Post-humanism, sexualities education and the production of citizenship

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Abstract

In this chapter we apply a new materialist ontology to issues of citizenship. We argue that instead of considering citizenship as a status to be acquired, lost or refused by an individual, it is an emergent and relational capacity. This capacity is produced and reproduced in everyday material interactions, across a spectrum of activities from work to lifestyle practices. To illustrate this shift, we examine one example of such a material interaction: the engagements that young people have with sexualities education. Using data from two studies of sexualities education, we assess how the capacities produced during sexualities education interactions – such as a capacity to express specific sexual desires or to manage fertility proactively – contribute to the 'becoming-citizen' of young people. We conclude by suggesting how this bottom-up, posthuman model of citizenship as *becoming* can assist social work theory and practice: by re-thinking agency, and acknowledging the differential access to resources and opportunities experienced by those of different genders, ethnicities, sexualities, classes and nationalities.

Introduction

Citizenship has been claimed as the foundation for 'modern claims to liberty, equality, rights, autonomy, self-determination, individualism, and human agency' (Nyers, 2004: 203), bearing upon issues of social and political participation, rights, exclusion and subjugation (Bhambra, 2015; Turner, 1990). However, as a concept, it has also been criticised as 'the worn-out offspring of liberal humanism' (Shildrick: 2013: 153), and as inadequately theorised in relation to material embodiment (Bacchi & Beasley, 2002). Building on such critiques, our aim in this paper is to establish a *posthumanist, relational* and *materialist* analysis of citizenship. 'Citizenship', we shall argue, is not a state or status to be acquired, lost or refused by an individual (Sabsay, 2012, p 610). Rather, it is an *emergent capacity* of a material and relational network or assemblage of bodies, things (such as money, property), collectivities (communities, nation-states), norms and values, legal and policy frameworks, and ideas (nationality, belonging, democracy).

This perspective suggests that citizenship is produced and reproduced within the everyday material interactions in which humans are involved (Beasley & Bacchi, 2000, p. 350). Such interactions between assembled elements create (amongst other things) the society-level effects often associated with 'citizenship' (Koster, 2015, p. 225), such as inclusion and exclusion, security and insecurity, legitimation and transgression. This perspective opens the door, theoretically and practically, to what Holland (2006, p. 202) has called a 'nomad citizenship' that can 'serve and foster the enrichment of life' (see also Shildrick, 2013). Further, it replaces concern with *belonging* with an open-ended *becoming* (Braidotti, 2013, p. 169), and new possibilities for action or 'lines of flight' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988, p.: 89), in place of boundaries and closure (Alldred & Fox, 2015; Frieh and Smith, 2018).

Such a 'bottom-up' model of citizenship is produced at multiple 'sites' (Barns et al, 1999, p. 18) of material interaction, including work, consumption, political and social participation, migration, health, social identity and personal relations, and education. Here we explore the social production of citizenship through materialist analysis of one site from this skein of material interactions: the engagements of young people with sexualities education, using data from two studies conducted by the first author. We assess the micropolitical impact of three different *sexualities education assemblages* – constituted in the practices of teachers, school nurses and youth workers – upon the sexual and non-sexual capacities produced in young people. These capacities – for instance, a capacity to assert their rights to express specific sexual desires or a capacity to manage their fertility – we shall argue contribute to young people's 'becoming-citizen'.[1]

Sexualities education and citizenship

'Citizenship' has been applied variously as an abstract political science construct (Heater, 2004), a legal status (Sadl, 2016), an objective of social policy (Bottomore & Marshall, 1992; Dwyer, 2010) and an aim of rights-based activism (Richardson, 2017; Wilson, 2009). Sociologically, it has been used to address public participation (Clarke, 2005; Turner, 1990) and exclusion and subjugation (Bhambra, 2015), as well as gender and sexualities. 'Sexual citizenship' is a derivative notion concerning 'the balance of entitlement, recognition, acceptance and responsibility' (Weeks et al, 2001, p. 196) of different sexualities and access

to rights of sexual expression and identity (Monro, 2005, p. 155-162; Richardson, 2017, p. 211). Meanwhile, feminist and other scholars have addressed the effects of gender, reproductive status and sexualities on social justice and participation in markets and public life (Evans, 2013, p. 8; Fonseca et al, 2012; Kidger, 2004).

