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Claire Maxwell and Peter Aggleton

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# Bodies and Agentic Practice in Young Women's Sexual and Intimate Relationships

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**Claire Maxwell**  
University of London, UK

**Peter Aggleton**  
University of Sussex, UK

## Abstract

This article contributes to theorizations of agency through a focus on how understandings of power within young women's sexual and intimate relationships connect with their descriptions of feeling, reacting and sensuous bodies, to suggest why and how agentic practice takes place. Drawing on the narratives of 54 young women aged 16–18 years in one secondary school in England, findings concur with other literature which suggests that sensations experienced on or within the body can instigate (agentic) practice. Significantly, however, both physical and verbal practices are drawn on during agentic moments. Young women who discursively position themselves as 'powerful' integrate their bodies within such an understanding, using this integration to shore up the possibilities for agentic practice. Moving away from an understanding of practice as 'accommodating' and/or 'resisting' norms and inequalities, this article identifies four strategies described by the young women (assertive, refusing, proactive and interrogative) for facilitating more sustained agency.

## Keywords

agency, power, sex, the body, young women

Recent years have seen an increased engagement with agency in social theory (Barnes, 2000; Clegg, 2006; McNay, 2000). However, there continues to be a gap in writing that brings together theory and findings from empirical research (for exceptions, see Allen, 2008; Maxwell and Aggleton, 2010; Renold and Ringrose, 2008; Youdell, 2005). There is also a paucity of published work which seeks to understand 'the intertwining'

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## Corresponding author:

Claire Maxwell, Institute of Education, University of London, 27/28 Woburn Square, London WC1H 0AA, UK.  
Email: c.maxwell@ioe.ac.uk

(McNay, 2000: 14) of the material with the symbolic in discussions of agency, especially within the field of sexualities (exceptions include Bryant and Schofield, 2007; Westhaver, 2006; Youdell, 2004). As Williams and Bendelow (1998: 154) argue, 'the sensual experience of our bodies [can provide] an expanded understanding of the place of bodily agency in society'.

The 'body' has also been the focus of increased attention in sociology over the last two decades (Blackman, 2008; Radley, 1995; Turner, 2008; Williams and Bendelow, 1988). Theorists concerned with feminisms (Budgeon, 2003; Butler, 1993; Frost, 2001; Grosz, 1994) and sexualities (Allen, 2005; Dowsett, 1996; Westhaver, 2006) have contributed to discussions. Against the background of work seeking to conceptualize the body and its potential to be agentic, this article seeks to develop further our ideas about young women's agentic practices (see Maxwell and Aggleton, 2010) through a focus on the body in young women's narratives of their sexual and intimate relationships. In particular, we examine how young women describe and understand their bodies, how the body is imbued with power, and the ways bodies appear to lead and be integral to practices which are agentic. In this way, our analysis hopes to extend current theorizations of the transformative potential of the body (Brown, 2006; Bryant and Schofield, 2007; Shilling, 2004; Westhaver, 2006).

## **An Introduction to the Agentic Body**

Current theoretical work on the body has moved determinedly away from the Cartesian dualism which prioritized the mind over the body, rendering the latter almost passive. In reference to recent work, Blackman (2008: 58) concludes, 'what we start with is an assumption of the permeability of boundaries and the inextricable connection of mind with body'. Grosz's (1994) image of the Mobius strip whereby the body is both object and subject evokes this fluidity vividly. But how exactly are thoughts, actions and wider discourses expressed, experienced, played out and potentially transformative within, through and on the material surfaces (i.e. the skin and perhaps even the flesh beneath) of the subject? This is still a matter of considerable debate.

Judith Butler offers a reading of the body as object, which is discursively produced and whereupon cultural meanings are inscribed. However, she also imbues the body with capacity or agency as she argues that the body 'can occupy the norm in myriad ways, exceed the norm, rework the norm ... [and is] open to transformation' (2004: 217). For her, the body is 'a field of interpretive possibilities' (Butler, 1987: 133). But how have other writers used Butler's work to understand empirical data?

