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# 9 Pre-Adolescent and Adolescent Sexual Relationships - More Than Just Sex!

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A great deal has been written, and said, about ‘teenage pregnancy’ and the resultant status of ‘young’ motherhood. Much of this commentary takes a moralistic position that seems insistent on imposing causal and consequential explanations; based upon values and beliefs that are seldom subjected to detailed scrutiny. This chapter relies upon recently completed research that did not presume to locate ‘young’ motherhood within such problematising narrative structures. Rather the emphasis was on gaining an appreciation of lives: how they are lived and how they are told. Presented in this chapter is what might be termed a brief encounter with Abby. The data that is presented, and analysed, focuses upon her pre-adolescent and adolescent relationships. The story told here is not one of early pregnancy and caring for children; although these are most certainly later aspects of her life story. Rather we offer an account of a vibrant young woman who enthusiastically shares her experiences and interpretations of events and locations where her understandings and expectations around sex and sexual relationships developed.

## **Human Agency, Community and Culture**

Taylor (1989) maintains that it is our position in relation to what is seen within our communities and cultures as morally commendable that gives us a sense of self. This argument is based on an assumption that individuals strive to think and behave in ways that are consistent with, what are considered by themselves, their wider communities and cultures, to be the most salient features of experience and the most worthwhile ways of being. Drawing upon a dichotomy proposed in an unpublished report by Rappaport (1994), Salzer (1998) demonstrates that narrative research can be used to gain an understanding of the interactions between society, communities, and individuals. This is achieved through examining narrative accounts at three levels; the first of these is referred to as ‘dominant cultural narratives’. Dominant cultural narratives are stories that are shared by individuals at a societal level and are transmitted through myths, fairy tales, proverbs, stories

and pictures in the media and conversation. These powerful narratives appear to be indicators as well as communicators of collectively held beliefs about people, places, or things that proliferate in any culture (Salzer, 1998). This concept is very similar to Bruner's (1990) notion of *folk psychologies* defined as 'a culture's account of what makes human beings tick' (p.13). The second level of narration is 'community narratives' which are stories that are common to the members of any given community and which can have a powerful influence on the behaviour of individuals within that community. These stories often (though not always) refer to life within the community. Furthermore, Polkinghorne (1988) proposes that experience is shaped, not only by the community that an individual is currently a member of, but also by a 'historical community',

Narrative is a communication not just between contemporaries but also between predecessors and successors, and the common destiny is more fundamental to it than any individual fate. Through the transmission of past possibilities to present hearers, the tradition of a historical community's common destiny is repeated or retrieved. (p.134)

The final level is 'personal narratives' which are the unique and idiosyncratic storied accounts that an individual gives of their own life and experiences. It is these personal narratives that are most often investigated within the field of narrative research. Yet, Mankowski and Rappaport (1995) argue that the narratives of a community will be similar in structure and content to the personal narratives of its members.

### **A Story of Resistance and Surrender**

At the time of the interview Abby was approaching her eighteenth birthday and had an eighteen-month-old son named Kyle. She had been in an on/off relationship with Kyle's father, Chris, for about three years and he was living with her at her rented home when Abby participated in the research.

#### *A Socially Located 'Rebellion'*

Abby's begins her life story by recounting events and relationships at school. She narrates her character as a 'rebel' and as someone who broke all the rules. Indeed many of the narrative accounts Abby gives of her life at school can be seen to have a 'habitual' (Riessman, 1993) quality in the sense that Abby is describing sequences of events that occurred on a regular basis rather than specific events. This is signified by Abby's repeated use of the phrase 'used to' which serves to emphasise that the 'bad' behaviour she is referring to was a feature of Abby's everyday life at school. Although she says that she 'never

really went to school' (because she 'never had to'), when she was at school, she was always in trouble. Abby says that she found school boring and gave numerous examples of her 'bad' behaviour, for example:

I always used to get into trouble (Kate laughs). Like, me and Mark we'd sit together in Science ... and like he'd poke me ... he never used to like bein' in class, so he'd poke me so I'd shout at top o' me voice and get kicked out ...

However she maintains that she was very popular at school and appears to equate her popularity with her 'bad' behaviour. Abby appears to want to lay claim to the identity of a 'rebellious teenager' here and on several occasions she positions herself as the agent in the acts of rebellion that she describes (eg. '*I used to forget me books on purpose*'; '*I remember there were this one time and I'd done summat*'). At the same time however, the other characters in these accounts are often positioned in such a way that they can be seen as 'provoking' Abby's 'bad' behaviour and thereby sharing any responsibility.

