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

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Abstract

In this brief commentary 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, firstly, "psychologisation" (the construction of the psychological subject); secondly, pathologising explanations; and thirdly, 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; feminism; 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 both excludes and makes exotic community members of diverse sexual and gendered identities, effectively constituting them as "other". Contemporary research in this area has been depoliticised: it is not 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 towards depoliticisation 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, psychologisation, in tandem with pathologising explanations and the disconnection of power-knowledge from violence, operates to deplete the theoretical resources for tackling sexual violence. Through these shifts and turns, the construction of mainstream sexual violence research is left unchallenged and a problematic "normal" / "queer" binary inscribed. Heterosexist privilege, therefore, is left intact.

This paper is written from a post-structural feminist and community critical psychology standpoint. It draws upon our experiences in working with community experts to address sexual violence and gendered oppression in higher education, and, alongside this, attending to and critiquing the literature. Firstly, by a "post-structural feminist standpoint" we mean a standpoint within which gender is considered as performativity (Butler, 1990). From this, we consider gendered exploitation to be constituted through continuing systematic and unreciprocated transfer of power from subjugated groups to dominant groups (Young, 1988) — that is, a manifestation of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1998). By extrapolation, gendered violence can be seen as a last resort exercised in the face of resistance to patriarchal oppression (Millet, 2005). If, as Foucault (1977) argues, gendered subjectification can become a means of achieving governmentality, this process involves gendered transformation of subjectivity, reconstituting the subject as heteronormatively self-governing in line with the interests of the status quo.

Secondly, by a "community critical psychology standpoint" we mean a standpoint from which we seek to enact a version of critical psychology with community praxis. From this standpoint we seek to do three things: firstly, to understand and contest how societal constructions (such as heterosexist patriarchy) immiserate, destroy and obliterate; secondly, to understand and challenge oppressive forms of psychology; and thirdly to de-construct, delegitimise and de-ideologise the socio-political processes through which "psy" claims are given the status of "knowledge" or "truth". Alongside this, we also aim to examine points of change. Firstly, we aim to 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. We also engage in praxis — progressive social action alongside, and connected with, constructions of emancipatory power and knowledge, legitimation, and profound radical reflexivity. Finally, we explore how emancipatory processes and outcomes can be facilitated 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" — an assumption drawn from mainstream research and legitimated through reference to rationality and empiricism. Rather, we operate on the post-modern assumption that there are a variety of "realities", each of which promotes the interests of some (as opposed to other) interest groups, and that each "reality" is socially manufactured through legitimation practices into "knowledges". The dominant version of "knowledge" is, generally and understandably, the "reality" that serves the interests of the most powerful groups. From this standpoint, the notion of "accessing queer data in a multi-disciplinary world" — deployed through the call for papers to which this article is a response — is problematic. Given this position, our aim is not to "access data" but rather to uncover and contest processes through which certain problematic claims are constructed as

warranted by "data", and thus subsequently "truthed" into problematic "knowledges" (or "realities") about sexual violence. From our post-structural feminist and community critical psychology standpoints we seek to engage critically with research as a set of social practices and to grapple with power issues in process and outcome. We also aim to contest the disempowerment of people implicated in these processes, together with the collusion of social scientists in its construction and maintenance. Most importantly, we look to go beyond documenting the distress associated with or caused by societal oppression to prevent or reduce it.