Youdell (2005), for instance, draws on Butler primarily to understand how young people perform sex-gender-sexuality, and how intricately bodily practices are involved in both constraining but also at times opening up new subjectivities. In the 'scenes' Youdell shares from her ethnographic work in school, she highlights how closely talk and bodies interact during the performance of gender. Reflecting on the experiences of Ian, one of the young men written about by Youdell (2004: 484), it would appear as if he is rather cruelly and intentionally physically excluded from finding a place to sit in an almost full classroom by another young man – Ohan (through 'a look' or by Ohan intentionally occupying a space round a table in a way that makes it difficult for Ian to

sit down). In such moments, the body is used – here by Ohan – to great effect to maintain heteronormative boundaries (as Ian does not appear to live up to appropriately masculine norms in this context). Later on, with the support of another boy, Ian is able to (un)intentionally get back at or embarrass Ohan through a verbal exchange which draws on ‘homosexual’ cultural and sexual references. Meanwhile, Scott, another young man described in Youdell’s (2004) article, combines talk about, with an impromptu physical performance of, ballet within the classroom, which arguably, at least in that moment, opens up possibilities for thinking about the performing boy/young man differently. While the various physical and discursive performances by these young men highlight how the two work together to create an impact, in order to further understandings of agentic practice we need to consider in greater depth the ways in which the physical and discursive work together. Particularly, we need to examine how speech and the physical sensations, reactions and movements of the body are experienced and deployed (consciously or unconsciously) in combination or on their own with most effect for opening up more sustained possibilities for agentic practice – which may or may not be socially transformative.

Although there is scope for continued theoretical distinctions to be made between understandings of the body that present it as both subject and object (Grosz, 1994), as ‘affected and affecting’ (Blackman, 2008: 129), as an event (Budgeon, 2003) or as a becoming (Braidotti, 2002), this article positions itself within all of these frameworks as we would argue they all recognize the power of individual bodies to interact with other individual bodies and broader discursive structures. Before focusing on findings from our own work, however, we briefly review a number of key articles that have directly engaged with the role of bodies in agentic practice within sexual and intimate relationships.

Writers such as Holland et al. (1998) and Allen (2005), from within a poststructuralist framework, have argued that a crucial step to being agentic within sexual and intimate relationships is for young women to feel connected to their bodies and to pursue sexual pleasure. Feeling and/or articulating sexual desire is argued to be a measure of power as it indicates ‘whose pleasure is prioritised in social relations’ (Allen, 2005: 94). Bryant and Schofield (2007) have developed these ideas further through their in-depth analysis of 18 women’s (sexual) life histories. These women’s narratives suggested 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’ (2007: 337). The authors found that women discussed particular ‘transformative moments’ (2007: 331) in which ‘new possibilities’ (2007: 332) were revealed, many of which ‘originated in erotic bodily pleasures’ (2007: 332). Some examples from their study included early sexual experiences during youth of being touched and kissed, or having one’s anus touched during a sexual encounter and deriving a newly felt pleasure from this act. Bryant and Schofield 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.

Such ‘body-erotic potential’ (Dowsett, 1996: 159) or a legacy of experiencing sexual pleasure could be argued to be closely linked to Butler’s (2002) idea that experiencing suffering or pain (Ahmed, 2002; Williams and Bendelow, 1998) can lead to a politics of

performative resignification (Butler, 1997). Shilling introduces a similar notion via the concept of 'creative revelation' (2004: 481). Drawing on the work of Bourdieu (1984) and Joas (1996), Shilling explores how experiences people have may clash with their expected, habitual action (and reactions), leading them to question their worlds (via a so-called 'crisis'), which in turn opens up the possibility for a new way of moving, behaving, responding, which itself may become habitual over time.

Westhaver has argued that 'bodily gestures ... evoke or create new semblances of the world, as gestures that create insight and empowerment for the actors involved' (2006: 636). In his ethnography of gay men attending commercially organized dance or 'circuit parties' in North America, he examines 'how *actual* bodies live with and through power' (2006: 616, italics in the original). Westhaver proposes 'an *immanent* conceptualization of power's relation to the body' (2006: 615, italics in the original) in which power is understood to be present within, as well as external to the body. The depth of analysis offered by Westhaver in relation to bodies, subjectivities and power is what makes his a key contribution to analysing how these aspects of experience combine. One of Westhaver's participants, for example, describes how the atmosphere of the parties sends a 'sexual vibe through the crowd' (2006: 624), which another participant (called Trent) seems to internalize as 'a click'. Trent explains that this seemingly internal physical reaction to the atmosphere of the party immediately makes him feel comfortable enough to have sex on the dance floor ('I just did it') but also extends to him having 'a new coming out', feeling 'comfortable with the whole gay thing' (2006: 624).

