

Reinventing the Squeal – looking for a sexual (r)evolution in New Zealand

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Introduction

The following is a brief outline and discussion of the initial stages of my PhD research looking at the sexual culture of Generation Y (GenY) women born in the 1980s or 90s, in New Zealand. This article will outline how I came to this topic, some aspects of the approach and methods, and a brief indication of initial findings.

Choosing a topic

In deciding upon a PhD research topic I wanted to find something that I could engage with on a personal level, as well as contribute meaningfully to contemporary debates around issues that directly affect women. Despite post-feminist media hype about the death of feminism, or at least its redundancy, there are a plethora of issues on which I could have settled with respect to valuable research. What was significant in my choice however was a number of memorable experiences gained whilst travelling and living overseas.

Of particular note was the degree of female sexual tourism I observed around the Mediterranean, exemplified by a pertinent postcard: a cartoon of a naked young woman dropping by (Union Jack) parachute into a sea of erect penises. Discussing this with an English female travel companion, she suggested I read Avril Levy's book *Female Chauvinist Pigs* (2005).

Like me, Levy is Generation X (GenX), born in the 1960s or 70s, and had grown up in the aftermath of Feminism's Second Wave, and then the backlash. Levy spent time with the *Girls Gone Wild* (GGW) film crew who travel around the United States filming young women, often of college age and usually on spring break, engaging in sexual behaviour for the promise of GGW branded merchandise¹. Levy commented on the young women who flashed their breasts and butts for t-shirts, stripped in front of screaming crowds of men for branded caps, and masturbated or performed oral sex on their female companions, all on camera (Levy, 2004), without care for privacy (they sign a waiver to release images of their actions) or repercussions. She talks about empowerment and wet t-shirt competitions, that "bawdy" means "liberated" and that "Bimbos are back." (ibid) Levy expresses her confusion – that this behaviour challenges her feminist sensibilities and appears to be a regressive step from where 'our' feminist mothers 'liberated' us, yet at the same time she wonders if she is being prudish, if this really isn't as much fun as it seems. "It's worth asking ourselves if this bawdy world of boobs and gams we have resurrected reflects how far we've come, or how far we've left to go." (2005, p. 5)

After reading Levy's book I had similar questions, and after watching a spectrum of the *Girls Gone Wild* DVD offerings, was no closer to an answer². Emily McGuire in her book *Princesses and Pornstars* asked the question about this kind of behaviour: "if all this is so empowering, why the hell aren't men doing it?" (2008, p. 5). Although a simple answer to this

question might be *they don't have to*, it offers very little save to possibly exemplify the still live presence of the Sexual Double Standard (SDS), whereby *he* does X and is a *stud* and *she* does X and is a *slut/skank/slapper* or other derogatory term. And so I settled on my PhD topic – to find some answers to the question “is all this ‘sexy stuff’ as empowering as it is portrayed to be”?

Methodological approach

Undertaking a study into the area of female sexual autonomy and agency presents a number of issues, not the least of which is deciding the approach. From the literature I have reviewed thus far, the majority of research conducted in this area comes from a psychological or evolutionary biological perspective. Although Third Wave feminist texts and articles/stories present examples of sexually agentic women, I have yet to come across a study that takes those voices that step beyond anecdotal/biographical. Although there is great value in all of the above research/mediums, I wanted to capture the voices of young women themselves, talking about their lived experiences en masse, to paint a picture of the sexual terrain they are navigating, and to see how and why they were responding as they were – causing traffic accidents in Invercargill, breasts bare for all to see (Leask, 2009).

Feminist research methodological perspectives seem appropriate for this kind of research. Such perspectives require the recognition of individual positionality and the validity incumbent therein, the recognition and reduction of power dynamics within the research context, researcher reflexivity, collegial research processes, and research designs and/or outcomes that benefit women. The suitability of these perspectives to the attempt to catch women's voices and their lived experiences, and to do so within a context of minimised power differentials and socially-derived judgemental constraints, determined my choice. The additional benefit of such a methodological stance is that it is well suited to research topics that are deemed sensitive, because it requires that the research design be considerate of the participant as a holistic socially-embedded individual, rather than a vessel from which to extract data without consideration of the impacts of such an ‘extraction’.

The sample group

As a GenX woman, I have noticed a significant change in the sexual politics of the time. My original thesis title ‘The Naughty Noughties’ reflected what I consider to be a major shift in the presentation of sex and sexuality since the turn of the century. Much of the behaviour under examination in this study is enacted by GenY women, who have been socialised in a more sexualised social environment compared to earlier generations. They were also chosen because they fall within Jeffrey Arnett Jensen's category ‘emerging adults’, primarily young people aged 18-25 (see 2004, 2006a; 2006b; 2007 for examples). Arnett notes that individuals in this age group are less encumbered with responsibility and therefore have fewer social restrictions, enabling them to engage in more exploratory behaviour.

The research design

The initial research design for this project was a mixed-method approach, devised to provide a wide variety of forums through which to hear women's voices. It was anticipated that some young women may be comfortable speaking through an anonymous survey, so one was designed. Others would want to say more, and be interviewed, but were too shy to meet me face-to-face, so online chats were incorporated. Others would want personal contact, so face-to-face interviews were added. Focus groups were included to capture the community voice and group

dynamic that can sometimes allow those with no voice to find one. And an online discussion forum was included, to capture the voice for those who were reluctant to participate in person.

