

Intimate intrusions of the neoliberal deceit¹

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I would like to thank the organisers for inviting me to give this 'state of the science' talk on the critical psychology of gender.

It is fantastic to see this area of psychology honoured in this way. And it is no coincidence, I think, that this is happening in South Africa. Because South Africa is home to one of the richest histories of critical psychology anywhere, and is a vibrant scene for contemporary research on gender.

So, it is a real honour. And it is of course also quite a challenge!

First of all, what is the critical psychology of gender? And how is it possible to represent the state of this field of scholarship, in all of its diversity? (It's not.)

Research in this field takes an interest in a very wide range of topics and questions. It has an equally wide reach across theoretical and methodological influences, and is often formed with transdisciplinary connections. We look at gendered experiences as well as cultural representations of gender. We are interested in seeing how the possibilities for gendered ways of being and acting are shaped in relation to context, to social structures, and to cultural norms and imperatives. We are interested in looking at how dynamics of power and justice intersect to affect women and men differentially. And how this also works in complex different ways according to axes of privilege around race, class, sexuality, age, and so on.

I am not going to attempt a summary overview of this diverse body of research and scholarship. Especially as it is not a tightly bound programmatic field (and I like it that it's not), I'm not sure where it would leave us.

Instead, I want to focus on a theme that I think undergirds much of our critical work at the moment. It is not always elaborated in explicit ways, but it is a theme that is

increasingly referenced in the articles we publish in *Feminism & Psychology*,<sup>2</sup> and it something that I hear myself returning to again and again when I am teaching classes on gender and psychology – discussing topics as diverse as heterosexual desire, rape trauma, or anti-depressants and depression. It is a theme that picks up on and emphasises *the political*, which is one of the defining features of a *critical* psychology of gender, as distinct from feminist psychology in general or especially as distinct from ‘gender science’.

This theme that I want to speak to today is the relevance of contemporary neoliberal capitalism in the production of our desires and needs, our anxieties and our values. And the importance of keeping this broader economic and political sphere in sight even when we are considering the conditions of possibility for the most intimate aspects of our lives.

I realised a little late, as I was working on this talk, what a ridiculously ambitious task this is. The argument I would *like to be able* to make is complex, and multi-layered, with different – contested – paths of historical connections, nuanced versions for different localities, and a plethora of critical feminist psychology research that could be woven into the story. The constraints of space and time, however, mean that I will only be able to draw a partial and limited sketch. But in the process I hope to point to the relevance of critical and feminist psychology research in showing how in concrete ways neoliberal capitalism takes hold in the intimate domains of our lives.

There are many pressing issues for those of us working in this field: Gender based violence, the resurgence of raw sexism, the ongoing travesties of racism, colonisation, and imperialism, as well as escalating threats of environmental destruction. On the surface a focus on some of the implications of neoliberal capitalism may not always seem directly relevant. And yet it is vitally important I think to keep these kinds of broader parameters in mind, both as they demand certain sorts of psychological responses, and as they shape the conditions through which we can respond to problems of inequality, injustice, and violence – not only in the public sphere, but in the minutiae of people’s intimate lives.

### **[slide] Neoliberalism**

Some scholars are, quite rightly I think, dismissive of what they see as an overuse of the term neoliberalism. It has become somewhat of a catch all phrase, a ‘critical code’ as Jamie Peck (in Roy et al., 2012) puts it, for anything that we (on the political left) don’t like. Peck and others are careful to emphasise that neoliberalism is not a coherent thing, it is not a “hermeneutically sealed monolithic structure”, and “there are few clean dividing lines between this project and its ‘others’” (Peck & Tickell, 2006, p. 27; see also Larner, 2000). Indeed Nancy Fraser (2010) has said that “what we today call

“neoliberalism” is nothing but the second coming of the very same 19<sup>th</sup> century faith in the ‘self-regulating market’” (p. 4).<sup>3</sup>

Psychologists interested in history would no doubt argue a similar point about what we might refer to as neoliberal subjectivity. For example, the idea of an autonomous individual has a long history in US culture (as it no doubt does in other western societies), as psychologists such as Dana Becker and Jeanne Marecek (2008), among others, have argued.<sup>4</sup>

With this caveat in mind I am using the term neoliberalism to orient to the economic and political context, and signal something about its contemporary form. So, I’ll just say a little bit more about what how I am understanding this.

Critics of neoliberalism describe a radical shift in social and economic logics that took hold in the 1970s and 80s (e.g., Harvey, 2005).<sup>5</sup> As David Harvey puts it, neoliberalism is “the elevation of capitalism as a mode of production, into an ethic, a set of political imperatives, and a cultural logic” (Thompson, 2005, p. 23). Although strongly associated with Thatcherism in the UK and Reaganism in the US, the turn towards neoliberalism has taken hold “everywhere” (Harvey, 2005, p. 2; see also Leitner, Peck & Sheppard, 2006; Peck, 2010).

