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Recovering Empowerment: De-personalizing and Re-politicizing Adolescent Female Sexuality

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Abstract In a 2010 issue of *Sex Roles* and in a recent jointly authored work, Lamb and Peterson (2011) introduced and grappled with some of the most complex debates surrounding adolescent female sexuality. In response to the questions they pose regarding the constitution of young women's sexual empowerment, this commentary revisits the fundamental principles of empowerment theory and practice. Empowerment is popularly equated with individualized concepts of self-efficacy and agency. However, collective efforts to develop critical consciousness and to address systemic bias and inequality were originally regarded as essential components of empowerment. I recall these broader, politicized aspects of empowerment as a way of advocating for: (1) a collective approach to supporting young women's sexual well-being through intergenerational alliances and safe spaces; and (2) a more thorough analysis of how contextual factors, including non-sexual ones, shape young women's sexual choices and lives.

Keywords Adolescent girls · Sexuality · Gender · Empowerment

Introduction

In her reflection on feminist psychological scholarship regarding adolescent female sexuality, Lamb (2010a) identified some important past missteps but also promising future ones. The subsequent exchange between Peterson and Lamb in 2010 (Lamb 2010b; Peterson 2010) and their jointly authored work in the current issue (Lamb and Peterson 2011) have advanced and enriched our collective understanding of young women's sexuality. Importantly, they achieved this neither by offering pat definitions of sexual empowerment, nor by providing simplistic instructions for how to distinguish authenticity from facsimile. To the contrary, and especially in their current co-authored work, both Lamb and Peterson explicitly reject the polarizing, oversimplifying rhetoric that dominates popular discourse. Instead, they thoughtfully parse points of convergence and divergence between them in ways that preserve the complexity of adolescent sexuality and respect its significance in the lives of young women.

In line with the tone and priorities set by Lamb and Peterson (2011) for a collaborative examination of the psychological, social, and political complexity of young women's sexuality, I offer my own comment to this conversation. I am especially interested in building on the foundation set by Lamb and Peterson by elaborating on specific principles of empowerment theory and practice. As Lamb and Peterson astutely observe and as I will argue further, individualist conceptions of empowerment are problematic and limited, especially in the sexual lives of young women. Nevertheless, empowerment theory has much to offer beyond personal empowerment, including important guidance for adults who wish to support young women's sexual well-being.

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Revisiting Empowerment Theory & Practice

According to its original formulation (see Lee 2001; Rappaport 1987), empowerment was theorized to consist

of three components: the intrapersonal (e.g., self-efficacy); the interpersonal (i.e., coming together with similar others to analyze critically power blocks and imbalances); and the behavioral (i.e., taking action to eradicate identified power blocks and imbalances). These domains were regarded as equally vital and even indivisible; there could be no mix-and-match or cafeteria-style approach in which one opts for personal agency but not critical consciousness, or engages in social action without corresponding self-efficacy. Instead, empowerment was conceived as an ongoing, iterative process enabled by the mutually enhancing interplay among all three components. Casting empowerment as a process in which one engages rather than as a state to be achieved circumvents the fractious potential of measuring who is and who is not truly empowered (Lamb and Peterson 2011 make this point, as well). If organizing and lobbying efforts do not result in desired policy change, for instance, this cannot be used to nullify the empowerment of its advocates; instead, their struggle for justice is simply ongoing.

Over the past few decades, empowerment has become a conceptual and rhetorical cornerstone of many academic disciplines, professional fields, and streams of popular discourse (e.g., feminist theory and analysis, community psychology, social work, education, management; see Pease 2002 for a consideration of how it has been used to serve diverse political and social agendas). Its pervasive invocation, however, belies just how truncated and superficial considerations of empowerment have become. In particular, the intrapersonal component of the theory (i.e., an individual's sense of empowerment) has eclipsed its collective and action-oriented counterparts, thus depoliticizing and eroding its promise as a pathway to social justice (Gutiérrez et al. 1995; Pease 2002; Riger 1993). There are several problems, in addition to those identified by Peterson (2010), with this personalized and depoliticized version of empowerment. As Rappaport (1987) argued, empowerment's multilevel systems perspective is what distinguishes it from person-centered approaches to building competence and strengths. When stripped of critical consciousness and social action to correct system injustices, empowerment is quickly distorted into a self-improvement discourse that instructs individuals: to identify themselves, rather than surrounding social conditions, as the problem to be fixed (Pease 2002); and to compete against others rather than join with them (Riger 1993). Related to the first point, Gutiérrez (1994) distinguished coping from empowerment by noting that the former places the burden on individuals to endure, if not achieve, in spite of flaws, deficits, and biases in the social environment. While coping models strive to strengthen individuals' abilities *to accommodate* the existing social environment, empowerment theory and practice in their fully realized states (i.e., incorporating intrapersonal, interpersonal, and behavioral domains) aim *to transform* the social environment to meet the needs, uphold the rights, and enable the well-being of those living within it.

