Pat is a widow with one adult child, and Peggy is married to a mature student with one child. A mixture of magazine readers, Anna is a fan of *Take a Break*, Denise and Helen actively dislike women's magazines. I gave a talk to the group on being a mature student at university and returned to do the focus group. Live in Sheffield.

**North Sheffield Mother and Toddler Group:**

Alice, various	Karen, various	Rebecca, various
Sandra, <i>Hello!</i>	Sharon, <i>Best, Bella</i>	
Kim, <i>Take a Break, Woman, Woman's Own</i>		

All white women and all aged between 25-34. Alice has two young children, is married to a chef, and has A-levels. Karen has a degree and is married to a clergyman with three young children. Kim and Sharon both have O-levels and Sharon also has nursing qualifications. Kim is married to a motor trader with one child, Sharon has two children and is married to a managing director. Sandra has nursing qualifications and is married to a sales manager with one child. Rebecca has no formal qualifications, is married to a solicitor and has two children. They read a mix of traditional and new weeklies and monthlies. Alice, Karen and Rebecca only read magazines that have been passed on. All live in Sheffield. Contacted by telephone after seeing their poster in my local branch library.

**Postgraduate University Students:**

Emma, 30, <i>She, Marie Claire</i>	Gill, 28, various monthlies
------------------------------------	-----------------------------

Both doing PhDs. Both readers of glossy monthlies, read weeklies occasionally (in waiting rooms, hairdresser's etc). Live in Sheffield, both single and white. Both based in my home university.

**Social Workers:**

Jilly, 31, Kate, 24, Sara, 39, all readers of various monthlies

Single women, all white, no children. All with degrees. Read mainly monthlies but occasionally weeklies at work. Jilly lives in Rotherham with her partner, an artist, the others in Sheffield. Jilly is a friend of mine.



**University Students:**

Lisa, 22, various monthlies    Nick, 22, monthlies, *Woman's Own*  
 Eleanor, 24, monthlies, *Woman, Woman's Own*

Readers of monthly magazines but Eleanor and Nick also read traditional weeklies for the soap opera gossip. Nick was the only man I interviewed - he joined the group because he was interested in women's magazines. All white, single and living in Sheffield. All students on a course I was teaching in media.

**Women's Library Group:**

Amelia, <i>People's Friend</i>	Rose, <i>Yours</i>	Dilys, <i>People's Friend</i>
Dot, <i>Bella</i>	Maggie, <i>Woman's Weekly</i>	
May, <i>Bella</i>	Nell, <i>Woman's Weekly</i>	
Ann, non-reader	Ruby, non-reader	Jean, non-reader

All aged between 60 and 80, with a combination of married, single and widowed, and all white, retired women. Not many readers of the new weeklies - mainly read traditional weeklies or titles specifically for older women, such as *Yours*. But both May and Dot are *Bella* readers. All live in Sheffield. Contacted via my local branch library.



## **APPENDIX THREE**

### **Magazines Used In Content Analysis**



**APPENDIX 3****Magazines used in content analysis (issue number and date)**

<u>Bella</u>		<u>Best</u>		<u>Take a Break</u>	
36	7/9/94	37	20/9/94	37	17/9/94
45	9/11/94	44	8/11/94	45	12/11/94
3	18/1/95	2	17/1/95	3	19/1/95
12	22/3/95	12	28/3/95	13	30/3/95
18	3/5/95	17	2/5/95	18	4/5/95
28	12/7/95	27	11/7/95	28	13/7/95



**APPENDIX FOUR**

**True Life Stories**

***Take a Break* 4 May 1995**

***Bella* 9 November 1994**

***Best* 8 November 1994**



She pressed hard with her red felt-tip pen and inscribed on the bus shelter in big bold letters: *I love you John Travolta.*

Sharon Hodgson, 15, stepped back with her two friends to admire her handiwork. Just then a cyclist came racing down the hill. She glanced up.

For a moment their eyes met. Then he whizzed past and was gone.

That evening Sharon and her friends were dancing in the local hall. A stranger pushed through the crowds and handed her a record.

'This is from Tinky,' he said. It was a copy of *Summer Nights* by John Travolta and Olivia Newton John.

'Who's Tinky?' yelled Sharon in mid-whirl. But the lad just melted back into the sea of dancers.

Half an hour later the DJ announced: 'Will Sharon Hodgson please go to the main entrance?'

