

Title: Young women's stories of pornography, sexual learning and sexual subjectivity formation

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This paper draws on research conducted with young women whose partners consume pornography. The purpose of the research was to gain insight into some of the ways young women experience, understand and respond to their partners' pornography consumption. This phenomenological project focused on developing an understanding of the complex lived experiences of five young women in relation to their partners' pornography use. The women, aged between 18 and 25, spoke frankly about pornography's location in their lives, and the impacts of their partners' pornography use on their socio-sexual relations and sexual subjectivities. This paper comes to the interview data with two key questions – Is pornography a reference point for young people's informal sexual learning? How does pornography influence these young women's sexual subjectivities? It will discuss the simultaneous value and danger of pornography as a resource for informal sexuality education and sexual subjectivity formation. Sexual subjectivity is best thought of as the sense of self associated with the sexual body (Gilbert, Ussher & Perz, 2013), it is a crucial aspect of an individual's identity and a major contributing factor to one's sexual practices and experiences. This paper takes a Foucauldian understanding of subjectivity, which sees it as an ever-changing production of oneself - a fluid process of invention and reinvention (Foucault 1984; McNay, 1992). In doing so, it seeks to better understand the ways research participants understood pornography in relation to their 'sexual selves'.

For over twenty years, feminist scholarship and activism on pornography has leaned toward dualistic thought and pedagogy (Attwood, 2002; Ciclitira, 2004; Albury, 2009). Within this simplistic 'anti' and 'pro' framework often adopted by feminists, pornography can only be either 'good' or 'bad' (Albury, 2009). Not only has this frustrated debate on pornography but it has also meant that the ambivalence of the issues involved has often been dismissed rather than explored (Ciclitira, 2004). This research forms part of an emerging body of scholarship often termed "Porn Studies" which takes up Paasonen's call for writers on

pornography to eschew “predetermined and categorical positions of for or against” pornography (Paasonen, 2010: 75). Certainly there is room for robust feminist critiques of pornography, but ‘paranoid’ readings (see Sedgwick, 2003) of pornography that emphasize a morality and/or risk discourse fail to capture the complexity of the subject and the various ways people engage with and make sense of pornography.

Sedgwick (2003) prescribes the notion of ‘beside’ as a tool when attempting non-dualistic ways of thinking:

Beside is an interesting preposition because there’s nothing very dualistic about it; a number of elements may lie alongside one another, though not an infinity of them... Beside comprises a wide range of desiring, identifying, representing, repelling, paralleling, differentiating, rivaling, leaning, twisting, mimicking, withdrawing, attracting, aggressing, warping, and other relations. (Sedgwick, 2003: 8).

The findings of this piece of research sit *beside* one another, in proximity and in tension. This paper argues that pornography can be both ‘good’ and ‘bad’, simultaneously. It tells two stories of young women’s encounters with pornography, extending the preliminary work of Albury (2014) on the notion of ‘porn as pedagogy’. Each story is not a narrative of pleasure/oppression, but one of education and/or miseducation. Both stories describe a young woman’s pathway to pornography as a source for sexual learning. In analysing empirical data, I will describe a cycle of miseducation and re-education, whereby pornography is either the source of education, or the source of miseducation, arguing that pornography acts as a reference point for sexual subjectivity formation. The stories demonstrate that pornography can be a valuable reference point for young people’s sexual

learning, however it can also be damaging for their sexual subjectivities when it is the only reference point.

Pornography and young people's sexual learning

Sexuality education can be understood in two ways: formal learning, which refers largely to curriculum based sex-education at school, and informal learning, which encompasses social and cultural learning (Albury; 2013). Often formal learning is delivered to young people within school contexts, whereas young people actively seek out informal learning. With the access to Internet pornography becoming widespread and its use routine, researchers have observed that young people seek out pornography as a source of informal sexuality education, valuing its detailed and explicit information about sex and bodies (See Allen, 2001; Holland et al, 1993; Measor, 2004; Mitchell et al., 2003). This is often presented to be a dangerous practice, with hazardous consequences for young peoples sexual practices, subjectivities and general well being (Flood, 2009; Flood & Hamilton; 2003). However it is also acknowledged that the reason why young people seek out pornography as an educator is for a lack of sufficient resources for sexual learning (Allen, 2006). Some scholars have challenged the notion that pornography is inherently harmful for young people's sexual learning (Allen 2005; Allen, 2006; McKee et al., 2010). So this begs the question, what is it about pornography that is filling in the gaps in young peoples sexual learning? Some researchers point out that it is the explicit nature of pornography that is appealing to young people, who otherwise wouldn't come across such detailed representations of sex within school or home based sex education (Allen, 2006).