Such an ambitious agenda requires a broad, integrated, and intersectional view of social problems in order to be meaningful and effective. The integrative perspective of women's health and human rights championed by Petchesky (2000), for example, reckons with how material, social, economic, and political circumstances intersect to shape individual behavior and choices. Mohanty (2003) drew on her own scholarship as well as the activism of leaders such as Vandana Shiva to argue for a unified agenda for women's rights, environmentalism, anti-imperialism, and economic justice. These comprehensive visions of empowerment resist the oversimplification, decontextualization, and partition of social problems.

I offer this reminder of empowerment's original tenets not only as a warning about how far empowerment theory and practice have drifted from their mooring in social justice, but also because I believe returning to all of the core components of empowerment—including self-efficacy, but also joining with others in critical analysis and action—can help inform, clarify, and revitalize efforts to support young women's well-being (sexual and otherwise). In the next section, I make explicit some of the ways in which empowerment tenets are already implicitly embedded in recommended practice with young women and provide examples of how this work might be enriched and expanded.

Joining with Similar Others

As described in the previous overview, empowerment is not forged in solitude; the feelings of personal confidence and competence that undergird self-efficacy are fueled by the support and solidarity gleaned in relationships with others. But these are not relationships predicated on unanimity or homogeneity. To the contrary, diversity of experiences, views, and objectives are essential to provocative and ultimately productive collaboration. This resonates with Fine's (1988) call for "safe spaces" (p. 36) in which young women could feel free to disclose and discuss issues of sexuality. In revisiting Fine's recommendation, Harris (2005) carefully reiterated that safe should not be equated with sanitized or innocuous; to the contrary, establishing a safe space means fostering a culture in which group members feel safe first to admit and then to explore the confusion they may feel, the contradictory opinions among them, and the complexity of the issues they face. Importantly, the objective of these efforts is not to arrive at a single right answer (or perhaps any answer) or to establish some litmus test for who qualifies as

being critically conscious (and who remains woefully falsely conscious). In past work, colleagues and I explored how such a distortion of empowerment principles to include evaluative, normative benchmarks can result in the censorship and regulation of girls' voices and sexuality (Bay-Cheng and Lewis 2006; Bay-Cheng et al. 2006). In contrast, safe spaces (i.e., joining with others, in the language of empowerment theory) could allow for the critical analysis that Lamb (2010b) rightly recommends without the judgment about which Peterson (2010) justifiably worries.

Colleagues and I (Bay-Cheng et al. in press) recently drew on Fine's notion of safe spaces to suggest a reorientation to the roles and responsibilities of adults in fostering girls' sexual well-being. We based our recommendations on focus group interviews with young women who expressed—both implicitly and explicitly—an interest in thinking and talking about sexual feelings, behaviors, decisions, relationships, and dilemmas. Rather than simply receive information, participants wished for opportunities to participate in candid discussion. The safe spaces that Fine envisioned as well as the "relational hardiness zones" recommended by Debold and colleagues (Debold et al. 1999, p. 192) echo youth empowerment programs that view young people not as recipients of needed services but as partners in a collective effort (Checkoway et al. 2003; Watts and Flanagan 2007). Lamb (2010b) also made a case for candid, cross-generation conversations in which adult women "join them [adolescent girls] in conversation and have faith in their ability to critique themselves as well as the culture around them" (p. 316). In order to be successful and trusted allies, adult women must learn how to use their life experiences in ways that do not trivialize those of girls. An important step in this direction would be for adult women to admit their own periodic confusion and areas of ambivalence regarding sexuality. As Lamb and Peterson (2011) smartly point out at different points: adult women must give up the condescending pretense that we have all aged out of sexual insecurities, uncertainties, and lapses in judgment.

Safe spaces comprised of girls and women of various ages discussing sexuality and engaging in actions to promote sexual well-being might be an especially important antidote to the within-gender alienation and competition that girls and women are often socialized into as well as adultist bias and age-based barriers to collaboration. Eventually and at times such conversations might also include boys and men. These are not neat and tidy exercises; there are no right answers and participants will not—should not—speak with one voice. The messiness and ambiguity are, in many ways, the point. They represent a refusal of both the one-dimensional gendered sexual roles offered to girls and women (The Slut, The Prude, The Tease, The Alpha Girl, The Good Girl) and the segregation of sexuality from the contexts—personal, relational, social, political, material—in which it is embedded.

Keeping Sexuality in Context

In her overview of empowerment theory, Peterson (2010) included many of the complaints that have been lodged against it. In particular, Peterson noted Riger's (1993) incisive critique that empowerment practice is typically concentrated only on self-interested personal advancement and the development of a subjective sense of self-efficacy, to the exclusion of building solidarity with others and garnering actual influence and resources. Peterson wrote:

> This idea [of striving to gain power and resources] makes sense in the context of community psychology in which resources such as school funding, representation in government, and availability of community property are measurable and quantifiable. It may make less sense when we are discussing sexual empowerment, as it would seem nearly impossible to objectively assess how sexual "resources" are distributed with a society or even within an individual sexual relationship. (p. 308)