Abby's personal narrative of life at school is very heavily socially located with Abby explaining much of her own and other people's behaviour in terms of their membership of a certain community. Until the age of about ten, Abby's family moved about a great deal and she may therefore have felt a particular pressure to 'fit in' with the community where she finally settled. As stated earlier Abby rarely narrates her 'bad' behaviour as being something that she engages in alone and often refers to rebellious behaviour within the context of a group of friends. Indeed, Abby appears to narrate life within her 'rebellious' community as exciting saying that '*everything used to go on*' on the Ferncliffe estate, whereas her own estate had become '*boring*' because '*everybody's calmed down now, they've cleared all't estate up*'. Abby's 'rebellious' behaviour can perhaps be seen then as an attempt to situate herself within a normative framework in which school is seen as a waste of time and where status can be gained by aligning oneself with other 'badly behaved' community members in an 'us' and 'them' situation.

#### *Being 'One of the Lads': A Space for Experimentation?*

Abby's narrative account of her pre-adolescent and adolescent self is highly gendered, yet it appears to be a masculine rather than a feminine identity that she is narrating. Abby talks, for example, about '*takin't mick out of all't year sevens*' and says that she '*used to wind everybody up*'. She also talks about fighting at school:

... we used to ... we used to do a lot of fightin' at school 'bout nine/ten ... used to get in a lot of fights wi't lasses ... and't lads (Kate laughs) and my mum ... my mum's crazy, she still bought me Barbie dolls!

In talking about fighting here Abby seems to be stressing that she engaged in behaviour that whilst being perceived as perfectly 'normal' and 'natural' for boys of nine or ten, could potentially be seen as 'bad' or at least 'inappropriate' and 'unfeminine' behaviour for a nine or ten year old girl. Drawing upon the work of Hudson (1984), Lees (1993) argues that dominant narratives of adolescence '*allow adolescent boys space for experimentation*' whilst girls are '*always seen as embryo women*' (p.16). Lees (1993) also points out that whilst girls' reputations tend to focus solely on their sexual activities, the social standing of a boy is influenced not only by his sexual conquests but also by '*his sporting or fighting prowess*' and his ability to '*take the mickey*' or be one of the boys' (p.30). Within the context of Abby's life then, Abby's occupation of what can be seen as a 'male position' appears to hold a number of possibilities. First, Abby's adoption of a 'male' subject position enables her to challenge constraining dominant cultural narratives of gender-appropriate adolescent behaviour and potentially gives Abby access to the '*space for experimentation*' (Lees, 1993, p.16) available for adolescent boys. Second, in permitting her to behave 'badly' this narration provides Abby with the opportunity to behave in ways that are socially-approved within her own community thus enabling her to 'fit in'. Brown (1998) for example, noted that amongst the working-class girls she studied:

... qualities fostered at home such as toughness, boldness, straightforward expressions of thought and feeling which often label them as difficult and disruptive at school, connect them with each other, their families and their community. (p.103)

Finally, being 'one of the lads' enables Abby to engage in behaviours such as fighting and mocking other people that make her appear 'tough' and enable her to shrug off teasing and downplay any vulnerabilities that she may have. Arguably by laying claim to a 'masculine' or 'ladette' identity Abby successfully challenges dominant narratives that constrain the options open to young women in negotiating their adolescence and increases the range of behavioural options available to her in living her life.

However, this is not to say that the narration of her life within a normative framework of male adolescence and the appropriation of a *ventriloquised* (Brown, 1998) 'ladette' voice is unproblematic for Abby. As a young woman, Abby's physical appearance does seem to be very important to her. Her self-esteem and sense of power seem to be inextricably linked to her physical and sexual desirability. Evans, Rutberg, Sather and Turner (1991) and Duffy and Gotcher (1996) observe that young women's magazines give the impression that for a woman, 'success' involves making herself as physically attractive as possible in order to 'get her man'. Yet, having positioned herself as 'one of the lads', Abby has opened herself up to the same 'mickey taking' that she subjects

others to. As a young woman Abby is open to a form of attack that is much less likely to be directed at young men, that is, an attack on her physical attractiveness. Indeed, at one point, Abby gave a narrative account of how two young men in particular used to tease her about her physical appearance at school and how she overcame this and was ultimately victorious by changing her appearance to the extent that one of the lads who had previously teased her didn't recognise her and bought her a drink in a club.

