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SEXY GIRLS AS « THE OTHER » : THE DISCURSIVE PROCESSES OF STIGMATIZING GIRLS

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the media discourse on that phenomenon known in Québec as the « hypersexualization of girls » which has led to a public debate over girls and clothing in the province's schools. Although my past research has focused on mapping the media discourses on hypersexualization, missing from this initial mapping were the voices of girls. To address this absence I designed a research project intended to bring the opinions and concerns of a plurality of francophone girls into the debate. The research is qualitative in nature, based on conversations established through individual interviews and focus group discussion conducted in 2007 with girls and young women aged from 11 to 21, in Quebec, Montreal and Trois-Rivières. These conversations have been a great source of learning and inspiration. As I proceeded with the work, I became troubled by some of the statements made by my participants and their « ordinary » or habitual ways of talking. For example, the term « slut » (« salope », in French) was commonly used to refer and stigmatize girls whose clothing is « inappropriate » and too « provocative ». In this presentation, I will comment and reflect on the ethical dilemmas of doing research with girls by examining the process of stigmatization by which a specific group of girls is constructed as the « Other ». In offering these reflections, I will connect my interviews to the problematic status of girls within media and public discourses. I will also consider the research literature on girls in Canada and Quebec. As some have observed, a monolithic conception of girls as a research category may smooth over the complexity and diversity of girls' lived experiences (Canadian Women's Foundation 2005; Gouin et Wais, 2006).

Keyword : Othering processes, Adolescent Girls, Feminist Research Methods, Girls studies, Québec.

SEXY GIRLS AS « THE OTHER » : THE DISCURSIVE PROCESSES OF STIGMATIZING GIRLS

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INTRODUCTION

The first stage of my doctoral research was the mapping of media discourses on the so-called hypersexualization phenomenon in Quebec. Clearly missing from the picture were the voices of girls and young women (Caron 2006). To address this absence, I designed a research project intended at bringing their opinions and concerns to the public as well as in the academy. The project was built on the existing girls' studies literature, which is largely informed by American and British cultural studies, and by feminist theory (Harris, 2004). Rachel Gouin and Fathiya Wais (2006) have recently pointed out to the few contributions that have been made, to this international field of research, from a Canadian context. They insisted too on the lack of Francophone perspectives. To « open up girlhood studies to Francophones » (Gouin and Wais, 2006), and make a significant contribution to this growing body of literature, my research project focuses on a plurality of French-speaking teenage girls. In 2007, I conducted several individual interviews and focus group discussions with girls aged from 11 to 21, in Quebec, Montreal and Trois-Rivières.

The purpose of this paper is to share and address my discomfort and ambivalence while proceeding with this work. In retrospect, I notice that I somehow expected these inaudible perspectives to be alternative. In fact, what I've heard was sometimes already out there. But, moreover, it didn't match my feminist framework of analysis, which prompted me

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to conduct the research. Urging feminist scholars to tackle the ethical dilemmas arising from this kind discrepancy, social psychologists Celia Kitzinger and Sue Wilkinson convincingly ask : « What, as feminist researchers, are we to do about this? » (1997 : 567) Basically, this critical concern echoes my own uneasiness with the recurring use of the term “prostitute”, in my participants’ talk, to refer to girls who wear « too sexy » clothes and behave in a « too sexy» fashion.

My presentation explores and interrogates the apparently common discursive practice among teenagers of using a stigma to construct a specific group of girls as the « Other ». In so doing, I will engage with contemporary discussions about (the politics of) otherness, a central feature of feminist thought since the second wave of feminism and postcolonial studies (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002).

JUST ORDINARY TALK?

My journey begins with a quotation from the magazine *Authentik*, created *by* and *for* teenage girls, as part of a one-year intervention plan in a youth center. The project was intended at preventing girls’ recruitment from street gangs in a poor and multiethnic area of Montreal. The first issue of the magazine was published in spring 2007 and dealt with the issue of hypersexualization.

Extract 1 : “Why I hate Paris Hilton”

“I hate Paris Hilton because she pisses me off with her wealth and her too made up Barbie style. It’s easy to say “love yourself” when you are a babe like her and a star because of your plastic body and your rich dad from Hilton hotels. Even prostitutes are more prudish than her! The worst is that there are plenty of girls that do just like her and they complain afterwards that guys just want to do them. It’s not only the boys who are the problem, it’s also the girls who go around half naked and give a slutty image of themselves” (*Authentik magazine*, 2007).

Given that this text was published in a self-declared feminist magazine, I was intrigued and uncomfortable with its blaming and arrogant tone that I just can’t associate with

feminism. The teenage author insinuates that sexual abuse towards girls and women is merely the result of their provocative clothing and behavior. This is something feminists have been struggling against for a very long time – and still are. Since the participants were expected to raise awareness and a more complex understanding of violence against women over the year-long activities associated with the production of the magazine, this trenchant patronizing charge appeared to me as a disturbing outcome of the project.