Key characteristics of this new political and economic agenda include the deregulation (or re-regulation, Wacquant, 2012; see also Peck, 2010) of economies, privatization, the promotion (and protection) of ‘free markets’, as well as the withdrawal of state spending on social services and in support of employment (e.g., Crouch, 2011; Harvey, 2005). In the process, the concept of the public good and the value of community have been degraded, and replaced with a fetishistic emphasis on individual freedom.<sup>6</sup> Harvey argues that these accomplishments came about through a sort of “class war” in which corporations and “class elites” set out deliberately to “change how people think”, not just about corporations, but also about culture and individuals (2005, p. 42, 43; see also Peck, 2010).<sup>7</sup> The result, as US political philosopher Michael Sandel puts it, is that we “drifted from *having* a market economy to *being* a market society” (2012, p. 10).<sup>8</sup> Everything, now, is for sale. This happened, he observes, without most of us really having a chance to notice and debate its moral consequences.

One of the things that this means is that giant corporations end up having a very powerful role in the governance of societies. British sociologist, Colin Crouch (2011), doesn’t beat around the bush when he makes the point that when we talk about ‘the market’, what we are really talking about is the corporation.<sup>9</sup> So free market policies end up supporting the rights of giant corporations<sup>10</sup> to conduct their business unfettered by laws and policies concerned with promoting and protecting the values of communities and collectivities.<sup>11</sup>

From our point of view as psychologists, we might ask how neoliberalization got to be so successful? In particular, how could the dominant social and political commonsense have been reshaped so profoundly, in ways that are counter to the best interests of most of the people in every society?

This has happened of course in different ways, in different parts of the world (Harvey, 2005; Leitner, Peck & Sheppard, 2006; Peck, 2010) – sometimes by consent and sometimes through coercion (Harvey, 2005). But Harvey, and others, make an important point about how neoliberal values have become embedded in a new commonsense.<sup>12</sup> Somewhat sinisterly, according to his account, the worthy political ideals of human dignity and individual freedom were hijacked to become a vehicle through which the ‘dangers’ of state intervention could be argued. “The founding figures of neoliberalism” managed to persuade us that dignity and freedom were threatened “not only by fascism, dictatorships, and communism,” according to Harvey, “but by all forms of state intervention that substituted collective judgements for those of individuals free to choose” (p. 5). What dropped out of the equation then, as an equally commonsense set of reference points, were values around community and collectivities. The social justice agenda that was held alongside concern for individual freedoms, by political movements at the time, became harder to argue for with the same force as individual freedom.

We can see a similar dynamic in the accomplishment of ‘postfeminism’, as scholars like Ros Gill and Angela McRobbie have pointed out so well (e.g., Gill, 2008, 2009; McRobbie, 2009). Where lofty feminist principles and aspirations like equality, freedom of choice, and empowerment have been coopted and debased to support all measure of practices that promote highly exaggerated opportunities for individual women at the cost of real change to the social conditions that would improve the lives of women in general.

### **[slide] Material wellbeing**

Critics of the neoliberal intensification of capitalism point out that large corporations have been given license to pursue financial profits at the expense of people’s basic wellbeing. They discuss a devastating array of ways in which this economic shift has directly impacted people’s access to basic material necessities, quality education and health care, and adversely shaped the terrain of people’s working lives. Imperialist wars, environmental degradation, toxic working conditions, exploitative wage structures, the encouragement of crippling levels of debt for ordinary people, leading to poverty, homelessness for some, and second class health care and education for whole classes of people in even the richest of counties – these are just some of the consequences for material wellbeing of the contemporary financialized economy.

(Not all of these forms of exploitation, and disregard are new of course. What is new is the way in which a particular economically driven rationality has gathered such force

that it is able to be used with the power of commonsense, to justify the ever intensifying pursuit of profit before people.)

**[slide] Opportunities and identity**

So, what is the relevance of this for psychology, and for a critical psychology of gender in particular?

Social psychologists are interested in the wider sociocultural context of people's lives. Those oriented to social justice share in common with the critics of neoliberalism, concern for how opportunities are structured according to race, gender, 'class' and money in ways that affect the very material conditions of our lives. But at the same time they also impact on identities, our sense of ourselves in relation to others.

Michelle Fine and her colleagues, for instance, have written about "circuits of dispossession,"<sup>13</sup> by which young people's lives are shaped in racialized ways by neoliberal social policies (e.g., Fine & Ruglis, 2009; Fine, Stoudt, Fox, & Santos, 2010). They argue that in the United States "most Black, Latino, immigrant, and/or poor" young people are denied the kind of educational opportunities provided for more elite White and Asian students, and suffer abuse and criminalization within overcrowded poor schools, that are increasingly privatized in various ways. Not only does this lead directly to poor educational outcomes, but siphons young African American and Latino men away from public education and into the military and prisons in disproportionate numbers.<sup>14</sup> It also affects young people's identities in more insidious and pervasive ways, telling them, according to Fine and Ruglis (2009) that they are worth less within the illusory "postracial" society they live in.

"As critical justice scholars", Fine and her colleagues say they see the "fundamental ... project of social inquiry is to render visible our human interdependence; to document the social psychological hinge of privilege and oppression" (Stoudt et al. 2012, p. 188). In this way, therefore, their work reveals and critically analyses how the assumptions guiding educational and other public policy – that we are all autonomous, independent individuals with equal opportunities that we are free to choose to pursue – is actually a neoliberal deceit that casts an unfair shadow on the lives of large groups of citizens. It shows the injustices that privatization delivers to ordinary people, through squeezing public services and forcing an insidious and mean responsabilization onto individuals, who are expected to 'stand on their own two feet' without the care of a wider social embrace.<sup>15</sup>

**[Slide – Shaping the conditions of possibility for intimate life]**

I want to move now to look more particularly at the ways in which neoliberalism shapes the possibilities for intimate life. Beyond (although of course related) to the direct

effects of privatization, responsabilisation, and the kinds of exclusionary social practices that Fine and others write about, there are at least two distinct ways in which the dominant economic and political order intrudes on the more private psychosocial spaces of our lives.