Sexualities education denotes the range of pedagogical interventions with children and young people around sexualities, reproductive biology and rights, sexual health, and issues concerning sexual consent and protection. Since the 1970s, it has been underpinned in the West by a humanist perspective. This is founded upon the rights of citizens to a full, happy and healthy sex life (Shtarkshall et al, 2007), and with the objective of empowerment – particularly of girls and marginalised young people (SIECUS, 2004: 19).

Sexualities education curricula in Western countries are delivered by specialist and non-specialist teachers, health workers such as school nurses and health educators, and community-based youth workers (UNESCO, 2015); and address sexual and reproductive biology; sexual health and personal protection; emotions and relationships; sexual rights and responsibilities, and also issue around sexual identity and citizenship (UNESCO, 2009). However, globally sexualities education remains patchy, with issues around gender and rights least often included in educational curricula (UNESCO, 2015, p. 34). In parts of the US, this liberal model is replaced by 'abstinence-only sex education', reflecting local conservative and fundamentalist religious attitudes to sexual morality and non-normative sexualities among both legislators and populace (Weaver et al., 2005, p. 176-177).

The most explicit UK policy link between sexualities education and citizenship was arguably the Teenage Pregnancy Strategy (TPS) established by the 1997-2010 'New Labour' government (Department of Health, 2008; Rudoe, 2014, p. 294. Non-normative parenting has long been blamed for social breakdown and exclusion, as well as societal ills from drug abuse to poor educational achievement (Armstrong, 1995; Weeks et al., 2001, p. 157). By implication, pregnant and parenting teenagers are either excluded – or exclude themselves – from the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. The TPS, which was introduced by the Blair government's Social Exclusion Unit (SEU), sought to promote young people's active citizenship and participation in the workforce by reducing teenage pregnancy and parenting,

and drawing teenage parents back into economic productivity and self-sufficiency (Alldred & David, 2010, p. 26; Kidger, 2004). Its 'solutions' to the social and economic exclusion of teenage parents entailed enhanced sex and relationship education (SRE) in and out of schools, improved access to contraception and sexual health advice (targeting high risk groups and young men), incentives for teen parents to return to education and assistance for child care (SEU, 1999, p. 8-9).

Earlier we noted the humanist foundations of 'citizenship' and questioned a view of citizenship as a state or status to be acquired, to be lost or to be rejected by an individual. By contrast, Beasley & Bacchi (2000: 344) have argued that citizenship needs to be seen as foundationally embodied. Citizens' social and political location are mediated via material interactions in social settings (Bacchi & Beasley, 2002, p. 330. Considered in this way, 'citizenship' needs to be seen not as referencing an attribute of an individual human, but as an *emergent capacity* of material social interactions: a ceaseless 'becoming' of the social world.

Citizenship in this latter view is an unstable and precarious project – a process of 'becoming-citizen' – that is continually in flux and continually threatened as human bodies interact with other people and with non-human matter. To explore this further, we examine in what ways sexualities education for young people may produce relational capacities conventionally associated with citizenship.

Theory and methods

We apply a 'new materialist' and posthuman analysis to sexualities education and 'becoming-citizen'. The new materialisms are a collectivity of disparate approaches that supply social theory with a means to re-immerse itself in a world of material forces that extend from the physical and the biological to the psychological, social and cultural (Braidotti, 2013, p. 3). Elements as disparate as organic bodies, things, and immaterial things (thoughts, desires, ideologies) may all be regarded as constituent parts of a relational material universe that interacts, assembles and disassembles continually to produce the flow of events that comprise the world, history and human lives.