Westhaver rejects mainstream Bourdieusian analysis because he argues it leaves little room for the body to play a role 'in explaining practice' (2006: 632). Instead, using Honneth's (1995) discussion of the importance of social recognition, Westhaver is able to theorize the body as 'an agentic force in its own right' (2006: 634) where feeling 'dis-respected', for instance, can become a 'motivation for practice' (2006: 634). Thus, Trent's sensation of feeling comfortable with being gay in the context of the circuit parties – an initially physical sensation, which he is then able to articulate verbally – becomes 'both the source and the means to revision the present' (2006: 636).

Reflecting on the theoretical understandings developed in the previous literature, we now explore how our own data provide a number of useful levers for examining how bodies can be agentic. The physical and emotional sensations and residues (be they pleasurable, painful or unarticulated) experienced through sexual and intimate relationships may provide the stimulus for potentially new modes of thinking and doing. These revelatory moments can then be translated into more sustained practice either through the desire or need for social recognition (as argued by Westhaver, 2006) and/or because this mode of action eventually becomes habitual (Shilling, 2004), which may or may not require the person to articulate, rationalize and consciously commit themselves to such a new understanding or behaviour.

## **Agentic Practice within Young Women's Sexual and Intimate Relationships – the Story so far**

Our starting point for examining agentic practice among young women has been an attempt to move beyond work which appears to see agency as a binary concept, in which

practice is seen as either accommodating or resisting dominant, heteronormative expectations and understandings. We have also argued that one of the limitations of writing to date which draws on empirical data to theorize about agency is that agentic practices usually appear to be momentary, and it is not clear how such practice can become more sustained. Our starting point for developing further understandings of the factors that might drive agentic practice and where possibilities for more sustained agency might exist has been to understand how young women position themselves within their sexual and intimate relationships and to consider how they understand issues of power and control within these.

In our work, we have found that young women view power not only as a resource that is shared (usually unequally) between two partners, but also a capacity of the self. We found that young women were able to describe many situations in which they had experienced an inequality of power between themselves and their partner, and that this had provoked an emotional reaction which appeared to motivate them to 'take action', 'take power back' and in this way be agentic. We also saw many young women positioning themselves discursively as simply powerful, where power was not understood as a relational concept. Such a discursive position was evidenced in the way young women positioned themselves as active and in control when narrating their experiences and through the use of a strong, 'I decide' (agentic) approach to relationships and sex.

Additionally, we found that some young women recognized certain conditions or experiences as ones they did not wish to have repeated, and appeared to be actively incorporating these lessons learned into their current and future practices – providing an indication of how more sustained agency might become possible (see Maxwell and Aggleton, 2010 for more details). What is key to our theorization of agency is that we do not assess whether practice is agentic or not based on whether it necessarily challenges dominant norms.

Centrally, in our work to date we have chosen to foreground 'narrative' as the medium through which we interrupt the 'stories' (Frost, 2009) young women construct about their sexual and intimate relationship experiences during the research process. Drawing on De Fina and Georgakopoulou, we view 'narrative as talk-in-interaction and as social practice' (2008: 379). Such an understanding of narrative allows us both to consider how micro- and macro-level discourses are used in talk and, very importantly, to conceptualize narrative as a mode of action in itself which is consistent with our concern to see agency as more than a discursive performance (McNay, 2000).

## The Study

As described elsewhere (Maxwell and Aggleton, 2010), our original study aimed to explore young women's reflexivity, narratives and embodied practices of agency in their sexual and intimate relationships. Using one secondary school in England as the research site, young women in their final two years of formal schooling (known in England as 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.

One vignette took the form of a young woman describing her experiences of masturbation and orgasm, and a second vignette was of another young woman whose boyfriend insisted he give her oral sex when they could not have sex because she was menstruating. 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.

All the discussion groups and interviews were facilitated by the first author over an in-depth period of four months. In total, 54 young women took part in the study (approximately half of all those across the two year groups), 33 of whom discussed their own experiences of sex and intimate relationships in an in-depth interview context. All participants were invited to identify a pseudonym for the study. 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. Focus group discussions and interviews were audio-recorded with permission and then transcribed. All data specifically mentioning the body, parts of the body, physical sensations experienced, and the physical practices of having sex were drawn out from the transcripts and further analysed.

