

# Town bikes unite

by

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*Written by a counsellor in an Australian Centre Against Sexual Assault, this paper questions the attitudes of the dominant culture to women who are sexually prolific. It also explores the links for some women between experiences of sexual assault and subsequent prolific sexual activity. By questioning the effects of dominant attitudes towards women's sexuality and by inviting therapists and researchers to explore the meanings that women give to their own experiences of sexuality, this paper offers new challenges to the counselling field.*

Keywords: *sexuality, sexual promiscuity, sexual assault, women, feminism, counselling*

Recently, I was with friends who own a small business in a country town and the talk drifted to the difficulties of hiring new staff.

'What about Trish?' asked the one who didn't grow up in this particular town.

'Oh no, we couldn't', replied the other who was a local and knew all the old stories, 'She was the town bike.'

I felt numb and silenced. I had always admired this friend of mine who, while catering to the demands of a milk bar, was also heroically studying a course in social work by correspondence.

Questions raced through my brain.

Hadn't my friend ever talked about gender issues in her social work studies? Why isn't there an equivalent term for the guys in this town who were obviously just as sexually active as Trish? Is that what everyone in the town thinks of this girl/woman? What about the fact that it was twenty years ago? How long is someone stuck with a label like that? What about her life since then? How could my friend judge someone like that? What kind of social worker will she make if she holds these kinds of judgements in her head? And then the hardest question came to me ... what would she think of me if I told her what I did in my late teenage years?

I walked away from the conversation feeling shocked, but also ashamed. Mostly, I was ashamed that I didn't speak up for 'town bikes' all over the world and set my friend straight.

That's how this piece of writing came about. I decided that I would write an article about the girls and women this issue affects because I think this problem is specific to us. I can't think of many ways to describe a man who sleeps around, and those that I can think of carry positive messages: stud, hero, spreading his seed, macho ... are there others?

I began to conduct some informal research. I asked my friends and colleagues if they thought this was an issue relevant only to rural Anglo-working-class culture or whether it was more wide-spread. After talking with Spanish speakers, German speakers, Arabic speakers, and an Amharic speaker, we concluded that this phenomena was relevant to a range of cultures.

## Sexual assault

Let me explain a little about myself. I work as a counsellor at a Australian Centre Against Sexual Assault

which provides counselling for anyone who has been sexually assaulted, either recently or in the more distant past. In the course of our conversations, many of the girls and women end up talking about a time in their life when they had lots of sex, with lots of partners.

These women speak of lots of unprotected sex. Lots of out of control sex - not quite rape, but not exactly consenting sex either. Lots of one night stands; lots of sex that didn't even last the night, or even make it out of the carpark. And lots of, what they would now call, rapes.

They talk about feeling shame and embarrassment. About feeling the eyes judging them as they walk down the street. About how doing the supermarket shopping becomes a major ordeal if they bump into someone who knew them from those times. They speak about how, once you get that reputation, it can be impossible to shake. They describe the energy it takes to ignore the talk and the looks. They talk about having to leave home. Leave town. About never going back.

One young woman I spoke to talked about attending a group for young women who had been sexually assaulted as children. After the formal group sessions they would head to MacDonald's for a post-group snack and it was there that they started comparing personal histories: 'I was always called a slut/whore/town bike/easy/'ho/tart/slag/loose/tramp ...'

So common was this experience between them that they ended up deciding that the group must have really been for girls who had problems with too much sex, and that they had been specifically chosen for the group because they were the only ones who had this peculiar problem. Many of the women we speak to at the Centre Against Sexual Assault say that they feel like they are the only ones to have had such experiences.

If I had been at that post-group meeting I suspect that, in my proper counsellor way, I would have tried to 'normalise' these young women's experiences by saying things like: 'Lots of the girls and women we see say they have gone through a period in their lives like this ... It is a common response to child sexual assault ... Many people mistakenly believe the 'proper' response to child sexual assault is to be put off sex ... There's no such thing as a 'proper' reaction ...'