Another lad was waiting for her.

'Tinky wants to see you,' he said, and pointed to a figure sheltering

from the rain in a shop doorway opposite the club. It was the cyclist she'd seen earlier.

Sharon stood in front of him, waiting. He smiled and offered her a mint. 'I'm Tinky,' he said.

They went for a walk, then he escorted Sharon to the bus stop. She arranged to meet Tinky again the following night.

Sharon was the envy of her mates at Acre Rigg School, Peterlee, Co-Durham, when she



Durham prison

announced she was going steady with 17-year-old John 'Tinky' Lee. Most of them had a crush on him.

Their passion was overwhelming and eventually she fell pregnant. She was 16. She told her teachers she'd decided to skip her exams and leave school to get married.

**'Haven't you heard? He was arrested'**

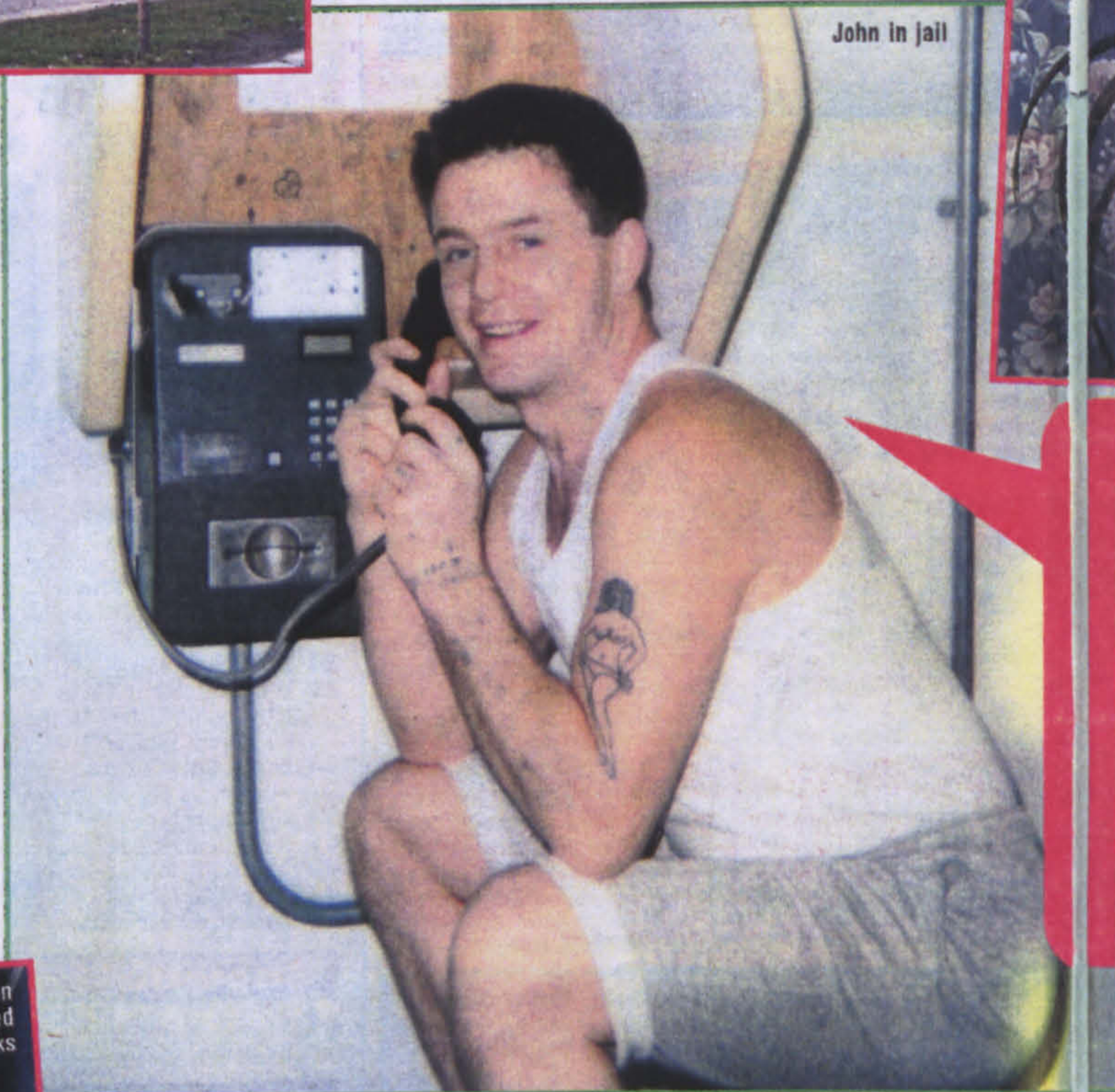
'What's the point of stupid lessons?' she said to her friends. 'I just want to be with my husband and have his children.'

