Girlhood, agency, and embodied space for action

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Abstract

The sexual double standard and the realities of sexual violence have a significant impact on the embodied freedoms of girls and young women. The chapters in this collection that explore the experiences of girls in the Nordic region in relation to sexual harassment (Aaltonen) and sexuality education (Honkasalo) reveal the ongoing challenges for feminists seeking to conceptualize the ambiguity of girls' agency, particularly sexual agency, as it is lived. Here I explore the possible benefits of the concepts of embodied space for action and situated agency, alongside the need for a perspective that pays attention to how a hierarchy of worth situates girls in relation to each other.

Keywords: sexual violence; victim feminism; sexual consent education; agency; girlhood studies

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The importance of a collection such as this in broadening perspectives on girlhood through articulating the experience of Nordic region, is evidenced in the contributions of Sanna Aaltonen and Veronika Honkasalo. In exploring girls' experiences of sexual harassment, Aaltonen challenges the common division of responses into the categories of passive and active. She argues for an understanding of resistance that has room for expressions that are more diffuse than this dichotomy allows. In suggesting that tolerating sexual harassment can be understood as a form of girls' agency, Aaltonen skilfully balances this apparently counter-intuitive claim with a

recognition of the ambiguous foundations of agency as it is lived within social processes that prioritize particular interpretations. Honkasalo's study on minoritized girls' experiences of sexuality education in Finland addresses the ways in which hegemonic interpretations of sexual practices and values, are reproduced and rewarded. Living and working in a UK context where, after years of dedicated feminist campaigning, the current government have recently announced that sex and relationships education (SRE) will become statutory, Honkasalo's analysis offers a timely warning. She makes a powerful argument for the need to ensure that SRE is informed by an actively anti-racist intersectional feminist perspective. Such a theoretical orientation is crucial to ensuring that social norms based on colonial and heteronormative values, such as female passivity and Christian morality, are not unthinkingly reproduced.

It is this intersectional perspective that grounds the need for Nordic Girlhood studies itself. What such a framing does is help alert us to differences in experiences across time and space. In place of one shared notion of girlhood amongst a unitary category of women we recognize that there are many ways of becoming a woman and that there are multiple, diffracted girlhoods. At its core is an understanding that although all women and girls are in some way subject to gender discrimination, all women and girls are not discriminated against in the same way. Hierarchies of worth situate women and girls in relation to each other, as well as in relation to men and boys. Our attention is drawn to the ways in which these hierarchical structures interact and intersect with gender inequality, and how its manifestation differs according to other markers of a woman's or a girl's social location. As Honkasalo's conceptualization of

identity markers as borders makes clear, we must work hard to ensure that the notion of girlhood itself is not colonized in being constructed through a white, heterosexual norm. This is particularly true in the current global climate in which xenophobia and homophobia are flourishing both in and outside the Nordic region. Both these chapters invite us, albeit in different ways, to think through how girls live and make sense of their sexual agency. Taken together, they address the impact of gendered sexual standards and the realities of sexual violence on what Jeffner (2000), developed by Kelly (2003), calls space for action. Space here is understood, like girlhoods, as multiple. For example in the current UK context, while social norms may stereotype many white girls/women as sexually passive, and many black girls/women as sexual agents, this does not mean that black girls/women are afforded a greater space for sexual action. Rather, their sexuality is seen as wild or animalistic, something out of control, and this construction is then used to locate them as *less than* on a hierarchy of worth that situates women's value in their sexual pureness. In addition, such raced and gendered stereotypes are inflected by other intersectional factors such as class, age, and/or disability. Again in a UK context, working class white girls are routinely stereotyped as sexually available rather than sexually passive, with this is then used to locate them in relation to the value of female sexual pureness, and set what action is acceptable from them, and what action is permissible against them. Crucially, as Honkasalo shows, increasing the space for action for a particular set of girls and young women with a specific experience of girlhood, does not automatically increase the space for all girls, and may, in fact, operate to reduce the space for others, particularly minoritized girls and young women.

Reflecting on these two contributions, I want to think about how we centre lived difference in our theorization of girls' and women's sexual agency as expressed and experienced in a context of violence against women and girls. I suggest that the concepts of situated agency and embodied space for action can help us to do this. First, I consider the ways in which the work of Aaltonen and Honkasalo illuminate, in different ways, how a rhetoric of empowerment can operate to police speaking out about the harms of sexual violence. Then I turn to looking at what is meant by embodied space for action and the ways in which both chapters demonstrate how the current gender order and hegemonic gender relations produce female embodiment that is acted on but not acted through. Finally, I offer an outline of what I mean by situated agency, and a reflection on how I worked with some of these problems in my research on women's experiences of men's intrusion, including girlhood experiences of sexual harassment, through developing a conceptualization of agency as situated.