While sexuality has conventionally been considered an attribute of an organism, be it plant, animal or human, new materialist authors have offered an alternative conceptualisation of sexualities. Braidotti (2011, p. 148) describes sexuality as a 'complex, multi-layered force that produces encounters, resonances and relations of all sorts', while Deleuze & Guattari (1984, p. 293) state quite bluntly that 'sexuality is everywhere'. Developing the latter analysis, Fox & Alldred (2013) argued that sexuality is not as a bodily attribute (albeit one that is consistently trammelled by social forces) but a series of capacities produced by a 'sexuality-assemblage' (see also Alldred & Fox, 2015; Renold & Ringrose, 2013), comprising both human and non-human elements. A sexuality-assemblage must be analysed not in terms of human or other agency, but in terms of the capacities produced by these assembled components.

With the unit of analysis moving from human agents to assemblages, the concern methodologically is no longer with what bodies or things or social institutions *are*, but with what they can do: their capacities (Deleuze, 1988, p. 127). To address this, we re-analysed datasets from two qualitative studies of professional sexualities educators conducted by the first author. The first was the two-year Sex and Relationship Education Policy Action Research (SREPAR) action research study to investigate the processes and pressures surrounding school-based sexualities education in a single local education authority with high teenage conception rates (Alldred and David, 2007). The second was the 'Sites of Good Practice' study of youth workers' approaches to sexual health or sex education-related work with young people (Alldred, 2018). Interviews in both studies were semi-structured and responsive.

We adopted the following approach to data analysis, in line with new materialist ontology. For each of the three professional groups (teachers, school nurses, youth workers) we began analysis by close reading of the interview data. This enables us to identify the range of material-semiotic *relations* (for example, bodies, things, concepts, organisations) that assemble around each professional group's material practices. Scrutiny of the data also supplied insights into the forces or *affects* that draw these particular relations into assemblage (for example, a teaching affect that transmits factual information to school students). These relations and affects populate the differing *sexualities education assemblages* (Alldred &

Fox, 2017) of teachers, nurses and youth workers. Finally, it supplied insights into the kinds of *capacities* that the three different interactions may produce in young people – for instance, a normative moral sensibility about sexual actions or knowledge of sexually transmitted infections. These capacities – what these bodies can do – include the inclusions and exclusions that produce citizenship.

Three approaches to sexualities education

At the time of the SREPAR study, Government guidance to UK state schools (DfEE, 2000) located SRE within a 'values framework', to help school students deal with 'difficult moral and social questions'. For the teachers interviewed, SRE took place within the context of an educational 'achievement agenda', which aimed to improve educational aspirations and engagement as a means to reduce social exclusion.

This context, the study found, had severe knock-on effects upon the delivery of SRE. As a non-examined subject – and one that (like PE and manual crafts) addressed bodies rather than minds – it was low status, and had to compete with academic subjects for timetable space. This was most marked in schools with high levels of academic achievement. Low status also meant less staff training and material resources for SRE classes; consequently many teachers resisted involvement in SRE, as an unwelcome add-on to their subject specialism, and one where they considered they lacked educational expertise. These contextual data enable us to locate teachers' engagement with SRE within a sexualities education assemblage comprising at least the following relations (in no particular order).

teacher; school students; parents; information; minds; lusty bodies; curriculum; workload; colleagues; 'achievement agenda'; classroom; tabloid newspapers; public outrage; resources; models of education and development; teachers' attitudes and sexualities

Analysis suggests that these relations assemble as a consequence of a powerful 'educational' affect, by which information/knowledge/values are passed from SRE curriculum to teacher to school student. Micropolitically, this affect economy establishes both a *specification* (in terms of a particular teacher-led perspective on sex and sexualities) and an *aggregation*

(locating sexuality within a top-down moral framework) of young people's capacities. We shall assess the impact of this micropolitics for their 'citizenship' in the following section (along with the other assemblages).