The baby was a boy. They named him Andrew. Soon after his birth, Sharon was pregnant again. This time they had a daughter, Helen. Now they were older, Sharon started to call Tinky by his proper name, John. They didn't have much money, but they were happy in their way.

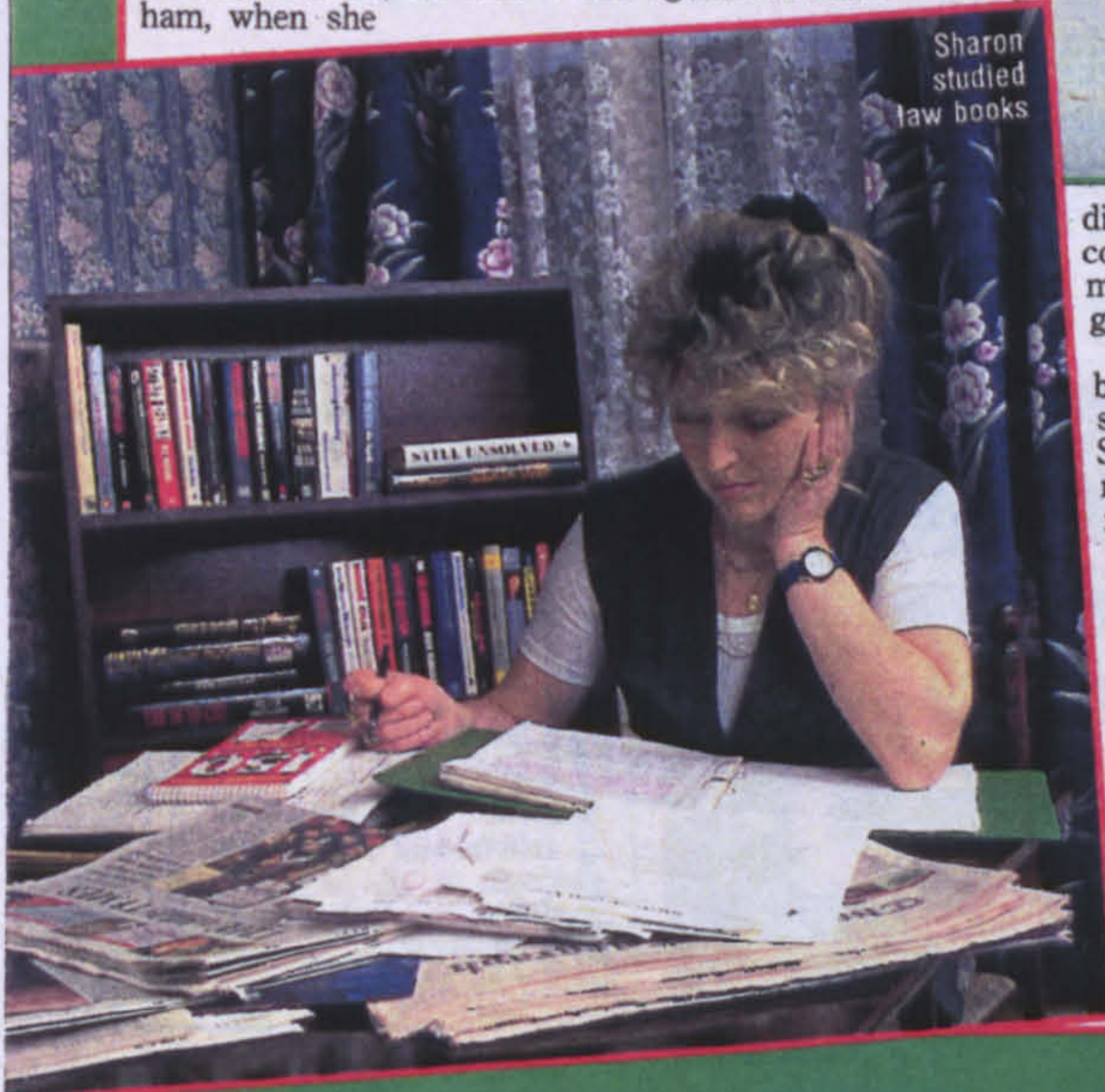
'You're my first and real love,' she told him. 'Now... and forever.'