**[Slide – Marketization]<sup>16</sup>**

In the most obvious and direct sense, we are subject to the pressures and inducements of the marketplace as our desires and anxieties are exacerbated and distorted, or actually manufactured. And then exploited to create ever expanding markets for the modification or transformation of minds, bodies and souls. We come to exist primarily as consumers.

This happens within popular culture through advertising and through the media more widely. It also happens within more professional territories through the commercialization of medicine and through the promotion of products and regimens by other health and wellbeing *industries* (such as fitness and diet and various forms of self help and improvement). And through other industries built on opportunities created through exploiting ideals of intimate perfection and the kinds of bodies required for this. For example, the beauty and fashion industries. And through industries based around the consumption of pleasure and leisure – such as the sex industry, and alcohol and gambling industries.

In all of these diverse domains our emotions and our values are directly targeted – pushed, pulled, and tweaked – in ways that can be exploited for profit. All parts of our lives are on limits – including intimate and private aspects such as the ebb and flow of our moods, our sexualities, and the aesthetics of our bodies. Our ideas about what is essential to a good life are moulded and our dissatisfactions are manipulated in ways to induce us to want and to consume.<sup>17</sup>

This kind of marketization has several levels of effect that are of interest to psychologists – both directly for individuals in the here and now and also for the shape of our evolving cultural norms that set out the possibilities for how we all can be and act in the world beyond the present.

**[slide – Marketization – e.g., Big Pharma and Disease-mongering]**

There is a lot of research now showing how marketization takes place through the pharmaceutical industry and its promotion of psychopharmacological treatments. Through processes of disease-mongering, Big Pharma actually creates new categories of illness, or exaggerates the harm of different conditions, calculatedly to expand markets for their drugs. Literally, we are sold new ways to be sick.<sup>18</sup>

In the area of mental health, for example, the number of new categories of mental illness 'discovered' since the first edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual back in 1952 has mushroomed. US psychologist Lisa Cosgrove has documented the enmeshment between commercial and medical/scientific interests in this process. For instance, seventy-five percent of those working on updating forthcoming DSM-5 diagnoses for mood disorders – a category for which drug treatments are increasingly “the first line intervention” in many places – report financial ties with the pharmaceutical industry (Cosgrove & Wheeler, forthcoming).<sup>19</sup>

Critically-oriented psychiatrists have also written about the way that doctors and scientists have been seduced into acting as front line advocates for new drugs, and unwitting ambassadors for the drug companies. Even though, as British psychiatrist, David Healy (2004), points out, some of these drugs may not, not only not be needed, but may actually cause serious iatrogenic effects. SSRIs – selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors – for instance, are associated with numerous, not always well understood or well recognized, adverse effects.<sup>20</sup> Yet they are widely prescribed<sup>21</sup> often times for states of being that would not, a few decades ago, have been seen as pathologies subject to medical or medicalized treatment. According to Cosgrove, the industry has “colonized” psychiatry (Cosgrove & Wheeler, forthcoming). Disease-mongering also happens, perhaps even more insidiously, through professional education and public ‘awareness’ campaigns run by governments, or ‘consumer’ groups, with support and sponsorship from the pharmaceutical industry.<sup>22</sup> This ensures that we know how to correctly ‘read’ the signs of our unhappiness and irritability as a condition that can be treated with drugs.

These medical practices are well supported by neoliberal ideals of personhood that psychology itself is complicit in promoting.<sup>23</sup> A form of personhood glossed with individual happiness, self-fulfilment and personal ‘empowerment’; without the nagging flaws of vulnerability, sensitivity, ambivalence, worry and discontent.

Similar ideals are promoted in more diffuse ways with more tangled and complex relationships to marketplace profit. For example, in Dana Becker’s forthcoming book she exposes what she calls “stressism”, a pervasive discourse in places like the U.S. through which it becomes normalized to angst about and internalize the difficulties faced in accommodating to strains imposed by the social conditions of contemporary life. In talking about the ‘stresses’ we have to cope with, attention is drawn away from those very conditions that continue to produce such difficulties, and the need to address them politically. These might include poverty, racial prejudice, and sexual discrimination, or the intensification of imperatives within work and personal life, or the alienation that comes about through social fragmentation. Problems of ‘stress’ remain safely located within individuals.

Marketization also reaches into our bedrooms and bathrooms, poking around in our sexual lives and the care of our bodies.

With the advent of Viagra in 1998 drug company marketing quickly began to specify and exaggerate the devastating intricacies of male “erectile dysfunction”. In countries with direct-to-consumer marketing (the USA and New Zealand) marketing spoke directly to potential consumers. The physical state of erectile change or difficulty was constructed as an impediment not only to certain forms of penetrative sexual intimacy. But also as an end to sex of any kind, an end to intimacy in general, romance, relationship happiness, and a severe blow to masculine identity. Viagra was offered as the magic bullet solution, a simple pill to fix this problem of erectile dysfunction (e.g., Gavey, 2005).