When sexuality education does not provide young people with the information they seek about bodies and the logistics of sexual practices, then they will seek this information

elsewhere. This has been the case for same-sex attracted young adults, for who school based sex education has been largely irrelevant and unhelpful – forcing them to look elsewhere. Several studies have demonstrated where pornography has been used as a positive tool for sexual learning amongst same-sex attracted people. A study of young same-sex attracted men (Mutchler, 2005) found that they learned mostly from Internet pornography, and little from schools and family. Similarly Kubicek et al.'s study with young same-sex attracted men cited pornography as one of the most common informal sources of sexual information, claiming that for young same-sex attracted men, pornography “is one of the only sources that provides a snapshot of the mechanics of anal sex” (2010: 258).

Findings

Within the interview data two pathways to pornography were mapped out. Some of the young women described accessing pornography directly, themselves for their own sexual learning. Others described sexual learning mediated by their partner's pornography use whereby their partner watches pornography, and learns things from that, and then his learning is shared with the young woman, or spontaneously impacts on the young woman. Most of the young women experienced both avenues of learning. For this brief paper, only the latter is explored.

Lara's story:

Lara is 21 and she has been with boyfriend Jon for approximately 1.5 years and is very content in the relationship. Lara's experience of sexual learning with regards to

pornography's presence in her life has been substantial. In her current relationship she has found it to be a major player. Of her current boyfriend, she said the following:

“I think that certainly his first experiences of sex were through porn. That’s [pornography] mainly where he gets his sexual information from. [...] He’s had so many sexual experiences through porn and relatively few sexual experiences with women. Everything that he thinks he knows about what I want and what any other woman he’s in a relationship wants has been informed by and large by all of the sexual experiences he’s had with pornography...When he talks to his friends about it because all of his friends from his description of it use as much pornography as he does and they were first introduced to sex through pornography and so all of them when they talk about it amongst themselves are coming from the perspective of having in their minds a kind of invisible cohort of women who are represented in pornography and have a certain set of desires and wants and values that I don’t reflect [...] the expectation that I’m just going to just love penetrative sex at every opportunity...” (Lara)

Lara found that her boyfriends ‘learning of what women want’ has led to a pathologizing of her own experiences and desires:

“It often makes me feel like I’m not a normal human being... Compared to these ‘other women’ who allegedly exist having all this awesome penetrative orgasmic sex.”

Even though Lara understood pornography to be a fictitious representation, it still acts as a sexual benchmark against which she and her partner measure their sexual performance.

Both Lara and her boyfriend began to believe there was something ‘wrong’ with Lara and drew pathological conclusions concerning her sexual functionality. Lara felt as though she was abnormal, belonging to a sexual minority of women who cannot experience sexual pleasure like she is ‘supposed to’ according to pornography.

Lara recalls the following conversation she had with her boyfriend regarding penetrative sex:

“But women seem to like it’ were his exact words and I think that the ‘women’ who seem to like it are the porn women... he’s only had two sexual partners so he’s seeing countless women in porn so to him even though his previous girlfriend and me haven’t been big about penetrative sex he thinks that this majority of women are running around out there loving it. And that he’s just gotten the two weird ones that aren’t into it.”

The dominance of pornified sexual rhetoric makes Lara’s own unique form of sexual interest and arousal appear suspect or pathological in comparison. In response she finds herself located in a defensive position:

“To have orgasms, I’m up against a kind of sort of like I have to defend it. I’ve said that before I feel like I’m in a defensive position because like instead of being able to say ‘oh this gets me off’, I have to say ‘unlike everyone else this gets me off’ but that’s despite the fact that all my female friends and almost every women I’ve spoken to shares my view. And so I can’t help but think that the representations of women who are enjoying all of this penetrative sex are sort of like like coming out of pornography.”