When Holly recently told me that the most difficult part of the sexual assault memories were not the assault itself but her wild behaviour afterwards, I promised to look for more thorough explanations. I vowed to work out some better ways to respond to the stories I was hearing. And I started to

think about my own history.

## I was sixteen

I was sexually assaulted by my uncle. While there was only one incident, his behaviour for the five years after that time left me confused and had a ripple effect throughout my life. One of those ripples was a period of 'promiscuity': at least that is how the literature would so delicately label that confused, dangerous and rollercoastery time in my life.

My memories of what I was thinking around that time are patchy. I was sixteen.

I remember thinking: 'This is what friendships with men are about.' There were no other models on offer, and certainly the men I knew weren't discussing different, non-sexual ways of relating. I remember thinking: 'This is what they want. It is easy for me.' There was some satisfaction in being able to fulfil the men's need or 'request'.

I say 'request' but from memory there wasn't a lot of talk, or a lot of checking. There also wasn't a lot of thinking on my behalf. It was just what I did in that intimate situation. There was nothing else I knew to do when in such close quarters. I remember a sense of feeling powerful, although that was fleeting, and there were many times where it went wrong and just felt plain dangerous. I remember not respecting the men after the deed was done ... there was nothing left to say, really. It wasn't like these guys wanted to stick around for a long relationship. And as for self-respect, that wasn't a concept that registered at the time.

I do remember being confused about the guys who knocked me back or who weren't interested. Or those who eyed me suspiciously and I knew they had those labels in mind.

## Average?

As I was thinking about writing this piece, one of the first questions I wanted to consider was ... 'Well, what's normal?' As it turns out, the statistics are a little confusing.

One survey of students at the University of Alberta in 1999 said the average number of sexual partners for female students was 6.2. The National Centre for Social Research in England (2003) surveyed 11,161 people and found the average for females was 7 sexual partners. Another study put the female average at 4.4. (Alexander & Fisher 2003). All of this research discussed the difficulty of getting accurate

information from participants in the research, because of what is considered to be socially acceptable. It was thought by researchers that women may put fewer partners than was actually the case so they are not negatively judged.

Reading these studies I was reminded of the episode of the television show *Sex and the City*, where Miranda has to make a list of her sexual partners in order to ring them about an STD check. I think she got to about thirty and was horrified. She inspired me to begin my own list. Like her, I struggled with names, and had to be content with 'friend of' or only the venue where the sex took place. I got to four times Miranda's list.

## Explanations

At this point I turned to the literature for explanations, and was surprised to find that there hasn't been much written about this topic. There were however a few research studies that caught my attention.

In the early sexual abuse literature, Karin Meiselman (1978) reviewed the writings of a range of authors in the 1950s and found 'a few cases in which the daughter had become very conspicuously promiscuous some years after the incest' (p.230). However, Meiselman goes on to consider two forms of bias in these early studies as many of the young women interviewed were from 'homes for delinquent girls' and most authors did not define what they meant by promiscuous, probably assuming their readers would know what was meant by the term. Still, this early literature makes me think that many women and girls have been grappling with this experience for many decades.

Finkelhor (1986) quotes research by Courtois which notes that '80% of the former incest victims in her sample reported an inability to relax and enjoy sexual activity, an avoidance of or abstention from sex, or conversely, a compulsive desire for sex' (p.159). Finkelhor also cites Fromuth (1983) who found 'evidence that women who had been sexually abused before the age of 13 were especially likely later to become victims of nonconsensual sexual experiences' (p.158).

De Young (1982) reports that 28% of the women she interviewed who had been subject to sexual abuse had engaged in activities that could be considered promiscuous. On the other hand, Fromuth (1983) observed that having experienced child sexual abuse only predicted whether or not subjects would 'describe themselves as promiscuous, not their

actual number of partners' (p.161).