Time passed and money was tighter. The bills

**He was calling her from jail and as she heard Tinky's voice, Sharon knew she was his last hope. So she went into town and got out the law books**



John in jail



Sharon studied law books

didn't seem to stop coming. The pressures mounted and they began to row.

Soon their neighbours could hear them shouting every day. Sharon couldn't take much more. One night she snapped.

'Get out!' she screamed at John. 'Get out and leave us alone!'

He slammed the front door behind him and didn't come back.

It was quiet without John. Weeks after he had left, Sharon heard that he had moved in elsewhere. With a

woman. She felt a sharp stab of jealousy. 'Well,' she told herself, 'it's too late to have him back now.'

Sharon met another man. She never thought about divorcing John, and he never asked her to. But her new boyfriend didn't want him around. Soon she and John lost touch.

She tried to make her new relationship work. She gave birth to three more children. But her man had a foul temper. Eventually she could take no more and left, taking the children to live near her mum Heather in Darlington.

By then, 10 years had passed since she and John had parted. Friends said he was doing well. She often

thought about him.

One day she rang his sister Angela to ask after his mother. 'Oh, and how's John?' she added, trying to sound casual.

There was silence at the other end.

'Haven't you heard?' said Angela at last. 'He's in trouble. He was arrested.'

'What for?'

'Rape.'

Sharon felt as if someone had punched her. 'No,' she gasped.

'There's no way it's true,' she told her mum afterwards. 'That's not the John I knew. He's not like that.'

Two days later she received a phone call. 'How are you and the bairns?' asked a familiar voice. It

**Next week: The killer at the christening**





Sharon knew what she had to do

# It's all lies, Sharon

was John. He was out on bail. They chatted, then Sharon swallowed hard.

'What's all this about you being arrested?' she asked.

Less than an hour later, John's white transit van pulled up outside her home in Trafford Close, Darlington. She walked nervously down the garden. A face appeared over the fence.

'You've gone grey!' he yelled and she realised that her cheeky Tinky hadn't changed a bit.

'It's the shock of seeing you,' she laughed. 'Come on in.'

John was doing his best to appear cheerful, but he'd lost a lot of weight and was chain-smoking furiously. 'It's all lies,' he told her.

Sharon lit a cigarette. She didn't say anything, but stared hard into his eyes. They were very clear and honest. 'Are you

sure?' she asked.

'I promise you, Shaz,' he said. 'It's lies.'

That night the pair went out for a drink. They laughed together the way they used to. The old feelings came flooding back.

Over the next few days

John told her all about his arrest. He'd been at his caravan on the moors with four teenage girls he knew. They'd been drinking. One of them was 16.

'I was asleep when she got into my bunk and started fooling around,' he

said. 'One thing led to another. But I didn't rape her. We all went home together happily. She'll drop it.'

But the case wasn't dropped. John's trial began at Newcastle Crown Court and Sharon sat in the gallery, listening to the evidence.

'This worldly man,' said the prosecution barrister, pointing at John, 'deliberately plied these innocent young women with drink. He knew exactly what he was doing.'

She heard other words used: *unscrupulous... blood... forced entry...* As the case closed, Sharon's mother said: 'He was a fool. But he's no rapist.'

The jury returned its verdict: *guilty*.

'No!' screamed Sharon. 'No, John!' She collapsed into her mum's arms. John was jailed for six years.

He was moved from Durham jail to Full Sutton prison, near York. Sharon was struggling to look after the five children on social security. But somehow she made the 120-mile round trip to see him every week, taking a poem and a rose.

'You didn't get a fair trial,' she said. 'I'll get you out.'

All the solicitors she spoke to were sympathetic but busy. So every day she trudged into the centre of Darlington to study law books in the library. She read law reports. She pored over case histories. 'I'm getting good at this legal jargon,' she told her mum.

She finally got an appointment with a solicitor called Martin Halliday. To his surprise, she presented

him with reams of legal points.

'In my opinion,' she said, 'the judge misdirected the jury in his summing up.'

