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Situating Agency

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There is a growing need to revisit our conceptual frameworks for understanding men's violence against women and girls. Recent high-profile cases have raised public awareness of the extent of sexual violence; by using digital media, feminist activists have highlighted the everyday nature of men's intrusive behaviour. The range of voices that give feminism as a political movement its complexity and reflexivity have been undoubtedly amplified. But the internet has also changed how we create, ingest and distribute information; often making our speaking to, a speaking over. Has our thinking paid the price?

When we are caught up in the practicalities of provision, prevention, prosecution and policy-making, we can easily miss opportunities to reflect on our differing perspectives and the unresolved tensions between them—to think about how our practice can inform our concepts, and how our concepts can inform our practice. Here I want to briefly sketch my own attempts to grapple with some of these issues – in particular the challenges of theorising women's agency in the context of men's intrusion – and share how I discovered an untapped resource in the work of Simone de Beauvoir.

Safety vs. freedom

Across feminist perspectives there is what has been described as a 'chronic need' to theorise women's agency, and in particular women's *embodied* agency. That need is felt particularly in relation to debates on issues like prostitution and pornography, where it is often suggested that placing emphasis on the context in which women are making choices is equivalent to negating their ability to choose (a view exemplified in the recent decision of Amnesty International to support the decriminalisation of the prostitution system). It is also seen in the routine rejection of feminist self-defence as a rape prevention strategy. It seems we have reached a point where acknowledging that women can act through our bodies is equated with blaming us for when we can't.

The absence of a framework which recognizes both that women have agency and that it is limited by the context in which it is exercised can have devastating real world effects. An illustration can be found in the independent inquiry on child sexual exploitation in Rotherham, which revealed systemic failings in the statutory response—many of them rooted in a misunderstanding of what appeared on the surface to be young women's agency. Instead of being seen as making choices in a context of coercion and constraint, young women were imagined as free and autonomous agents who were effectively choosing their own exploitation.

Focusing on violence against women and girls as a context which structures and limits our freedom often prompts accusations of espousing a 'victim feminism' that undermines women's sexual agency. But that perspective is itself unhelpfully reductive: it does not acknowledge the complex, multiple and uneasy ways in which women, individually and collectively, actually live our agency, and our oppression, within the current gender order.

I came to recognise the need to expand our thinking about women's embodied agency when I was doing research on what is commonly termed 'street harassment', meaning men's intrusions on

women in public space. I struggled to find a way of celebrating women's skilful navigation of male intrusions – looking down, wearing headphones, dressing in dark colours, always sitting near the door – while at the same time acknowledging how this 'safety work' limits our freedom.

'Safety work' is the term Liz Kelly uses to describe the strategising and planning that women and girls undertake in responding to, avoiding and/or coping with men's violence. The vast majority of this work is pre-emptive: we often can't even know if what we are experiencing as intrusive *is* intrusive without external confirmation. That confirmation generally comes in the form of escalation: he moves from staring to touching, he walks quicker behind you, he blocks your path. This escalation is what safety work is designed to disrupt. Women learn to quietly make changes, continually evaluating the situation to decide what constitutes 'the right amount of panic'. Such work, repeated over time, becomes habitual: it is absorbed into the body as a kind of hidden labour.

From the perspective of lived experience there is an opposition between taking actions to increase our safety and taking actions to increase our freedom—increasing one means decreasing the other. But from the perspective of theory, how should we conceptualise a woman's decision to limit her freedom in exchange for an increased feeling of safety? On one hand it does not seem helpful to argue that she has no choice: a feminist argument that denies the ability of women and girls to act does nothing to increase their capacity for action. On the other hand there is something distinctly uncomfortable about claiming women's 'safety work', which decreases their freedom, as an expression of women's agency.

Bringing back Beauvoir

For me, it was Simone de Beauvoir's understanding of the self as a *situated* embodied subject that provided a framework for understanding this tension.

It might seem strange to talk about 'bringing back Beauvoir', since her groundbreaking work *The Second Sex* is referenced constantly in feminist theoretical discussions. But Beauvoir's ideas have often been misrepresented or misunderstood. In recent debates on sex and gender, her work has been invoked to support both the voluntarist conception of gender favoured by queer theorists and the opposing view that emphasizes the biological realities of the female body, which are then gendered through social processes. In fact, both of these are incompatible with Beauvoir's understanding of our lived body: a culturally inscribed material embodiment. The body-object, as described by biologists, simply does not exist in Beauvoir's account which is located in a philosophical tradition focused on limiting abstractions and describing experience as lived. We can never experience the human body outside of it being *someone's* body, a lived bodily-self situated in a particular place and time. When her work is fragmented, reduced to the occasional quote dropped into an argument to support one or other of the orthodox positions, we are missing the uniqueness of Beauvoir's insights overall, and how they can help move us forward in our conceptual thinking about men's violence against women.

