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DISMANTLING DOMINANT SEXUAL VIOLENCE RESEARCH WITHOUT USING THE MASTER'S TOOLS.

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Abstract

In this brief paper we argue that currently dominant 'mainstream' sexual violence research reproduces heterosexism and cisgenderism and 'others' community members of diverse sexual and gendered identities by positioning them as exotic. We suggest that the hegemonic research apparatus, manifested through discourses, definitions, practices, methodologies, methods, technical procedures, educational practices and debate in this area, is problematically flawed. We argue that through interconnected processes of 'psychologisation'; the construction of the psychological subject, pathologising explanations and disconnection of power-knowledge from violence, the theoretical resources for working progressively within communities to address sexual violence are severely compromised.

Key words: heterosexism, cisgenderism, sexual violence, psychologisation.

Introduction

This paper is concerned with the way in which a 'mainstream' version of sexual violence research has been constructed and maintained which serves the interests of heterosexism and cisgenderism. This dominant version of research excludes and makes exotic community members of diverse sexual and gendered identities constituting them as 'other'. Contemporary research in this area has been depoliticised by not being framed within a political struggle, lacks theoretical resources for critique and fails to engage with power, privileges, subjectivity and intersections between gender and sexual identities. This shift is underpinned by processes of 'psychologisation' which construct individuals as self-managing units embodying measurable characteristics, attributes, attitudes and behaviours (Parker, 2007; Rose, 1999). More specifically the construction of the psychological subject, the presence of pathologising explanations and the disconnection of power-knowledge from violence depletes theoretical resources for tackling sexual violence. Through these shifts and turns the construction of mainstream sexual violence research is left unchallenged, a problematic 'normal' / 'queer' binary inscribed and heterosexist privilege left intact.

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This paper is written from a post-structural feminist and community critical psychology standpoint and draws upon our experiences in attending to and critiquing literature whilst working with community experts to address sexual violence and gendered oppression in Higher Education. By a 'post-structural feminist standpoint' we mean a standpoint within which gender is considered as performativity (Butler, 1991); gendered exploitation considered to be constituted through continuing systematic and unreciprocated transfer of power from subjugated groups to dominant groups (Young, 1988), a manifestation of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1998); gendered violence considered as a last resort exercised in the face of resistance to patriarchal oppression (Millet, 2005); and gendered subjectification considered a means of achieving governmentality (Foucault, 1977) i.e. gendered transformation of subjectivity reconstituting the subject as heteronormatively self-governing in line with the interests of the status quo.

By a 'community critical psychology standpoint' we mean a standpoint from which we seek to enact a version of critical psychology with a community praxis, a standpoint from which we seek to: understand and contest both how societal constructions (such as heterosexist patriarchy) immiserate, destroy and obliterate; understand and challenge oppressive forms of psychology; de-construct, de-legitimise and de-ideologise the socio-political processes through which 'psy' claims are given the status of 'knowledge' or 'truth'; render transparent and accountable the subjective, material, institutional, societal, political and ideological 'psy' interests served by what is, and what is not, thought, said and done by all relevant parties; engage in praxis (progressive social action interconnected to and simultaneous with emancipatory power-knowledge construction and legitimation and profound radical reflexivity); and facilitate emancipatory process and outcome through progressive redistribution of social power.

We reject the modernist assumption that knowledge is fundamentally a representation of 'what is the case' in the 'real world', arrived at through mainstream research legitimated through reference to rationality and empiricism. Rather we operate on the post-modern assumption there are a variety of 'reality-versions', each of which promotes the interests of some as opposed to other interest groups and that each is socially manufactured through legitimation practices into 'knowledges' . . . the dominant version of 'knowledge' generally being the 'reality-version' that serves the interests of the most powerful groups. From this standpoint, the notion – deployed through the call for papers to which this paper is a response – of “accessing queer data in a multi-disciplinary world” is problematic. Our aim is not to “access data” but rather to uncover and contest processes through which certain problematic claims are positioned as warranted by “data” and thus 'truthed' into problematic 'knowledges' about sexual violence. From our post-structural feminist and community critical psychology standpoints we thus seek to engage critically with research as a set of social practices, to grapple with power issues in process and outcome, to contest the depowerment of people implicated and the collusion of social scientists in its construction and maintenance and to go beyond documenting distress associated with or caused by societal oppression to prevent or reduce it.