I was also interested to read that Heather Stewart and Ann Tattersall (2000), in their research with young women who 'present violent, challenging and/or offending behaviour', asked 88 young women what they do when they feel angry. In response to this question, 23% of the 13 to 18 year olds and 18% of the 19 to 25 year olds indicated that they 'have sex'.

We get to hear the opinions of researchers, which often seem to emphasise negative interpretations of the women being studied, but we rarely get to hear from the women themselves. Was the sex a negative experience for them? Or a positive one? Or both? Would that have been hard to admit? What about women who have had lesbian 'promiscuous' sex experiences? Were these experiences similar or different to heterosexual experiences? More dangerous or safer? What connections have those women whose stories appear in the research papers made between their experiences of child sexual assault and their sexual lives? Have their understandings influenced what and how much they said to the researchers? What about women who weren't sexually abused in childhood and yet have had times of prolific sexual activity in their life?

Recent writings have mostly viewed this sexual expression of women negatively and have sought to explain it in terms of abnormalities and deficits in the women themselves:

- tendencies to recreate a traumatic past (Herman 1992);
- engaging in cycles of revictimisation and re-enactment (Matsakis 1996);
- lack of ability to sense danger and to get away from exploitative persons (Matsakis 1996);
- heightened needs for intimacy and tendencies to sexualise affection (Centre for Health and Gender Equity 1999);
- need for masculine attention (Malmquist, Kiresuk & Spano 1966);
- need to confirm that all men are alike (Butler 1978);
- inability to discern the difference between sex, love and abusive ways of being;
- neurobiological explanations<sup>2</sup>.

Other explanations focus on what the women may be seeking in their sexual actions – including wishes for warmth and closeness (Centre for Health and Gender Equity 1999) and sexual pleasure. And occasionally writers (Butler 1978) endeavour to explain that for women who have been forced to endure unwanted sex in childhood, engaging in sexual acts can involve a range of forms of survival skills and that this in

turn can influence sexual decisions in the future.

Despite the range of explanations, most of this literature only discusses heterosexual sex and there is little space generated to hear the complex meanings that these sexual acts and relationships have for women. There is little discussion about how the negative meanings attributed to these sexual events could be linked to the negative societal views about women and sex rather than, or not only because of, the experiences of the sex itself. I am interested in the effects of these different frameworks and ways of thinking. How might they change our views of these young women? How might they influence our responses to them?

I am particularly interested in the explanations of the women themselves. I have asked other sexual assault counsellors to collect stories and explanations from the people who consult with them. Some of the things that they have reported have included:

- *If they showed an interest in me I had to respond.*
- *I did it to annoy my parents.*
- *I was trying to call attention to how much pain I was in and how wrong things were.*
- *I was looking for love with the wrong people.*
- *I was mistaking sex for love.*
- *I was trying to make sense of the abuse.*
- *I was trying to be powerful.*
- *I was playing out the abuse in the sex.*
- *This was just something I had learned to do.*
- *It involved taking risks and at the time this was something I was into.*

These are responses from women who have sought counselling. Perhaps there are also many women who have not sought counselling, and for whom prolific sexual activity was a way in which they came to terms with the events in their lives. Perhaps it is something they respect about themselves, or perhaps they understand that it was a consequence of abuse, or perhaps it has both meanings in their life. I would be very interested to hear from others about this.

The meanings associated with these times can be complex. I can remember thinking to myself things like: 'Right, this time I'm the one who is gonna be in control', and: 'I'll show you who is the boss', and even: 'I'll prove (to everyone) how much this doesn't hurt me'. There were also aspects of pride: 'I might be overweight, but I can still attract

guys'. Most of the memories are grim and unappealing. While I may have started off 'in control' and 'the boss', that is mostly not how the encounters ended. I was mostly diminished and hurt by these experiences. Particularly if I was subjected to any judgements by friends, colleagues or family. But there were a few notable exceptions, for which I am grateful. These were times that were pleasurable and which also offered me other ways to view myself.