Turning to the school nurses, this group considered themselves as sexual health experts, with a major part to play in campaigns to reduce teenage pregnancy rates and prevent sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Most nurses in the study had responsibility for a secondary school and four primary schools, typically teaching school students between 11 and 14 years, and offering drop-in sessions for individual consultations. Their role was supplying up-to-date, accessible medical information that empowered school students to make informed decisions, without moral judgment. Unlike teachers, they felt confident about their skills, communication and use of teaching aids and reported positive school student responses to a 'no-nonsense' teaching style (for instance, a competitive 'condom test' to engage boys in learning about safer sex). The sexualities education assemblage in which school nurses are relations may be summarised as (in no particular order):

school nurse; school students; diseases; bodies; other health professionals; biomedical model of sexual health; medical information; teenage pregnancy reduction agenda; STIs; condoms; teaching staff; school spaces; school rules

These relations were assembled by a 'health promotion' affect that educated young people's minds and bodies into safer, healthy practices. Nurses generally embraced the UK Teenage Pregnancy Strategy as a framework within which to teach about safer sex. Micropolitically, the affects in this assemblage *specify* school students' capacities: this time by placing sex and sexualities within a health register, and *aggregate* young people to practice sex rationally, safely and healthily, according to health promotion principles.

However, analysis revealed a second powerful affective movement in this assemblage. Whether nurses conducted whole classroom sessions or individual consultations, they described young people as their patients, and their provision as patient-, rather than school-centred. This client-focus ascribed agency and decision-making capabilities to young people

possessing legitimate needs for health and sexual health information, with sexualities education as the means to enable them to make informed life choices. As one nurse commented

> What I'm interested in is: at the point they got pregnant, had they got all the information that they needed? Could they have prevented it had they wanted to? Whatever choice they make, as long as it's an informed choice and they make it because it's what they want to make, I've no problem with it. […]

This professional/patient relationship introduces a *singular* non-aggregating affect that acknowledges them as sexual decision-makers in their own right. The significance of this for young people's citizenship will be discussed in the following section.

The youth workers in the *Sites of Good Practice* study provided sexual health and relationships work in youth groups and schools, and one-to-one work with young people. Both practices were framed as supporting young people's well-being, and reflected general youth work principles of voluntarism, participation, equality and social justice. Youth workers increasingly were being invited into schools to contribute to SRE, recognising their expertise in engaging with young people on a range of topics. In the study, youth workers provided sex-positive accounts, addressing the positive contributions sex might make to relationships or well-being, alongside the risks to health or self-esteem. One youth worker described his aim as being '... to get young people talking about sex and relationships ... to get young men to take responsibility towards young women they see [date], in relation to relationships, consent and sexual health.' Another explained his role as:

> raising young people's awareness of the range of decisions and choices open to them around sex and offering opportunities for discussion and debate on the implications of particular choices … respecting young people's choices and views, unless the welfare or legitimate interests of themselves or other people are seriously threatened.

The relations in this sexualities education assemblage may be represented as follows (in no particular order):

youth worker; young people; UK youth work principles; information; services and resources; autonomy and agency; learning opportunities; informal education; responsibility; sexual subjects; schools and teachers

Unlike the assemblages around teachers and nurses' SRE work, here the principal affect in the assemblage was not around information transmission, but instead sought to empower, support and resource young people to make active decisions about sex and sexualities. Youth workers in the study engaged with young people as sexual subjects who were potentially sexually active, with desires, fantasies and experiences. Sexuality was a subject for discussion, not to minimise risks such as STIs or pregnancy, but as a means to enhance positive experiences and relationships, in both present and future selves.

Consequently, the affect economy in these youth work assemblages was both *generalising* and *singular* (non-aggregating) and produced a different and potentially wider range of capacities in young people than those discussed previously, including sexual autonomy, sexual responsibility and a respect for sexual diversity. In these assemblages, young people might gain capacities to be materially affective, opening up possibilities for current and future sexual expression. We now turn to consider the implications for citizenship of this and the other two sexualities education assemblages we have analysed.

