Agency and the body: young women, sexual and intimate relationships

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Introduction

The literature surrounding young women’s relationships to their own bodies and physicality suggests on the whole it is relatively negative. Frost (2001) argues that young women suffer from ‘alienation from their bodies ... [and] exhibit signs of body self-hatred’ (p. 2). Other writers, however, argue for a slightly less one-sided analysis of young women’s relationships to their bodies. Willett (2008), for instance, found that young women are able to, at times, ‘resist societal and peer pressure regarding ... feelings about their bodies’ (p. 432).

Similarly, in discussions of young women’s expressions of sexual desire and pleasure there is a sense that young women are taking up a number of different discourses too. Michelle Fine’s seminal phrase ‘the missing discourse of desire’ (1988: 29) has been used to explain why many young women involved in research appear to struggle to articulate feelings of sexual desire and pleasure, or report that they do not enjoy sex (Tolman, 1994; Hillier et al., 1999). Yet, more recent research argues that some young women do expect and experience sexual pleasure (Allen, 2005; Maxwell, 2007).

Writers such as Holland et al. (1994) and Allen (2005) have argued that one crucial step in being agentic within sexual and intimate relationships, is for young women to feel connected to their bodies and pursue sexual pleasure. This idea has been developed further in recent years by a number of papers – see Westhaver (2006) and Bryant and Schofield (2007) for instance.

Bryant and Schofield (2007) interviewed women in Sydney, Australia aged between 19 and 79 years about their (sexual) life histories. They argued that ‘sexually embodied practice ... produces diverse experiences, including joy, exhilaration, confusion, pain....and transcendence. These...shape...and fuel the kinds of sexual relationships and identities they pursue’ (p. 337). The authors found that women discussed particular ‘transformative moments’ (p. 331) where ‘new possibilities’ (p. 332) were revealed, many of which ‘originated in erotic bodily pleasures’ (p. 332). Bryant and Schofield (2007) also found that women were able to describe the experiences over time which had enabled them to begin to identify what they were looking for from a partner – both sexually, but also more broadly within an intimate relationship.
A new way of approaching the study of agency within young women’s sexual and intimate relationships

In our current work we have been exploring how to approach the examination of agentic practice within sexual and intimate relationships by beginning with young women’s own conceptualisations of power within these relationships (Maxwell and Aggleton, in press). We have found that young women often referred to notions of power using words such as ‘control’ and ‘choice’. Young women appeared to view power as a resource that is shared (usually unequally) between two partners, but we also found that some young women positioned themselves discursively as simply powerful.

These conceptualisations, we believe, offer two new ways of understanding agentic practice within intimate relations – either through ‘reacting into action’ and taking power back (usually driven by an emotional reaction to a situation of inequality); or by ‘starting from’ a powerful position. The latter discursive position was evident in the use of an active, ‘I’ voice within young women’s narratives and the portrayal of themselves as strong, confident people.

In this paper we are keen to explore how young women’s narratives of physicality within sexual and intimate relationships might link into our developing understanding of agentic practice.

The study

The data presented in this paper are drawn from a study which aimed to explore young women’s reflexivity, narratives and embodied practices of agency in their sexual and intimate relationships.

We focused our study in one secondary school in England, and all young women in their final two years of formal schooling (i.e. the Sixth Form) were invited to participate in focus group discussions and/or in-depth interviews.

The focus group discussions used a series of vignettes drawn from previous research to stimulate debate on young women’s sexuality and their experiences of relationships. Two of the vignettes were of young women discussing experiences of sex, including orgasms and being coerced into sex. The in-depth interviews meanwhile focused on young women’s own intimate relationship and sexual experiences – asking them to recall both positive and negative instances within these, and specifically asking them to describe how they felt when they were being sexually intimate with someone else.

In total 54 young women took part in the study, 33 of whom took discussed their own experiences of sex and intimate relationships in an in-depth interview context. The young women were aged between 16 and 18 years and were all white, with a small number having grown up abroad but with UK family connections.
All data specifically mentioning the body, parts of the body, physical sensations experienced, the physical act of having sex and so forth were drawn out from the transcripts and further analysed.

**The physical matters**

The young women who participated in the study discussed a number of ways in which physicality played an important role in their approaches to, and practices within their sexual and intimate relationships.

Many young women described how they responded physically to certain young men often because they were very ’fit’. One young woman talked about getting ’butterflies’ in her stomach when she saw one particular young man. Another participant talked about the importance of feeling a ‘spark’ before pursuing a sexual experience or intimate relationship with anyone.