The problem with moral panic

I want to start with the notion of moral panic, and its close corollary, the charge of victim feminism. There is a lengthy history both within and outside of different feminist perspectives, of reducing feminist arguments to thinly veiled attempts to uphold puritanical moral codes. Most notably, the notion of moral panic has been used to collapse feminist expressions of the sexism and racism in mainstream pornography into conservative agendas motivated by an obscenity framework. Even the use of the word panic itself has distinctly misogynistic undertones in such a context, with panic substituting for hysteric as a way of dismissing ways of knowing and speaking that do not fit those normalised by and for a white, male subject. The

term has thus been made suspicious through how it has been used against an intersectional understanding of the complex interplay of inequality and agency. As such, I am wary of using the notion of a post-feminist moral panic and the claim that it is motivated by a drive to protect young people from sexual curiosity, when thinking through current debates on sexualization. The concept casts its net too wide and does not seem to allow space for a consideration of the material realities of sexual violence. It encourages us to look solely at the behaviour of girls, and our responses to it, rather than seeing this behaviour as situated within a broader context of violence against women. My critique here is similar to that made by Nicola Gavey (2012, 719) of how the term empowerment is "able to be cast as a property or state of individuals untethered to the situation of their lives or the meanings ascribed to them, their bodies, and actions." Men's practices become invisible in the moral panic framing, as do the ways in which different sexual standards and stereotypes apply to the actions of differently located girls and young women. We see this in Honkasalo's recognition that the impact of social structures and inequalities on young people's sexuality is rarely analyzed in Finnish sexuality research, something which is not unique to the Finnish context.

We need to find a way to talk about both pleasure and danger, about social expectation and individual histories, in terms of how they inflect and alter each other rather than as wholly independent and opposed categories. As highlighted by Maddy Coy and Maria Garner (2012), the inclusion of violence against women as a context within which girls' sexualisation is lived, is markedly unpopular. Instead the dominant narrative focuses on the possibilities of pleasure and an unrestricted

conceptualization of agency, something that, as argued by Sharon Lamb (2010), works to reaffirm rather than problematize limiting dichotomies such as subject/object or pleasure/danger. In the confines of such a narrative, to give voice to the lived experience of violence in women's lives, and particularly the heightened perpetration of violence against minoritized women, is to be charged with promoting what has become known as victim feminism.

Victim feminism

The logic of victim feminism is that concentrating on (or sometimes even expressing the existence of) violence against women and girls as a context structuring girls' freedom undermines their ability to act within it. Such a perspective locks us into an unhelpful binary in which the complex, multiple, and uneasy ways in which as women we individually and collectively live our agency and oppressions in the current gender order are lost. This binary appears in a reworked form in the notion of a sex-positive feminism and its often unnamed though obligatory counterpoint, sex-negative. Both positions acknowledge women's sexual freedom as a necessary part of women's freedom, and recognize that women's sexual freedom is restricted in specific ways, although the solutions to increasing women's space for action diverge radically.

Responses to sexualization are split into the clear binary of sexual protection or sexual celebration, allowing no room for the ambiguity and ambivalence that structures material action. The charge of victim feminism is that mentioning the contexts in which girls are making decisions, in particular regarding the continuum of men's

intrusive practices, denies the fact that they are in fact making decisions: that locating or *situating* their actions is incompatible with their ability to act. The accusation thus inadvertently reproduces the very thing it critiques. It contains within it a failure to recognize girls as complex agents, the "willful subjects" of Ahmed's (2014) title, alongside a notion of agency and freedom that is free-floating, unconstrained and equally available to all. It also affirms a conservative view of the position of victim as being something which should be avoided at all costs, that "(v)ictimhood is a state of mind engaged in as a matter of choice, rather than a matter of fact…a regressive relic of the 'second-wave' beyond which a now more enlightened feminism is well pleased to have progressed." (Convery, 2006, 2). There are clear similarities here with the experience of participants in Aaltonen's study on sexual harassment. What we are being asked to do is downplay the existence of sexual violence in order to hold onto a sense of agency, and to reproduce a discourse that disparages the positon of victim. We must refuse, working instead with the ambiguity that is woven into lived experience. The concept of space for action helps us to do just this, as well as direct our theoretical attention back to the material body, practices, and bodily habits.

Embodied space for action

Across feminist perspectives there is what has been described as a "chronic need" (Stavro, 2000: 133) to theorize women's agency, particularly women's embodied agency. We need a conceptualization of agency that, as Kelly (1988) points out, is able to maintain the complex and multiple ways in which the continuum of sexual violence operates as a context that situates girls' freedom. It needs to do so without figuring girls as passive objects of representation, nor as seeing them as all beginning

from the same point. We need to theorize agency as embodied and relational (McNay, 2004); as a model of girls as subjects acting on, in, and through the body that is located in different and similar ways along a hierarchy of worth.