At least that’s the idea we have been sold. However, it was once considered normal for a man’s erectile capacities to change over the life span. A drug like Viagra, and the opportunities it presents for sexual bodies and practices, is arguably inherently neither good or bad. But in portraying erectile difficulties as both a devastating problem and one that is easily fixed, new norms are instilled about the necessity of “sex for life” (meaning a very narrowly conceived idea of what sex is and could be), and individuals are hailed to become responsible for getting their bodies fit for the job.

The problems with this are multiple. Because while ‘the problem’ was not always as devastating as we were told, neither is the solution as magical. Men are encouraged to prioritize their ability to have a certain kind of erection to such an extent that some take unnecessary health risks and some suffer unpleasant side effects. (Here a parallel can be drawn with SSRIs, which for some people have effects that are worse than the condition they were prescribed it for [e.g., Liebert & Gavey, 2006; 2008].) Some of our research showed that women in longer term relationships with a man who is taking Viagra sometimes find themselves pressured into sexual activities that they no longer want (or at least not as often as they once did). Sometimes this is associated with pain and discomfort, all which might be tolerated or suffered because ‘that’s what everyone expects now’. Or because of the difficult interpersonal dynamics that can arise when a man has spent quite a lot of money on the pill to enable the erection (Potts et al., 2003). Men, too, especially in newer relationships with younger women can find themselves under pressure to medicate their bodies into performances when they would rather not have to, because the power of new Norms shape expectations about sex and intimacy and at the same time reshape the meanings of the un-medicated body (see Vares et al., 2007).

In the process, alternative stories about erectile difficulties that offer nonmedicalized and affirming possibilities are submerged. In research that Annie Potts, Victoria Grace, Tiina Vares and I did with men who had tried Viagra, *some* men described their erectile difficulties not as a life ruining problem, but as actually enhancing their sexual



relationships (Potts et al., 2006; see also Potts et al., 2004). (This was because it provided an opportunity for pausing, stepping aside from dominant heterosexual scripts and finding new forms of sexuality, intimacy and communication).

There are many other examples like this where the norms of intimate, sexual behaviour, and the norms around what is an acceptable body for intimate relationships have been shaped, in coercive ways, we could argue, when medicine and commerce collide. Sometimes with bizarre outcomes, as we see with the relatively new field of cosmetic genital surgery. Research by my colleague Ginny Braun, and work by the New View Campaign in New York, lead by feminist psychologist Leonore Tiefer, draw attention to the misleading claims that are made in the promotion of surgeries to 'beautify' women's genitals (e.g., Braun, 2005; 2010; Tiefer, 2008).<sup>24</sup> Implicitly this pathologizes a wide range of perfectly normal bodies, and leads to some women choosing to pay to have healthy genital tissue amputated, and other women to feel anxious and dissatisfied because their bodies look more like the 'before' photos in the surgeons' promotional 'before and after' surgery shots that are graphically displayed on their websites.

So through marketization all kind of intimate detail is open to being targeted for drumming up discontent and so that we can be sold the solution. It establishes new norms in the process, inviting us as individuals to spend money, to take risks, and to conform. At the same time it shapes the cultural landscape, changing the conditions of possibility in which we all live, prescribing new scripts (authored by those orienting to economics) for how it is legitimate and desirable to be and act in the world.

### **[SLIDE - The nature of human nature according to neoliberalism]**

But underlying this marketization is a distinct transformation of the conditions of possibility for everyday life that is even more subtle and insidious. Harvey (2005, p. 3; see also Peck, 2010) writes about how neoliberalism, as a "mode of discourse", has become part of "the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world". It instils a set of assumptions about the very nature of human nature and about the values we should hold dearest.<sup>25</sup>

One of the main points I am wanting to make today is to argue that the influence of neoliberalism, especially as it takes hold in our private and personal lives, hinges upon a central deceit about the nature of human subjectivity. By deceit I mean misleading promises and half truths promoted by neoliberal discourse about what kinds of subjects we are (autonomous and self-knowing) and what is important in life (individual freedom above all else).<sup>26</sup>

Going back to the examples I mentioned earlier: When we consider the strange technologies of beauty, sexual pleasure, personal happiness, erections and so on, the

most common answer to any questioning about the ethics or politics of these practices (or at least about the promotion of these practices) is a resort to the individual's right to freedom of choice as a bottom line deferral of critique. What do we hear when we question the risks and exploitation involved in cosmetic surgery, when a woman in 'the West' submits to a surgeon's scalpel to 'trim' or amputate part her labia? Or when a man picks up a script for Viagra? Or when he sits down to watch gonzo pornography that calls women bitches, pulls them by their hair and subjects them to myriad demeaning and painful-looking acts? Or any number of other activities made possible and more normative by the commercialization of intimate life?

When individual choice is invoked two things are going on: one is the deceptive assurance that we *do have* choice. The other is a reiteration of the foundational value of freedom of choice, that we *should have* choice; and that this is obvious and beyond question, and should always trump other considerations. I will say more about the aspirational part later. First, to look at the question of whether we really are as free as we are given to believe.

Critical feminist psychology research is building up a picture of how the rhetoric of choice is taken up to account for these kinds of intimate practices (as well as a whole range of other life paths that women find themselves on). In the realm of femininity and the production of gendered bodies this research also shows, how, ironically, given the popular cultural association of beautification with individuality and creative expression, the participation in such practices is often a form of conformity. (As Ngaire Donaghue and colleagues [2012] show so well in their study with young women "choosing to conform" to feminine beauty practices.)

