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FEMINIST FORUM

Beyond "Empowerment"? Sexuality in a Sexist World

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Abstract The subject of girls' sexual empowerment is a fertile area for feminist debate. While most feminists are committed to the promotion of diverse and egalitarian sexual possibilities for girls (and women), we differ in our views on how to hold an aspirational vision alongside paying attention to real world constraints on its unfolding. A specific instance of this tension is posed in considering how relevant claims to individual empowerment are within a broader context that remains broadly sexist and limiting as well as saturated with racist and other forms of discrimination and inequality. In this paper, I join the dialogue opened by Lamb and Peterson (2011) to explore some of these questions. I argue that the concept of sexual empowerment, as taken up in these debates, might be too flexible to do the work we require of it. In particular, I suggest that it is unhelpful to fix our lens on claims of individual empowerment, if and where this involves eliding the broader sociocultural conditions of possibility for "intimate justice" (McClelland 2010) for girls and women; and, where it leads us to over-ride the psychosocial complexity of all individuals in ways that distract us from attending to ambivalence and understanding the "cruel attachments" that can bind us to injustice. Rather than seeking to offer an "'expert' view of empowerment," I argue for the value of reflexive, empathic, and respectful feminist critique of the cultural conditions of possibility for such a thing.

Keywords Sexual empowerment · Feminism · Postfeminism · Sexuality · Girls · Cultural critique

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Introduction

In the broad context of debates around adolescent sexuality, disagreements among feminist scholars are perhaps relatively minor. Given the high stakes in terms of human rights violations and impediments to "intimate justice" (McClelland 2010, p. 663) that have played out in the U.S. in recent years (see Fine and McClelland 2006), as well as in other parts of the world, our disagreements mostly concern how best to promote the possibilities for diverse and egalitarian sexual possibilities for young women (and men). Sharon Lamb and Zoë Peterson's (2011) innovative step in moving beyond adversarial debate towards dialogue is a promising model for teasing out priorities and tensions in feminist approaches to complex issues such as girls' sexuality. In reflecting on their dissatisfaction with having found themselves on two sides of a dichotomy that neither was invested in, their subsequent discussion on the specific question of adolescent girls' sexual empowerment reveals instead that they share quite a lot of common ground. While united around a similar vision and values for girls' sexuality, there do, however, remain some important differences in emphasis.

In Lamb's earlier (2010a) article, she developed a critique of "feminist ideals for a healthy female adolescent sexuality" (p. 294), in particular the positing of desire, pleasure (and subjectivity) as markers of "healthy sexuality" (p. 294). She argued that this sets up an overly idealistic version of sexual subjectivity, that it unnecessarily (and unrealistically) reifies active over more passive forms of sexuality, and that it problematically implies that pleasure equates with good and ethical sex. She also noted that the ways idealized forms of teenage sexuality can play out in girls' lives will intersect with their different positionings according to race, ethnicity, class, and so on. Finally she

suggested that the feminist ideal of a sexually empowered teenage girl bears an uncomfortable resemblance to the "power porn sexualized female" that is currently marketed to women. This latter point, and the dilemmas it raises, is one of the issues that Lamb and Peterson (2011) take up for further consideration.

The key point of their disagreement concerns whether or not the presence of sexual desire and pleasure, and so on, are (necessarily) signs of sexual empowerment. (The question is also framed, in the abstract as, "whether empowerment includes a subjective sense of efficacy, desire, and pleasure" [Lamb and Peterson 2011, this issue]—which I read as a different, less controversial, question.) In the body of the article, Lamb is wary of reading empowerment on the sole basis of girls' self-reported pleasure, desire, choice, and so on; while Peterson wants to see any claims to "a subjective sense of empowerment" *as* "legitimate empowerment" (this issue). Both authors are aware of and concerned about the situational and broader contextual limits on girls' empowerment, and they offer a thoughtful discussion of whether a girl was ever "really empowered" in the first place if she later suffered negative unwanted outcomes from a sexual experience that she felt to be empowered at the time (which the authors discuss in terms of feelings of either desire, autonomy, certainty or responsibility). Peterson seeks to get around this problem by conceptualizing empowerment as multi-dimensional; so that it is possible for a girl to "simultaneously experience empowerment on one level and disempowerment on another level" (this issue).

Beyond "Empowerment"?

In this article I will highlight two points that seem to dart in and out of the shadows in both this and the authors' previous contributions to this chain of discussion (Lamb 2010a, b; Peterson 2010): the sociocultural landscape and the psychosocial complexity of individuals. Alongside this, I raise the question of how we imagine the nature of feminist political engagement, and whether this affects how we contemplate the viability of different moods of critique. Following Lamb and Peterson's lead, I will (by and large) avoid a point-counter-point response and rather take their rich musings as a springboard for continuing to think through questions about how as feminists we theorize the possibilities for girls' (and, for that matter women's) sexuality.