The concept of space for action builds on Eva Lundgren's (1998) work on the concept of life-space, originating in the Nordic region. This concept was used by Lundgren to capture how the motivations of men who are violent towards their partners are, in part, based on a desire to set limits on women's ability to exercise their freedom. The life space of women is decreased as a way of increasing the life space of the men who were violent towards them, a claim empirically tested in a recent paper by Sharp-Jeffs, Kelly, and Klein (2017). The concept was developed into the notion of space for action by Jeffner (2000) in her exploration of young people's understandings of rape, and by Kelly (2003) in relation to trafficking for sexual exploitation. Maddy Coy (2009) also uses it in relation to the sexualization of popular culture, positing sexualized culture as enacting limits on girls' horizons through painting a picture of womanhood that narrows rather than expands the space available for them to act within. This concept of horizons is important, particularly in the Merleau-Pontian ([1945] 2002) sense of horizons of possibility. Space for action refers to the possibilities for action and not only to its manifestations. It is thus able to respond to the need Gavey (2012, 722) articulates, of exploring girls' own accounts of agency or empowerment through focusing on "the cultural conditions of possibility rather than the individual." The concept enables us to balance the action of subjects as located in particular contexts that reward certain acts and punish others, both explicitly and implicitly, without collapsing agency into solely an effect of social processes.

Both these chapters show clearly how an empowerment rhetoric structures responses made by individual girls, as well as the dominant academic discourse, to both sexual harassment and sexuality. Such a frame works to narrow girls' space for action, even when it is trying to expand it, by creating in effect a hegemonic reading of sexual violence as, at the same time, tolerable and invisible. This does not mean that there is no way a subject can contest that reading and attempt to occupy a different space, nor that a subject does not have room to move or choose within the space she has to act. As Hall (1980) illustrated, dominant or preferred meanings are not univocal nor uncontested. What it does mean is that agency is not free-floating, it "is exercised in context, and contexts are always more or less constrained by material and other factors" (Kelly, 2003, 143). In terms of the earlier discussion of victim feminism, what is important to hold onto here is an understanding that "the idea of freedom is not incompatible with the existence of certain constraints" (Beauvoir, [1949] 2011, 57) and that agency is situated by, and exercised in, material and structural locations that both widen and narrow our space for action. Our embodiment forms not only one of these locations but is foundational to our ability to act at all. Our choices, actions, and even desires are situated; they spring from our material bodies, and are located in ways that open and close particular possibilities to us. The social meanings given to our bodies are used to position our worth in relation to each other. Black, white, and brown bodies, female, male, and gender diverse bodies, aged bodies, disabled bodies, classed bodies – all of these markers are used by us and on us to order our access to social power, status, and value. The ways in which these intersect create particular standards, norms, and inequalities and create different spaces for action. As such, any

consideration of agency must pay attention to our embodiment (with an understanding of this as both materially and socially produced) in enabling and constraining our freedom.

Situated agency

In my own work (Vera-Gray, 2016, 2017) I have developed a concept of situated agency, to allow for such a discussion. Recognizing agency as situated helps to heed the warning of Bina Agarwal (1997) that emphasizing the restrictions on women's agency risks undermining the multitude of ways in which women act within these restrictions, alongside refusing to promote the individualist notion of all actions as equal regardless of structural inequalities experienced between and among actors. It does justice to the call by Kathy Miriam for discussions of agency to foreground how the term is "defined as a capacity to negotiate with a situation that is itself taken for granted as inevitable" (2005, 14). Crucially, it rises to the challenge posed by Lois McNay (2004) of rethinking an idea of agency around a non-reductive notion of experience, a blend of the structural and the material.

When we draw from a concept of embodied space for action in thinking through girls' situated agency, we look to what widens or narrows the spaces girls have to act *through* their bodies. What is evident in both of these chapters, as well as in my own empirical work on street harassment (Vera-Gray, 2017), is that the ways in which girls' experience of their agency is not expressed by the body as being the self *in* action, but rather by being acted *on*. This is the model of female embodiment construed through the sexual double standard that emphasizes boys' sexual activity

and girls' passivity, as well as that constructed through the medical model in sexuality education, with its focus on early pregnancy and disease prevention; of girls' bodies as done *to*. Drawing on the concept of embodied space for action, however, allows us to go somewhere different. It allows us to see why the charges of moral panic and victim feminism fail when applied to feminist interventions that seek to expand girls' possibilities through questioning the hegemony of the empowerment and pleasure discourse. It suggests an approach to feminist research and activism that is similar to that of Aaltonen in this collection; speaking about the borderwork and resistance in women's accounts. This helps us navigate the binaries of freedom or constraint, pleasure or danger, subject or object, focussing our attention instead on the ways in which our action is lived as ambiguous; is lived as both. We are thus offered tools to help unpick the ways in which girls' sexual agency is restricted and enabled in different and similar ways depending on their social location. This is how we start to build a space in which to talk about sexual violence as a restricting force without thereby denying the action of girls in relation to it. We start to sketch a form of agency that is situated, and an understanding of resilience as multiple and diffuse. A space is opened for feminists wanting to talk about the continuum of sexual violence as a constraining context for women, without forfeiting the autonomy of girls and women, and our acts of resistance and resilience.

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