They met again later that

day. 'Well?' said Sharon. 'Tell me straight. Is there any hope?'

'You've done an excellent job,' Mr Halliday replied. 'You've persuaded me of John's innocence.' Then he set to work.

Exactly 15 months after John's conviction, Sharon travelled to the Court of Appeal in London. She watched the three judges ponder the paperwork. She flashed a brave smile at John in the dock. He was too nervous to smile back.

After several hours the judges reached their decision. 'The jury were misdirected by the judge,' one

said. 'The forensic evidence was unsatisfactory.'

'John Lee, you are acquitted.'

Sharon squealed with joy. The judges gazed sternly at her.

John stumbled out of the courthouse, clutching all his possessions in two battered cardboard boxes. Sharon raced over to him, picked him up and spun him round.

'Thank you,' John said to his barrister.

'Don't thank me,' replied the barrister. 'Thank this young lady of yours. She did a damned good job.'

Today Sharon and John are back together again.

John, 34, says: 'I was jailed for a crime that I did not commit. I don't know what I would have done without Sharon's help.'

Sharon, 32, says: 'The second time round, our love is even stronger. We'll never spend a single day apart again.'

Bill Davey

John thanks Sharon



Back at home with the family

**£200** paid when we publish your true story. It's EASY! Jot down a brief outline of the facts and send to True Life, Take a Break, 25-27 Camden Road, London NW1 9LL.

Photo: Barry Hanson



Liz Kidd anxiously checked the table for the umpteenth time. Everything looked perfect. There were the sandwiches she'd painstakingly made for her special visitors and the chocolate biscuits she'd bought for her seven-year-old daughter Hazel.

"Here you are, darling — these are still your favourites, aren't they?" Liz asked nervously, handing the plate to her daughter.

For a moment, Hazel nodded eagerly, reaching out a chubby hand to take one. Then she stopped.

"It's all right if I have one, isn't it, Mum?" Hazel asked. But she wasn't talking to Liz — her eyes were fixed on the woman sitting in the corner.

In the silence that followed, Liz had to bite her lip hard to stop herself from screaming: "Don't call her that — I'm your real mummy! I love you. I never wanted to give you up."

"You can't imagine the pain of sitting there in silence while your own child calls another woman 'Mum'," Liz says bitterly. "It's like a physical ache in your heart."

Yet Liz has had no choice but to bear the pain. And that sad tea party in 1984 was the last time she saw her daughter. For, against Liz's will, Hazel had been formally adopted.

For most people that would be heartbreaking enough. But for Liz, now 38, the pain was even worse — because her own childhood had been ruined by years of cruelty and

**Liz Kidd was determined to give her daughter all the love she herself had missed out on as a child — but she never got the chance**



This faded photograph of a smiling Hazel is treasured by Liz (right)

# 'You're incapable of

abuse while in care. "Nothing in the world will ever make me forget what the social workers said to me," says Liz. "I was told: 'Your deprived background means you're incapable of love — you'll never be a proper mother to Hazel.'"

Liz was only four when she was taken into care by Grampian Social Services. Her family were travelling tinkers and the authorities believed she'd be safer in a children's home. They were wrong.

The home Liz was sent to in Banffshire has long since closed, but the horrific memories of the

abuse she suffered inside that grim place are still vivid.

Children were beaten for the slightest reason. Even tiny babies were smacked for crying. Lulled to sleep each night by the pitiful whimpering of the other children, little Liz dreamed only of escaping.

Her mum and dad were warned not to visit and the presents they sent their daughter were never passed on.

When Liz was seven, she was told that her father had died. "Stop snivelling, Liz. You're a big girl now," was all the sympathy she received.

"My heart broke that day," recalls

Liz sadly. "For years after that, I didn't dare cry, no matter how much I was hurting inside."

Liz repeatedly tried to escape, but it wasn't until she was 15 that she was legally old enough to leave.

Excitedly, she moved into a hostel in Aberdeen and got a job in the local Wimpy bar. But she couldn't cope alone. Within a year, she was voluntarily admitted to the Royal Cornhill Hospital in Aberdeen, mistakenly

**'You can't imagine the pain of hearing your own child call another woman "Mum"'**

believing she'd get help for her emotional distress.

"After the children's home, I didn't think anywhere could be worse. But I was wrong."

At the hospital, instead of receiving the care and support she needed, Liz was simply pumped full of drugs.

