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‘YOU CAN SPOT THEM A MILE OFF’ – YOUNG WOMEN’S NEGOTIATIONS OF CLASS AND THE SEXUAL CULTURE OF SHAME

Abstract

In contemporary Western society, young women are caught between the competing discourses of the slut/virgin dichotomy and the more recent imperatives of a sexualised culture. Drawing on data from qualitative interviews with young people, I identify a relationship between social class and susceptibility to sexual stigma. The practice of slut-shaming works locally to bolster the social capital of some girls at the expense of others, often those of perceived lower status. I find that middle class women are afforded sexual liberty, particularly if they display agentic practice. In contrast, working class women occupy more precarious positions of sexual respectability which depend on narratives of relationships and love to ameliorate the potential for slut-shaming.

Key Words – Young Women, Class, Slut, Shame, Agency

Introduction

There are a number of derogatory terms in use to describe female sexual behaviour that contravenes a particular ‘code of conduct’ which is variable across time, place and social standing. That the subject of such slurs is female is taken for granted as there exist few terms to describe similar behaviour in men (Farvid et al. 2017; Tanenbaum 2000), most likely because such behaviour is not deemed socially deviant or problematic for men. ‘Slut-shaming’ refers to the practice of policing women based on their gender or sexual expression, identity or practice. Crucially, for slut-shaming to occur there does not need to have been any actual sexual

activity – revealing clothing (Bay-Cheng 2015), ‘sexy’ dance moves, having male friends, and an openness to discussing sexual matters can all be used as characteristics of a ‘slut’ regardless of whether the young woman in question is sexually active or not (Tanenbaum 2000).

Similarly, behaviour that may result in slut-shaming can be either actual or alleged (Bay-Cheng 2015), meaning that there does not have to be any actual evidence of transgression, or even agreement that transgression has taken place. The allegation alone can be enough. As Tanenbaum asserts, ‘the ostracized school ‘slut’ is a case study for all the other girls considering hooking up with a guy’ (2000, 87) in that she becomes the cautionary tale by which other girls measure their own sexual morality. Jackson and Cram note that such labels are often used by girls against each other, ‘regarding not only sexual behaviour but also behaviour that contravened traditional femininity’ (2003, 115; also Hamilton & Armstrong 2009). Thus ‘slut stigma is more about regulating public gender performance than regulating private sexual practice’ (Armstrong et al. 2014, 102).

This paper examines the role of slut-shaming in the construction of classed and gendered sexual subjectivities for young women.

The Gendered Double Bind

The gendered double standard refers to the different expectations of men and women in terms of sexual or romantic relationships. The male sex drive paradigm posited by Hollway (1984) relies on the widespread belief that sex is something which men need, a biological urge which must be satisfied and that men are naturally promiscuous. Thus, having multiple sexual partners is considered desirable for men (Farvid et al. 2017). In contrast, women are constructed as

sexually passive and are punished with social stigma for promiscuity, casual sex or early sexual activity. Thus individual women are either constructed as virgin (good) or slut (bad).

While much has been written previously on the slut/virgin dichotomy, the fact that this continues to pervade young people's sexual cultures means that it remains a compelling subject (Tolman, Anderson & Belmonte 2015; Tolman, Bowman & Chmielewski 2015; Bay-Cheng 2015; Aapola, Gonick & Harris 2005; Chambers, Tincknell & Van Loon 2004). Yet, within a society which is widely described as sexualised, the slut/virgin (slag/drag) dichotomy becomes more complicated. It is argued that sexualisation emphasises sexiness as an attribute for women and incites them to behave in sexually explicit ways in order to be seen as valuable (Papadopoulous 2010). Yet, how do women negotiate a society which simultaneously demands a good reputation and also a sexualised demeanour? This has come to be termed the 'double bind' (Bay-Cheng 2015; Livingston et al. 2013).

In recent years, a number of scholars have begun to unpick the notion of a 'double bind' for young women. Thus;

'...the conventional notion of a 'double bind' might be too simplistic a description of young women's entanglement within a complex knot of multiple, seemingly opposed normative injunctions: to abstain, to resist, to comply, to seduce, to express, to arouse and to perform' (Livingston et al. 2013:39).

For Bay-Cheng, constructions of female sexuality are being influenced by neo-liberalism. In her theory of the Agency Line, she offers 'an updated characterisation of the contemporary normative field in which girls' sexuality is constructed and enacted in the US' (2015, 279). Neo-liberalist discourse, according to Bay-Cheng, requires the exercise of free will, control and 'personal responsibility for all consequences' (2015, 280). Instead of a relatively simple double bind of slut/virgin for young women, she argues that the matter has been complicated

by neo-liberalist demands for agency contesting that ‘girls are now also evaluated according to the degree of control they proclaim, or are perceived, to exert over their sexual behaviour’. To illustrate this interplay, she goes on to contend that the virgin/slut continuum is bisected by the Agency Line, forming quadrants associated with different combinations of activity and agency levels. Therefore, according to this model, a young woman exhibiting high agency but low levels of activity may be described as ‘consciously celibate’. In comparison, a low agency but high activity subject would be labelled a ‘slut’.