This was a substantial design, based in part on the preconception that as talking about sex is deemed sensitive, recruitment would be challenging. The launching of the anonymous online survey quickly challenged that perspective.

The survey was designed to capture a variety of data: young women's definitions of hooking up, casual sex, 'real' sex; their participation in and observation of public displays of sexuality, and their opinions of that behaviour; their perception of the SDS; and how they felt about their own sex lives. Considering the content, and the nature of the study in general, my hopes were to accrue around 100 responses over a four to six month period. Flyers were distributed in the women's toilets (private environments where the choice to participate would be unobserved) and public notice boards of Victoria University of Wellington and Auckland University campuses in time for the start of the first trimester of 2010. Within approximately the first three weeks of the trimester the survey received over 150 starts, and by the time I closed it down one week later (after an initial analysis to determine saturation) 251 individuals had logged on.

Along with the unexpected response to the survey I also received 57 contact emails from young women who wanted to continue on with the next level of participation. Some commented that the project looked like "fun", others that "it was interesting" and others that it was research that needed to be done. What became clear to me very quickly during this process was that my ideas around the sensitive nature of the project were being challenged, and that as a result I would need to rethink my approach so as not to close off avenues of dialogue because as a researcher I was being overly sensitive in a way that was not appropriate for the research group.

This challenge to the notion of sensitivity around sex and sexuality was also a surprise to my supervisors, and was in strong contrast to the expectations of the ethics committee. It was the first indication that the socio-sexual terrain young women were traversing had had some effect on them in terms of sexual agency – although some young women indicated that it was still taboo for them to talk about sex, they were determined to do so anyway. Survey responses appeared frank and honest when discussing opinions around their own sexual activities, impressions and satisfactions. Research on anonymous and online data collection methods indicate that these kinds of methods often allow respondents to voice their opinions in ways they may be less likely to do in person, including deeper disclosure and more honest expression (Shields, 2003, pp. 400-404), and that anonymous platforms have a tendency to capture those that would not otherwise participate more openly (Jansen & Rae Davis, 1998, p. 291). The quality of responses appears to confirm these findings.

The pertinent question in respect of this influx of voices is whether or not the medium is wholly responsible for the unexpected degree of participation in what is deemed a sensitive research topic. When canvassing respondents on further participation, the number of young women who signalled that they would participate in a number of methods, including in-person interviews and focus groups, was significant. Although it is impossible to draw any conclusions from this, as the research group is a self-selecting population, it is interesting nonetheless to speculate. At this point however, on the strength of the response rate to the anonymous survey, it seems clear to me that young women are eager to participate in conversations about sex and sexuality that concern them directly, and address them as agentic individuals, rather than *Cosmopolitan*-consumers of sexuality.

Initial findings

In terms of analytical frameworks, two Third Wave feminist themes³ have come through in the initial analysis of the survey: the primacy of choice over judgement, and the acceptance of the self as internally contradictory. Many young women expressed their disapproval over a variety of behaviours enacted by others which they had enacted themselves, while expressing their desire not only to not judge others but not be judged themselves. The dissonance in opinions and positions may be indicative of lived tensions for young women – their desire to express themselves sexually without judgement or encumbrance, whilst at the same time recognising the force of the SDS and social censoring of women's erotic voice/agency in general. Further phases of the study are designed to unpack these issues and examine them more closely to see if this is indeed the case.

One other theme worth mentioning at this early stage is the idea of a rite of passage with respect to sexual activity and behaviour. Western society is thick with metaphors of boys/men discovering their sexual selves ("sowing their wild oats" for example) and it would be a simple step to speculate that young women are following a similar script in terms of self-discovery. Many young women noted that the sexual behaviour they enacted in their younger years was part of their growth experience, but that as older women they would no longer engage in them. Although this appears on the surface to track favourably with a lessening affect of the SDS in terms of gender-blind acceptance of sexual self-discovery, the sexual arena for women may be more limiting. Judgement on behaviour may still curtail sexual expression in women in ways men still do not experience. Kathleen A Bogle's (2008) study of American university campus culture indicates that this may be the case, and statements made by some survey respondents agree with Bogle's position. As the study progresses this avenue will be investigated further.

Next steps

Although the research is at an early stage themes coming from initial analyses are promising with respect to capturing not only women's voices, but also prominent organising concepts implicit in women's negotiation of their sexual environment. At present I am undertaking a series of interviews, both online via web-based chat platforms, and in person, to expand upon ideas and concepts yielded by the survey in order to develop the depth of conceptual analysis and to generate broader descriptions of lived experience.

It is hoped that as research progresses not only will I as a researcher gain a better understanding of young New Zealand women's sexual development from their own perspective, but that a clear image of paths to agency and autonomy become evident, for the benefit not only of the reader, but also the young women involved in the study.

Notes

- 1 GGW began in 1998 by Joe Francis, who videoed young women on campus flashing and engaging in sexual behaviour. It became popular quickly, spawning a catalogue of dozens of DVD titles, ranging from M-rated to soft-core porn content. Nationally focused websites illustrate the international popularity and success of the brand and the concept – a web-search will reveal a New Zealand GGW site.
- 2 GGW offer a string of contradictory imagery with regards to female autonomy and enjoyment in their DVDs. Although many images appear rambunctious and rebellious, fun-loving and spontaneous, others show images of performance anxiety, concern and genuine discomfort.
- 3 Although the nature of Third Wave feminism is highly contested, a number of themes are visible from a canvassing of the literature, and although these are in no way definitive, they are consistent enough for me to deem them as suitable for analysis.

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