Assembling sexual bodies, assembling citizenship

How then do these assemblages and capacities contribute to young people's 'becoming-citizen'? The first assemblage that we explored – the 'teaching assemblage' – revealed an uncomfortable encounter between a profession tasked with educating young minds and a government-inspired and top-down agenda to control young bodies' fertility; delivered by often unwilling and anxious staff. This conflicted affect economy specifies and aggregates young people's capacities for sexual behaviour and reproduction within a particular social and moral context.

The ‘health-assemblage’ that we analysed next reflected a very different professional focus upon sexual health, in this case delivered by enthusiastic professionals who saw an opportunity to use their expertise to engage students-as-clients to promote safer sex and the Government teenage pregnancy reduction strategy. Once again, young people’s capacities are specified and aggregated, in this case into a biomedical understanding of sex and reproduction, and the knowledge and skills for healthy, safer and – if possible – non-procreative sex.

Finally, the ‘youth work assemblage’ was shaped by a professional ethos based upon a commitment to young people as partners in learning and decision-making, and to helping young people develop their own values (National Youth Agency, 2004). Young people here are considered as autonomous and potentially sexually-active, and this affect is generalising and singular, encouraging capacities of sexual autonomy, responsibility and sexual diversity, and hence a potential ‘line of flight’ from the kinds of specification that the other SRE assemblages produced.

The various micropolitics of these three assemblages reveal their profoundly different effects on students’ capacities, not only for the ‘target’ capacities concerning sexualities, procreation and parenting, but also for ‘non-sexual’ capacities such as autonomy, employment and social inclusion. In terms of the former, some capacities are constraining, locating sex and sexuality within narrow framings; others are expansive, opening up potential for exploration, becoming and ‘lines of flight’. Concerning non-sexual capacities, our analysis discloses capacities that link directly to some key aspects of a liberal-humanist conception of ‘citizenship’. These include reasoned action led by evidence; knowledge and skills to protect oneself and others from deleterious effects of social engagement and interaction; and autonomy and self-governance within the law.

Earlier we noted that, in (new) materialist ontology, sexuality is to be seen as an impersonal affective flow within assemblages of bodies, things, ideas and social institutions: productive of all kinds of capacities to do, interact and desire. We may see citizenship similarly, as the material flux of affects between humans, things, social collectivities and ideas. This flux

produces capacities in *all* these elements: not only in what a human body can do, feel, think and desire. It produces the capacities of organisations such as schools, health services and governments; of social institutions (the law, marriage and the family); of abstractions and social constructs such as monogamy, nationality and democracy; and of things (from condoms and dating apps to passports and work tools).

'Citizenship' is consequently a flow that permeates the entirety of the social space in a liberal democracy. Within such an understanding, the material relations within sexualities education that engender capacities in young people such as safer sex, responsibility in sexual relationships and recognition of sexual diversity permeate beyond the immediate contexts of a classroom activity or a group discussion, and beyond their subsequent sexual encounters. They produce impacts (often highly normative) upon their wider capacities as participants in a society and a culture. Of course, we would not wish to imply that the sexualities-education assemblages we have discussed here are the only contributors to young people's citizenship, or even to their 'sexual citizenship'. What a young body can do – sexually and otherwise – will be a consequence of all the events, actions and interactions that together constitute a life, from sexual encounters or engagements with sexualised media and pornography (Fox & Bale, 2018); interactions with peers, teachers and employers; participation in work and civil society, and so forth. There will be a myriad of specifications, aggregations, generalisations and dis-aggregations of capacities – some of which produce 'the sexual', others producing the phenomena conventionally described as 'citizenship', and some of which produce both.