Methods

The data presented here draws on qualitative interviews and focus groups with 31 young people between the ages of 16 and 25 years. Participants were recruited on a voluntary basis from drop-in youth services in the North East of England. Interviews were semi-structured to allow for the exploration of unanticipated topics and to allow participants to discuss what was important to them. Thus, encouraging the participants to ‘talk about the subject within their own frames of reference’ (May 2001, 124) was of particular importance. The focus of the research was sources of sex and relationship education therefore there were no specific questions about sexual reputation, sexual practice or slut-shaming but this was a key theme which emerged during analysis.

Transcripts were coded by repeated and close reading and the collation of emerging themes. A critical discourse analysis approach was employed in order to emphasise the relationship between discourse and social variables, specifically gender and class. The intention was to reflect on the competing systems of meaning available to young people and their abilities to take up, resist or challenge subjective positions within socially constructed discourse. The language used to talk about sexuality was deemed significant in revealing the different

discourses available to young people based on gender and class differences (Holland et al., 2004). Likewise, 'speech as a form of action' necessitates an 'analysis of the act of speaking' in conjunction with an analysis of the content of speech (Kehily 2002, 7). The analysis presented here emphasises the ways that youth sexual subjectivities are constructed through discourse.

A Note on Class as a Variable

Broad identifiers such as working and middle class were used in this research although it is recognised that this could represent an over-simplification of the class structure in contemporary Britain and that some of the nuances of class are lost by the use of this terminology (Elley 2013). However, these were the terms most readily understood and used by young people themselves and while other frameworks or language may offer more detailed categorisations, they also require a greater depth of personal disclosure than it was possible to generate within a transient, 'drop in' research relationship. Similarly, while other terms may be more descriptive and inclusive of a broader spectrum of criteria (advantaged/disadvantaged, for example), they are also more subjective, more easily misunderstood and suffused with particular connotations. Thus, participants who happily situated themselves as working class, might have felt more uncomfortable describing themselves, or being described, as disadvantaged.

Sometimes young people who had been similarly classed were particularly difficult to compare. In these cases, I have used the term aspirational working class to describe young people who were situated on the borders between classes in order to differentiate them from others in more established classed positions. Thus, a typically aspirational working class participant would be Reggie, who described himself as working class, whose upbringing was particularly impoverished and whose single mother was in and out of low paid employment. Reggie himself

was studying to be a pharmacist at university and expected to have a well-paid career after graduation. As a point of contrast, Sean, who was 22 and also lived with his mother, had no qualifications or training, had never had a job and did not have much interest in finding one. It becomes clear that including both these young people in the same class category would limit the analysis.

Old Habits Die Hard

Participants in this study acknowledged the injustice of the gendered double standard, while simultaneously reinforcing its centrality to contemporary youth cultures. The social status to be gained from having sex was widely recognised as true for young men, however, young women were subject to much more nuanced rules regarding sexual expression – sexual activity for young women was widely recognised as being potentially damaging and a source of shame. Practices that might confer ‘hero’ status on a young man may be viewed as ‘deeply morally questionable’ when enacted by a young woman (Aapola, Gonick & Harris 2005, 143; Carmody & Ovenden 2013). This privileging of male sexual desire and the regulatory effect of ‘sexual reputation’ on the sexual expression of young women was regularly described by the young women.

Boys can sleep with like numerous girls and be like...respected for it...but then if the girl does the same thing, within a friendship group, she gets like named...to be a slut (Charlotte, 16, w/c)

Like you don't want to be stereotyped as like a slut. So I would say it's bad. Like for a lad to be...to have many sexual partners and stuff, it's like seen

as...almost like...I don't know, like victory or something. You've got so many. But for a girl, it's like 'oh, don't touch her'. For a girl's own wellbeing, I would say don't be promiscuous. (Kimberly, 19, aw/c)

The participants perceived a considerable risk for young women in talking about their sexual experiences that is not present for young men as the following exchange highlights:

Interviewer - So for boys it is important to sleep with a lot of girls?

Stacey - I think so, yeah, personally. And especially being friends with a lot of...with a lot of boys, it's like I think that they all find it important to discuss and divulge into every part of a girl. Like tell them everything that has happened and it's just a bit embarrassing for a girl really, isn't it?