The main themes which arose from the initial analysis of narratives which discussed sex, sexual practices and feelings about the body included: that physical attractiveness of a partner mattered; statements which suggested a confidence or lack of confidence in one's body; the importance of feeling comfortable with a partner; statements about whether the young women enjoyed sex and whether pleasure was important to them; and variably articulate descriptions of the sensations experienced in moments of sexual pleasure and desire. In this article we explore how young women's narratives of sex and their bodies within their sexual and intimate relationship experiences might further inform our developing understanding of agentic practice.

## **A Feeling, Reactive and Sensuous Body**

Allen (2005) draws a distinction between disembodiment, dysembodiment and embodiment when analysing how young people describe their bodies within sexual practice. Jackson and Scott (2007) meanwhile have offered three ways of understanding embodiment itself within sexual relations (objectified, sensory and sensate). At one level, bodies are understood by a person to potentially be objects of desire which can be interacted with in a sexual way (objectified embodiment). However, bodies themselves are argued to have the capacity for sensory perception (sensory embodiment) and for these feelings to be named by the subject (i.e. that another body is desirable to you). Finally, sensate embodiment is the process of making sense of what we see, hear, touch and taste and why we are feeling and reacting to these senses in a particular way; for instance, determining whether we feel desirable or whether we are experiencing feelings of desire or pleasure. How did young women in our study discuss their bodies? Did they understand their bodies as intricately bound up with their experiences of sexual and intimate relationships, and with their own subjectivity? In what ways did they imbue their bodies with power?



Only a very small number of young women described their sexual and intimate experiences in a relatively disembodied way (Allen, 2005). Although Dot explained that the sexual aspect of her other relationships had 'just been fine', when asked about 'the physical side of [her most recent] relationship' she responded:

It wasn't a big part of it because he had a problem with it. He really wasn't confident, he was really embarrassed and everything. So I didn't ... I didn't want to pressure, and I think he just sort of felt ... I think if it had been longer than it would have been, but ... he really wasn't comfortable with it.

Here Dot appeared to struggle to articulate exactly what had happened between her and her boyfriend in relation to 'it', the sexual part of their relationship. She appears to intimate that her ex-boyfriend's body responded without confidence or in embarrassment to her physical overtures. However, the lack of description of what sexual activity took place and the lack of direct reference to her partner's body makes it difficult to discern what exactly might have happened between Dot and her ex-boyfriend. However, such narratives were rare. Even Chanelle, who proclaimed, 'I don't think I'm a really, really like sexually orientated person, it's not something that's always on my mind', talked about 'mutual attraction' being important to her, and how her relationship with someone she had had sex with once at a party was now 'awkward'. Such a reference to awkwardness suggests a physically or bodily constituted and emotionally felt space between two people.

The majority of young women interviewed for this study, however, called forth bodies that felt, reacted and were sensuous, which we would argue is a useful way of conceptualizing the body in order to further theorize how bodily agentic practice might take place. Mercedes, for instance, endowed her body with (sexual) feelings, 'you know when you really fancy someone [find them physically attractive], you get butterflies'. Usually these (sexual) feeling bodies were responding or reacting to another person/body. Jude had clearly responded in a very physical way when she first met her current boyfriend. She explained that she could not help but just keep repeating the fact she found him 'so hot' to her friend.

Some young women differentiated between being drawn to someone's good looks (as they made a judgement of their attractiveness) and reacting in an arguably more physical way to another body via a 'spark' or some 'sexual tension'. Natalia explained, 'even if the guy's not attractive, if there's some sort spark between us then yeah, and you definitely sort of feel it'. Such physical reactions experienced within the body could be positive and sexually desirable (as suggested by Natalia here). Yet, Geraldine recalled how she had been 'really unattracted' to one young man who had recently shown an interest in her, and she had a strong physical reaction as well – 'literally anything would just repulse me ... I couldn't bear anything intimate to happen with him'.

Most of the young women in the study actively integrated discussion of bodies in their narratives of their sexual and intimate relationship experiences – through relatively articulate descriptions of feelings experienced, of bodily reactions and in analyses of the physicalness of sex. Geraldine, for instance, described sex as a 'kind of adrenalin experience'. She also positioned herself as quite 'a physical person', who 'yearned for that

closeness, the physical contact' of sex. Geraldine went on to explain that once this (sexual and/or emotional) urge had been satisfied, she would, after sex, feel the need to withdraw from this moment of intensity and that she did not want to be 'touched' any more. 'Once we've had sex, I'll then suddenly be ... I won't want ... I'll just literally want to be by myself ... and not have anyone kind of be kind of around me.' Here, Geraldine foregrounds the body within her descriptions of sexual experiences while also understanding her body as a defining feature of her subjectivity (as a physical person). The reflexivity within her narrative suggests she feels very connected to her body, but also that she understands or wishes to imbue these sensory responses (both on the surface, at the level of the flesh, but also beneath, within the body – such as the yearning for closeness, or the repulsion mentioned in the paragraph above) with the power to drive her bodily and emotional responses.