Prolific pornographic representation results in Lara having to do extra work to have her sexual needs and preferences heard by Jon. Lara spoke of the laborious nature of having to undo the miseducation her partner had received through pornography and try to explain to Jon what works best for her. Lara described it taking “a lot of self-esteem” to get to a point where she was able to embrace her own sexual response and re-educate her partner about “the sex that is going to get me off rather than having the sex that I think should get me off or the sex that he thinks is going to get me off ...”.

Lara’s story highlights significant gaps in young people’s knowledge that both Lara and her boyfriend both used pornography to address. It also tells a story of miseducation, education, miseducation. Re-education. Firstly there were gaps in her partner’s knowledge which Lara believed to stem from a lack of experience, so her boyfriend addressed those gap by educating himself through pornography, which Lara found to be a miseducation of *her* sexual desires and functions, in which case she re-educated her partner about what works for her. Notice there is nothing passive about this young couples sexual learning with regards to pornography, these are active subjects with regards to their sexual learning. One of the fears with regards to pornography being considered a sex educator is that young people will interact in a passive fashion with pornographic texts, but this is not demonstrated in Lara’s story.

What is demonstrated is a scarcity of reference points for both Lara and her boyfriend’s informal sexual learning. Pornography in and of itself is not the central cause of the negative impacts on Lara’s sexual subjectivity, it is the fact that it is the only, or the dominant erotic and explicit reference point for both her and her partner. The scarcity of erotic and explicit representations of sex available to young people sees pornography becoming a prominent

resource informing young people's sexual subjectivity. This is problematic because, as claimed by health researchers and feminist scholars alike, pornography is a limited representation – with some arguing that it remains a male discourse, representing activities focused on male sexual pleasure (Ciclitira, 2004: 297), and others claiming pornography leads to 'risky' or even violent sexual behaviour amongst young people (Flood, 2009).

It has been argued by Allen (2004) & Flood (2009) that young people ought to have access to a range of compelling materials on sex and sexuality, demonstrating positive and equitable erotic discourses of (hetero)sexuality both for education and arousal. This way, pornography would become just one of several other explicit and non-explicit texts that young people can access for sexual learning and sexual subjectivity formation (Albury, 2014). Resources are required that provide young women and men with the skills to recognize and critique negative aspects of sexual representation, and yet are explicit enough to provide the informative detail sought out by young people.

Natalie's story:

Natalie is an upbeat kind of girl who is very happy in her relationship with her partner of almost two years. Throughout the interview she sang the praises of the things pornography has done for her boyfriend, and consequently their sex life.

Of her current boyfriend she says:

“He is 25 and has only been with one other person beside me. So he has had to learn, if you know what I mean, which is where this pornography thing has come into place because he knew what to do anyway, so I think that's been how he learnt. Well that's

my assumption. Where else would you get it from if you haven't done it much? I've been his only fulltime girlfriend, he didn't know what to do, so porn's been a teacher really, and a guide."

When asked whether it had been a good teacher she didn't hesitate to respond:

"Yep, otherwise he wouldn't have no clue. Haha. Poor bloke... The more he watches the more knowledge he gets so he thinks ah yeah maybe I'll do this and maybe I'll do this... because he's so traditional and gentlemanly, it might've helped him realise we don't always have to make love, and we don't always have to just lay there, there's other things to do. I think he would've just conformed to the traditional otherwise, now he's sort of just stepped out of his comfort zone or something."

Natalie appreciates that her partner's pornography use has helped to 'liberate' him from an otherwise conservative, or boring sexual repertoire. And said of their sex life that if it weren't for pornography

"there'd be nothing there ... if he had never watched porn in his life and he had only slept with that other person which was once I don't think he would know, I'd have to walk him through step by step."

Her sexual and relational desires are for a man who knows more about sex than her and who takes control in the bedroom, who initiates, and so Natalie is thankful for pornography having 'equipped' her partner to 'know what to do'. She implored other woman who have a negative view of pornography or of their partner's using pornography to appreciate the benefits pornography brings to their sex life:

“It’s helping you, subconsciously, you might not even know it but your husband has been doing you as well as you think he has because of this stuff (pornography).”