The same events can have varied meanings for different people. I recall working with a client for several years, 'Debbie', and one of the themes we were discussing was her 'promiscuity in her teenage years' which followed several years of sexual assault by a neighbour. We had not talked in much detail about her sex life due to a number of more pressing issues such as medication, her mental health history and the many layers of shame she experienced. When we returned to the subject, in a moment of boldness, I asked: 'What are the numbers we're talking about here?' Debbie counted up nine sexual partners. Given my history, I had never thought to stop and check what 'promiscuous' meant for this woman. Once we began talking about it, we could look at the national average, why it might have happened, and discuss what this meant for her as a Christian woman. I discovered that her shame about her sexual life had kept her out of the church for years. These conversations enabled her to continue down a path towards what she called 'self-forgiveness'. She decided that because of the abuse she had got 'love and sex mixed up'. She described how maybe it was the only way she knew how to ask for care from someone. Gradually, self-compassion came to replace self-judgement.

For those of us who have had similar experiences, how has our sense of ourselves been shaped when all the labels associated with being a 'loose woman' were cast around by friends, family and society, and echoed within our own minds? And how has this affected our relationships with our daughters, nieces and other young women we work with or know. Do my fears about these young women's safety; my worries that they may be labelled; and my doubts about whether they have language skills and abilities to negotiate in intimate moments, stop me seeing them as capable? Do my experiences stop me celebrating the steps these young women take to create their own sexual lives?

What is more, what does all this mean for us as workers, counsellors, mothers, fathers, aunts and others who care for and about young women? What language can we use to talk about these issues? One colleague of mine uses the

phrase 'indiscriminate' sex, rather than 'promiscuous sex', because it has less of a moral history. It allows us to talk about choices and consequences, and choosing differently next time. 'Indiscriminate' sex focuses attention on the sex itself, rather than the young woman. Perhaps it also opens possibilities to explore degrees of 'discrimination' and choices. Even when young women are engaging in a lot of sex, there will also be decisions that are being made, choices that are being followed. Perhaps exploring these will open space for us to consider what is important to these young women and how they can be supported in creating lifestyles that will nourish them.

Perhaps we all need to talk more about sex and intimacy and relationships, and to be reminded of how and why we make the decisions we do. If we could talk across generations about the intimate moments and choices we have all made, maybe it would be easier to talk about safe sex.

Writing this piece has been quite an experience. As it comes to completion I feel admiration for the toughness, the 'you're not gonna break me' attitude that I hear in the voices of the women I meet with, particularly those women who have had the bravery to admit to breaking such a strict moral code. I would very much enjoy hearing from any other 'town bikes' who read this piece of writing. Perhaps we 'town bikes' can unite to support the young women of future generations.

## Notes

1. Linette can be contacted via email: linette98@hotmail.com or by post c/- PO Box 443, Footscray VIC 3011, Australia.
2. In 1999 at a presentation in Melbourne, entitled *Interpersonal Trauma: Origins, resolutions and expressions*, Bessel van der Kolk introduced a neurobiological understanding of trauma and how it impacts on the victim/survivor. He discussed some research in which two groups of young women were tested for levels of the hormones that are understood to be involved in the human sex drive. The young women were 6 to 15 years old, and were divided into those who had and hadn't been sexually assaulted. Those who had experienced sexual assault had levels of androstendione that were three times higher and levels of testosterone that were five times higher than the girls who had not been sexually assaulted.

What are we to make of this? Does it suggest child sexual assaults caused these high levels? That the young women who have been sexually assaulted as children are more at the mercy of their hormones? That their sexual lives might, in part, be influenced by these bodily responses? Or that, in combination with the very particular skills they learnt to deal with the sexual assaults and the silence and shame surrounding child sexual assault, the young women might be struggling to work it out the best way they can? Do these frameworks and ways of thinking change your view of these young women? Of their actions?

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Holly and Debbie for their bravery, for speaking about their experiences and for allowing me to include their stories. I would also like to acknowledge the encouragement of my work colleagues and especially Sarah's contributions for the careful ways in which she read and re-read earlier drafts.

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