"I don't need to be sedated," she kept pleading. "It's what I've been through that's the problem."

But the more she protested, the more injections she was given. "This

will keep you quiet," the staff would say, jabbing a needle into her thigh.

"I found out later I was being injected with a sedative called paraldehyde. It's only meant to be used in emergencies, but I was given it up to three times a day.

"After nine months, I walked out of the place — they couldn't stop me," Liz says.

Still only 19, she moved to London and in May 1976 met Alan Kidd, a 23-year-old builder. Although he was convinced he could make Liz happy, she was wary of involvement.

"Every person I'd ever loved had been taken away from me — I was scared stiff the same thing would happen with Alan," she says.

But Alan's patience paid off and the couple moved into a flat together. Soon afterwards, Liz was delighted to find she was pregnant.

When Hazel Jocelyn was born on 21 May 1977, Liz hugged her beautiful baby tightly. Gazing down at her wispy blonde hair and perfect features, Liz felt an overwhelming rush of love and pride.

"I'll be the best mum in the world," she vowed. "I'll make sure no one ever hurts you or takes you away from me. I'll give you all the love that I didn't have."

But what Liz didn't know then was

Bill Robinson



Liz (on right) as a child. Right: With Alan, Hazel and baby Alan





## Story of the week



that her own tragic past was about to catch up with all of them. She suffered a bout of postnatal depression and agreed to have little Hazel fostered temporarily, while she received treatment. "That was the worst mistake of my life," Liz says now.

In 1979, social services said they were concerned about Liz's mental stability and wanted to make Hazel a ward of court. "They had the cheek to say that because of the way I'd been treated as a child, I'd never be able to

**Liz is a devoted mum to her other children Tammy, Alan and Lorna**



be a loving, caring mother," says Liz. "I couldn't believe it. It was *their* fault I'd had a deprived childhood."

At first Liz and Alan, who'd married the previous year, were allowed to see Hazel every weekend. On one of their days together as a family, a friend took a picture that is now one of Liz's most treasured possessions.

"There's Hazel in her best blue outfit, tightly clutching my hand," says Liz. "I treasure that image of us together."

But gradually, over the next four years, those precious weekend visits were reduced to just one every three months. And in 1983, Liz and Alan were told that Hazel was to be adopted by her foster family.

They refused point-blank to sign the papers, but it was a futile gesture. The adoption went ahead.

Even though by then Alan and Liz had three other children — Alan, now 14, Tammy, 12, and Lorna, 11 — who were all happy, well-adjusted and loved, the social workers refused

**'For years and years, I didn't dare cry, no matter how much I was hurting inside'**

to allow Hazel to come to the family home in Wallington, Surrey.

"Our other children were forever asking why Hazel couldn't live with us. It broke my heart," says Liz.

It's now 10 years since she last saw Hazel at that tense final tea party. "It was a terrible day. Alan and I had been told not to call ourselves Mum and Dad," recalls Liz.

"I'd spent hours getting everything ready, but in the end Hazel was only with us for 20 minutes.

"She sat on my knee and I stroked her lovely blonde hair. But though my love for her had never wavered, by then she hardly knew who I was. That was the moment I finally realised I'd lost her for ever."

In June this year, in an out-of-court settlement, Grampian Health Authority agreed to pay Liz £50,000 for the ordeal she suffered while a patient at Royal Cornhill Hospital.

"I'm delighted that at long last my story has been believed. But no amount of money can compensate for losing Hazel. She's 17 now, almost a woman. I can't help imagining her sharing her problems and secrets with someone she calls Mum — that someone should be me.

"I used to tell people I had four children. Now I just say I have three. How can you explain that your child has been adopted through no real fault of your own?"

"I wasn't cruel or unloving — I lost my daughter simply because of what I suffered myself as a child."

**Tessa Cunningham**

## Precious moments

Have you a special moment to share with us? Touching, tender, joyous — one you'll never forget

### My life's complete

Life, they say, begins at 40 and I reach that magic moment this month — a happily married man with a beautiful wife Tracey and two-year-old daughter Sasha.

It's hard to believe that until five years ago I'd hardly ever been out with a girl, let alone married and started a family. Then I lost my job at an out-of-town shopping centre, found a new one in a

local supermarket — and met Tracey. Our friendship grew, we started dating and fell deeply in love. Six months later we were married.