Depoliticisation

Second-Wave Feminist Theoretical Resources

Second-wave feminism re-conceptualises the construction of violence towards women. From one position it was argued that violence was a form of social control (Brownmiller, 1975); that male sexuality was patriarchally structured and thus inherently violent (MacKinnon, 1987); and that the institution of compulsory heterosexuality forced heterosexuality upon women. Such reconceptualisations marginalised a range of women's sexualities: for example, women in lesbian relationships who identified with "butch" identities and practiced S&M were — by default — seen as reproducing gendered oppression (Levy, 2005). In contrast, 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 at least has been critiqued as proposing an essentialised feminine/masculine dichotomy in which women's agency has not been fully realised (Brownmiller, 1975; MacKinnon 1987). In terms of both positions, the emergence of third-wave feminism and post-structural thinking has seen new theoretical resources for framing 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, 1990); 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. For example, in their chapter titled 'Understanding and Preventing Rape', Ahrens, Dean, Rozee, and McKenzie (2008) "comprehensively" summarise the current rape prevention and intervention literature and research. In this chapter, they identify five areas in which rape avoidance would benefit from an increased focus: 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. In these five areas overall, a dichotomy is constructed of potential assailants and potential victims, where men occupy the former category and women the latter — which in itself frames 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: firstly, "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, p. 537), and secondly, "A recent multivariate analysis found that woman with self-defence [training], 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). While these excerpts reinforce our specific concerns about absence of diversity, more broadly speaking, they also reinforce the fact that reviews or meta-analyses in this area commonly position heterosexual violence as the norm or mainstream.

Perhaps more problematically, research in general commonly has heterosexist assumptions 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 occur in romantic or intimate relationships, and which evaluates educational interventions concerned with femme or female-identifying people to protect themselves from male perpetrators, only suggests this particular manifestation of sexual violence in concluding remarks (Gidycz, Rich, Orchowski, King, & Miller, 2006). Heterosexist assumptions are also manifest in other ways, such as in research concerned with correlations between femme or female-identifying women's sexual activity and risk of violence — which nevertheless requires information about previous sexual encounters with men (Testa & Derman, 1999).

In more general terms, mainstream literature commonly incorporates cisgender assumptions about what constitutes sexual violence towards femme-identifying people. For example, Flack et al. (2007) adopt a definition of unwanted sexual intercourse for femme or female-identifying participants which includes not only "unwanted sexual intercourse involving vaginal, anal, or genital-oral contact, but also fondling (non-penetrating) behaviour" (p. 140). They hypothesize on the basis of previous literature that "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 they consider the impact of sexual violence and potential for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD): "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., un-

wanted fondling versus unwanted vaginal intercourse), and the availability of adequate social support" (Flack et al., 2007, p. 155). Not only does this phrase appears to imply that "unwanted fondling" occurs on a continuum towards "vaginal intercourse", but these excerpts overall explicitly refer to the violation of what is constructed as "female" genitalia — and thus require participants to participate on the basis of these assumptions.

Similarly, in providing sexual assault prevention education, the literature often discusses the potential benefits of such education for "single-sex" or "mixed-sex" groups (Banyard, Moynihan & Plante, 2007; Fabiano, Perkins, Berkowitz, Linkenbach, & Stark, 2003; Gidycz et al., 2006). Although increasingly this research categorizes potential recipients of the educational preventions as single-gender or mixed gender-groups, like the construct of sex itself, this categorization is again dichotomous: for example, single gender refers to a group constituted (solely) of "women" or "men", while a mixed gender group refers to "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 rather to indicate underlying assumptions which in turn shape definitions, methods, educational practices and debate in this area.

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, however, has remained either oblivious or reluctant (or both) to engage with the host of forms of power and privileges which ensure that sexuality is simultaneously invisible and governed (Carmody, 2003, 2006; Carmody & Carrington, 2000; Kitzinger & Frith, 1999; Tolman, 2002). This 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, intersex, sex and/or gender diverse people's lifetimes both globally (Lombardi, Wilchins, Priesing, & Malouf, 2001; Witten & Whittle, 2004) and in the Australian context (Couch et al., 2007; Moran & Sharpe, 2004). It can be argued, moreover, that often transphobic violence is ignored, or made invisible in judicial systems, which in itself serves to silently sanction such actions (Witten & Whittle, 2004). Some of the aforementioned research operates from a traditional frame of reference in terms of what constitutes violence: that is, interpersonal and physically manifested violence. Research carried out by Couch et al. (2007), however, 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 thus avoid derogatory treatments. This particular research begins to engage with the ways in which cisprivilege is bound up with perpetuating violence (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

The process of depoliticisation which we outline above 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", or "the heterogeneous knowledges, forms of authority and practical techniques that constitute psychological expertise" (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. Here, we examine three key features of psychologisation: the construction of the psychological subject; the pathology "line"; and the disconnection of violence from power-knowledge.

