
Book Review

Knowledge, Power, and Young Sexualities. A Transnational Feminist Engagement

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It is not an easy task deconstructing inequalities, gender in/justices, the persisting dominance of heterosexuality, prejudice, and violence among those labelled 'marginal and marginalised,' all in the context of class-based and globally imbalanced struggles. Yet, Shefer and Hearn have done that, engaging, in a feminist manner, with young sexualities – a *troubling* book, as announced in the preface by Floretta Boonzaier and Kopano Ratele, about youth sexualities coupled with a focus on adults (teachers, parents, policymakers, and politicians) demonstrating how a one-sided approach of young sexualities does not help in unfolding healthy, untroubled sexuality (and general wellbeing) for generations to come. The study unravels a vicious cycle of politics, power, and restriction, repeating itself across generations and geographically distributed power. The book is troubling in the sense that all critical research should be: disrupting, questioning, and systematically unveiling the taken-for-granted that keeps certain groups of people in their historically designated and traditionally gendered place, and others in dominant (patriarchal) positions. All that via an in-depth account of how youth sexualities unfold in a one-sided manner dominated by heteronormative prejudice, ageist assumptions, and pervasively gendered local and global politics.

The first chapter sets the stage by illuminating how trouble can and should take multiple meanings. It disquiets, uprooting undesired and historically systematic patterns, while at the same time showing how troubling it is to convey one-sided messages of health and social risks. Which other country than South Africa builds a stage where all forms of separateness (Apartheid) thrive until the present day, where the legacy is so vast? Thus, the book departs from South Africa, but at the same time mirrors patterns of thinking and behaviour to inspire worldwide. Young people's sexualities, their sexual 'education' mirror and reflect adults' norms, fears and political direction and adaptation, often in forms of disciplining instead of genuine, *respons-able* care. Efforts for gaining social justice in terms of gender, 'race', class, and educational positioning are manifold, but often reproducing, and thus undermining, the good intentions, if there are any.

The book is based on a vast body of literature, academic and popular (public discourse), about education, health care, politics, and of course, gender studies – it problematises the effects of certain dominant and often unquestioned knowledge. Chapter two unpacks the interrelations of youth, gender, and sexualities by looking at developments in South Africa after 1994, the year when the new constitution was put in place, with the promise of equality and equal chances for all. Obviously, this was – and is – also the age of HIV, and thus of a firm focus

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on health in relation to especially young sexualities. As already described by Pisani (2008), HIV triggered normativity and ‘trade’ to come to the fore: norms about (hetero)sexuality coupled with worldwide ‘help’: flows of money to the extent that we can speak of trade, streams of good and bad intentioned warnings related to sexuality. All this predominantly at young people, who are supposed to be sexually careless while non-heterosexuality ‘[is] marginalized, pathologized and stigmatized’ (Shefer and Hearn, 2023: 23). The main body of research supporting and elaborating this stance builds key themes for interrogation: intersectionality, gender-normative practices (including the blind spots in heteronormativity), coercion in sexual practices (based on a combination of both preceding terms), a specific focus on how boys and men are socialised into fairly one-sided masculinity and gender-biased norms and practices, and the impact of programmatic interventions. For instance, the probably unintended focus on sexuality as ‘dangerous’ and abstinence as a ‘solution’ triggering a very one-sided, build no helpful advice for young people. Herewith the stage is set for further detailed investigation, underlining that South Africa is a highly relevant context for these studies, but also reflects worldwide patterns of meaning, policy, and practice.

Chapters three to five each provide in-depth study and critical interrogation about the main themes: heteronormativity, patterns of power via ‘victims and perpetrators’, and a revealing treatise on how young people are being idealised and demonised via the adult gaze (and mind) of teachers, policymakers, and ‘well meaning’ social programmes. Gender binaries and heteronormativity have been widely studied and often proven ineffective in changing (gender) relations. Binary thinking and reinscribing heteronormative undercurrents keep producing images of passive femininity, rendering women helpless, vulnerable, and often victimised, or as super female survivors. Especially in the context of HIV/Aids, the reproduction of (older) male seducers and (very) young female victims has reinscribed both heteronormativity and a one-sided, ageist role division. Even the safe sex campaigns re-produce sexuality as one-sided or male pleasure driven – after all, all stories around condom use represent a specific understanding of male sexuality as both most important and most endangering.