... one o't lads in there dint recognise who I was, 'cos I've known 'im a few year n' like I went to ... Oakham (school in different part of district) with 'im (K: mm-hm) and like I ... used to look really ugly (giggles) ... I used to 'ave this like 'air up to 'ere (K: awww) really bushy-out ... it looked awful n' ... he never recognised me (K: yeah) so I told 'im me name were Jodi ... I told 'im that it were Jodi so like 'e bought me a drink and I says, "well don't you recognise me then?" 'cos Rick 'ad come an' stood behind 'im and 'e shouts round, and 'e'd seen who I was but he dint know what I were doin', so I says "don't you recognise me then?" and then ... Rick 'eard me say that so 'e goes "eh up Abby" and Jakesy just looked at Rick an' he turns round and he goes "uh" (Kate laughs) sort of, "eh, what's going on?" (Kate laughs again) so then 'e found out who I was (K: yeah (laughs again) it were just funny though because like he always used to take mick out o'me, 'im n' Dave, n' sit at back o't classroom takin't mick out o'me goin' (in disdainful voice) "Oi, Jakesy, if I ever saw 'er in a nightclub I'd tip a drink over 'er rather than buy 'er one" (K: awww) or they'd say "I'd buy one just to tip over 'er 'ead". So I just found it amusin', I got a drink out of 'im.

There is a stark contrast in this narrative between the account of Abby's recent experience and the account of her experience with the same character (Jakesy) at school. When Abby relates how she teased the lads in the nightclub it is she who has the power and control over the situation. In this narrative she uses her own voice to recount the story only using Jakesy's voice to emphasise his confusion and therefore her control over the situation ("*eh, what's going on?*"). Abby is positioned as more powerful than both Jakesy and Rick in this section of the narrative because she is the only character who knows what is '*going on*'. In the account where Jakesy and his friend were teasing Abby at school however, her *lack* of power is emphasised. In this account, the story is related in Dave and Jakesy's voices ("*Oi, Jakesy, if I ever saw 'er in a nightclub I'd tip a drink over 'er rather than buy 'er one*"; "*I'd buy one just to tip over 'er 'ead*"). In mentioning her physical appearance at the beginning of this narrative, Abby gives the impression that this is the reason for her lack of control. When she was ugly, the young men had control of the situation but now she is no longer 'ugly' and as a result, she has had the last laugh ('*it were just funny though*'; '*I just found it amusin*'). Probably what is most interesting to reflect on is the way in which, try as she might, Abby is not allowed to be 'one of the lads'! She is successfully re-positioned as a woman who is subject to evaluation and judgment by men.

*Narrating Promiscuity Within a Normative Framework*

In recounting her sexual experiences, Abby once again appears to reject aspects of dominant narratives of gender-appropriate behaviour that can place constraints on young women's sexuality and sexual behaviour. Abby seems to be aware of a romantic narrative whereby women are portrayed as necessarily seeking monogamous, romantic, long-term relationships characterised by intimacy, fidelity and commitment. Nevertheless, Abby appears to reject these kinds of notions of female sexuality and narrates her own sexual experiences using what Hollway (1984, 1989) refers to as 'the permissive discourse', whereby the principle of monogamy is challenged and the rights of both men and women to express their sexuality in any way they choose are highlighted. Rather than positioning herself as a passive recipient of sex who is waiting for 'Mr Right' to come along and sweep her off of her feet, Abby portrays herself as almost predatory and as actively engaging in a number of casual (and often adulterous) sexual relationships:

... woman next door but one's husband ...well ... I were seein' Chris at time an' 'e knew about it (K: uh-huh) 'e weren't bothered, 'e let me do it (K: yeah) it were 'is idea (Kate laughs) ... er, God ... er (4). Before I got pregnant wi' Kyle when I were going wi' Chris ... I always went behind 'is back (K: yeah) try something ... with his best mates an' stuff like that (K: yeah (laughs)) (3) erm (4) I can't think (9). I remember this one lad I went wi' ... and then ... a few month after, me mother started seein' 'im (all laugh) ... me mum dint know that I went wi' 'im, like, nowt ever got said ...