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The Psychological Subject

Psychologisation is invested in the construction of the "individual" as a self-managing unit; as an embodiment of characteristics, attributes, attitude and behaviours. Some interconnections of these characteristics, attributes, attitudes, and behaviours are positioned as "normal" and legitimated as "real" through psychological research (Parker, 2007). Socially constructed, dominant norms of sexual and gendered identities are therefore positioned as "natural", whilst identities which deviate from the norm become "othered". In the aforementioned research we have already seen the ways in which there is little room for diverse and shifting sexual and gendered identities — which clearly 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 the answers given to pre-set questionnaires as objectively accessing the internal state of the subject — thus "truthing" them as "reliable" and "valid" measurements relating to the effectiveness of the intervention — but are they?

This is not to say that the psychological subject is considered without agency in this research: in fact, there are many 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., 2001, 2006; Rozee & Koss, 2001); managing and minimising women's "at risk" behaviour (such as alcohol consumption); changing attitudes towards sexual activity; establishing boundaries in their peer group (Gross, Winslett, Roberts, & Gohn, 2006); and examining 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 aimed at achieving personal governmentality through how agency is constituted and reconstituted. While 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 remains at the heart of them. 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 and Frith (1999) used conversational analysis to develop a feminist perspective on sexual refusal, while other programs strongly advocate a "Just Say No" approach. Some research has indicated that miscommunication operates when femme-identifying people demonstrate a lack of assertiveness and clarity in declining sex; this, as well as men's interpretations, can be contributing factors to sexual violence. Kitzinger and Frith (1999), for example, cite Ehrlich (1998), who demonstrates the way in which theories of miscommunication are useful as a resource for defendants in sexual assault tribunals. Kitzinger and Frith (1999) also 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 constructed as "abnormal". As we are all too well aware, these classifications may be oppressive in relation to diverse sexual and gender identities. Recently renewed calls came for the (pending) fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-5) of the American Psychiatric Association (APA) to include a disorder "Paraphilic Coercive Disorder" to classify people who may be distressed by urges to force sex upon others (Sexual and Gender Identity Disorders Work Group, APA, 2010). Our concern is that such a diagnosis could function as a legal defence for people who use (sexual) violence.

If we do not problematise preconceived notions of violence as socially constructed and as serving particular interests, we overlook or

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dismiss significant problems. We must interrogate how our own practices may, in actuality, be complicit with heterosexism and gendered power, but, rather than engaging in new ways of thinking, mainstream research instead 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 (e.g., Bourdieu, 1998; Muehelenhard & Kimes, 1999). Kate Millet writes "When a system of power is thoroughly in command, it has scarcely need to speak itself aloud" (2005, p. 55). In other words, unchallenged forms of violence which appear natural to the status quo in a particular socio-political context may remain unproblematised. As we have demonstrated, there is a need to understand how power is exercised in relation to violence, whether it is through privileges, authorities or silencing mechanisms. Sexual violence research should be at the helm of this process.

Conclusion

From the standpoint of this paper's authors, the question has not been whether disempowerment and oppression — constituting heterosexist privilege — characterise all groups, organizations, institutions and dominant research paradigms in contemporary Western societies. Rather, we have questioned through which subtle and seamless interconnections of knowledges, practices, procedures, and discourses are gendered disempowerment and oppressive renderings of people governable through processes of subjectification achieved in particular domains? Here, we have addressed that question specifically in relation to the domain of dominant sexual violence research. 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, together with unrelenting resistance to those forces. The processes of depoliticisation and psychologisation discussed in this article are indicative of the ways in which

power is inextricably bound with knowledge. In light of this, existing literature must be critiqued as manifesting dominant, problematic knowledges. From our standpoint, radical reflexive engagement, alongside de-ideologisation and resistance to the ways research apparatuses construct and maintain problematic knowledges, are essential.

Our title pays homage to the work of Audre Lorde, in particular her address to the Second Sex Conference in New York in 1979 titled "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house". Here, Lorde asks, "[w]hat 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 of change are possible and allowable" (1984, pp. 110-111). Likewise, we are (rhetorically) asking 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? We answer that it means only the narrowest parameters of change are possible and allowable.

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