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## Revisiting youthful sexuality – continuities and changes over two decades

### Introduction

The impact of academic work is notoriously difficult to establish over short timeframes, despite current government attempts to assess research in these terms and the controversy these efforts have engendered. In this context there is something wonderfully straightforward and gratifying about receiving recognition from a journal that an article we wrote is 'one of the most influential published to date'. What is even more satisfying is that *Sexual and Relationship Therapy* is rooted in a community of practice, where the utility of research can be judged in a very direct and practical manner – does the research speak to the challenges that are encountered in educational and therapeutic work? Unusually for a research team, the original authors are all still in close contact, having continued our collaboration in a (to date) fourteen year study of young people's transitions to adulthood. This includes a consideration of sexual and romantic life in a broader biographical context including work, education, family and leisure. The ideas that we explored in the 2000 paper continue to form part of our intellectual agenda and the findings of the original study operate as a benchmark in judging how young people's sexual cultures have and have not changed.

The Women Risk and AIDS project (WRAP) and subsequent Men, Risk and AIDS project (MRAP) on which the paper draws were funded in the late 1980s in the light of the threat of HIV and AIDS (Holland et al. 1990, Holland et al. 1998/2004). They constituted the first UK based major empirical investigations of young people's heterosexual practices, and employed primarily qualitative methods (see too Jackson 1982, 1999). Alongside the Wellcome Trust funded Sexual Lifestyles Survey (Wellings et al. 1994) they marked an opening up of 'private' sexual lives to investigation, and the production of public knowledge and understanding. For us

this process was located within a feminist tradition of making the personal political, questioning ideas of sex as 'natural' and 'normal' and in Ken Plummer's words 'creating a culture of public problems' out of personal troubles (Plummer 1995: 129). 'Deconstructing virginity' was one of the last journal papers that we published from this study, signalling like the title of our book, the asymmetry, institutionalisation and regulatory power of heterosexual relations, and the silencing of female desire. The work however continued to have a life of its own within the field, giving rise to similar and related studies in a range of countries (for example Australia, Brazil, Finland, New Zealand, Spain), and to critiques and debates. The analytical approach was found accessible and usable from a variety of theoretical approaches, including for example in research on violence against women, beauty therapy, health promotion, and sexual and other risk-taking. A second edition of our book, 'The Male in the Head' was published in 2004 and there we summarised and commented on the impact of the study thus far, and how our findings might be brought into conversation with a changing social landscape.

In this short article we revisit the original study, placing it in its own time and the current context of research and practice, including recent developments in explaining and deploying the 'sexualisation of society/culture'. We then comment briefly on how key ideas outlined in this paper have been developed in subsequent research – including a focus on critical biographical moments as a way of exploring the relationship between the individual and the social, and our enduring interest in how narratives of loss and gain operate as a medium for negotiating conflict and inequality.

## **Activism and research in sex education**

One way in which we took up the findings of the WRAP/MRAP research was through activism and research in the area of sex education. Until 1986 there was no primary legislation on sex education within the UK, with responsibility for resourcing this work being in the hands of Local Education Authorities and often carried out by individuals shaped by feminist, anti-racist and lesbian and gay activism. In the mid 1980's this became the focus of attention from the conservative government of Margaret Thatcher and tabloid newspapers which together incited a moral panic about the corruption of children through schooling, resulting in the infamous section 28 legislation that prohibited schools from promoting homosexuality as a 'pretended family relationship'. In this context, sexual health became a theatre for the explication and contestation of new knowledge about intimate practices and the assertion of rights to information, resources and services (Thomson 1994). Paradoxically those highly conservative times gave rise to a proliferation of speaking out about sex and campaigning for sexual citizenship. Research played an important role, making private practices public and articulating the nature of the 'problem' (Thomson 2004a). The contribution of the WRAP research to the policy and practice agendas was multifaceted. In terms of sex education it problematised the absence of sexual pleasure as a dimension of the curriculum, the idea of a 'missing discourse of desire' (Fine 1988, Holland et al. 1994). It also asserted a relationship between sexual safety and empowerment, suggesting that the gendered loss/ gain of control that is so deeply written into heterosexual sexual scripts undermines our ability to recognise risk and to assert self interest. The WRAP research reminded its audience that young people are sexually active, and are under pressure from multiple sources eager to influence their sexual behaviour (parents, school, peers, religion). By bringing the voices of these sexually active young people directly into the arena of policy making, the research asserted the right of young people to take their place as stakeholders in sexual health work, alongside parents, the medical field and moral guardians, something that is taken for granted today.