It was heaven, something I'd never thought would happen to me. Then came the 'icing on the cake' — Sasha was on the way. Our feelings for each other grew even more intense and when our daughter arrived I was almost in tears.

Every moment of our life is precious and I could never



So happy — Andy, Tracey and Sasha (inset)

have dreamed things would change for me so dramatically — and wonderfully.  
*Andy Maslen, Liskeard, Cornwall*

### Amsterdam reunion

I was always very close to my cousin Janet, who's just one month older than me, and spent most of my summer holidays with her and her parents. One year, my older sister Helen came along, too, but she and Janet fell out badly. I still remember the misery of breaking up their fights and trying to stay friends with both of them.

Time passed and we all went our different ways. Janet finally settled in Holland, I lived in the States for three years and Helen married and had a son. We never had a chance to meet up. Then I won some Air Miles and decided

to take my sister to stay with Janet in Amsterdam.

What a good time we had. The three of us got on so well and all the bad memories of the past were totally banished. To prove it, here's a photo of us 'going Dutch'!  
*Ann Rowe, Plumstead, London*



All together now. From left: Helen, Janet, her partner Leo and Ann

### A baby at last

When I was 19, I had a stillbirth at 28 weeks following a car crash. At 20, I had a

miscarriage at two months. At 22, I had an ectopic pregnancy and lost my baby and a Fallopian tube. At 24, this happened

again and I lost the other tube. At 25, I went on the waiting list for IVF treatment and had to wait two years.

The first two attempts failed, but the third time I found I was pregnant with

twins. Two months later, I miscarried one child and spent most of the pregnancy in hospital. I developed diabetes and had to go on to insulin.

My consultant decided to induce my baby at 37 weeks and I hardly dared hope. But on 22 June, I gave birth to a beautiful, healthy boy, Christopher. Was it worth it? Incredibly so — it was the best moment in my life.  
*Caroline Thomas, Gillingham, Kent*



Caroline and Christopher with proud dad Steven

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# Pointer crossword

Solutions are on page 45



In a pointer crossword, the clues appear in the answer grid in place of the usual black squares. Simply write your answer to each clue in the direction indicated by the arrow. We've filled in a couple to show you how it's done

Pictured TV presenter	Strike Pull along	H	Nourished Keep	
		I		
Whole Eminent	N	O	T	E D
			Kept a secret watch	Tries out
Coniferous tree	Perched Stared in wonder			
Room in a pub	Beg	Thieving bird		
Point at a target		Drizzles Joins by stitching		
		Magnitude		Dodge
Provide with weapons	Goes before			
		Marry	Thick cord	Rubber wheel surround
Under the weather	Make sore by rubbing	Shouts	Nothing more than	Rodent
Weep		Sulky		
			For every	
Brie or Stilton, eg	Zone	Regret Choose		Worry
Artificial, fake			Grotto	Bustle
			Complain	Make believe
Section of a poem	Suffers defeat	Ruler Rear; bring up		
			Go to the polls Assist	
Look daggers	Dull pain Tame animal		Golfer's expected score	Anger
Malice Social insects			Pastry dish	
		Commit to memory		
Sheer			See _____ become angry	

# 'Mummy's died and gone to he



Richard tries hard to be a mother and father to his daughters

# Missing mummy

There are times when only a mum will do, but with four girls depending on him now, Richard James can't give up trying...



PC11. PHOTO: HUGH THOMPSON/CAPITAL PICTURES. PUZZLE DESIGNED BY HICK SAVAGE



# heaven. She's not in pain any more'

**T**hree pairs of eyes, wide with excitement, peep from under the covers. Daddy tells the best stories. They snuggle up and listen in three beds side by side.

"Goodnight, darlings," he says as he finishes. He can hear the triplets chatting as he walks downstairs. Then the house is very quiet. And that's when Richard James misses his wife most of all.

Lynda was 35 when she died of cancer in May this year. She left behind four girls - Rachael, eight, and her sisters, Sarah, Nichola and Katherine, six.

"I told them the week before she died that Mummy may go to heaven," says Richard, 38. "It was the hardest thing I've ever had to do. I said some people don't get better. Kids think you only die if you're old."

Lynda was just 19 when Richard met and fell in love with her. "People always remember her laugh," he says. "She had a brilliant sense of humour. She was also a talented athlete."

They married in 1981 and, six years later, Lynda was pregnant for the second time. Richard was in the waiting room when she went for a scan. "When I saw her, Lynda was grinning and crying at the same time," he recalls.