Underlying my response is a sense of fatigue with the very concept of sexual empowerment. Just like those other well-meaning concepts—choice, agency, and pleasure (e.g., Gill 2007)—empowerment is a good idea. But like those concepts it is prone to being coopted and depoliticized within neoliberal postfeminist discourse leading it in my view to be too conceptually flabby to be useful in anchoring feminist debates. Of primary concern is the way it is able to be cast as a property or state of individuals untethered to the situation of their lives or the meanings ascribed to them, their bodies, and actions. If we are reduced to worrying about the validity, value and accuracy of women's "subjective feelings of empowerment" (this issue), *irrespective of the circumstances* of those feelings, then it seems to me that we have to ask whether empowerment is the right concept to be fixing our attention on. In response to the question "are girls sexually empowered if they feel that they are empowered?" (this issue), the answer would surely have to be "it depends"; but also, that it might be beside the point. As Lamb (2010a) noted, "feeling emboldened sexually is not the same as empowered" (p. 301). Not only is it not necessarily the same as *feeling* empowered, but feeling empowered is not necessarily the same as *being* empowered (a view I would extend to myself as well as to teenage girls). The reason for being sticky over this distinction is that it is difficult to see how the notion of empowerment is useful if it doesn't retain some deeper political analysis that takes seriously the sociocultural terrain in which individuals are crafting their lives as well as the psychosocial complexities of individual subjectivities. Instead, I would argue for shifting the lens to focus our inquiry not on whether or not any particular individual or act is empowered but rather to look at the cultural conditions of possibility for girls' sexuality, embodiment and relationships.

In their article, Lamb and Peterson sketch four scenarios involving a hypothetical 13-year old girl who might feel empowered in deciding to have sexual intercourse. They describe different ways in which her sense of empowerment could be generated, that would count as sexual empowerment according to various definitions. One relates to her acting on her intense positive sexual desires, one relates to her acting autonomously making a decision not constrained by her parents or other authority figures, another relates to her sense of certainty in having made the right decision and, finally, one relates to her having acted responsibility to obtain condoms and/or birth control pills. All of these courses of action involve a certain amount of agency, and all might invite some kind of honouring of at least some degree of autonomy and responsibility in the girl's actions. However, the authors interrogate all of these possibilities to consider the ways in which each of these courses of action may have been "encumbered by less than empowering contextual factors" (this issue); and also how each course of "empowered" action may have negative outcomes for the ostensibly empowered individual girl. For example, the girl who feels her choice to have sex with her much older boyfriend is autonomous even though it is made in the context of considerable pressure from him.

Might it be better therefore, to abandon the notion of empowerment as the umbrella term for referring to the active and positive (in at least some ways) dimensions of girls' choices, actions, and experiences, and use instead a more varied and specific vocabulary? We can and should still talk about desire, pleasure, enjoyment, satisfaction, and so on. But not conflating these with empowerment would allow us to reserve the notion of empowerment for processes and conditions in which individual experience is more closely aligned with cultural conditions that promote expansive, enriching and valued opportunities for girls and women *in general*. Feminism, as a change oriented theory and practice, cannot be limited to privileging individual expressions of contentment above the collective interests of women and the political drive for equality. If it had done so in the past, women may never have got the vote!

We tend to debate empowerment and agency in relation to those forms of sexuality and feminine identity and embodiment associated with "raunch" or "pornographied" culture. For example, "porno-chic" style (e.g., Evans et al. 2010), pole dancing (e.g., Whitehead and Kurz 2009), the consumption of pornography (e.g., McRobbie 2008); or what are argued to be new forms of sexual engagement detached from relationship, such as "hooking up" (e.g., Kalish and Kimmel 2011). These kinds of practices are argued by some to be liberating or empowering, and by others to be exploitative or sexist. One way of reflecting on the limitations of conflating "empowerment" with feelings of desire and pleasure or confidence and autonomy, and so on, might be to pose the same sorts of questions in relation to older and what might seem to us more mundane scripts for female sexuality. What about the case of a woman who has sex with her husband whenever he wants it, despite her lack of sexual arousal? Does her claim to enjoy and feel pride in the "good wife" status she feels render her "empowered"? If empowerment means some kind of endpoint that invites us to hang up our feminist tools of critique, then surely the answer is no. Another example to test the limits of acceptable empowerment might be fake orgasm. Until Annamarie Jagose's (2010) recent radical reconsideration of this practice, it hadn't attracted much feminist debate. No feminist I suspect has launched into print to uphold a woman's claim that her choice to actively perform this more traditional feminine sexual script is "empowered" because she says it is so. This is not to deny that the performance of fake orgasm might be best thought of as an agentic, strategic act. It may embody certain forms of resistance at the same time as it perhaps embodies a kind of obedience to normative expectations of the good feminine sexual subject. As Jagose (2010) insists, it is a political act. But to consider it as empowered might be a mistake that forecloses opportunities not only for elaborating critique of the cultural conditions of possibility that provide such limited options for ways of acceptably practising sex (such that it might feel "required" by too many women in too many circumstances); but also, at the level of the individual it honours only one of the possible stories that likely can be told about this practice. While a woman may enjoy her performance of (fake) orgasm for a myriad of reasons, and gain benefits in terms of identity and relationship, it might also be marked by negative affect (including potentially, disappointment, embarrassment, guilt, shame, or anger), and so on.