## **Change and continuity**

At the time we had hoped to follow up and consolidate the research on young people with a study of established couple relationships, further investigating and challenging the taken for granted ideas about trust, wellbeing and safety within ordinary heterosexual relationships. We were unable to obtain funding to complete our research agenda of connecting early sexual experiences with the subsequent relationships and practices in the private lives of older heterosexual couples. But the study of sexuality as a whole, in all its multiplicity has advanced and proliferated in recent decades, moving from the margins of social science to the centre. In that process, influenced by feminism, lesbian and gay politics, and other sexual movements, an explosion of ways of conceptualising sex and sexuality and concomitant new sexual knowledges have been generated. These have reshaped the ways that sexuality is understood, and demonstrated the central importance of understanding sexuality for understanding contemporary societies themselves (Weeks et al. 2003, Weeks 2007).

In the early 1990's public concern about youthful sexuality was focused on the curriculum and the local state; as we write anxieties are coalescing around the market, media and the sexualisation of popular culture, particularly childhood. In February 2010 David Cameron took a stance on eradicating sexualisation of young children (Barrett 2010), and the government produced a report on the phenomenon with 36 recommendations for eradication (Papadopoulous 2010) linking sexualisation with violence against women. The study of sexuality extends to the sexualisation of culture and Feona Attwood (2006) offers an indication of the range of things that the term seems to refer to in academic investigation and writing:

a contemporary preoccupation with sexual values, practices and identities; the public shift to more permissive sexual attitudes; the proliferation of sexual texts; the emergence of new forms of sexual experience; the apparent breakdown of rules, categories and regulations designed to keep the obscene at bay; our fondness for scandals, controversies and panics around sex. (Attwood 2006 78-79)

Media are key sites where this process is examined, through its content, in particular discourses and representations of sex, sexuality, masculinity and femininity. They are contradictory sites in that the phenomenon is found there and media are also potent sources of much of the moral panic about sexualisation and pornification of culture and society.

Ros Gill (2009) suggests that there is a surprising degree of consensus that the sexualisation of society is an empirical phenomenon in media, popular writing and academic texts, but disagreement about how this should be understood. She identifies three positions: first a public morals position, with concern for standards, taste and public decency; second, a democratising sex approach, taking an optimistic perspective, celebrating a more pluralistic sexual culture, with porn as transgressive and liberatory; third, feminist approaches which differ from 1980s militant anti-porn approaches (Dworkin and MacKinnon 1988), some now being sex positive, some linking the phenomenon to discourses of celebrity, choice and empowerment, some describing raunch culture as repackaging sexual objectification of women as empowerment (Levy 2005). Gill herself is concerned to expose the uneven power relations at work in processes of sexualisation, and to examine the intersection of gender, race, class and age relations in 'sexualised visual culture' (Gill 2009: 142).