Interviewer - What about if a girl did that?

Stacey - She would get called a slut or a whore. She'd get a bad reputation, wouldn't she? Even girls look down on girls that do things like that. So for girls I think it is a bit more secretive, you don't want everyone to know if you've slept with people. But then, it's just sex really isn't it? I don't see why everyone can't do it. But girls get a bad name, don't they? (20, m/c)

Stacey discloses how the boys she knows enjoy discussing every aspect of their sexual experiences, making those experiences meaningful (Holland et al. 1996). While acknowledging that this is embarrassing for their female partners, she offers no real challenge or condemnation, accepting this behaviour as indicative of being a 'lad'. It is important to note that she is talking specifically about discussing sexual activity, and not necessarily the activity itself. She identifies that girls need to be 'a bit more secretive' and that 'you don't want

everyone to know'. She recognises that girls play a part in their oppression of each other as 'even girls look down on girls' who dare to discuss their sex lives, yet doesn't offer any real objection. Furthermore, while she questions the legitimacy of girls being subjected to restraints on their sexuality in a way that boys are not, ('it's just sex really, isn't it?') she accepts that this is the reality.

Thus, young women continue to face the slag/drag dichotomy even in the wake of the sexualisation of society and an apparently increased openness regarding sexual matters. The suppression of women's talk around sexuality is not a new phenomenon (Skeggs 1997; also Aapola, Gonick & Harris 2005) yet in an environment which some say constitutes an incitement to sexuality, the stigma attached to the discussion of personal experiences seems illogical. While talking for young men boosts status and adds to their reputation, girls can quickly become labelled and often face the greatest condemnation from other young women, even when those girls, such as Stacey, recognise the inequality of the status quo.

Sluts and Shame

The virgin/slut continuum is described as the 'the primary hegemony that is imposed on girls' (Tolman, Anderson & Belmonte 2015, 301). During these interviews the word 'slut' and synonyms were used to describe sexually deviant women by a number of female participants and were generally accepted as a label that women would want to avoid; that is, one which is entirely negative (Farvid et al. 2017). Interviewees were keen to distance themselves from 'sluts', either real girls who had been labelled or just the idea of a slut, and some actively participated in 'slut-shaming' their contemporaries. This was particularly evident in interviews with working class young women, possibly highlighting internalised constraints on sexuality in a society where working-class sexuality is disproportionately problematized (Tyler 2011;

Walkerdine et al. 2001). The following extract reveals the shared understandings that young women have about what constitutes 'slutty' behaviour.

Interviewer - So if a girl has sex with a boy and then people know about it, is that a bad thing for her?

Michaela – It depends on the situation. Like, if she's been seeing him or if it's a one night thing.

Charlotte – Like if she was drunk or something.

Michaela – Or if she didn't know him or whatever.

Charlotte – Or like if it was outside, inside. It depends.

Interviewer - So if she's drunk and they have a one night thing outside, is that bad?

Both – Yeah.

Charlotte – Everybody like laughs at you...like 'Oh my god, you shagged him outside'.

Michaela – It's a bit of a trappy thing to do.

Charlotte and Michaela demonstrate clear ideas on the right circumstances for having sex and circumstances which will result in being labelled a slut - being drunk, having sex with someone who is not a long term partner and having sex outdoors were all signifiers of misplaced sexuality for girls. Similar findings by Bay-Cheng and Eliseo-Arras (2008) cited multiple partners, concurrence of sex and inebriation and sexual activity outside of a relationship as

what Bay-Cheng terms ‘red flags for sexual risk and social sanction as a slut’ (2015, 284) suggesting a somewhat universal norm of what constitutes sluttiness.

A separate interview with two aspirational working class young women demonstrated these shared understandings but also lengthily described girls who *were* sluts. The shift in vocabulary is subtle but an important distinction. For other female participants the existence of a real, tangible group of women who were sluts was negligible – the important factor was the use of the label as a regulatory means, whether or not it alluded to real people or urban legends and a distancing of oneself from that label. For Kimberly and Amy, sluts were a particular group of girls with a number of distinguishing features.

Interviewer - When you say you could pick out the sluts a mile away, in what sense? From the way that they looked or the way they behaved?

Both – Both.

Kimberly – The makeup they wore. The...even their hairstyles were different.

Amy – Yeah, the hair, yeah.