Within sexual relationships, many of the young women reflected on the extent to which they had felt ’comfortable’ or ’awkward’. This was often linked to how they felt about their own bodies, or showing their bodies to a sexual partner. Those who described feeling more ‘self conscious’ about their bodies, also made a link to, at least initially, finding it hard to ’relax’ during, or ’enjoy’ sex.

Most young women, however, saw sex as ’normal … a bit of fun … it’s just natural isn’t it?’ and for the most part expected to experience sexual pleasure. Many discussed the importance of, and fun they had experimenting sexually with their partner. Some participants saw themselves as a ’sexual person’ and seemed comfortable with this view of themselves.

> I mean we’re both quite sexual people as it were and so it was fine … I just think I enjoy healthy sex (Iona)

**The body as powerful and an integral part of agentic practice**

The young women interviewed appeared to understand the power of physicality in three ways. They described how the physical nature of sex and attraction was almost uncontrollable and often directed what happened next in a situation. At other times, however, they seemed to attribute action to the physical reactions or sensations they have experienced towards a partner or within an encounter. Finally, participants also described physicality as a route through which they developed more broadly as a person – usually in positive ways, making them more confident, knowledgeable and taking more control of their relationships.

1. **Physicality as almost uncontrollable and directing practice**

Young women described physical reactions to a person or to being touched, which seemed to leave them with little choice about what happened next.
There’d be certain people who’d I’d sort of look at and go, ‘Oh I really want to have sex with you’ that sort of thing, and I literally ... I want to jump on them ... There are just certain people which I kind of sense, I really really like fancy you ... sort of sexual ... it would be like a moment, yeah I’d be like, ‘Oh my god!’ (Barbara)

The physical appeared to direct the young women, seemingly without needing to consciously reflect or process these sensations, towards action.

It’s like when you wake up in the morning and like you turn over and they’re like lying next to you. You just wake up and then you’re like ‘All right’ – off you go [have sex] (Iona)

2. Physical reactions informing young women’s practice

In other situations, physical reactions to sex had clearly informed their future practice.

Letita had had a drunken sexual encounter with her brother’s friend one night, ‘the next day it was just so awkward, and I felt really dirty’, so she decided never to let herself get involved in such a situation again.

Natalia described how experiencing the physical revulsion of giving a guy oral sex (‘I just cannot stand doing [oral sex], it just makes me sick’) had led her to decide that in the future she would not remain in a relationship with someone who demanded she perform it on her.

3. Physicality building confidence and facilitating the taking of control within relationships

Young women also explained that with increased sexual experience, came confidence (about sex and meeting their own sexual needs), as well as, in some cases, taking greater control of other aspects of their relationships with partners.

Carmel had learnt over the course of a year-long relationship with her first sexual partner ‘now I know exactly what I want, what I like, what I don’t like, what I could possibly stand...put up with, whatever’. Her likes and dislikes had informed Carmel’s subsequent sexual relationships.

For Ellie, the very physical nature of her relationship to her current boyfriend has led to her feeling as if a ‘whole new side of me’ had come out. This meant she expressed her frustration clearly when her partner did not want to have sex and that she felt confident saying ‘no’ to certain sexual acts. Another young women said that she now felt confident initiating sex and experimenting during sex, after becoming more sexually experienced.

Another young women explained how she saw herself as more ‘sexual’ than her boyfriend. This realisation had led her to see that men were not necessarily more powerful in relationships.

I’d initiate it and he was quite funny about stuff like that like. He had to feel really comfortable ... it was quite nice for him to be so sensitive about it instead of just
being like, ‘Oh yeah’ all the time. But it was kind of like ... it would kind of make me laugh in a way, it would just be a real surreal. It was a bit ... I would never expect it (Bella).

Conclusions

Our work on agency (in Maxwell and Aggleton, in press; and as detailed in this paper) has led us to several conclusions. First, that emotions, and ‘the sensual experience of our bodies’ (Williams & Bendelow, 1998: 154) are crucial to understanding agentic practice in young women’s sexual and intimate relationships.

Second, that physicality appeared to be felt and experienced, often at quite an unconscious, instinctual level, and were argued by the young women to drive their practice.

Third, while some young women positioned themselves as powerful both discursively as well as in their physical responses and reactions to people, sex and events; for others agentic practice became possible mainly because of their responses to the physical. They were much more timid about discursively positioning themselves as powerful when narrating non-sexual experiences with their intimate partners.

Finally, our work suggests that sustained agentic practice might occur through a systematisation of insight (a more reflective process). However, sustained agentic practice, at least within the sexual parts of their relationships, may also occur when young women become more confident and knowledgeable about sex and what is pleasurable to them.

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References


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