I organized a focus group discussion in this youth center and shared my concerns about this piece. I asked the girls what the “slut” label made them think of. Some answered: “Of a prostitute”. Ally² said:

Ally., 15 years old

To me, a slut, it’s a girl who thinks she is truly and fully sexy, hot, and really beautiful, when she is not at all. It’s a girl who intentionally wears plunging necklines, sweaters that go up to here... The really mini-skirt... A girl that is there and pisses everyone off, and when she sees a good-looking guy, it’s HER guy, and nobody else’s. To me, that is a slut. It’s really a girl who bugs everyone.

Was this an exception, or a hint at a common pattern of communication among teenagers? In a second methodological stage, I added a few questions to my interview guide. The answers proved me right : the labeling of sexy girls as sluts, skanks and prostitutes, appeared, either implicitly or explicitly, as a common feature of my participants’ talk. The roughness of their spontaneity left me speechless. Here is a quote from a focus group discussion held in a Montreal’s Haitian Community Center.

Extract 3 :

Tori said: ., 15 years old
(...) if you dress too tight (...) they’ll say [the guys]... “ if she dresses like “this”, then she is like “this”. (...)

I replied (CC)
If she dresses like that (too tight), she is what?

They laughed with uneasiness

T., 15 years old

² All names are pseudonyms.

Well..., excuse me... she's a slut.

I added:

Guys say that to girls? You've seen that?

Many answered simultaneously

Well... yes... It's common.

(...)

CC, addressing myself to the group

You, do you do that, labeling girls who dress sexy?

Together

Yes!

Yes, yes! We do that, everyday!

Laughs

I added:

What do you say about girls who dress sexy?

Tori answered ., 15 years old

Well I say that they are sluts.

Obviously, this positioning is closely related to the available discursive resources sustained by the expert-dominated media discourse which is based, as demonstrated in my previous work, on patriarchal norms of (hetero)sexuality, and which has become a common-sense approach to hypersexualization (Caron, 2006). But despite my connectedness with the participants, however, my feminist politics prompts me to resist the abject label imposed on the « too sexy girls ». If omission and censorship are strategies routinely used by researchers to avoid dealing with unsettling data (Kitzinger and Wilkinson, 1997) I rather contend that this is precisely the task of feminism to address the ethical concerns raised by the inconvenient statements quoted above. They cannot be considered as *just ordinary talk* : they are hinting at a process of othering that, as a researcher informed by poststructuralism and postcolonial feminist theory, I just can't avoid to critically examine.

SEXY GIRLS AS THE « OTHER »

From De Beauvoir to Black feminism and postcolonial studies, the « Other » stands as a key concept, tied up with "[n]otions of difference [which] conceptualize how people are actually situated in relation to others, and what these differences mean, how they are constituted, regulated and experienced (Walkerdine, 1997, in Ramazanoglu et Holland, 2002: 106). This definition, according to Holland and colleague (2002) “challenges the notion of an 'other' as naturally different from, and properly subordinate to, a dominant category of normal self” (Ramazanoglu et Holland, 2002: 108). But whatever is considered normal depends upon who sets the norm. As a result, the « Other » is often denied authority, neither is he granted any expert status. In sum, the « Other » is a relational concept connecting two distinct and ordained categories.

The three above excerpts from my research interviews hint at a process of othering among teenagers, in that they highlight the marking of differences in talk. The delimitation of a border between two categories (« us » and « them ») allows the speaker to simultaneously put a distance and to position herself in the category she thinks is the best. It separates the « bad » girls from the « good » ones, and ordines them. Since none of the participants endorsed the « sexy girls » identity, the purpose of othering is seemingly to avoid being cast in the lower position associated with the « too sexy girls », socially defined as clueless (Pomerantz, 2006; Caron, 2006).

This labeling has been somehow signaled in several Canadian girls’ studies (Currie, 1999, Raby, 2006; Pomerantz, 2006; Currie and Kelly, 2006). Shauna Pomerantz (2006), for instance, in her ethnographic study on schoolgirls’ style in a Vancouver public high school, found out that, « [t]he « skank » label was used to form « exclusionary matrices » (Butler, 1993) that created both insiders and outsiders to each racially-defined group » (Pomerantz, 2006 : 180). Also, this label functioned as a resource for the positioning of racial groups

within the school as well as the emphasizing of class differences among girls (Pomerantz, 2006). It was also tied up with the particular form of femininity privileged in western public high schools, that many critical education theorists have defined as sites of « compulsory heterosexuality » (Epstein, 1994).