What is a stake here is that identity and behaviour attribution (re)stereotypes young people, women and men, while hiding more detailed, ‘life world’ accounts of diversity and creativity in gendered behaviour that might provide a more nuanced picture of roles and of options that better express, and possibly alter the life world of young people. Summarising these patterns in a quote:

...the construction of a binarism in which masculinity is associated with the sexual, and femininity with the relational appears to be inherent in the assumptions of many researchers and educators ... (52).

All this raises questions for researchers and educators: how to address sexualities without affirming stereotypes that just confirm ‘old’ role models, practices and thus a lack of safe and happy sexualities? How much contestation will it take for a more nuanced understanding of feminine and masculine sexuality to gain common ground?

In Chapter four, the reproduction of binaries both in research and educational practices are unravelled as resulting in further entrenchment: heteronormativity further unquestioned, gender stereotypes affirmed, stereotypical behaviour (especially related to violence and victim positioning over time) and less normative space for thinking or acting otherwise continued. More specifically, this chapter shows how zooming in and out of South African contexts by switching scope from world research and South Africa-specific examples, helps gain a sense of the continuation of traditional patterns in an ever-changing world. Although alternative strategies are being promoted by some researchers and young people themselves, it proves hard to acknowledge the value of alternatives; showing and enacting vulnerability is hard under current circumstances.

This leads, in Chapter five, to explicitly address both idealisation and demonisation of young people. Using what is called a ‘Critical Adult Studies’ (CRAS) lens, the authors demonstrate how young peoples’ sexualities (including education, if performed at all) depart from an ‘adult’ understanding of sexualities rather than a human-development understanding of what sexualities should and could entail. This further perpetuates heteronormativity and ‘old’ norms and values about ‘proper behaviour,’ stressing danger, risk, and violence in the first place. In South Africa, this takes on particularly harsh forms as:

... South African young people are revered as the hope for the future, while at the same time stereotyped as at risk, vulnerable and dependent on adult knowledge and protection (79).

Especially in education, young sexualities are silenced – because it is difficult for adults to address the topic? Or because ‘ideal’ students should refrain from sexuality to better concentrate on their studies? This fatefully means that students who do explore their sexualities, and for instance, get pregnant, are to be excluded from education, obviously confirming gender patterns (girls leaving school for being pregnant and being ‘promiscuous’). This can hardly be taken as an adult solution for ‘a problem’? At the same time, such type of normativity engenders multiple power dimensions, via a temporal, or life course paradox: how should young people ever develop an ‘adult’ (balanced – non-binary, non-heteronormative) sexuality as part of their human lives if not via education, discussion, and openness about a multitude of related questions?

Chapter six then opens what at first sight (read) seems a different debate: the North-South debate in studies of youth and sexualities, whereby the south (Africa, Southern Africa, South Africa) is often represented as ‘suffering’ more from health risks, violence, and risky behaviour. What is being problematised here is a *transnational* perspective on young sexualities and how this is supported by traditions of doing and dispersing research knowledge. This take shows how research (transnational, transdisciplinary) also suffers from engrained norms and habits reflecting traditional power relations. Neoliberal university practices have once again colonised research habits, practices and what is seen as rules for proper research. Transnational feminist postcolonial studies have promoted different forms of knowledge production in that they address globalisation of capital, politics, and imperialist ways of knowledge production as pervading science and hindering alternative vistas on inequality, traditional norms, etcetera. But it is hard escaping neoliberal ways in research and teaching while, for instance, notions of ‘development’ and ‘aid’ speak so loudly, leading to ‘privileged irresponsibility’ (p. 99) among academics, politicians and those funding research and development in the first place. Yet, alternative approaches and knowledge outlets emerge when the pressure is high. Also concerning young sexualities, alternative powers are appearing via student activism and ‘wild’ scholarship promoting alternative pedagogies and creative assignments, e.g., in a combination of art, theatre and forms of activism purposefully including new knowledge and revealing extant power relations.

The latter is taken up in the concluding chapter, Chapter seven, where the authors sum up what they found and again dig deeper: showing how inspiring examples arise by young scholars who expand the limits of ‘traditional’ knowledge production. As with every revolution, student resistance and activism show glimpses of what a more equal and fair understanding of youth sexualities could look like - in ‘intersectional gender justice struggles’ (p. 125). Never to reach an ideal situation any time soon, but at least addressing, unveiling, and reversing extant power dimensions, in classroom relations as well as worldwide against neo-colonial undercurrents.

The book is densely written, citing numerous works and highlighting those publications and researchers that do problematise ‘traditional research’ by an explicitly feminist and deliberately international stance. Could it be that the *troubling* proven in this volume troubles more than young sexualities? It would be a benefit for all.

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