Depoliticisation

Second wave feminist theoretical resources

During second wave feminism, considerable re-conceptualisation of violence towards women occurred. From one position it was argued that violence was a form of social control (Brownmillar, 1975), that male sexuality was patriarchally structured and thus inherently violent (Mackinnon, 1987), that the institution of compulsory heterosexuality forced heterosexuality upon women. The reconceptualisation marginalised a range of women's sexualities e.g. women in lesbian relationships who identified with 'butch' identities and practiced S&M regarding them as reproducing gendered oppression (Levy, 2005). An alternative position often described as 'pro-sex feminism' advocated that sexual liberation was concerned with the ways in which women's sexual subjectivities were being governed (Califia, 2003; Rubin, 1992, 1998). The former position (Brownmillar, 1975; Mackinnon 1987) has been critiqued as proposing an essentialised feminine/masculine dichotomy in which women's agency which was not fully realised. In the emergence of third wave feminism, and post-structural thinking new theoretical resources have been developed for thinking about sexual violence which re-theorise power as fluid, exercised and embedded in discourse and practice (Foucault, 1977), gender and sexuality, as socially constructed binaries, as intersecting and as performed (Butler, 1991) and violence as naturalised and seamlessly perpetuated (Bourdieu, 1998).

Contemporary research

The focus of inquiry in what is constructed as the 'mainstream' of sexual violence prevention research is for the most part devoid of discussion of diverse identities. Ahrens, Dean, Rozee & McKenzie, (2008) in their chapter: '*Understanding and Preventing Rape*' comprehensively summarise the current rape prevention and intervention literature and research. They identify five areas which rape avoidance would benefit from an increased focus upon: risk reduction; identifying and repelling sexually aggressive men; predicting behaviours of aggressive men; predators' selection and approaches toward potential victims who 'present themselves as vulnerable'; and known rape tactics which may alert women to danger. Overall in these five areas a dichotomy is constructed of potential assailants and potential victims, where men occupy the former category and women the latter, framing a notion of heterosexual violence. The authors go on to suggest a further addition to these five areas: self-defence training. The following two excerpts of text are given to support the promotion of self defence training: "The problem is that most women have been taught that to physically resist a rapist is both futile and foolish (Rozee, 2003). One common myth is that because of men's greater size and strength, it is unlikely that a women can successfully defend herself" (Ahrens et al., 2008, p537) and "A recent multivariate analysis found that women with self-defence, compared to women without such training, were more likely to say that fighting back stopped the offender or made him less aggressive (Brecklin & Ullman, 2005)" (Ahrens et al., 2008, p.538). These excerpts reinforce the aforementioned concerns but more broadly speaking reviews or meta-analyses in this area commonly position heterosexual violence as the norm or mainstream.

Perhaps more problematically it is common in research for heterosexist assumptions to be so entrenched, that authors of research reports rarely explicitly state that their focus is upon heterosexual violence and sexual assault. For example, research which accepts that many forms of sexual violence may occur in romantic or intimate relationships and evaluates educational interventions concerned with femme or female identifying people to protect themselves from male perpetrators but only suggests this is the case in concluding remarks (Gidycz, Rich, Orchowski, King & Miller, 2006). Heterosexist assumptions are manifest in others ways

such as research which is concerned with correlations between femme or female identifying women's sexual activity and risk of violence, in which information is required about previous sexual encounters with men (Testa & Derman, 1999).

The mainstream literature commonly incorporates cisgender assumptions about what constitutes sexual violence towards femme identifying people. For example Flack et al., (2007) in their research adopted a definition and of unwanted sexual intercourse for femme or female identifying participants as "Thus, in addition to unwanted sexual intercourse involving vaginal, anal, or genital-oral contact, fondling (non-penetrating) behavior is also included under this rubric" (p.140). They hypothesize on the basis of previous literature "Thus, women were expected to report more experiences of unwanted intercourse (vaginal, anal, and oral) and unwanted fondling as compared with men" (Flack et al., 2007, p.142). In the discussion section of the paper the impact of sexual violence and potential for PTSD is considered in saying: "Whether such experiences are or become sufficiently severe to warrant the identification of PTSD symptoms probably depends on a combination of factors, including the individual's previous history of stressful events, the degree of violation (e.g., unwanted fondling versus unwanted vaginal intercourse), and the availability of adequate social support" (Flack et al., 2007, p155). These excerpts explicitly refer to the violation of what is constructed as 'female' genitalia and required participants to participate based upon these assumptions.