The conflation of appearance with sexual reputation is one which has been reflected upon by a number of researchers (see Bay-Cheng 2015; Tolman, Anderson & Belmonte 2015; Armstrong et al. 2014; Tanenbaum 2000; Skeggs 1997). For Kimberly, ‘even their hairstyles were different’ demarcating a clear borderline between her own friendship group and ‘the sluts’. Neither girl was able to offer any detail on *how* the hair and makeup was particular, they were satisfied that it was simply different from their own. It is also significant to note that while Amy and Kimberly agreed that both appearance and behaviour were indicators of sluttiness, they chose to first elaborate on the aesthetic differences between themselves and the other girls, suggesting an eagerness to ensure that they were not mistaken for being part of this group.

Kimberly - So...and I mean...like when you say 'oh there was this group of sluts' it was basically like all the Charver lasses. Like it would be that group.

Bay-Cheng (2015) observes that for young women, choice of clothing can lead to them being labelled a slut, although she is specifically referencing a celebrity culture of sexiness that requires revealing outfits. Charver culture would usually represent a less overtly sexy look, typified by sportswear, but this is not enough to preclude Kimberly's assertion that the Charver group were sluts. Slut as a derogatory term often articulates more regarding class position than as a judgement on sexual morality (Armstrong et al. 2014; Tanenbaum 2000), and this is evidenced in Kimberly's disdainful description of the 'Charver group' at her school - 'Charver' being the local term for the group known nationally as 'Chavs'.

Chav Life

Charver status is based upon aesthetic, a uniform of tracksuits and trainers (Nayak 2006; Tyler 2008) being the most obvious signs. The Charver or Chav sub-culture has strong associations with joblessness, young parenthood, lack of education and the suspicion of participation in crime (Nayak 2006; Tyler 2008). As Davidson suggests, 'They are the dole-scroungers, petty criminals, football hooligans and teenage pram-pushers' (2004 quoted in Tyler 2008:21) and the Charver figure has long been derided in popular culture, one example being the Vicki Pollard character on BBC sketch show Little Britain. What Skeggs describes as 'signifiers of sexuality' such as 'loudness, vulgarity, bluntness and openness' (1997,124/5) are other connotations of Charver culture (Nayak & Kehily 2014). The perceived offensiveness of Charver culture in general, and particularly for the female, is summarised neatly by Tyler with her description of young Charver mothers.

‘The chav mum or pramface, with her hoop earrings, sports clothes, pony tail (‘Croydon facelift’) and gaggle of mixed race children, is the quintessential sexually excessive, single mother: an immoral, filthy, ignorant, vulgar, tasteless, working-class whore’ (2008, 26)

Kimberly’s repeated reference to ‘Charver lasses’ as sluts conflates sexual activity and class. Thus, being one or the other, for her, automatically makes a girl both. Kimberly goes on to discuss behaviour.

Interviewer - What kind of things did they do that made them slutty?

Kimberly – Well, for instance, I’ll tell you about this one girl, right. I mean she wasn’t the like...how do I put it? She wasn’t the most attractive, right? [...]And this girl came in one day and started bragging about how she’d literally met this lad for ten minutes and then they had sex on the field. And she was throwing it about like it was something to be proud of and I’m like ‘what?’ and I mean I’m not ashamed to say I was like one of these innocent ones who was like ‘Oh my God, what are they on about?’ but like, I’d sit there and like listen and I’m like ‘you’re going to regret that when you are older’. Like that is not something to like be bragging about and...oh, it was just ridiculous.

This excerpt demonstrates Kimberly’s desire to communicate the difference between herself and the girl in the story. Thus, class ‘is lived as an identity designation and not simply as an economic relation to the means of production’ (Walkerdine et al. 2001, 13). Further to this, we can say that, for Kimberly, the ‘Charver’ is, regardless of economic resources, of lower status than other working class women (such as Kimberly herself) due to her identity categorisation within a particular subculture. Moreover, Armstrong and colleagues (2014), who compare

higher and lower status young women in their study, find that social status is not dependent on material resources, although this can play a part in maintaining a particular lifestyle and can make it easier for a woman to achieve and maintain higher status. Status, for their college-attending participants, was based on looks, confidence, social skills and attractiveness to boys. Therefore, Kimberly's mention of her subject's looks, 'not the most attractive', could be described as a way to establish the lower status of this young woman.