Lamb (2010b) countered this by citing Fine and McClelland's (2007) analysis of how public policies curtail adolescent girls' access to sexual knowledge and services and consequently undermine their sexual health. And in their joint work, Lamb and Peterson (2011) explore the case of a 13 year old whose subjective sense of empowerment—or at least, of self-efficacy—might be hampered by circumstances such as being coerced by a partner. These examples make clear the feasibility and necessity of critically evaluating the distribution of sexual resources and sexual power. Such analyses could be strengthened even further by the adoption of a broader, more integrative view of empowerment and of sexuality. For instance, *sexual* resources are not the only ones that bear on sexual life and relationships (of girls, women, or anyone). And in the case of the 13 year old who feels empowered but is coerced, the list of impediments to sexual agency ought to be expanded to include contextual factors beyond the relationship dyad, such as: a young woman's home environment; her material circumstances; her academic and professional opportunities and prospects; and the forms of structural bias that oppose her. Lamb and Peterson point out that notions of sexuality as socially constructed (e.g., DeLamater and Hyde 1998; Tiefer 2004) have gained considerable traction; however, it remains rare for sexuality to be socially contextualized. In many regards, this reflects the predominant focus on girls

with relative race- and class-based privilege that Lamb (2010a) cited as characterizing much of the field. Beyond sexual desires and interests and in addition to variations in gender and sexual norms at intersections of identity, we must also consider how non-sexual factors—such as social policies, material resources, and social capital—affect girls' sexual choices, including whether they have any to make.

In trying to make the case for why women's sexuality deserves a place on a social justice agenda, I have argued that for women without independent, direct access to sufficient resources, sexuality becomes a means of accessing them (Bay-Cheng 2010; arguably, trading in on one's (hetero)sex appeal is common even among women with plenty of resources). Inadequate or unequal resources also reduce women's leverage in negotiations with a sexual partner on whom she may depend for necessities like money, food, housing, or even transportation to a job (Baumeister and Vohs 2004; Muehlenhard and Kimes 1999). The economic disadvantage facing most American women compared to men in terms of wage parity and the ongoing feminization of poverty (especially among women of color) is compounded for young women who, as a function of their age, are practically barred from financial independence. This leaves them with little recourse other than sexual and romantic relationships if, for example, they feel compelled to leave their family home (e.g., in cases of violence or discord). As Fine and McClelland (2006) argued while situating the sexual health of youth in the context of surrounding social policies and material conditions, "Private acts are never wholly private; intimate choices are always profoundly social" (p. 304)

Inadequate social and material resources can also amplify the consequences of even a single misstep. Adolescent development in general, and sexual development in particular, necessarily involve some degree of experimentation and learning through trial-and-error (Fortenberry 2003; Steinberg 2007). Yet identical behaviors—however reckless and ill-informed—by young women at different social locations will have drastically different reverberations through their lives depending on whether they have access to supportive and knowledgeable adults, affordable and high-quality health care, and systems of care that respect their dignity and privacy.

An Example

I recently concluded a small study of the sexual histories of nine adolescent girls in the foster care system (Bay-Cheng and Fava 2011). All of them had extensive histories of trauma and neglect and came from impoverished—in many ways—families and communities. We interviewed the participants in order to learn about the meaning and place of sexuality in their lives. Although we asked about their consensual experiences and relationships, what we heard were repeated narratives of how their demonstrations of agency were thwarted: participants described being assertive, being vocal, being resourceful and creative negotiators, all in their attempts to avoid sexual interactions that they did not want (for various reasons) and to pursue other behaviors that they did want (or at least, did not *not* want). But despite their efforts and apparent individual agency, all but one of the participants' stories ended with them being coerced, deceived, violated, and/or shamed. Their narratives expose the damage done by thinking about empowerment only in terms of the individual. Without meaning to oversimplify their experiences and situations, it was not a lack of agency—sexual or otherwise—that was their downfall: it was that their agency was not enough to trump their lack of leverage with male (often older) partners, their depleted social and familial networks (leaving them with few models, sounding boards, and supports), and the inaccessibility of resources (information, services, and even simply money for bus fare home).

There are countless programs designed to shield young women from sexual harm by boosting their agency and equipping them with skills to say what they want and what they do not want. Such programs presuppose that girls know what they want and that this is a singular thing, a notion that is clearly disputable (Lamb and Peterson 2011; Muehlenhard and Peterson 2005). But they also operate from the implicit assumption that what puts girls at risk is their own inability or deficiency and that being assertive is sufficient to protect oneself. An adolescent interviewee from the focus group study referred to earlier bluntly rebuffed such a notion: "I mean, if that were the case, that a guy would believe 'no' then there wouldn't be those rapes that you hear about. There wouldn't be all that stuff. Obviously 'no' doesn't mean 'no' to guys." (p. 1183, Bay-Cheng et al. 2010). Girls and women do speak up for their sexual interests and should be encouraged to do so. But what they also need is the material and social capital to back up their words and to compel others to listen. There is a role here for adults to play, too, as allies of young women in pursuing a full-fledged movement toward sexual empowerment: one that grows out of collaborative analysis and action to redress the range of inequalities that impede young women's agency and well-being (both sexual and otherwise); and one that reaps both individual and collective benefits.

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