Partying, going to nightclubs and drinking alcohol are also regular features of Abby's narratives around her sexual experiences (eg. '*she (Abby's mum) usually throws these mad parties after (K: yeah) Friday and Saturday nights, mad parties*'; '*I'm usually out Thursday, Friday, Saturday night*'; '*all of us 'ad been drinkin*'; '*That's all anybody ever used to do wannit? Drink*'). Abby's storying of herself as a promiscuous and sexually active young woman who likes to party and have a good time can be seen as a form of resistance to dominant cultural narratives that position young women who are too forward or too promiscuous as 'slags'. Instead, Abby seems to position herself within a 'girls just wanna have fun' type narrative of the kind that are currently being used to advertise alcoholic drinks such as Lambrini and Archers.

Again, Abby's narration of her sexual experiences is heavily socially located and her promiscuity and infidelity are storied within the normative framework of sexual behaviour shared by her fellow community members. Even at school, Abby says that everybody had '*at least one boyfriend*' and the promiscuity of one of her male school friends at nine or ten years of age is explained in terms of the '*rough*' estate he lives on. When she speaks of her

other friends she talks about Tina stripping off in a graveyard, Julie 'shagging' a lad in the subway at the train station and Louise having sex at a party while everyone was listening. Abby also uses the term he's/she's '*been round't estate a few times*' to describe three particularly promiscuous people she knows. This phrase has a number of consequential effects. Firstly, by mentioning the estate, she limits the promiscuity to her own social location. The promiscuous people she is referring to are finding their 'myriad' of willing sexual partners within their own community. This positions Abby's own promiscuity firmly within a framework of promiscuous behaviour that is normative to her social location. Secondly, this phrase serves to make a distinction between Abby's own sexual behaviour and that of these other individuals. Thus 'even by Abby's normative standards', these individuals are particularly promiscuous.

#### *Rendering the Self 'Absent' in the Narration of Penetrative Sex*

On the three occasions that Abby explicitly spoke about having slept with male partners, her accounts appeared to be strongly informed by a more conventional romantic narrative. In all of these accounts, the protagonists were much less agentive than in the preceding accounts and sex was portrayed as something that 'just happened', for example:

This lad called Craig, he's from London, (to Louise) I told you about it dint I? (L: mm) he come up for 'is grandma's, 'is, not 'is grandma's, 'is auntie's funeral (K: uh-huh) and like we were clear-, helping clear 'is auntie's bed out an' we'd been left in't 'ouse on us own ... things got a bit carried away (Kate laughs) (3) we ended up sleeping together in 'is auntie's old 'ouse n' .... Just, mad!

'First time I went wi' Chris I weren't seein' 'im, he were seein' me best mate Kaz (K: mmm) and I took 'im down to me dad's and like erm, we started watching this video 'cos we were supposed to be talking. I were supposed to talk to 'im about Kaz ... and me dad'd gone out so I'd been left in't house on me own, but ... I ended up sleepin' wi' Chris ... in me dad's front room.

Interestingly in each account sex is narrated as almost 'accidental'. It is the situation that is framed as leading to sex 'happening' rather than the actions of either of the characters. The use of the phrase '*been left in't 'ouse on us/me own*', for example, serves to make the sex someone else's responsibility (ie. someone else actively 'left' them there alone). In all three of the accounts, Abby also mediates her responsibility for the act of 'sleeping together' by saying that her and her partner '*ended up sleeping together*'. This implies that there was no intention to sleep together and that it was something in which both parties were passive and were unable to avoid.

Although much of Abby's talk appears to be in direct opposition to the romantic narrative, the effects of dominant cultural narratives of passive female



sexuality are illustrated in these accounts of her own participation in sexual encounters. Whilst Abby seems happy to talk throughout her personal narrative about actively engaging in the act of *'getting off with'* other people, she seems to make a distinction between *'getting off with'* lads and penetrative sex (*'like I'd gerrof wi' 'im an' that, ne'er slept wi' 'im (K: yeah) we've done other things as well but, it's just that I've never slept wi' 'im'*). In her accounts of having had penetrative sex, for example, her agency is minimised, being almost non-existent. Abby also refers to herself having penetrative sex as *'sleeping together'* whilst in accounts of other people's behaviour, she often refers to it as *'shagging'*. Despite her apparently permissive attitude towards sex, Abby ultimately seems unable to reconcile her own experiences of penetrative sex with *'shagging'*, a term that can be seen as having negative connotations, particularly within narratives of passive female sexuality. Furthermore, she seems unable to narrate these experiences within her *'girls just wanna have fun'* narrative. In these accounts, the ventriloquised (Brown, 1998) voice of the *'ladette'* appears to have been replaced by the more *'gender-appropriate'* voice of a *'sexually passive female'* to whom sex has *'happened'*.