In providing sexual assault prevention education, the literature often discusses the potential benefits of this education for 'single-sex' or 'mixed-sex' groups (Banyard, Moynihan & Plante, 2007; Fabiano, Perkins, Berkowitz, Linkenbach & Stark, 2003; Gidycz et al., 2006). Although increasingly in this research potential recipients of the educational preventions are categorized as single-gender or mixed gender-groups, however like the construct of sex there this is again dichotomous, for example single gender refers to a group constituted of solely 'women' or 'men' and a mixed gender group refers 'women' and 'men' (Anderson & Whiston, 2005; Bradley, Yeater & O'Donohue, 2009; Howard, Griffin & Boekeloo, 2008). These examples are not given to criticise individual researchers but to indicate underlying assumptions which shape definitions, methods, educational practices and debate in this area.

Whilst in the Australian context, there has been an increased focus upon researching violence in the LGBT community (Farrell & Cerise, ACON & the Same Sex Domestic Violence Working Group, 2006; Hillier, Turner & Mitchell, 2005;) and violence against members of the trans community (Couch et al., 2007; Cummings, 2005; Moran & Sharpe, 2004), mainstream research has remained oblivious and reluctant to engage with the whole host of forms of power and privileges ensure that sexuality is simultaneously invisible and governed (Carmody, 2003, 2006, Carmody & Carrington ,2000; Kitzinger & Frith, 1999; Tolman, 2002). The lack of engagement in addressing violence against members of the trans community is surprising given disturbingly high levels of violence over the course of trans, ISGD and gender diverse peoples lifetimes globally (Lombardi, Wilchins, Priesing & Malouf, 2001; Witten & Whittle, 2004) and in the Australian context (Couch et al., 2007; Moran & Sharpe, 2004) . Moreover it is argued that often transphobic violence is ignored, or made invisible in judicial systems, which serves to silently sanction such actions (Witten & Whittle, 2004). Whilst some of the aforementioned research operates from a traditional frame of reference, in terms of what constitutes violence, (interpersonal and physically manifested violence), research carried out by Couch et al., (2007) found

participants reported modifying their behaviours and gendered presentation in private/ public and or going part-time / full- time in order to 'pass' as a particular gender category and avoid derogatory treatments. This research begins to engage with the ways in which cisprivilege is bound up with perpetuating violence (Please see the Cisgender Privilege Checklist, T-Vox, 2007). In this sense the invisibility of inclusion and the othering of exclusion is another manifestation of implicit heteronormativity in the domain of psychological research.

Psychologisation

This process of depoliticisation serves heterosexist interests and is accomplished through the psychologisation of the research domain. Nikolas Rose (1999) regards the domain of psychology as a constituted 'psy-complex'; ("the heterogeneous knowledges, forms of authority and practical techniques that constitute psychological expertise"), (Rose, 1999, p. vii). In relation to sexual violence, accounts of expert knowledge have been crucial in shaping and restricting our subjectivities and the resources available to us for understanding our ways of being. The key features of a process of psychologisation which we will examine here are the construction of the psychological subject, the pathology line and the disconnection of violence from power-knowledge.

The Psychological Subject

Psychologisation is invested in the construction of the 'individual' as a self managing unit, the individual as an embodiment of characteristics, attributes, attitude and behaviours, some interconnections of which are positioned as 'normal' and legitimated as 'real' through psychological research (Parker, 2007). Socially constructed, dominant norms of sexual and gendered identities are positioned as 'natural', whilst identities which deviate from the norm become othered. In considering some of the aforementioned research, we have seen the ways in which there is little room for diverse and shifting sexual and gendered identities, which very much adheres to the notion of the unitary subject. The construction of such a subject is a necessary precondition for research to construct through examination 'external' effects upon this subject. For instance measurements of attitudes before and after an educational intervention may position answers given to pre-set questionnaires as objectively accessing the internal state of the subject, and thus 'truthing' them as 'reliable' and 'valid' measurements relating to the effectiveness of the intervention.