In considering fake orgasm anew, Jagose (2010) draws on the work of Lauren Berlant (2006), who refers to "'cruel optimism' to describe 'a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility'" (Jagose 2010, p. 533). The case of fake orgasm, and Jagose's argument about its place in a rethinking of the relationship between sex and politics, is complicated and suggests trajectories of implication (in relation to agency, pleasure, identity and politics) that are quite different from those of women's performance of what might be thought of as more peculiarly current postfeminist sexual imperatives (such as, perhaps, anal sex—irrespective of one's personal sexual interest in the act). What it does, however, is highlight how even those acts that have widely been regarded as "unfeminist" (Jagose 2010, p. 518) or as unliberated (such as faking orgasm, or having "ordinary" sex that is unwanted for that matter), can be recognized nevertheless as agentic, political and even sometimes pleasurable; *and*, always, at the same time, that they have to be made sense of in terms of the disappointing "constraints of the present" (Jagose 2010, p. 532) that they arise within and speak to. This kind of counterintuitive reading of fake orgasm clearly illustrates the possibility of thinking differently about the psychological and political dimensions of any kind of sexual engagement or performance of gender. What is so surprising and successful about Jagose's (2010) argument is the way that it frames a widely disparaged practice as instead "innovative" (p. 530), "ingenious" (p. 525), and "resourceful" (p. 532). In simultaneously recognizing the cultural conditions of constraint, such an analysis opens space for a respectful rethinking of a common feminine sexual practice, where it can be seen as political without (most likely) having a political intentionality and as agentic without *therefore* being empowering. Fake orgasm is not at all a perfect analogy for pole dancing in the style of a stripper. Yet it is possible that similar processes might be at work in stirring the hopeful attachments to raunch culture that some women of a younger generation may feel. Whether the optimism of such attachments is always "cruel" is not certain, but it does seem likely that they will not always deliver what had been hoped for.

Lamb (2010a; and in Lamb and Peterson 2011) is right, in my view, to question our tendency to dichotomize the

possibilities for self in terms of subject *or* object; and then imagine the ideal female subject only as the agentically active (pleasure seeking) subject. We are, of course, always both subject and object. As objects for another we are not necessarily victims of derogation and subjugation (Cahill 2009). And as subjects we are not automatically unfettered and free. The process of subjectification, in broadly Foucauldian terms works both to constrain *and enable* possibilities for how we understand ourselves and other people, and how we experience and act in the world (see Gavey 2005). So, for instance, the "choice" to be "passive" and go along with unwanted sex or to be "active" in a way that obeys old fashioned heteronormative imperatives are just as much an effect of power as is the "choice" to be "active" in a more modern guise and, for example, dance around a pole for a boyfriend. As acts in any individual women's life, they could have a wide range of possible meanings and consequences, but they do also have meaning within a wider logic of gendered sexuality as parts in the broader social (dis)order of gendered sexuality.

The Politics of Feminist Scholarship: Patronizing Judgement of Individuals Versus Empathic Cultural Critique

One of the concerns canvassed by Lamb and Peterson is whether "we, as 'experts', or in the very least, as adults who care deeply about girls' development, can ever make the strong point, theoretically or directly to a girl, that a girl who feels empowered is actually not empowered" (Lamb and Peterson 2011, this issue). Peterson suggests that it would be "giving girls the hurtful message that, although they *feel* empowered, their sense of power is, in fact a false consciousness" (Lamb and Peterson 2011, this issue). These are familiar concerns that have long rattled feminist scholars; and they are important. There is something distasteful about the image of an older adult feminist standing on a pedestal lecturing to girls about sex and sexuality—as if we know all the answers for ourselves let alone for them. It may, however, be helpful to unpack the impressions that this line of argument projects. For instance, how do we imagine the feminine subject that we may hurt? How do we imagine our relationship to "her"? What kind of political practice do we imagine is taking place? And, what is lost in pulling back from this kind of critical analysis?