Similarly, Ellie's vivid description of the first time she had sex with her long-term boyfriend evokes the presence of the body (through mention of 'hands'), alludes to the sensation of sexual desire, and suggests a confidence about her sexual subjectivity when she describes sex as not 'neat' or 'P-O-L-I-T-E' and evaluates the experience as 'just brilliant'.

I didn't want to keep my hands off him, and it was just like ... and it was all just so like ... mess is the wrong word ... it wasn't neat P-O-L-I-T-E sex, it was like proper ... (*laughs*) and it was just like ... yeah it was different, it had different, other feelings of just being, just literally could not keep my hands off, and it was just really like passionate and that was just brilliant.

The articulacy and apparent comfort with which some young women presented themselves as 'sexual' (Iona) – 'I'm known as quite a sexual person ... I think that's just the way people view me. Which I don't think's a bad thing you know, 'cos ... to be honest it's true' (Stacey) – can be understood as young women not only connecting their subjectivity with being sexual, but also as offering a reading of their physical bodies as being integral to their experiences and as driving reactions and behaviours.

Our participants' accounts suggested their bodies felt, reacted and were sensuous entities. Such a conceptualization supports Jackson and Scott's (2007) distinction between objectified, sensory and sensate embodiment. However, we feel that, in order to theorize how agentic practice becomes possible and takes place, we need to develop further our understanding of the body – in particular, how it is imbued with power and how the physical body and acts of speech work together to open up opportunities for agentic responses and behaviours which could become more sustained.

## Agentic Bodily Practices

Young women in our study talked about bodies that reacted to other bodies through the sensations evoked (physical and emotional). Westhaver (2006) and Bryant and Schofield (2007) have theorized that (sexual) bodily responses and experiences can provide a stimulus for change – in relation to the expectations someone might have about sex or a stronger confidence about their sexual subjectivity for instance. Meanwhile, Youdell's (2004) writing suggests that bodies can be used to great effect for communicating – to

uphold boundaries and censure illegitimate identities, or to challenge dominant norms and those persons who wound our subjectivities. The latter mode of communication – using the body to challenge norms and people – can be seen as an example of agentic bodily practice. Did the feeling, reactive, sensuous bodily experiences and performances which young women in our study shared with us appear to provide a stimulus for change, i.e. the basis for agentic practice? And/or was the body used to enable young women to take back power within their relationships or perform being powerful?

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)

Barbara was describing a young man she had seen on arriving at a party. This 'sense' (also described by Amy as a 'flash') of 'fancy[ing]' another person's body (she had never met him before, so his personality could not have been part of what drew her to him) led Barbara to 'go over' and try to 'pull' (i.e. kiss) him. Here, Barbara suggests her physical reaction to this young man directs her behaviour. This direct, seemingly confident response is constructed by Barbara as natural and suggests she and her body are powerful. This makes it an agentic practice, which, although Barbara does not intimate that she perceives it as challenging dominant norms, is arguably socially transformative when set against the backdrop of the heteronormative culture these young women experienced at the school.

In the next example, Mercedes explains that her reaction to experiencing 'bad' sex was to end a newly forming relationship. Here, the young man's inexperienced use of his body during sex makes Mercedes go right 'off him' – physically (because he cannot satisfy her sexually possibly) but also at a deeper physical and/or emotional level (perhaps because his lack of confidence in managing his body in this situation is unattractive to her as she expects men to be more competent with their bodies?).

Mercedes: Then I slept with X ... and then I really went off him.

Claire: (*laughs*) Why's that?

Mercedes: He was really awful. And I didn't actually think that guys could be bad in bed.

....

Mercedes: ... like he was on top, he wouldn't actually go on top of me, he'd lean on one arm. And it was really weird and I was just like, 'Oh my God, what are you doing?' and also he lasted about two seconds.

Mercedes' response to this experience led her to end her relationship with this young man. Again, in light of dominant heteronormative expectations, such a response could be viewed as socially destabilizing, although the naturalness in the way Mercedes explains her response suggests she does not see her own behaviour as necessarily agentic. Hence, for Barbara and Mercedes, these bodily experiences do not appear to provide the stimulus for change in their own mode of behaviour, but their feeling, reactive and sensuous bodies are understood as powerful and their practice is potentially socially transformative in terms of broader gender relations.

