
Resisting the binarism of victim and agent: Critical reflections on 20 years of scholarship on young women and heterosexual practices in South African contexts

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Abstract

The last 20 years have seen a proliferation of research, spurred by the imperatives of the HIV epidemic and reportedly high rates of gender-based violence, on heterosexual practices in the South African context. Research has focused on how poverty, age and gender within specific cultural contexts shape sexual agency and provide a context for unequal, coercive and violent practices for young women. This paper takes stock of what we currently ‘know’ about heterosex and critically reflects on the political and ideological effects of such research, specifically in the light of young women’s agency. A primary concern is that efforts to address gender inequality and the normative gender practices that shape inequitable heterosexual practices may have functioned to reproduce the very discourses that underpin such inequalities. The paper ‘troubles’ the victim–agency binarism as it has been played out in South African research on heterosex, raising concerns about how the research may reproduce gendered, classed and raced othering practices and discourses and bolstered regulatory and disciplinary responses to young women’s sexualities. The paper argues for critical, feminist self-reflexivity that should extend to re-thinking methodologies entrenched in frameworks of authority and surveillance.

Introduction

Twenty years into democratic South Africa presents itself as an opportune moment for critical reflection on gender justice goals. This paper takes stock of one aspect of this – our progress with respect to two decades of addressing young women’s reproductive health in the light of the challenges of the HIV epidemic and the widespread nature of gender-based violence (GBV). More to the point, I attempt a critical reflection of the scholarship on gender, power and heterosex in South Africa. In line with Foucauldian notions of governmentality and knowledge-power, an excess of ‘talk’ and the proliferation of ‘knowledge’ on heterosexual practices in international contexts is by no mean organically ‘liberatory’. Indeed, the contrary is indicated. As Deborah Posel (2005) points out, the emphasised focus on sexual violence and the overwhelming scrutiny of men as perpetrators (read as poor, Black men) in South Africa since democracy, has had less to do with the imperatives of gender justice and more with national anxieties in the post-apartheid era. She argues that ‘the key to understanding this politicisation of sexual violence lies with its resonances with wider political and ideological anxieties about the manner of

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