Along with these changes in the study of sexuality, and the sexualisation of culture there have been dramatic changes in many other aspects in young people's lives over the past three decades, often represented as a transformation in the possibilities for young women. The 'new girl order' has been contrasted with a crisis in masculinity. In the postmodern era the certainties of the past crumble and identities, masculinities, and femininities become multiple and more flexible, the time ripe for self-invention. The crisis for young masculinities derives from just this disappearance of the traditional ways of doing boy into man, of traditional male work as the economy moved from production to service, and of the male breadwinner role in the family. Boys underachievement at school is contrasted with increasing educational success for girls. The new girl order is one in which success at school and work and concomitant economic independence means that girls really can have it all, particularly in terms of consumption and lifestyle. They can also experiment with masculine behaviour, and in the process perhaps provoke moral panic. They can be 'ladettes' becoming publicly drunk and violent, engaging in casual sex with multiple partners. But there is an intersection of class and gender in these patterns of behaviour and experience. Middle class boys do achieve at school, black and white working class boys are a problem; working class girls are more likely to be ladettes, or described as such, and to adopt a sexualised hyper femininity (Holland 2008). Although Renold and Ringrose (2008) found resistance to the current pressure for a hyper sexualised femininity amongst the tween and teen young women in their study, social class was implicated in how it played out. Middle class girls could project this hyper femininity onto working class girls as the 'other'.

Despite the dramatic changes in many aspects of young women's lives, and in parallel though predating the study of sexualisation, a strong strand of feminist work sees the reinscription and reinstatement of heterosexual normativity in operation through many social and cultural

mechanisms, including the market and manipulations of consumption. They see the feminist language of freedom and emancipation being taken up and used to sell life styles, to evoke sexualised hyper femininity and conformity to particular body images (McRobbie 2006; Aapola 2005). In our own work on sexual values we have explored how ideas of 'readiness' for sexual activity reflect the complicated negotiations that young people must undertake between competing gendered ideas of maturity, competence and efficacy (Thomson 2004b).

When we began our study of young women's sexuality in the late 1980s we were interested to discover the extent to which young women's experiences differed from our own at that age – a period spanning the late 1950's to the early 1980s. Although there had been obvious and considerable historical and social change during that time, we found that the sexual relationships, experiences and understandings of their sexuality described and expressed by young women and men resonated with our memories of our own experiences. And as researchers took up our work in different countries and locations, they found similarities in those relationships and the way young people described experiencing them, in very different contexts. We located these continuing findings within a feminist critique of the asymmetric gendered power relations within which young people practiced 'normal' heterosexuality (Chung 2003, Hodzic 2003). We and they also found resistance to heteronormativity amongst young women and men, but limited, difficult to enact and sustain, often experienced as threatening to a masculine or feminine identity. With the advances brought by the proliferation of studies and theories of sexuality in the time since our study, conceptualisations and ways of explaining these relationships have become increasingly elaborate and subtle. And as we can see from the discussion above, the social and cultural context in which young people construct their adulthood and sexuality is perceived as changing, becoming increasingly sexualised, with the expectation of a knowing sexualised self. A complex relationship between change and



continuity is characteristic of the findings of many of the studies, and is an area that we have explored in our own subsequent work.

### **Themes in our continuing research**

One of the most powerful aspects of the design of the WRAP study was our decision to follow up a subsample of young women a year after their original interview. This enabled us to discover tensions between expectations and experiences, theory and practice – helping us to develop a model of understanding empowerment as both intellectual and embodied, with some strategies of empowerment being context specific, effective only within a particular relationship and some strategies travelling with the individual and becoming part of their repertoire of sexual practice. Overall the WRAP and MRAP studies gave us a snapshot of young people's heterosexual cultures in a particular historical moment, in certain locations. By going back to particular individuals we began to think about sexuality in the context of a whole biography, changing over time. In the subsequent Adulthoods (IA) study we made this longitudinal element central to the investigation (Henderson et al. 2007). We wanted to explore how sexual lives fit into wider biographies, in turn shaped by social class and geographic location.

The WRAP/MRAP studies were based in two urban sites, and although we had a strong sense of and discussed the diversity within our sample (Holland 1993), our focus on gender to some extent occluded a full analysis and account of other dimensions of difference – race, ethnicity and class. This coincided with a moment in academic feminism where ideas of intersectionality were coming to the fore, associated with an interest in what divides women from each other as well as what constitutes shared experience. Ideas of intersectionality drew attention to the ways that gender and sexual identities are always situated in particular times and places, and that

researchers need to find ways of bringing that context into the analysis. In the process of designing what was to become the Inventing Adulthoods study, we wanted to build locality into the study, enabling us to identify and understand the interaction between local values and traditions and aspects of a shared culture – including ideas around sexuality, parenthood and respectability (Thomson 2000). We identified samples of young people in five geographical and socio-economically contrasted locations including rural and urban areas, and over time we have been able to comment on the interplay of individual trajectories, local norms and those forms of belonging such as social class, gender, sexuality and religion that are rooted in yet also transcend place (Thomson and Taylor 2005).