Ellie, meanwhile, offered a more accessible narrative in relation to how her body and the experiences she has through sex provide the stimulus for change – both for herself, but also one could argue more broadly in relation to young women being seen as active sexual agents. Ellie explained how ‘a whole new sort of side to me’ had come out due to the very physical nature of her relationship with her current boyfriend. She explained that she had ‘not really had that before ... I do stuff that I never [would have before]’. This new experience of a sensuous and confident body meant that she now felt able to (verbally) express her frustration when her partner did not want to have sex and that she felt confident saying ‘no’ to certain sexual acts (such as using a video camera or a vibrator – ‘I’m not into that. I’m just like, ‘No, I don’t like that’).

While Ellie felt she now had the confidence to say ‘no’ to her boyfriend, Jude emphasized how, with increased sexual experience and confidence about a sensuous body, she had taken more control of initiating and experimenting sexually.

I wanted to kind of you know explore it [sex] and become more ... I don’t know, into it ... I could kind of suggest things that might kind of you know liven things up ... just kind of experimenting.

Taking a lead in her sexual interactions was new for Jude, which had come from a growing confidence about her sexuality, her body and herself. Thus, sexual exploration within her relationship led her to feel expert enough (a stimulus for change) to take the initiative (take back power) both through speech by ‘suggest[ing] things’ but also by letting her body (such as her mouth and hands) experiment on her boyfriend’s body – leading to agentic practice. For both Ellie and Jude their bodies provided the space within which they experienced pleasure, and as they and their bodies became more knowledgeable about sex and comfortable within their own sexuality – they became agentic in the way they talked to their partners (by saying no – Ellie; or by suggesting new sexual acts – Jude) but also in the way they used their bodies (initiating and experimenting sexually – Jude) and therefore communicated with their bodies as confident, sexual young women in control of their sexual interactions.

## **Bodies as Central to Sustained Agentic Practice**

Not only were bodies integral to most young women’s narratives of sexual and intimate relationships, but they also appeared crucial for instigating and directing agentic practice. In what ways therefore might bodies be central to more sustained agentic practice? Our analysis points to four key ways.

First, as a result of a negative, physical (and consequently sometimes emotional) response to sex, some young women developed clearer or different expectations of sex for the future. Letita, for example, had had a drunken sexual encounter with her brother’s friend one night, and explained that because ‘the next day it was just so awkward, and I felt really dirty’, she had decided never to let herself get involved in such a situation again. Natalia also described how experiencing the physical revulsion of giving a man oral sex had led her to decide that in the future she would not remain in a relationship with someone who demanded she perform oral sex on him.

I just cannot stand doing [oral sex], it just makes me sick ... and X [my ex-boyfriend] was really up for me doing it, and that's why I didn't like go out with him any more, I was just like, 'No thanks!'

The consequences for Letita (of the physical awkwardness the day after sex and the emotional reaction of feeling 'dirty') and for Natalia (of feeling 'sick' when performing oral sex) led them to reflect on these bodily responses and determine to avoid such experiences in the future (opening up the possibility for more sustained agentic sexual practice). Looking at the experiences they recounted as occurring from that point on, it did appear as if Letita and Natalia were successful in changing their practice.

A second way in which the space for more sustained agentic practice opened up through bodily experiences can be seen in the increasing physical and sexual confidence, knowledge and embracing of their sexuality which appeared to occur for some young women over time. This appeared to enable them to establish guidelines for what they would demand from present or future relationships.

[Now I] like try different positions or whatever ... [and am] more confident in sort of showing what I like I suppose. So it's definitely something that develops and ... I enjoy ... [sex] more ... because you're learning about them [your partner] and you're learning about yourself ... [then] sort of when we're like just talking about it [sex] ... 'Oh you know ... I'd like to try that and see if that's good for me.' (Summer)

Like Summer, Carmel had learned over the course of a year-long relationship with her first sexual partner what 'exactly ... I want, what I like, what I don't like, what I could possibly stand ... put up with, whatever'. Her sexual likes and dislikes, and the confidence to talk about this had informed Carmel's subsequent sexual relationships. A greater understanding and a growing confidence about one's sexuality and the ability to communicate about this could be linked to increasing maturity and a growing number of experiences, but for Summer what seemed to be crucial was that this learning had occurred within a long-term (and loving) relationship. Yet Carmel's first long-term relationship, in which she had learned about her sexual preferences, had been a largely negative relationship in which she felt controlled by her boyfriend (sexually and emotionally). Despite this hurtful experience (which can be read in her description of sexual acts you can 'possibly stand ... put up with'), she felt she had become more confident sexually, and certainly the long-term relationship she was in at the time of the interview she described as more equal and fulfilling sexually and emotionally.