Stories of girls happily "going wild", so-called glamour modelling, and stripping "for fun" to the attention of male audiences are renditions of a certain kind of sexuality that is challenging (and can be troubling) for a feminist scholar. There are plenty of accounts of young women enthusiastically participating in so-called raunch culture and living an "empowered" sex life of abundant and apparently unconstrained sex (e.g., Levy 2005; Walter 2010). But what is less clear is the extent to which young women in general are doing this and insisting that they are empowered in the process. We do have to pay attention to the voices of young women who may endorse all kinds of different sexual possibilities, including pornographied aesthetics and modes of sexual engagement. But there is also a question of to what extent the imaginary empowered girl in these scenarios is a caricature of the complexities of real girls who, as Lamb and Peterson might both agree, could well be more ambivalent than suggested in both the accounts that applaud and abhor these "hypersexualised" versions of girls' sexuality.

In 2010 I, alongside several young postgraduate students (Gavey et al. 2010a, b), interviewed young women and men about their experiences at a high school "after ball" party that had been reported in the media as featuring "sexily dressed professional cage dancers" (Smith 2009). "After ball" parties are typically large social events organised by students (sometimes along with parents), that take place late into the night immediately after a school ball. They are a major social occasion for senior high school students, and tend to be held in venues like empty warehouses, with dance music and alcohol. In contrast to the formal balls that they follow, which are organised by schools, these events are explicitly organised independently of the school. (In 2010, with police intervention targeting illegal under-age drinking and drug use, tighter restrictions were put on these events, and many were cancelled.)

The young women and men we spoke with (aged mostly between 17 and 19) expressed a range of views about the event, the professional "Vegas style" dancers who were hired for entertainment, and the presence of cages on the dance floor. The standard response was initially to naturalise the fact that it was "girls" and not "guys" dancing in the cages (men were prevented from entering by security staff) and that it was only women dancing professionally for entertainment (in "very brief" "full on Vegas show girl costumes" [participant who was a professional dancer at the event], Gavey et al. 2010a). Also naturalised initially was the discrepancy in effort and expense required by girls and guys to look the part for the ball itself; and the sexual double standard in relation to how girls (negatively as "slutty") and guys (somewhat admiringly as "skuxx") were judged in regard to gregarious sexual behaviour. As girls discussed their own or other girls dancing in cages, no-one described it using the term "empowering". Some of the young women described the cage dancing as light-hearted "fun" (see also Donaghue et al. in press); yet in illustration of Donaghue et al.'s point that while women can choose to act in various "raunchy" ways (their example was pole dancing), they do not have

control over meanings ascribed to those actions by others. Ironically, the professional dancer we interviewed (who was a young woman of a similar age to the party-goers, and who was employed to perform at this party) described the dancing of the girls in cages on the dance floor as "embarrassing":

> as a girl, myself, that was embarrassing, seeing them what they were doing like, they were, dancing, like, the way they were dancing, would have been to like get the boys' attention sort of thing like, it was really not nice dancing, like, you could go to a strip club and see that kind of dancing (Nicola: Really) yeah (19 year old Pakeha woman) (Gavey et al. 2010a)

Girls (and women more generally to some extent) are still caught in a bind, it would seem, required to balance tight tensions between conformity to traditional feminine sexual mores and appearance on the one hand *and* more "liberated" sexual norms on the other. As various scholars have noted, these tensions and the consequences for breaking the complex rules of contemporary femininity can be even more punishing for women who are not white, heterosexual, slim, conventionally attractive, and of the "right" age (e.g., Collins 2005; Fine and McClelland 2006; Gill 2008b; Lamb 2010a; Tolman 2002). Recent research with young women continues to show just how constrained some "choices" around the display of the feminine body are (e.g., Fahs and Delgado 2011; Stuart and Donaghue in press) and how the costs of nonconformity can have racial, ethnic, and class dimensions (e.g., Fahs and Delgado 2011).