In Natalie’s story there is much to criticise with regards to her sexual and relational desires which reflect typical discourses of feminine and masculine sexuality that feminists would argue to be disempowering for women. Similarly her appreciation of a ‘more adventurous sexual repertoire’ may just be a symptom of the ‘pornified culture’ she moves within (see Paul, 2005), conditioned by popular culture’s asserting that ‘pornified’ sex is better sex (Levy, 2005). However within Natalie’s story we can also see a young woman who knows what she wants from her partner and sex life, and has taken active steps to get that and is sexually satisfied. There is ownership here, sure it may be drawing on a disempowering discourse of femininity, and sure it may be awash with ‘pornified’ prescriptions of sexual pleasure but essentially Natalie describes pornography filling a gap in her partner’s sexual learning, and her reaping the benefits of that.

Certainly Natalie has appreciated the way pornography has educated her partner with regards to how she can experience sexual pleasure. In Allen’s 2006 study, out of a possible 31-item list of topics regarding sex and sexuality, “how to make sexual activity enjoyable for both partners” was the issue most young people wanted to learn about. Knowledge concerning sexual pleasure is one of the gaps in young people’s sexual learning that perhaps pornography has a role to fill. It is important to note that not all pornography serves up sex-positive representations of sex. There is a significant amount of objectification, commoditisation and sexism that accompanies much mainstream pornography and therefore it is crucial that young people interact with pornography in a critical manner (Kellner & Share; 2005).

One of the things lacking in formal sex education, another gap in young people's sexual learning, is explicit representation of sex, or what Allen (2006) has termed "an erotic deficit in sexuality education". This is no new criticism; in fact a missing discourse of desire in sexuality programmes has been noted for more than 30 years (Allen, 2004; Fine, 1988; Jackson, 1978). One of the negative impacts of teaching a sexual subject in a de-sexualised way is that young people are constituted as illegitimate sexual subjects, incapable of handling 'the real thing', and this serves to reinforce negative youthful sexual subjectivities.

Where school sexuality education de-eroticises bodies, using cartoons and diagrams to demonstrate bodies engaged in sexual practice, pornography provides enflashed and sexualised bodies which are engaged in real-time sexual practice. And this may be appealing to some young people, who like anyone wishing to accumulate knowledge on a subject, may prefer real demonstrations over cartoon representations. Natalie made it clear that she accessed pornography for this very reason:

"I started looking at it [porn] just to see what these people do, what is there to do, how do they do... it's not like I would sit there and be like oh this is exciting me, really turning me on..."

This makes pornography a useful resource for informal sexuality education. It is a text that can be used to demonstrate what is possible, to discuss sexual ethics, to discuss power relations, to provide young people with the 'explicitness' they are seeking when it comes to sexual learning, without having to involve their own bodies in the experimentation.

These two young women's stories have demonstrated both the value of pornography as a resource for informal sexual learning and sexual subjectivity, and the dangers that can arise

when pornography becomes the dominant resource. Young people value pornography for its explicit detail, something both Natalie and Lara described their boyfriend's appreciating and for Natalie, this has had positive flow on effects for her sexual subjectivity. Pornography is also valuable because it presents sex within a discourse of pleasure, which is high on young people's priority list when it comes to sexual learning, yet lacking in formal sources of sexuality education. Whilst pornography is shown to be valuable for these young people, I argue that it had frustrating repercussions for Lara's sexual subjectivity. This was due to it becoming *the* representation – whereby both her and her partner interacted with pornography as a benchmark, leading to an inaccurate pathologisation of Lara's sexual desires and functionality and consequently damaging her sexual subjectivity. Returning to the questions this paper began with, it is clear that pornography is a reference point for young people's informal sexual learning, and these stories provide insight into some of its value as a reference point. What is more ambiguous is the way that pornography influences these young women's sexual subjectivities. With regards to these young women's sexual subjectivities, what can one really *know* about these young women's sexual subjectivities, based on this data? Very little. And so this paper has merely offered suggestions and provocations based on these two young women's stories. In Lara's case the influence appeared to be a homogenising one and therefore damaging (but not irreparable). However in Natalie's case, the presence of pornography as a "guide" for her boyfriend had relieved her of the burden of having to "teach" her boyfriend how to experience sexual pleasure, a task which would have been potentially unsettling for her sexual subjectivity. Female sexual subjectivity is an under researched area. Further research investigating the various ways it can be shaped and understood would be fruitful, and this is the path I am currently undertaking for my doctoral thesis project.

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