A third possibility in which the body is integral to sustained agentic practice is linked to our previous finding that some young women position themselves discursively as powerful in their sexual and intimate relationships (Maxwell and Aggleton, 2010). Mercedes was one of the young women who most clearly positioned herself centre stage in her own narrative and presented herself as directing her experiences. Similarly, her descriptions of her body and of her experiences of sex suggested that she understood her body as integral to her position as someone who was powerful. Her assertive, knowledgeable discussion of orgasms is striking, especially as she felt able to discuss this in the context of a focus group.<sup>1</sup>

I've never had it [an orgasm] from a guy being inside of me ... ever ... but what I've found with most guys is they don't really understand the whole foreplay thing and they don't really enjoy doing it that much. They kind of just want to kiss a bit and fool about a little bit and then have sex, but they don't really understand the concept.

Mercedes explained that she knew 'men are attracted to me', which she thought had enabled her to take on a 'controlling' and 'dominating' role within her relationships with men. This, she suggested, gave her the confidence to decide whom she would become sexually or intimately involved with, depending on the degree to which she found them physically attractive – 'I'm pretty straightforward in that if I don't fancy someone I make it quite clear I don't fancy them'. Mercedes appeared to link her bodily reactions to her (agentic) practice, but also suggested that she located her body and its response as central to her assessment of experiences (such as getting put off by a young man's inexperienced use of his body during sex), and that this together with (or because of?) the response she and/or her body received from others (especially men) arguably sustained her agentic approach to sexual and intimate relationships (discursively secured through words such as 'controlling' and 'dominating').

Our analysis also points to a fourth and potentially very significant understanding of how bodies may be central to sustaining agentic approaches to sexual and intimate relationships for young women. Bella had been in a long-term relationship which had recently ended. When discussing her relationship she appeared to understand power as something which was a resource, in this case unequally, shared. Her ex-partner appeared to be very controlling – jealous of any contact Bella had with other young men (where even his friends would warn off young men who approached her if he himself was not there), whispering to her in public that she looked like a slut if she was wearing a skirt and so forth. During her interview, Bella explained that her friends had cautioned her to leave him, that she 'deserved to be treated' better, but she had tried to ignore her friends' words because 'he's got quite a lot of insecurities and stuff that nobody really knows about, but I know about them' and this made her feel and view their relationship as special.

In Bella's narrative, her description of this relationship positioned her ex-boyfriend as the one who was powerful and she offered no examples where she had attempted to 'take power back'. Yet, in her descriptions of the sexual side of their relationship, a different narrative voice emerged.

Like in the summer we'd always go swimming and then ... we'd always play really silly games like ... this is really silly ... like we used to play like catch and stuff, but for sexual things. They would be like 'If you don't catch that, you have to do this' ... I think we were aware of the fact that we didn't want it [sex] to get boring.

Although Bella described other 'fun' and intimate moments between her and her ex-partner which were not necessarily sexual (getting drunk together, spending time at his house), it was the recounting of positive, pleasurable sexual experiences which appeared to offer the potential to shift the balance of power between the two of them in her narrative. More significantly, it was her realization that she was in fact a more 'sexual' person

than her ex-boyfriend that appeared to open up for her the possibility that men need not necessarily be more in control, or more powerful within relationships.

I used to find quite a lot that I'd initiate it [sex] and he wouldn't want to ... which I found weird ... 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 [bit] surreal. It was a bit ... I would never expect it. And like occasionally it was a bit annoying.

Bella shared this experience in a focus group surrounded by the friends who, she indicated in her interview, disapproved of the way her ex-boyfriend had treated her. Although we are not suggesting that Bella necessarily resisted some of her ex-boyfriend's negative, controlling, demanding behaviour towards her, we wonder whether the jolting of her conceptualization of her ex-boyfriend through the experience of feeling more sexual than him, and of being the one to initiate sex more often, might open up the possibility for Bella to conceive of power within future relationships differently. The sexual body and an emerging understanding of one's sexuality from bodily experiences may therefore have the potential to shift understandings of gender relations and of how power is understood within sexual and intimate relationships and this could be a fourth way in which bodies can become central to sustained agentic practice.