One of the most poignant interrogations of these issues that I've come across recently is Breanne Fahs' US research that shows just how mythical the idea of choice can be when applied to the practices for disciplining the feminine body (Fahs & Delgado, 2011; Fahs, 2011). Fahs writes about an extra credit exercise she ran in her class in which women could stop removing body hair for the duration of the semester (and men could start removing it), and keep a diary about their experiences. Fahs' work on these mundane everyday practices dramatically highlights how duplicitous the assumption can be that we are fully autonomous and freely choosing individuals.

Women who stopped removing their body hair encountered harsh and hostile responses from those around them – such as mothers and boyfriends. The experience was also affected by race and class. The authors noted that more stigma was associated with transgressing norms of idealized femininity for African American and Latina women irrespective of class, and working class women irrespective of race. One woman (who was described as a 'woman of colour') was laughed at, and called names by her relatives. Her sister told her that her Women's Studies major was "messing with" her mind and turning her into a man. Her boyfriend "boycotted sex", "saying it was too hairy

or a jungle down there”. He also asked her not to put her arms up when she was sleeping because the sight of her underarm hair troubled him so much. Other women’s boyfriends also complained that their natural body hair was “gross”.

Yet, in spite of this clear demonstration of the punitive responses women can expect when they transgress the norms of idealized feminine appearance, it would still be commonplace where I live for a thirteen year old girl considering shaving her legs for the first time to be told, misleadingly, “it’s your choice, dear”.

**[Slide – Implications for ethics & justice in intimate life and for the politics of change]**

Feminist and other critical scholars have written extensively about how neoliberal ideals are held up as truths about the nature of human nature. It is difficult to argue with values like individual freedom and equality. But there are a number of things we need to consider:

Currently, these ideals are held up *as if* they are already accomplished, in contexts where we know at some level it isn’t true. We see this at the social level. For example, in my country there is an implicit and strongly held fantasy about the accomplishments of gender and racial equality, that don’t match with the reality. We see it also at more personal and intimate levels where we are expected to live our lives according to an exaggerated and deceptive mantra of freedom of choice. As if the choices we have are ours alone. As if they exist independent of the cultural contexts that limit the possibilities for people according to gender, race, sexuality, ‘class’, age, physical abilities and appearance, and so on. And as if our choices are unconstrained by the seductions and punishments associated with these norms and values.

But even when freedom of choice is promoted or flagged as an aspiration rather than an accomplishment, there are problems. For feminists, the call for women to have the freedom of choose has been hard fought for and extremely important in campaigns for sexual and reproductive rights, and against sexual and domestic violence, for example. But, as Harvey (2005, p. 41), points out, “values of individual freedom and social justice are not ... necessarily compatible”: As he says, the “pursuit of social justice presupposes social solidarities and a willingness to submerge individual wants, needs, and desires...”.

**[slide – eg, mainstream pornography]**

Mainstream pornography, I think, provides an example par excellence of the kind of seductions and the kind of trouble that neoliberal logic can lead us into, in relation to gender politics in particular. An example that shows us how elevating the principle of freedom of choice can work in ways that are arguably antagonistic to social justice.

Pornography is a site where the kind of deceits that are promulgated within neoliberalism work in unruly ways. In ways, that I and many others would argue, protect misogyny, sexism, and racism in the name of individual choice and pleasure. And where these principles – the right to individual freedom of expression and consumption, the right to personal pleasure – are held up in ways that squeeze the frame of ethics and undermine the possibilities for the kind of political engagement necessary to sustain progressive social change.

Pornography has proliferated under the conditions of market capitalism and rapid technological developments. Corporations have seized upon the commercial opportunities in producing explicit ‘sex’, in more and more extreme forms. It is huge business, even if the commercial underpinnings are not always obvious to a consumer (in say picking up free online content).<sup>27</sup>

The issue is complicated, with some scholars and activists focusing on what they see as ‘the positive’ opportunities for a “democratization of desire”, as Brian McNair (2002, 2009) would put it, in relation both to pornography itself and the so-called ‘pornographication of the mainstream’. (And this is one of the contradictory things about neoliberalism, because it is true that within the logic of its framework there is room to celebrate difference and diversity<sup>28</sup>.)

Pornography is of course a diverse genre, and some is arguably progressive.<sup>29</sup> But within some of the most popular mainstream material addressed primarily to a heterosexual male audience, harsh physical acts are filmed that present women’s bodies not only as ‘objects’ of male desire. But as completely ‘derivatized’, as philosopher Ann Cahill might say – that is, reduced to a thing that exists *only* for the satisfaction of the other.<sup>30</sup>

Women might have several men ejaculating on their bodies and faces, they might have more than one penis in their vagina at the same time, they might have a penis taken from their anus and put straight into their mouth (without it being washed). Scenes include hair pulling, hateful name calling, and popular recently, a kind of rough ‘deep fallatio’ that leaves the woman choking and gasping for air. All of this is rigidly and repetitively patterned by gender, so that it is women’s bodies that are being acted upon, and stretched, quite literally, to extreme limits.<sup>31</sup>

In interviewing young men about what they find appealing about pornography, Alex Antevska, who is a recent masters graduate from Auckland University, found that many were capable of a kind of disconnect from thinking and caring about the woman performers. When asked about their response to scenes in which women were probably in pain or discomfort, or not enjoying it<sup>32</sup>, one man said “that doesn’t come into my thought at all ... [it] wouldn’t concern me-“. His friend added, “I don’t know it’s their choice though”. Choice, again, is assumed and invoked to render the enjoyment of

watching a woman being “pounded”, as they put it, beyond question, even if she was in pain and discomfort.