"Your wife's not having one baby..." the

doctors said. "She is having three!" Richard was stunned. He didn't know how they were going to cope.

The triplets were born by Caesarean section. Nichola, the smallest, weighed just under five pounds.

"At home, the babies had to be fed 15 times a day. Some nights, we didn't sleep at all. I fed one and Lynda fed another. Whoever finished first fed the third. As the girls grew up, it became easier. They had a mop of blonde curls and, whenever we took them out for the day, people stopped to look at them. We couldn't believe how lucky we were. We

**'She was crying, but this time they were tears of desperation'**

often used to say our lives were very special."

Then, in January 1991, Lynda found a lump in her breast. It was malignant and she needed eight weeks of radiotherapy. "It was a terrible shock, but we thought she'd beat it," says Richard. "She was always so positive about everything."

With Lynda's encouragement, Richard set up his own business as a financial adviser. "She had far more faith in me than I had in myself," he says. "She was my best friend."

The cancer was forgotten about until January this

year. "Lynda didn't feel well one day," Richard recalls. "She had tests at Darlington Memorial Hospital and they called us in for the results."

The news couldn't have been worse. The cancer had spread to Lynda's lungs, stomach, hips and head. "What can we do?" she asked the doctor. Richard felt he was going to faint as he looked at his wife.

"It reminded me of the day she'd been told she was having triplets," he says. "She was crying again but, this time, they were tears of desperation, not joy."

When Lynda left the room, Richard asked how long she had to live. The consultant couldn't say. "Just take each day as it comes," he advised.

Lynda's GP came to their home in Darlington, Co Durham, to tell her she was not going to get better. "Is there anything about death you're afraid of?" he asked.

"I don't want to die. I have four children," she replied.

After he had gone, she sat with Richard at the kitchen table. "You're going to need some help," she said.

"It doesn't matter about me. What about you?" he asked, anguished.

"Don't worry about me. They may think I'm going to die, but I'll show them - I'll get through it," she said.

In February, she started a course of chemotherapy. She lost weight and slowly grew weaker. "Even though she was going through hell,

### Facing the future...

From left: Katherine, Rachael, Nichola and Sarah miss their mum greatly, but their dad says, 'They are very resilient - we talk about her all the time.'



### In happier times

Richard and Lynda had the perfect family. 'We couldn't believe how lucky we were. We often used to say that our lives were very special.'



she still took the children to school," says Richard. "And when she lost her hair, she wore a headscarf."

In May, he took her for a weekend in Northumberland. They stopped in Berwick-on-Tweed, where he had watched her run a race when they first met. This time, she was so ill she could hardly walk.

"Even though we couldn't do much, we had a fantastic weekend," recalls Richard. "We simply enjoyed each other's company."

A fortnight later, Lynda went into hospital to have a tumour removed from her stomach. She died on 31 May.

During the last few days, Richard told her he loved her and that he would look after the children. "I was holding her hand," he says. "She started breathing differently. I put my hand on her chest and felt her heart stop. She looked at me and closed her eyes. I knew she had died but she had such a great sense of humour I expected her to open her eyes and say, 'That fooled you, didn't it?'"

Richard went home to tell the children. "Mummy has died and gone to heaven," he said. "She's not in any pain any more."

He pulled them close as they started to cry. "We're still a big family and Daddy loves you very much."

"Does that mean we're not going to see her any more?" they wanted to know.

A childminder now looks after the four girls during the day. The children have shown her a video of their mum. "I can't watch that

video yet, but they can," says Richard. "They are extremely resilient and we talk about her all the time."

"They've had their hair cut shorter because I wasn't able to put it in bunches every morning. I was worried about not being able to

**'Without the children, I would not have a purpose in life'**

tell when they needed new shoes, but I can do that now, and I take them shopping for new clothes.

"At bathtime, I used to wash their hair and Lynda dried it. Now I do both. And, after they're asleep, I make their lunches for school."

"I have no time to be depressed or bitter. Without the children, I would not have a purpose in life."

"But they miss her," adds Richard. He particularly remembers the night the triplets were ill and he was hanging out the washing. He could hear the girls crying out for their mum.

"It's your daddy," Richard had to say as he went into their bedroom. "But I'll do my best."

GERALDINE SHERIDAN

PHOTOS: JIM McADAM





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