Further, based on work carried out by Holland, Ramazanoglu and Thomson (1996), Hird (2000) suggests that it is often seen as the man's role to initiate sex and the woman's role to regulate sexual activity; in their capacity as what Gavey and McPhillips (1999) refer to as *'gatekeepers of heterosex'* (p.365). Dominant narratives of this kind that draw on what Willig (1998) refers to as the *'sex-as-primitive-instinct discourse'* can be seen as impacting upon Abby's personal narrative account on a number of occasions. She talks, for example, about men being *'after't same thing'* from her (a phrase which resonates with the commonly held notion that men are *'only after one thing'* and that women are responsible for monitoring whether they *'get it'* or not) and having to take control and say no:

I know Becky 'ad been wi' Gary (5) an' like I were goin' out wi' Dave 'n' ... like 'e were, 'e were after t'same but ... (laughing) I weren't gonna 'ave it (both laugh) (K: yeah) not at that age.

I've never slept wi' 'im (K: yeah) so ... must've asked for I don't know 'ow many years (Kate laughs) still ant slept wi' 'im (Kate laughs) an' 'e's still after't same thing.

There is also some suggestion in Abby's narrative account that contraception is a woman's responsibility (eg. *'if it weren't for lasses usin' contraception Chris'd have about twenty kids by now'*). Narratives of this kind have led to a perception amongst both boys and girls that *'nice'* girls will say no to sex outside of long-term, romantic and committed relationships (Tolman, 1994).

### **Beyond Cause and Consequence: A Contextually Grounded Interpretation of Abby's Unique 'Life Story'**

Abby's personal narrative of her experiences around sexual relations seem to be informed by dominant cultural and community narratives in many complex ways. It can be seen that Abby's personal narrative constitutes neither a straightforward adoption nor a rejection of these narratives. Indeed, Abby's perceptions of her own experience and the options open to her in living her life appear to result from her narration of her life in relation to a Byzantine web of often contradictory narratives at both cultural and community levels.

Abby's narration appears to be informed by community narratives of 'rebellion' that may in turn be informed by dominant cultural narratives that frame social location as deterministic. Her narration of herself as 'one of the lads' appears to be a reaction to constraining narratives of gender-appropriate behaviour. This narrative strategy can perhaps be seen as synonymous with the 'assimilation' tactic identified by Tajfel (1978) in his social identity theory as one of three kinds of resistance that subordinate groups may utilise in challenging dominant groups. In assimilation members of the subordinate group appropriate the attitudes and behaviours of the dominant group as a way of gaining entry to this higher status group. Although it may be more akin to a form of 'collusion with' young men than a form of 'resistance to' them, Abby's strategy of performing herself as 'one of the lads' can perhaps be seen to afford her the 'space for experimentation' available to adolescent boys. Yet it can be argued that due to the prevalence of dominant cultural narratives around gender-appropriate behaviour and power relations, Abby's 'experimentation', particularly with regard to her sexual relations, places her in a precarious position with regard to her autonomy, sexual health and safety.

Further, whilst Abby's narration of her sexual experiences within a 'girls just wanna have fun' narrative enables her to challenge many constraining aspects of the romantic narrative and the notion that young women should not be 'sexual outside of heterosexual monogamous marriage' (Tolman, 1994, p.324), Abby seems unable to narrate her actual experiences of penetrative sex within this narrative framework and appears instead to narrate these experiences using a more conventional narrative which stories 'active' engagement and enjoyment of such encounters by women as 'gender inappropriate behaviour'. Thus Abby's adoption of two apparently contradictory positions in relation to gender appropriate sexual behaviours has implications for her narrative coherence, sexual autonomy, sexual health and safety. Perhaps Abby's positioning of herself as a rebel, within a 'girls just wanna have fun' narrative precludes, or might preclude, her from doing what a 'nice' girl would do and thus she may not say 'No' even when she might prefer to do so.

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