Conclusion

This posthuman and micropolitical perspective opens up an agenda for social work to explore both 'sexual citizenship' and citizenship more broadly. 'Sexual becoming-citizen' is not to be regarded as an outcome of society-level initiatives such as those to reduce teenage pregnancy or encourage safer sexual practices discussed in this paper. Nor is it an act of human agency that asserts sexual choices or a transgression of sexual norms. Rather it is the more-than-human becoming of sexuality-assemblages that come in all shapes and sizes (Fox & Alldred, 2013, p. 782), and that encompass both normative sexualities and those that conventionally have been excluded from full citizenship, from homosexuality to bisexuality, trans, fetishes and BDSM (Monro, 2005, p. 155-162; Rubin, 1984), as well as pregnant and

parenting teens. More generally, citizenship emerges continually from the material engagements between bodies and other physical, social and cultural relations. Citizenship is not a neat process whereby bodies are either assimilated into a cultural milieu or cast out as transgressive, to plough their own counter-cultural furrow (Ryan-Flood, 2009: 186; Taylor, 2011: 588). This assessment extends far beyond the confines of pre-teen and teenage education, to all members of a society or culture.

This perspective on citizenship does not reject the legitimate struggles of people to gain the rights afforded by 'belonging' to a nationality, a community or a social formation. Indeed, we would argue that it emphasises that citizenship should be more than just a matter of law, policy and social equity. Our vision is for a more generous and productive view of citizenship, one that is intricately caught up in the web of social interactions that surround human bodies. The value of the posthumanist approach we have developed here lies in its capacities to inform pro-actively policy and practice (Fox & Alldred, 2017). If we can unravel the micropolitics of sexualities education assemblages to understand the capacities they variously produce, the same analytical procedure may be used not just to re-design these and other assemblages to foster positive sexual and other capacities in participants, but also to open up possibilities for becoming-citizen.

A micropolitics of citizenship assemblages thus supplies a sophisticated and detailed analysis from which to manage the internal cogs of becoming-citizen. However, we would suggest that this perspective can also serve as a counter to current trends toward neoliberalisation and austerity. These shifts are gradually replacing welfare systems and a rights-based approach to social security with an individualising and pathologizing discourse that ignores growing social inequalities and shifts blame for their predicaments on to individuals. In the UK, this shift has been accompanied by the loss of community social work from the curriculum and as a recognised specialism. A posthuman understanding of citizenship can enable a critical imagination by policy-makers, activists and social work professionals and academics that acknowledges the differential access to resources and opportunities experienced by those of different genders, ethnicities, sexualities, classes and nationalities. It consequently bolsters social work practitioners' and educators' efforts to enable service users to know and demand their rights within specific social settings, in ways that foster an emergent nomadic

citizenship of becoming and lines of flight, and counter those who would weaken this capacity.

For example, the micropolitical approach we promote here suggests moving far beyond current approaches to sexualities education (Long, 2017), to design life-long interventions and developmental engagements around the public and private dimensions of sexualities, relationships and reproduction that can open up possibilities for becoming-citizen. This nomadic citizenship can incorporate sexual lines of flight; safer, diverse and responsible participation in the sexual and social world; and produce a culture in which sexual expression, pregnancy and parenting are no longer evaluated normatively.

We have focused here on one small area of social life – sexualities education, to reveal how differing professional practices produce a variety of capacities that affect how bodies participate in social contexts. Sexuality has been analysed extensively for its significance for citizenship as 'belonging' (Plummer, 2001, p. 238; Richardson, 2017, p. 212; Weeks, 1998, p. 36). However, the wider literature on citizenship has explored many other areas of social interaction – such as work, consumption, health, legality and illegality, political representation and social stratifications. We have argued that citizenship (or its absence) is not a property or attribute of a body, but a disseminated flux that draws bodies, things, concepts and social institutions into assemblage. The posthuman analysis that we have applied to sexualities education here, we would conclude, has potential to be used productively to explore these other areas of social life and social interactions, and may similarly inform radical possibilities for nomadic becoming-citizen.[2]

Notes

1. This data has also been reported in Alldred & Fox (2019).

2. For example, the growing use of zero-hours contracts and the 'gig economy' might be explored micropolitically to address how work contributes to becoming-citizen. Conditional cash transfers to encourage health or other behaviours might similarly be examined (Fox & Klein, 2019).

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