There are so many ethical questions raised by this kind of pornography. And yet as we see by this sort of exchange, caricatures of neoliberal subjectivity (for example, the idea that she wouldn't be doing it if she didn't choose to) make it difficult to get critical traction. The issue, I would argue, is not only whether or not her actions are freely chosen, whatever this might mean. But also, whether this is the only relevant question?

In thinking about ethics in terms only of the rights and welfare of performers and consumers, we paper over the interconnectedness of people's lives. The consumption of pornography is usually a private practice, but it does not take place in a social vacuum. Like our engagement with any type of media, any type of cultural product, it can't help but be affecting. It is implausible, if not impossible, that our ways of seeing the world, our imaginings and desires, our expectations about our own and other people's bodies, about gender, and about sexuality would not be informed in some ways through the kind of pornography we might view. And that these would then find their way into real relational spaces with other people.

Research by Australian social researchers and documentary makers Maree Crabbe and Dave Corlett (2011) shows how this can play out in a very direct and literal way. Young men tell of their surprise and confusion when young women responded badly to their attempts to 'do' sex like they had seen it done in pornography.<sup>33</sup> And we can see suggestions of this also in trends in intimate practices such as heterosexual anal sex and women's pubic hair removal following the normalization of these practices within mainstream pornography. Both the personal anecdotes and the documented trends point to the way pornography, as a cultural product, has the power to affect the cultural landscape, in just the same way as the promotion of products like Viagra and make-up and diets do.

The neoliberal fantasy that we are autonomous, self-contained rational individuals can support an attitude of callous disregard for the hurt of others. If anyone is offended or hurt by sexist advertising, misogynist pornography or rape jokes (see West, 2012), for example, a neoliberal ethos renders that *their* problem.

I think there is another important element in all of this, in regard to the ethical and political, and personal, consequences of the neoliberal deceit. How do we understand what drives, or at least sustains, misogyny, sexist and racist hostilities?

US feminist psychologist, Lynne Layton (2010) applies psychoanalytic theory to understanding what she calls the “social traumas” caused by neoliberalism, and discusses how they lead to “perverse modes of subjectivity” (p. 303).<sup>34</sup> For example,

what is the effect of living in a culture that does not tolerate vulnerability, especially in men, and that attempts to deny our interconnectedness and interdependence? Might this provide part of the psychological side of the story of how come so many men (and some women) can consume misogyny for pleasure (in pornography and elsewhere), and at the same time so forcefully deny the costs of this for others? Neoliberal ideology provides the cultural resources for doing this, allowing us to nullify niggles about the ethics and injustice of hateful material, through deflection to personal choices. And a way of managing either the pain or the shame (or possibly both) that attaches to this material and that might otherwise force us to engage critically with the deceit at a political level.<sup>35</sup> The mantra of personal choice is helpful in this regard.

Layton (drawing on Bion and Freud) refers to how the “capacity to bear frustration” (p. 304) is essential for the “capacity to think” (p. 305). “When the raw emotion evoked by frustration is not adequately contained,” she suggests, “lying, rather than thinking, may become a customary way of defending”.

**[slide – Layton quote]**

She says that, “Key to the capacity for truth-telling is the capacity to tolerate uncertainty, helplessness and vulnerability rather than disavow the reality that evokes those states. So what happens”, she asks, “to possibilities for truth-telling in a culture that makes uncertainty and shame about the vulnerability it evokes a way of life?” (p. 311)<sup>36</sup>

When the promotion of individual pleasures and pursuits through products as wide ranging as Viagra, pornography, and beauty products, change the cultural landscape, the terms under which all of us in that cultural context live are transformed. Questions of ethics, justice and politics therefore must extend beyond consideration of the individual.

Judith Butler’s work, in her 2005 book *Giving an Account of Oneself*, is helpful here. She outlines a “new sense of ethics” (p. 42), grounded in what she argues is our “primary and irreducible relations to others” which, she argues, is a “precondition of ethical responsiveness” (p. 135). Central to her argument is the claim that the self is fundamentally opaque. That is, we can never know ourselves completely and we can only ever know ourselves in relation to the social world in which we exist. Two things follow from this. Firstly, it provides a basis for calling into question reference to individuals’ desires, pleasures, ‘needs’ and so on as unquestioned and unproblematized givens that act as warrants for consumptive practices. Instead, these things would have to be weighed against consideration of the ways that these might affect others (including how they provide modes of recognition for others). Secondly, because the social norms through which we are constituted are historically contingent, social

critique is essential to ethics, and thus the boundary between ethics and politics becomes blurred.

## **Conclusion**

So, to conclude very briefly.

Critical analyses of neoliberal subjectivity increasingly permeate feminist psychology scholarship. I have barely been able to scratch the surface of the rich field of work that ties into understanding the formation of gendered subjectivities and the possibilities for gendered lives under neoliberal capitalism; as well as the spaces of opportunity for contestation and other forms of creative disruption.