In 'Deconstructing virginity' we focus on first sex as a significant biographical moment that could provide a point of comparison between individuals and a way of thinking about the biographical in relation to wider discursive formations (ideas about what is natural, normal, desirable). We did not know how young people would define their sexual debut, whether they would locate it at the margins or the centre of their biography. In practice we found it to be a highly productive approach. In subsequent research we have maintained and developed this focus on 'moments' that have both biographical and wider social resonance. In the IA study this involved inviting young people to identify critical moments in their lives which then could be mapped against other axes of difference and inequality (Thomson et al. 2002). Our longitudinal approach enabled us to review the consequentiality of these moments in the longer term, recontextualising meaning in new circumstances (Holland and Thomson 2009). Most recently some of our team have explored first motherhood as a critical moment, using this common biographical point as a way of connecting the accounts and experiences of successive generations of women, adding a historical dimension and perspective to our understandings of

gender and social change, while also attending more closely to the significance of family legacies in the shaping of expectations and intimate desires (Thomson 2008).

'Deconstructing virginity' also places significances on narratives of loss and gain as a way of capturing asymmetries and dependencies involved in normative heterosexual scripts. The idea that heterosexual desire operates through the eroticisation of power differences was a central insight of radical feminism (Jeffreys 1990), giving rise to the 'sex wars' in which the search for an erotics of mutuality was confronted by assertions of the potential of play and fantasy as realms of creativity and politics (Segal 1994). Yet as itself a project of modernity, feminism is deeply invested in ideas of progress and emancipation, with the inequalities and differential power of the past being confronted and resolved. The history of second and third wave feminism suggests that simple narratives of progress and decline, loss and gain, are inadequate for capturing the complexity of inequality and how inequalities can be reconfigured in new yet old ways over time (Brown 1995). In our research with young people making the transition to adulthood we invited them to interview their parents and older relatives about how the world had changed since their own childhood. What resulted from this exercise were complicated narratives that described losses and gains, trade-offs – where a loss of freedom of movement perhaps was understood in relation to a gain in standards of living or educational progression. Over time we have come to think about loss and gain as perspectives that can be articulated, but which are not mutually exclusive. Whether we perceive loss or gain depends in part on where we are standing, but also importantly to whom we are talking (McLeod and Thomson 2009).

## **Conclusion**

Through the WRAP/MRAP projects we understood that young people are positioned within gendered discourses from which they can perceive and account for themselves in terms of loss and gain. Yet we also recognised the significance of the politics of intimacy – ways that embodied practices, conversations and even research projects, can disrupt and complicate these familiar stories. In the 20 years that has passed between the original fieldwork for this research there is both continuity and change. Some of the original respondents will now be parents of teenagers themselves, another stage in the intergenerational conversations through which families mediate cultural processes in the form of warnings, encouragements and aspirations. The broader social landscape itself is changed, with widening social inequalities, an extension of young people's economic dependence on parents and a transformation in information and communication technologies that place young people at the centre of mobile personal networks. The representation of sexuality in the public sphere has changed in interesting ways, pornography is mainstream, sex and sexual diversity is visible, and hopefully contraception and condoms are more easily accessed. Yet the business of negotiating fledgling sexual relationships remains fragile and uncertain. Girls worry about being sexy yet not sexual, boys worry about how to appear knowing when they are not. As the political spectrum swings back towards a popular engagement with youthful feminism and an interest in the relationship between power, pleasure and control we find that the WRAP/MRAP studies may themselves find a new audience, facilitating a conversation about complicated relationality, about loss and gain, progress and continuity.

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