This is not to say that the psychological subject is considered without agency in this research, in fact there is a whole host of ways in which interventions encourage and define appropriate forms of agency in relation to resisting sexual violence. Popular intervention strategies include; teaching women self defence in order to physically resist sexual violence (Gidycz, et al., 2006; Gidycz et al., 2001, Rozee & Koss, 2001,) managing and minimising women's 'at risk' behaviour such as alcohol consumption, attitudes towards sexual activity and establishing boundaries in their peer group (Gross, Winslett, Roberts & Gohn, 2006) and participation in a 'hooking up culture' (Flack et al., 2007). The focus here is on requiring people to change and act, a reconstruction of agency through achieving governmentality through how agency is constituted and re constituted. Whilst many of these ideas may link in with images of the 'be a good girl' cliché, the notion of the subject as a self managing unit is at the heart of this. As noted elsewhere (Carmody, 2006; Kitzinger & Frith,

1999), there are political implications of asking people to take responsibility for managing their risk of violence from others. For example Kitzinger & Frith (1999) used conversational analysis to develop a feminist perspective on sexual refusal, and programs which strongly advocate 'Just say no'. Some research has indicated that there is a miscommunication, and that femme identifying people's lack of assertiveness and clarity in declining sex as well as men's interpretation are contributing factors to sexual violence. Kitzinger & Frith (1999) are quick to cite the work of Ehrlich (1998) which demonstrates the way in which theories of miscommunication are useful as a resource for defendants in sexual assault tribunals. Kitzinger & Frith (1999) provide a critique of the way in which femme identifying people are made responsible for the way in which others interpret them.

Disconnecting violence from power through pathologising explanations

Within the domain of psychology there is an ever present line of pathology which offers a set of explanations for behaviours and conditions which are constructed as abnormal. As we are all too aware these classifications may be oppressive in relation to diverse sexual and gender identities. Recently there were renewed calls for the DSM 5 to include a disorder 'Paraphilic Coercive Disorder' concerned with people who may be distressed with urges to force sex upon others (Sexual and Gender Identity Disorders Work Group, A.P.A., 2010). Our concern is that such a diagnosis could function as a medical defence for people who use violence.

If we do not problematise preconceived notions of violence, as socially constructed and as serving particular interests, we look over or dismiss problems. We must interrogate how our own practices may in actuality be complicit with heterosexism and gendered power, yet instead of engaging in new ways of thinking, mainstream research positions the key task as narrowing, categorising and defining violence in more manageable ways. Many scholars have challenged the traditional conceptions of what constitutes violence (Bourdieu, 1998; Millet, 2005; Muehlenhard & Kimes, 1999). Kate Millet writes "When a system of power is thoroughly in command, it has scarcely need to speak itself aloud" (p.55). In this statement the unchallenged forms of violence which appear natural to the status quo in the particular socio-political context may remain unproblematized. There is a need to understand how power is exercised in relation to violence, whether it is through privileges, authorities or silencing mechanisms and sexual violence research should be at the helm of this.

Conclusion

From the standpoint of this paper, the question has not been whether depowerment and oppression constituting heterosexist privilege characterise all groups, organisations institutions and dominant research paradigms in contemporary Western societies. Rather, the question has been: through which subtle and seamless interconnections of knowledges, practices, procedures, discourses etc. gendered depowerment and the oppressive rendering of people governable through processes of subjectification are achieved in particular domains. In this paper we have addressed that question, specifically, in relation to the domain of dominant sexual violence research. Note that from our standpoint the notions of 'agency / structure', particularly in the

form of the individual/ context binary, are superseded by the notion of the social constitution of the individual subject through inexorable forces of re-subjectification in the service of governmentality, as well as unrelenting resistance to those forces. Processes of depoliticisation and psychologisation discussed in this article are indicative of the ways in which power is inextricably bound with knowledge, and literature must be critiqued as manifesting dominant, problematic, knowledges. From our standpoint, radical reflexive engagement and de-ideologisation and resistance to ways research apparatuses construct and maintain problematic knowledges are essential.

Our title pays homage to the work of Audre Lorde and in particular her address, entitled “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” to the Second Sex Conference in New York in 1979 in which she asks “What does it mean when the tools of a racist patriarchy are used to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy? It means that only the most narrow perimeters (sic) of change are possible and allowable” (Lorde, 1984, 2007: 110-111). Likewise we are asking rhetorically what it means when the tools of heterosexist patriarchy are used within a ‘mainstream’ version of sexual violence research to examine the fruits of that same heterosexist patriarchy and answering that it means that only the narrowest parameters of change are possible and allowable

Authors’ Note

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