Kimberly herself presented as an ambitious and aspirational working class young woman, currently studying at university. She presents as highly invested in slut shaming as a way to reinforce her own, precarious status as a respectable working class young woman. As Skeggs (1997,124) writes, 'The actual practice of sex occurs within a framework of recognitions of how women have already been socially positioned'. Therefore, the young Charver woman in the story, who has already been positioned as socially inferior based on class, subculture and looks, would always be susceptible to being labelled a slut, whatever the circumstances of her sexual experiences. Her possible participation in 'signifiers of sexuality', such as loudness, for example, means that whether or not she participated in actual sexual activity, she was already assumed to be sexual. Therefore, Kimberly can use this woman, or the idea of her, to illustrate difference and to bolster her own claims to respectability. By deflecting this stigma onto others, in a process called 'defensive othering' (Armstrong et al. 2014), she can consolidate her position as superior. Nayak and Kehily argue:

'The 'chav' as a recent and distinctive class-cultural phenomenon can be seen as both a media construction and a reconfiguration of enduring class-based social divisions fuelled by conceptualisations of an 'undeserving poor' and a

social 'underclass' whose life-choices place them beyond the pale of working-class respectability' (2014,1130)

Her disapproval of this young woman having sex with a partner with whom she had just met, supports the notion that some working class women view sexual activity outside the confines of a formal relationship as 'morally suspect' (Armstrong et al. 2014,112; see also Skeggs 1997; Lees 1993). She echoes Charlotte's assertion that 'If she's been seeing him or if it's a one night thing' is crucial as to whether or not a girl's behaviour deserves condemnation or not. As Aapola, Gonick and Harris state, 'Girls are supposed to only become sexually active within the romantic discourse' (2005, 152), which emphasises the confines of a stable relationship as the acceptable environment for sexual expression. I argue that this is particularly salient for working-class women, for whom sexuality is already problematised (Walkerdine et al. 2001). For many, a relationship would be the only environment in which they could safely explore their sexuality and ameliorate the possibility of slut-shaming.

To illustrate, having sex outdoors was derided as indicative of sluttiness, the location of the sexual acts in question was specifically included in the narration of the story to support the claims. Yet when asked if sex outside constitutes sluttiness, Kimberly highlights the difference in how this behaviour would be perceived when acted in the context of a relationship, 'I don't think being older and with a partner and saying 'Do you want to try something different?' and maybe a change of scenery (laughing)'. The behaviour takes on an entirely different meaning, one of sexual experimentation and daring, when it takes place within the safety of a relationship. Similarly, Kimberly's emphasis on being older underlines her views about the propriety of sex for young people, while side-lining the issues that contribute to young people having sex outside, namely that for many young people, there are few spaces where their sexual activity is sanctioned.

Furthermore, 'that is not something to like be bragging about' reinforces the idea that the discussion of sex is especially troublesome for girls (Armstrong et al. 2014). Therefore, if talking about sexual activity makes it meaningful (Holland, Ramazanoglu & Thomson 1996), the young woman in the story has made her own experience negatively perceived by boasting, in the same way that a young man might make the same experience more positively perceived. Unfortunately, when it comes to sexual reputations for women, how you are perceived by others is often more important than your actual behaviour.

The Agency Line

I remember there was one girl as well who likeI remember it was on that day, the sex ed day. And she came in and she was like 'I think I've had sex. I don't remember really. I was like really drunk. I just remember coming round and my buttons were undone on my pants'. And we were like 'Oh my God. What's happening? How can you not know?' (Laughs). I think she was labelled from then on. (Amy, 20, aw/c)

As a researcher, I was disturbed by this story as, for me, it offers a narrative of vulnerability and possibly, rape and I was uncomfortable with the complete lack of sympathy that this engendered in the participants. However, application of Bay-Cheng's theory of the agency matrix to Amy's narrative offers the possibility of a broader analysis and some explanation of her reaction to the story. Neo-liberalist injunctions to agency preclude this young woman's story from eliciting empathy as the issue in question is not the sexual activity itself, but the fact that its occurrence has happened outside of her control. It is this failure to exercise free will

and choice that leads to this young woman's label as a slut, 'How can you not know?' Furthermore, the insistence on personal responsibility means that the young woman in question must absorb culpability for this incident as her excessive drinking has diminished her ability to act with agency. Bay-Cheng argues, 'Neoliberal ideology insists on unconditional personal responsibility while it simultaneously exempts us from any obligation to one another' (2015,287). This could explain Amy's lack of outrage at this potentially non-consensual situation, the girl must be held responsible for being unable to consent.

Interviewer - So from what I am understanding, tell me if I'm getting it wrong, slutty behaviour is like getting drunk and having sex?

Amy – I wouldn't say getting drunk and having sex, I would just say having sex for all the wrong reasons. It wasn't anything to do with that they wanted to. It was the status of it, like 'I've had sex, I'm amazing. You haven't. You're all virgins, you are all losers'.

Kimberly – But basically, all of them who were like sluts or whatever, were in that charver group that would go out drinking on a Friday night in a field with a bunch of lads. So in a way you could bring drunkenness into it.

Amy – It was the way they were acting, it wasn't specifically the drunkenness. Like it was the actions that came afterwards.