It was notable how readily, when gently probed, many young women we interviewed expressed dissatisfaction or discomfort with various features of the gendered order of their lives and the sexism they tentatively observed. Yet they appeared to have no access to socially acceptable tools for critical engagement with it, and tended to be diffident about expressing it. With feminism not a readily accessible framework within their peer group, the only alternative seemingly was to "make the most" of their place in this order. So while we might worry about "hurting" girls by telling them they are not empowered when they think they are (e.g., Peterson, in Lamb and Peterson 2011, this issue), I wonder whether taking claims about sexual empowerment at face value is always as validating as it might seem. Maybe it is better to refuse the terms of the question that seeks to interrogate if we/girls and our actions are empowered or not. Instead we can open up other sorts of conversations which make space for all of us together to understand the politics of our personal lives, to understand the constraints on choice and to develop tools for weaving our way through them with our eyes a bit more wide open. In this process, we can acknowledge our own complicities and constraints and not pretend that we are unaffected by our own cultural formations.

Questioning whether, for example, pornographied aesthetics, activities and values are empowering for women (of any age) does not require a didactic mode of engagement that judges and patronizes young women and berates them for not knowing what's (not) good for them. Feminism can raise questions, highlight contradictions, and invite new ways of seeing some of our shared taken-for-granteds. Critique—particularly when focussed on the cultural conditions of possibility rather than the individual—can be generous and respectful. Its effects can be enriching and ultimately affirming rather admonishing and hurtful. Alex Antevska, one of the postgraduate students I was working with last year on the after ball party research, reflected on her and a classmate's response to encountering feminist analyses of the cultural conditions of their lives the year before. In an undergraduate course on gender and psychology where she was introduced to Rosalind Gill's (2008b, 2009) work on subjectification towards sexualized norms, she noted:

> I remember even me and [another female student] last year when you first talked about how feminism had been taken up in advertising to make you think that you're like cool and unique and edgy and you know you were the relaxed girl (Nicola: Yeah) that wasn't so like uptight (Nicola: Yeah) and actually talked about sex we kind of like looked at each other and we were like oh really, and we thought we were cool (All laugh).
>
> (Research Team Discussion, Gavey et al. 2010a)

For young women who are fed up with the facade of choice and empowerment offered within our contemporary sexualised cultures, feminist questions and ideas are still relevant, and can help to expand the otherwise narrow "space for action" (see Coy 2009).

Lamb and Peterson's (2011) article raises so many issues that are challenging, provocative and important for feminist efforts to understand and help enhance the intimate and sexual lives of girls. A persistent dilemma seems to be how to regard and respond to articulations of empowerment as an individual state of being when it arises in relation to cultural norms and practices that have problematic implications for girls and women collectively. Writing from a different geo-cultural vantage point, it is possible that my preference for not wanting to simply take claims of empowerment at face value is an "instinctive" response to a slightly different political reality; one perhaps in which the individual figures differently in relation to the terms and conditions for policy and activism.

Stepping back to a broader disciplinary frame of reference, however, I am reminded of US philosopher Susan Bordo's (1997) inspiring argument for the necessity of cultural critique as an endeavour that is different from

simply advocating for the rights of others. In discussing the thorny question of personal choice when it comes to people's participation in activities that reinforce restrictive and sexist gendered norms (her example was cosmetic surgery), she continually references her own "enmeshment" (Bordo 1997, p. 13) in the same culture; an enmeshment that works on her own desires, vulnerabilities and choices, just as it does on those who take up different responses. Yet she insists that while it is possible to understand and sympathise with people's personal choices, we must always see those choices within the broader context in which they occur. Not only do our individual choices "[create] our own individual lives" but they also "[construct] the landscape of our culture" (p. 16): such that "unless one strives to develop critical distance on that enmeshment, one is apt to simply embody and perpetuate the illusions and mystifications of the culture" (Bordo 1997, p. 13). Rosalind Gill (2008a) argues a similar point within the European context, and wonders why "simply acknowledging cultural influence is seen as somehow *disrespectful*," and "being influenced is regarded as *shameful* rather than ordinary and inevitable?" (p. 435, emphasis in original). In referencing their own cultural embeddedness, Bordo and Gill do no elevate themselves as finger-wagging "experts" above and beyond the push and pull of culture. Rather, they demonstrate Nancy Fraser's (1997) point that "nothing in principle precludes that subjects are *both* culturally constructed *and* capable of critique" (p. 214, emphasis in original).

For feminism to make a (sustainable) difference in the lives of girls and women it does have to listen to diverse voices, and allow for surprising and unconventional views and values. But it also has to hold on to the challenge of a politics of change. For this, in my view, claims to individual empowerment should not lead us to abandon critique when it looks like the cultural conditions of possibility for that feeling of "empowerment" are counter to the promotion of empowerment (towards diverse and equitable opportunities and rewards) for *all* girls and women.

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