There is some urgency to this aspect of our work – both in understanding what is going on, and contributing to critical challenges. Because what is at stake is the sedimentation of particular foundational norms and values that both reinforce sexism (and other systematic installations of privilege, power and prejudice), *and simultaneously* undermine the possibilities for critique and political engagement. It is time for us to call it as we see it, as deceit based on misleading half truths about the nature of human nature, and the state of social relations. A deceit that allows inequality and injustice to flourish, even in the most intimate domains of our lives.

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<sup>1</sup> Invited ‘*State of the Science*’ address (Critical psychology of gender), 30<sup>th</sup> International Congress of Psychology, Cape Town, 22-27 July 2012. (This paper is written for a spoken talk – the written project is work-in-progress – because it’s in draft form please do not distribute without permission.)

Thanks to Catherine Casey, Raj Panikkar, Ginny Braun, Rachel Liebert, and Octavia Calder-Dawe for conversations over the years that have contributed, and added new dimensions, to my critical interest in neoliberal capitalism in relation to the intimate sides of life.

<sup>2</sup> For example: Baker (2010), Donaghue et al., (2011), Evans et al., (2010), Fine (2012), Gill (2008), Harrison, (2012), Jacques & Radtke (2012), Kilty (2012), Leve et al., (2012), Malson et al., (2011), Riley & Scharff (2012), Stuart & Donaghue (2012), Warin et al., (2012).

<sup>3</sup> It is beyond the scope of this piece to excavate the various detailed contours of neoliberalism (as explained, mostly, by its critics). But it is interesting to note Wacquant’s (2012) version which holds that the core of neoliberalism is “an *articulation of state, market, and citizenship* that harnesses the first to impose the stamp of the second onto the third” (p. 71). He offers this as an alternative to neo-Marxist critiques that focus on market rule on the one hand, and Foucauldian approaches that focus on governmentality on the other.

<sup>4</sup> See also Becker & Marecek (2008b). Sampson (1977) was already delivering a critique of the ‘self-contained individualism’ prized by US psychology. [*also Cushman, 1990?, Rose?*] (“We maintain that the bounded, autonomous self that strides through a positive life is an illusion, as is the notion that human flourishing and happiness are readily available to all” (Becker & Marecek 2008a).)

<sup>5</sup> Although it had been brewing for some decades before – Peck (2010) provides a good account.

<sup>6</sup> Wacquant (2010, 2012) emphasises what could be thought of as the mirror trope, individual responsibility.

<sup>7</sup> Harvey notes that they targeted schools, universities, courts, and the media, to protect their political power and financial interests, which were under threat by the 1970s.

<sup>8</sup> Peck (2010) refers to neoliberalism as “market fundamentalism” (p. xi).

<sup>9</sup> This point is emphasised in his lecture: ‘The strange non-death of neoliberalism’. Critical Governance Conference. The University of Warwick. Posted on Youtube 22 November, 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R3oZaDFXeIc> [accessed 26 June 2012]

<sup>10</sup> This term (‘giant firm’ or ‘giant corporation’) is Crouch’s (2011).

<sup>11</sup> Indeed, neoliberal capitalism according to Casey (2011) “encourages action by the market and the corporate firm against the interests of society” (p. 186).

Critics note that neoliberalism has both a soft and duplicitous side as well as a harsh and dogmatic side (e.g., Roy, Larner & Peck, 2012). Its features include both “roll back” (destructive forms of de-regulation) and “roll out” (creative forms of re-regulation) (Peck & Tickell, 2006). In its ‘softer’ (Peck, 2010) forms, such as entrepreneurship and self help (Roy in Roy et al., 2012), where neoliberalism can seem to “mean less government, it does not follow that there is less governance” (Larner (2000, p. 12). As Rose (1998, 1999) has emphasised, loosely following Foucault, subjectification – the making of certain kinds of selves – does not require domination and subordination. Rather, it is possible to be “governed through our freedom” (Rose, 1999b, p. 62). Scholars such as Peck and Wacquant are, however, concerned to highlight the role of the state in fostering neoliberalism. As Peck and Tickell (2006) argue, it is only rhetorically that neoliberalism means “less state”: “neoliberalism, in its various guises, has always been about the capture and reuse of the state, in the interests of shaping a pro-corporate, freer-trading ‘market

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order” (Peck, 2010, p. 9). Wacquant (2010, 2012) goes further to emphasise the state’s own role in shaping this process.

<sup>12</sup> As Peck (2010) says, “it has become so commonplace to think *with*” neoliberalism, that “it can be difficult to think *about*” it (p. xi).

<sup>13</sup> Drawing on David Harvey’s concept of “accumulation by dispossession”.

<sup>14</sup> See Wacquant (2010) for an argument that the “drive to hyperincarceration” (p. 211) in the US is a key part of the neoliberalism. He also points out the two-faced nature of neoliberal government: “The soft touch of libertarian proclivities favouring the upper class gives way to the hard edge of authoritarian oversight, as it endeavors to direct, nay dictate, the behavior of the lower class” (p. 214).

<sup>15</sup> See Casey (2011) for a critique of the broader degradation of education (especially higher education) as a result of “the market economy’s triumph over social and cultural relations” (p. 9).