Amy's reference to one woman's assertion that 'I've had sex, I'm amazing' again aptly demonstrates the condemnation that a girl can face on discussing her sexual exploits. The interviewees do not seek to denounce female sexuality or experience per se, but rather find shame in having sex 'for all the wrong reasons.' The failure of young women's agency is apparent in that, 'it wasn't anything to do with that they wanted to', having sex in order to

bolster social standing was frowned upon, even for women who may have had little social capital outside of their sexuality. Ringrose and Renold (2012) state that working class women are more invested in their desirability as this can be productive of 'erotic capital' or higher status (Armstrong et al. 2014). I would argue that while this might be the case for some working class women, for those who occupy the borderlands between working and middle class (those designated aspirational), there seems to be more capital in academic achievement, education and intelligence. Thus, Amy and Kimberly are disdainful of girls they think have sex to prove their worth. It is worth noting, however, that the social capital of these aspirational working class women is precarious, possibly explaining their investment in slut-shaming as a means to consolidate their superiority.

While Amy argues that 'it wasn't specifically the drunkenness' that she objects to, the implication is that excessive alcohol has led to the inability to act in an acceptable way, 'it was the actions that came afterwards'. Willett contends that while agency plays a role, it is a perceived lack of discipline that provokes criticism. Thus, Amy sanctions those who 'lack the discipline to make good choices' (Willett 2008, 429), in this instance the undisciplined body being the inebriated body. For Fjær and colleagues, who studied young Norwegians' judgements of others' sexual behaviour, 'the implicit prescription seems to be that women should always exert self-control by controlling their own sexual desires (which is not the same as denying them)' (2015, 11). Thus, for their participants, having sex and getting drunk were not especially problematic, indeed in some circumstances both behaviours were expected and encouraged, as long as a girl was understood as being in control.

Jackson and Cram (2003) denote a difference between women who are proactive in their desire to have sex and can go out looking for it and those who merely react to the desire of men, girls

who 'just say yeah to everything'. Here the undisciplined body can be applied to those who are reactive, they lack the discipline to seek out potential partners or experiences themselves.

Middle Class Sex

In line with Maxwell and Aggleton's findings (2013), middle class girls were less sexually limited by ideals of propriety and respectability than working class young women. Discourses of love were less obvious in the girls' interviews, with casual sex outside of relationships normalised and less shame attached to promiscuity.

I kind of have a similar view to sex as I do to catering. So, you know, it is a physiological need and as long as you go somewhere safe then it's not really a problem. (Valerie, 21, m/c)

...in my experience, I think there are a lot less negative connotations with girls having sex with a lot of guys or girls than there used to be. And everyone seems a bit more open to the idea that if guys can play that way, then why can't we? (Ida, 18, m/c)

In contrast to the working class girls who discussed promiscuity only in terms of *other* girls and were at pains to separate themselves from such activity, middle class girls were able to disclose their own behaviour.

Last year when I was a fresher, I kind of, you know like, slept around a bit. (Stacey, 20, m/c)

Similarly, while working class girls spoke of the status of having sex for boys, middle class girls recognised that sometimes, in certain circumstances, this could also be the case for girls. While an absence of agency was conducive to being a slut, being perceived as agentic in sexual matters offered middle class girls the opportunity to gain the respect of their peers.

I mean some girls respect that, as in you've done what you want, good on you.

(Ida, 18, m/c)

Being seen to be doing 'what you want' meant that middle class girls had more opportunity to sexually experiment than was afforded the working class girls. Aside from being perceived in a positive light by others, increased sexual experience was personally valued by some of the participants. In a discussion in a joint interview about starting university and disclosing numbers of previous sexual partners, Jenny (19, m/c) and Rosie (20, m/c) position themselves as unapologetic sexual subjects.

Jenny – it is a numbers game with boys, I think. Whereas with girls, it's not at all.

Rosie – so if you're like...if you say like a certain number, girls can be like 'oh, that's quite a lot' and you're like 'can't really take that back though' Like a lot of our friends, girlfriends at uni, are...like their numbers are relatively low, they range between 1 to about 5.

Both young women have a positive view of themselves regarding their sexual expression, even when this is in conflict with group norms. This may be partly attributable to their confidence that they were not having sex for the 'wrong reasons', to increase their numbers of sexual partners or in order to boast as boys did, but because it was what they wanted. Therefore, while a friend may comment that Rosie had slept with 'quite a lot' of partners, there is no lasting stigma for Rosie herself. Maxwell and Aggleton (2012) found that, for their participants, with increased sexual experience came increased sexual confidence, which in turn led to an improved capacity to exert control over other aspects of their relationships. This may explain Rosie's ability to shrug off a friend's judgement. While Kimberly (aw/c) constructs herself as

superior due to her fewer sexual partners, Rosie (m/c) sees herself as superior due to her greater experience and confidence.