## The Body as Powerful and an Integral Part of Agentic Practice

Jackson and Scott offer an interesting way of conceptualizing the body within sexual and intimate practices: 'the physical contact of sex entails simultaneous touching and feeling. What makes this recognizable as erotic is, first ... each individual's understanding of embodied experience and, second, the interaction itself' (2007: 101). Jackson and Scott argue that something happens between the bodies and people in a sexual moment, but also within the subject or beneath the surface of the subject's skin, which in turn influences the interaction; and all the above processes are shaped by the discourses available that relate to sex, gender, sexuality and so forth. While this offers an accessible way of thinking about the intertwining of the physical body, a person's subjectivity and interactions with other bodies and subjects, this conceptualization does not suggest how practice may be(come) agentic or what might support it to become sustained.

Our previous work suggested that events that bring to the fore inequalities of power within a relationship can instigate agentic practice (Maxwell and Aggleton, 2010). Similarly, others have argued that being wounded in some way for transgressing the appropriate boundaries of heteronormativity (Youdell, 2004) or that the desire for social recognition of sexuality (Westhaver, 2006) can provide the stimulus for change or motivate practice. Just as young women were emotionally hurt by the behaviours of young men they were involved with, which led them to take power back (Maxwell and Aggleton, 2010), the narratives presented in this article have emphasized how their feeling, sensuous bodies reacted into action based on what they perceived to be pleasurable or negative physical sensations and responses to other bodies and persons. Additionally, the young

women described how they communicated agentially through both their bodies and by what they said (their speech).

The contributions of Westhaver (2006) and Bryant and Schofield (2007) offer significant insights into how bodies can be part of agentic practice within sexual and intimate relationships. We view our work as building on these contributions by detailing in even greater depth how these potentially agentic moments occur, how bodily gestures and speech interact to produce agentic practice, and how both the body and narrative voices (see Maxwell and Aggleton, 2011) are central to sustained agentic practice.

Significantly, our starting point for an analysis of agentic practice – how young women appear to understand power – offers a new way of thinking about, and tracing, how the body is integral to agency. Mercedes and Barbara understood power as a discursive position they occupied, and subsequently their bodies were not only imbued with power, but bodily experiences also appeared particularly closely tied into their sense of their own subjectivity. For them, the body not only instigated practice, but also directed practice, and furthermore was arguably a symbol of their powerful positioning (as slim, attractive, tanned and comfortable entities).

Young women like Mercedes and Barbara illustrate the first of four ways we have identified for sustained agentic practice to become possible – a key focus of our work. First, for some young women in our study whose bodies and speech appeared to be directed by a strong, confident, ‘I decide’ voice, or positioning, the potential for on-going agentic practice seemed very real. Second, we found that negative bodily experiences could lead a young woman to commit to not wanting these repeated in the future. Third, some young women discussed how, as they and their bodies became more knowledgeable and confident about sex and being sexual, they began to have expectations about future pleasurable sex and developed the physical or verbal communication skills to ensure this happened. Finally, we have speculated how a growing sense of one’s active, desiring sexuality, and a comfort with this, can offer opportunities for reviewing other aspects of an intimate relationship and expectations of these changing (as in Bella’s story). These *assertive*, *refusing*, *proactive* and *interrogative* strategies respectively, constitute, at least partially, the grammar of a more inclusive theory of agency that goes beyond the inadequacies of framing practice simply as affirmation and/or resistance. Together with Shilling’s (2004) idea of new practices becoming habitual, this allows us to theorize how each of these strategies – individual and in combination – may facilitate the sustainability of new, embodied and narrativized, mode of actions.

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## Notes

- 1 All the quotes in this article were taken from one-to-one interviews between the participants and the first author, apart from this one by Mercedes, and one further down by Bella.



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Claire Maxwell is a researcher at the Institute of Education, University of London. Her research interests include young femininities, social class, theorizations of agency and gender equality work in schools. She is currently leading a study, funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council, examining the links between different middle-class privileges, being privately educated, young femininities and agentic practice.

Peter Aggleton is Professor of Education, Health and Social Care and Head of the School of Education and Social Work at the University of Sussex. His research focuses on young people, gender and health both internationally and in the UK.

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