Historically, a major obstacle to English-speaking feminists' understanding of Beauvoir was their reliance, for over fifty years, on an extremely problematic translation of *The Second Sex*. The translator, a male zoologist, cut a third of the original text, and had no understanding of the philosophical tradition that shaped Beauvoir's own linguistic choices. There is now a new

translation which, though not without its own problems, goes some way towards giving the English-speaking reader a truer sense of Beauvoir's ideas about the situation of women.

The Second Sex provides a map for building theory that speaks to the commonality of women's experience of men's violence without losing sight of the way our varying social and personal histories shape the way violence is individually experienced. Beauvoir provides us with a theory of embodied selfhood that also accounts for the different meanings given to the individual and generated by the individual through their socio-historical location. Crucially, her account of the self as 'always uniquely situated' acknowledges the way agency is rooted in real, and often restrictive, contexts, without suggesting that any acknowledgment of the limits of particular situations effectively denies women autonomy.

The situated self

Beauvoir credited Jean-Paul Sartre with originating the idea of 'situation', but correspondence between the two of them that was published after her death revealed this as a misrepresentation. Rather what the letters contain is a series of disagreements about, and developments of, the work of German philosopher Martin Heidegger on the concept of 'being-in-situation'.

For Heidegger, human existence has the inescapable characteristic of 'thrownness'. We are thrown without knowledge or choice into a world that was there before us and will remain after us, and in this thrownness we find ourselves in the world always already in a particular situation, again one that is not of our own choosing.

For example, I was born as a white, able-bodied female in the early 1980s, in a small logging town on the North Island of New Zealand. None of these material conditions, their socio-historical meaning, or indeed my entry into the world itself, are expressions of my freedom; but my freedom nevertheless depends on them. My situation is what makes my freedom possible, as well as being the starting point from which I choose my projects. The influence of our situation on our choice of projects is seen in the way that situation acts to expand our possibilities in the world. A change to my birthplace would have changed my possibilities; a change to my body would have altered the starting point for my perspective on the world. From this situation we make choices from which in turn we derive our meaning. Our situation does not determine us, yet it does give us a location within the world through which it becomes meaningful – through which it becomes 'ours'.

Beauvoir developed Heidegger's concept to talk about how this situation that we find ourselves thrown into, a situation which includes our embodiment and the associated meanings and possibilities, is both the point from which we make choices—and thus the basis of our freedom—and the source of our limitations. Human 'being' is such that we have the ability to act on the world, and to make it our own through the taking up of projects we find meaningful (the project of ending men's violence against women, for example). At the same time our situation is constituted by forces that are not of our making, forces that may act to limit the projects we choose and the meanings they have for us (would we have chosen the same projects if we did not have certain lived experiences—e.g., for many of us, experiences of men's violence?)

For Beauvoir we are both free and constrained, with neither lived reality cancelling out the other. Her philosophy insists on the ambiguity of human existence, rejecting simple binary oppositions between freedom and constraint, subject and object, actor and victim: it is not a question of either/or but of both/and.

Situated agency

Beauvoir's work offers important insights for current feminist theorizing about women's agency, especially though not only sexual agency, as it is lived under patriarchy. Her concept of situation provides us with a theoretical tool that enables us to explore the ambiguous, 'both/and' position of the 'victim-survivor'. It helped me to see that safety work is an expression of the way women are both acted on by, and capable of choosing to act within, the patriarchal gender order. The idea of situated agency, agency that is simultaneously free and restricted, can help us resist the temptation to see women's responses to male violence and intrusion as evidence of their lack of agency, without feeling obliged to go to the other extreme and suggest that their actions are expressions of absolute freedom.

There are connections here with Evan Stark's theorisation of the constraints imposed on women by controlling partners as limiting women's *opportunities* rather than their *capacity* to enact their life projects. Stark states that in reconceptualising domestic violence from an assault-based model to one of experienced reality, 'no challenge was more formidable than conveying the extent of women's resiliency, resistance, capacity and courage in the face of coercive control without minimizing the comprehensiveness of the strategy'. Such a claim connects to Beauvoir's idea of 'situation', referring to the total context in which and through which we choose our projects and so give our life meaning. For Stark, as for Beauvoir, freedom and agency are situated.

The ideas developed by Beauvoir open up a space for feminists wanting to talk about Liz Kelly's concept of the continuum of sexual violence as a constraining context for women, without denying women's autonomy and our acts of resistance and resilience. Our choices, our actions, and even our desires are not free-floating: they spring from our material bodies, which are located in ways that open up some possibilities to us while closing down others. All agency is situated.