Similarly, Hamilton and Armstrong (2009) note that middle-class girls in US viewed college as a time for sexual experimentation, hook-ups and promiscuity and that these behaviours were not only acceptable but encouraged as part of the college experience. Relationships were constructed as problematic for middle class college students as they presented a distraction from school work and career progression. Thus, the hook-up culture of college provided them with a way to engage in sex without the demands of a relationship. It is important to note that all of the middle class girls who participated in this study were university students, living away from parents and outside of the place in which they grew up. This anonymity and freedom from parental control might explain their more relaxed attitudes to sex. In Hamilton and Armstrong's study working class women were less invested in career and education, and were looking forward to marriage and children in the near future. In my study, working class women presented themselves as highly invested in relationship maintenance as this represents the only acceptable context for sexual activity. Comparatively, none of my middle-class participants disclosed ongoing, formal or exclusive relationships with boys.

For one of Hamilton and Armstrong's participants, casual sex represented a form of social education that involved learning 'what it's supposed to feel like when I'm with someone that I want to be with' (2009, 605). She interpreted women who did not have this experience as worthy of pity, 'I feel bad for some of my friends....They're still virgins' (*ibid*). Likewise, when Jenny, in this research, later asserts that their friends will change in terms of sexual experience over the three years of university, she reveals her shared understanding that greater experience offers increased status. Here, Rosie and Jenny construct themselves as knowledgeable through experience and as active sexual agents. Indeed, Rosie offers excuses not for her own proclivity, but for the lack of experience her friends have gained.

...lots of them have had like long term relationships but...like since they were about 14...or didn't have sex, didn't lose their virginity until they were about 17.

Young women of higher status are not included in slut-shaming discourse – their higher status affords them the privilege of sexual expression without the constraints of public censure (Armstrong et al. 2014). Regarding Rosie and Jenny, both described themselves as middle-class and presented as confident, educated and popular and thus, could be described as higher status. This could protect them from slut-shaming discourse and enable their confident disclosures of multiple sexual partners, sex outside of relationships and drunken one night stands (Armstrong et al. 2014; Bay-Cheng 2015).

Similarly, Carly recognises that there is a double standard for boys and girls most of the time, but also argues that plenty of young women are promiscuous with few negative consequences.

It really depends on the person. I think boys as a general rule are a bit more...like they don't mind about sleeping around with lots of people cos they don't get called names obviously. Whereas girls have got to be a bit more careful cos you get called like a slut and stuff if you do that. But at the same time like loads of girls sleep around loads and it doesn't (affect) them at all so I don't know. It's kind of...it depends on the person really (Carly, 19, m/c)

Her statement that the way people think about and perform sex and relationships depends on the individual, points to an acknowledgment that not all girls and young women are equally treated by society. It could be that some young women can 'sleep around loads' while displaying appropriate levels of agency and are therefore considered acceptable. It could also point to a recognition that certain conditions offer exemption from slut-shaming – class or race privilege, or increased status, for example (Bay-Cheng 2015).

This can be viewed in terms of being positioned and positioning (Jackson & Cram 2003; Wetherell & Edley 1998). Thus, working class women positioned other women as ‘sluts’ and were aware that their own behaviour could allow other women to position them as ‘sluts’ if caution was not exercised. Rosie and Jenny positioned themselves as sexually experienced and simultaneously recognised that this position was unshakeable, ‘can’t really take that back though’. They positioned others as ‘drags’ but acknowledged that this could (and implicitly, should) change over time.

On the topic of neoliberal sexual agency in modern culture, Bay-Cheng (2015, 281-2) asserts that a key element is to ‘showcase female sexual power and appetite: women commanding sexual attention, demanding sexual pleasure, and pursuing sexual fun, all without apology’. Using this definition and the previous extracts, Jenny and Rosie set themselves up as ideal neoliberal sexual agents. However, while the pursuit of sex and sexual attention was entirely acceptable for Jenny and Rosie, they were certainly not able to demand sexual pleasure.

Interviewer - Do girls expect to have a good time when they’re having sex, do you think, or is it just for the boy?

Rosie – Erm...it depends.

Jenny – I mean, it’s nice to have a good time but I suppose, I wouldn’t like go into sex knowing, yeah...it’s not like with a boy they go into sex, they’re like ‘I know I’m going to enjoy this’. With girls, it’s a bit more....it’s going to go one way or the other.