<sup>16</sup> Which goes hand in hand with commodification (Vujnovic, 2012, suggests the two terms can be used synonymously).

<sup>17</sup> I obviously disagree with Crouch’s (2011) claim that “there can be no market in happiness” (p. 36).

<sup>18</sup> (Currie, 2005 ; Lane, 2007, 2009?; Moynihan & Cassells, 2006 ; Tiefer, 2006)

<sup>19</sup> Overall, she found that over 65% of the *DSM-5* task force members involved in developing the forthcoming *DSM-5* report ties with pharmaceutical companies (Cosgrove & Wheeler, forthcoming). The panels with the highest proportion of members with financial conflicts of interest “are those for which pharmacological treatment is the first-line intervention” (Cosgrove & Wheeler, forthcoming; *other refs*).

<sup>20</sup> *Note also the point about the corruption of the science/business of medicine and its regulation allowing bad drugs to get and stay ‘on the market’ – eg, Healy, Goldacre (2012) Bad Pharma?*

<sup>21</sup> *stats*

<sup>22</sup> *examples*

<sup>23</sup> *develop*

<sup>24</sup> See also: <http://www.newviewcampaign.org/fgcs.asp>

<sup>25</sup> *Rose*

<sup>26</sup> These characteristics of the ideal neoliberal subject are not necessarily all peculiar to neoliberalism. But they take shape in a world in which a neoliberal commonsense has taken hold, with its aspirational path laid out for us all as autonomous, rational, independent, responsible individuals free to choose and craft our own lives. (Within wealthy western nations, from the abundant resources and opportunities open to us all.)

The painful reality, however, is that things are not really as they seem. In places like New Zealand, where I live, we are sold a fantasy of gender equality that leads to gender neutral policies which sometimes lock into place the very disparities between women in men that are disavowed. In the Unites States, as Michelle Fine and her colleagues have discussed, the mythical illusion of a ‘postracial’ society clouds the racial inequalities that persist, in a way that allows them to become further exacerbated. And around the world, sexuality scholars celebrate progressive possibilities within the new proliferation of pornography in a way that ardently refuses to take seriously the extent of misogyny, sexism, and racism that goes along with it.

<sup>27</sup> For instance, although many people consume online pornography without paying for it directly, the whole online business is structured with networks of connection designed to

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detour some of the ‘casual clickers’ (as Jennifer Johnson, 2010, calls them) to paying sites. Even if only a small proportion of casual online users end up at paying sites, this leads to huge revenues. Also, the trend towards so-called user generated content, where people upload video of themselves having sex is not always as democratic as might be assumed, with commercial platforms supporting and benefitting from this kind of material.

<sup>28</sup> This is something that Crouch (2011) would probably link to a longer history of liberalism which has contained a complex mix of not always compatible social and economic dimensions. As a feature of contemporary neoliberal societies, however, it should perhaps not be celebrated too lightly. Difference can be co-opted, and recuperated into new normativities that operate as ‘just another market’ (e.g., Weiss, 2008). (*Duggan, 2003?*) Racialized and classed vectors of exclusion co-exist with new enfranchisements, so that *select* (previously?) non-normative subjects are warmly welcomed into the public fold while many others remain invisible and socially disposable (e.g., Reddy, 2011?; 2011-12). Moreover, these gestures towards inclusion can themselves become part of the problem, as in the way that concepts like ‘diversity’ can come to obfuscate rather than challenge racism (Ahmed, 2010; Owusu-Bempah, 2012).

<sup>29</sup> It is important to stress that I am only concerned here about the sexism, racism, misogyny and violence within mainstream pornography – so I have no argument with anything that calls itself pornography which is not overlaid with prejudicial gender and race politics.

<sup>30</sup> It is not the kind of desire that we might speculate involves longing and vulnerability and, as such, is potentially more amenable to egalitarian relations.

<sup>31</sup> When questions of ethics are raised about pornography, the net tends to get cast narrowly. More often than not, it is an ethics grounded in neoliberal sensibilities that focus on the individual, and their rights, responsibilities and choices; and an ethics restricted in scope to the conduct of those directly involved in the production and consumption of pornography (e.g., Albury, 2009; McKee et al. 2008).

<sup>32</sup> The men themselves referred to sexual acts being done to women using language like “pounded anally”, “taking three dicks like a champ”, and so on.

<sup>33</sup> In a society where sex education is limited, pornography had taken that role.

<sup>34</sup> She draws a parallel between the kind of care that children need in order to grow up secure with the kind of care that we, as citizens, need from our “social environment” (p. 307). In order for infants not to be overcome with anxiety, she notes, they need to be taken care of with containment and holding, that recognizes their vulnerability. (p. 307)

What happens, then, when vulnerability is culturally repudiated, and when it is less safe to feel this emotion? (More so for men in many of our cultures.) She argues that under these conditions it more difficult “to tolerate states of dependence and [it] makes it hard to acknowledge how we are all connected to one another” (p. 311). So the illusion of autonomy – and possibly fantasies of power, control, and entitlement – are held in place, arguably, by a disavowal of vulnerability and interconnectedness.

<sup>35</sup> (As long as it doesn’t cross the line into overt physical violence perhaps.)

<sup>36</sup> What happens, we might wonder, when exploitation, prejudice, and unfairness are denied and both the pain and the shame that this produces are disavowed?