While ethnographic girls' studies helpfully provide a better understanding of girls' style, identities and agency, they remain silent, however, about the process of othering involved in the « communicating » and « communicated » embodiment of style. It doesn't say much about how difference is done and undone through talk, nor does it problematize the ethical concerns that those practices raise to the feminist researcher³. If style differentiates people, how, then, are the borders made relevant at the level of talk? My participants' accounts suggest that style is used to achieve a desirable identity. Yet, studies show that the decoding of one's style is filled with ambiguity and contradictions; it is unstable because it rests on the beholder (Pomerantz, 2006). The way clothing and style are spoken seems to matter too, though. I suggest that a closer look to how marginalization is achieved in talk might be helpful, in the future, for finding ways to disrupt it.

But as many have pointed out, translating one's feminist commitment to social change and justice is filled with constraints and contradictions (Kitzinger and Wilkinson, 1996 : 20-21). Actually, feminist researchers do confront exclusionary practices among girls and women and even anti-feminist statements while proceeding with their work. For instance, sociologist Rebecca Raby, reported that her young female participants contended that meanness was typical of women (2006). Kathryn Morris-Roberts (2004), in her ethnographic study conducted in a British high school, resented painful concerns when she has been confronted to the homophobic practices of her participants (Morris-Roberts, 2004). If voicing and validating

³ However, in their study of girls' agency and « relational aggression », Currie and Kelly (2006) comment on the othering aspect of meanness (2006). Nevertheless, how this operates at the level of talk is not problematized nor theorized.

womens' experience is a cornerstone of womens' studies, how are we going to interpret, then, data that doesn't fit our framework ? Kitzinger and Wilkinson have noted that this practical research problem was dealt, in fact « ... with a variety of ways which are often undertheorized or unclear, and which raise various ethical and political concerns" (Kitzinger et Wilkinson, 1997: 568).

Postmodern and postcolonial writers acutely argued that breaking the silence by « giving voice » to those who are spoken for is « inevitably a textual device that retains and reinforces rather than weaken the writer's authority » (MacMillan, 1996). To avoid this, it was proposed that we let the subjects' voices speak their own truths (Devault, 1990). But some consider that this solution misses the point : there are no voices nor subject's experience that would simply reflect one's transparent truth, since subjectivity is contingent upon its contexts, history and language (Spivak, 1988; Mohanty, 1988). In that regard, Spivak and Mohanty have insisted on how crucial is the stage of interpretation, given that the researcher « ...has the power of interpreting her/his selection of data according to his/her own chosen epistemology » (Ramazanoglu et Holland, 2002 :115). Hence, « As feminist researchers, we are 'chronically and uncomfortably engaged in ethical decisions about how deeply to work with/for/despite those cast as Others » (Fine, 1994a : 75).

I contend that being aware of the power relations embedded in academic research and writing shouldn't be an excuse for leaving out my participants' discursive practices of othering. Neither should it be an excuse to avoid acritical examination of what is at stake in the stigmatization of young women. Distancing myself from the outraged tone towards hypersexualization and « sexy girls », is my first move intended to break these practices, that are, incidentally, widely used among social workers, interns and teachers I have met throughout my research process. I find that to refuse to endorse the positioning of sexy girls either as victims or perpetrators is a first step in resolving my feminist ethical dilemmas. As

Michelle Fine and Linda Alcoff have suggested, the next step is, to listen carefully (Fine, 1994a,b) and critically (Alcoff, 1994) to what the girls have to say.

CONCLUSION :

According to Kitzinger and Wilkinson:

Unless we actively engage with the process of othering as *topic*, we run the risk of uncritically reproducing it in our own research and writing. Only by making *Othering* (rather than *Otherness*) the focus of our attention, and by exploring the ways in which it is done and undone, reinforced and undermined, can we open up the possibility, finally, of interrupting its oppressive discourse (Kitzinger and Wilkinson, 1996 : 27-28).

Unfortunately, I think this has already happened. Over the last years, it has become commonplace to blame girls who endorse the sexy style for being either provocative or irresponsible, and in both cases, for being corrupted. Even feminist psychologists, activist, and social workers tend to consider them as the manipulated objects of marketing and media corporations. In addition, the few feminist studies on hypersexualization in Quebec are rooted in the false-consciousness paradigm of interpretation. It seems that none of the sexy girls can enjoy fashion in its own right, and with their own taste to begin with. There seems to be an assumption that the girls' style is somewhat devoided of meaning, or that the girls actually wear provocative clothes, only to provoke. Meanwhile, the social meaning of clothes, which is currently under the control of those who are entitled to speak out and whose voices are legitimized, remain unproblematized. In that regard, it might be time to critically examine the norm, that even feminist experts have contributed to set over the last years, when addressing their concerns towards hypersexualization. The widespread discursive practices which are casting a specific group of young women as the "Other" in our society deny their subject's position: this must be challenged and disrupted. This is why feminism cannot afford to leave it out.

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