Jenny’s understanding that sex for women is ‘going to go one way or another’ (it might be pleasurable but equally it might not) challenges Bay-Cheng’s ideas of young women’s agency. Jenny presents herself as lacking control over sexual outcomes and as a passive recipient of

boys' actions. While Jenny may be free to choose when, where and with whom to have sex, seemingly without fear of social sanction, she reveals her lack of freedom to ensure her own sexual pleasure. It would appear that Jenny, otherwise a social and sexual agent, takes little responsibility for having a good time.

Interviewer - Is it important to be able to talk to your partner about what you like, and what they like, or is that not something you would do?

Jenny – I don't know, not really.

Rosie – I think it's quite...it's like unspoken about...I wouldn't be like 'oh, I really like it when you do this'.

Jenny – It's a taboo subject.

It is interesting to note that a number of participants highlighted the importance of communication between partners, but this was usually framed in terms of feeling uncomfortable or not being happy:

I think that is important as well, because if there is something you are not comfortable with then they should completely understand that. (Molly, 17, aw/c)

It just ruins it for both of you really if you're not happy with something that they want or they are not happy with something you want, it's kind of like, you're not in sync at all and it's pointless really. (Claire, 17, aw/c)

The girls understood it was important to be able to communicate with a partner about being 'not happy with something'. However, the importance of communicating what you *did* want was missing.

I don't think I feel uncomfortable saying 'not that', you know if they suggest something or try something...like, I find that easy to do. But I'd find it harder to suggest like 'could you try this?' or 'would you like this?' I find that a bit more embarrassing. I tend to play it safe (Olivia, 20, m/c)

Olivia, while otherwise very confident and open-minded when discussing sexual matters, demonstrates the difference for her in being reactive, 'not that', and proactive in assuring her own pleasure. These problems with disclosing desire echo previous points on the danger of talking about sex for women, suggesting that the taboo on female sex talk is deeply embedded in youth culture.

If it is the second or third time I'm sleeping with them then I'm perfectly comfortable in communication in saying this is what I like, this is what I don't like. Like asking them, gauging what they also enjoy but in a one night stand situation it is more a bit like keep it traditional. (Ida, 18, m/c)

For Ida, the ability to be active in pursuit of sexual pleasure was dependant on the context of the experience. In a one night stand situation, she prefers to play a passive role – when asked about the term 'traditional', she qualified this by saying, 'Like, lie back and think of England'. Taking responsibility for her own sexual pleasure was something that was only acceptable in the context of an ongoing sexual association.

The image painted by Bay-Cheng of a sexually liberated, confident young woman exerting her right to sexuality is complicated by these factors. It is worth noting here that while Bay-Cheng (2015) argues that neoliberalism has offered young women unfettered sexual agency – indeed, it demands sexual agency – there are more complex factors involved in showcasing female sexual power than simply the amount of sexual partners or the acceptability of sex outside of a relationship.

Conclusion

This research shows that young women are still subject to conditions shaping their ability to express themselves sexually. Sexualisation discourse concludes that young women are incited into promiscuity yet 'slut-shaming' and the fear of stigma offer powerful disincentives to become sexually active, particularly for aspirational working class young women.

There are marked contrasts between middle class and working class participants, represented by their relationship to, and investment in, slut-shaming. Working class participants, particularly those belonging to the aspirational working class, were keen to distance themselves from more sexually experienced contemporaries and highlight their own limited experience. Participants constructed themselves as knowledgeable, not through experience, but through reiteration of group understandings of 'the right kind of sex under the right kind of circumstances'. Having sex for the wrong reasons, such as in order to boast, could be said to breach appropriate codes of working-class femininity as discussion of sexual exploits and boasting about one's sexual partners were usually viewed as uniquely male privileges.

Slut-shaming was also linked to class, signifying not just a slur on sexual reputation but also a communication of class inferiority. Aspirational working class women in my study were particularly judgemental of other girls' sexual exploits, whether real or imagined, and were particularly invested in slut-shaming as a way to reinforce their own perceived social superiority. In contrast, middle class young women presented as less invested in slut-shaming. In some cases they worked from the opposing view, that those with less experience than

themselves were to be pitied. They demonstrated a ‘class privilege’ that appeared to exempt them from labelling, or at least, from the ill effects that a ruined reputation might offer.

A key issue in the maintenance of sexual reputation was agency, and being in control, disciplined and exerting free will regarding sexual activity were deemed to be ideal circumstances. Agentic performance of sexuality, whether actual or perceived, could protect a young woman from slut-shaming. Bay-Cheng’s agency matrix (2015) is somewhat supported by the findings here, although there are more complex, complicating factors at play. While some young women demonstrated agency in choosing when and with whom to have sex, there was little evidence of young women feeling empowered to be proactive in their own sexual pleasure. While girls seemed to take responsibility for speaking up about feeling uncomfortable, there was no available discourse for young women to advocate for their own sexual pleasure.

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