

# Why we need to research sex more post #MeToo

September 7 2018, by Victoria Brooks

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Credit: Valeria Boltneva from Pexels

Feminist arguments around #MeToo have become bitter and divisive. Battle lines have been [drawn](#), with discussion in many quarters turning to whether the movement is turning women [into victims](#) rather than empowering them.

The most recent instance of this divide is the emerging spat between prominent feminists Naomi Wolf and Germaine Greer. When Greer, a prominent "second-wave" feminist and author of the watershed text [The Female Eunuch](#), recently published a post-#MeToo essay simply titled "[On Rape](#)", the essay was criticised by renowned "third-wave" feminist and author of [The Beauty Myth](#), Naomi Wolf. [She argued](#) that Greer minimises the harms of #MeToo survivors by writing things such as "rape without injury should not be considered 'violent'".

Wolf was also clearly disappointed that Greer did not give women what she thinks we need in this post #MeToo world: a "magisterial summary of the issue of sexual assault by a great feminist philosopher". In Wolf's view, what is needed is some "solid research" – in contrast to what she sees as Greer's piece of "pernicious fiction".

## Asking the right questions

But in reality, there's actually not so much distance between Wolf and Greer. Both, in the end, are simply saying we need to know more about the sexual experiences of women. And this means more research in the area.

Greer, for example, thinks that the "[law doesn't know what rape is](#)", suggesting that the law fails to fit real experiences of sexual violence. Greer also said that the law does not reflect the multitude of ways that women can be coerced. This implies that we need more research about the experiences of women, so that the law can reflect this.

The definition of consent as English law [defines it](#) is: "A person consents if he agrees by choice, and has the freedom and capacity to make that choice." This definition gives the illusion that the situation is black and white. But what does "freedom" mean – it's surely not the same for everyone. If your partner says you must have sex with him, otherwise

you must leave your home, or you simply know that if you don't you will have a massive row filled with emotional and or physical abuse, is this freedom? A strict application of the law would probably say so.

As well as clear instances of rape, we also need to investigate and understand the more subtle (yet painful) ways in which women are coerced and abused. The same question goes in relation to pleasure. Simply put, as both Greer and Wolf say, we need to know more about what is going on for women in sex – what makes women suffer and what gives women pleasure.

*Find out more about sex research: listen to The Anthill's episode on Sex.*

## **Finding the answers**

Many academics are currently exploring such questions. This research might consist of interviews, observations, or surveys, with a broad range of men and women, and can also involve what is known as "[participant observations](#)" where the researcher directly explores sexual cultures, spaces and behaviours in order to understand more about sexual identities. Such a researcher is in the "field", as opposed to analysing literature and researching at a distance. Although women have been thinking and doing [feminism](#) for a long time, only recently have they been using participatory research methods to do so.

In 2014, for example, I spent some time on a nudist and public sex beach in France, where I observed, sometimes took part in, and reflected on my experiences in order to explore and understand more about the [sexual behaviours, cultures and ethics](#) in such places. Immersion in the object of study and reflecting on the researcher's own body and sexual experiences during research, to challenge gender and sexual identity, and sexual assumptions, can also be found in the pioneering work of [Paul Preciado](#).

Armed with this in-depth knowledge about actual sexual experiences, researchers can then make links with the philosophies that underpin our assumptions about sex, as well as our morals, ethics and laws.

Universities are the place for such research, since they supposedly have the resources and will to be innovative and push the frontiers of knowledge. But there are problems.

As I and many other researchers in this field have found, work that challenges sexual knowledge and boundaries (such as consent) can bring you into confrontation with institutional power. Such work is often seen as "[dirty work](#)", as the researcher Janice Irvine found. It is often viewed as somehow sordid or prurient, rather than as the crucial research it in fact is. This stigma reflects institutional inequality in that it prevents women from being in a comfortable and enabling environment for this kind of research. Universities prefer "safe" work that yields research money, does not raise awkward ethical questions around privacy, for example, or gendered concerns about researcher safety.

Meanwhile, the same power dynamics that brought about #MeToo are present within universities. This has been demonstrated by leading feminist academics, such as [Sara Ahmed](#) at Goldsmiths, leaving their institutions in response to what they see as the normalisation of sexual harassment within these institutions.

All this means that the very places that fiercely debate feminism and human rights are producing hostile environments where the ideas of women are [not given equal weight](#). And so carrying out the crucial research that explores women's experiences of sex, pleasure, and abuse is very challenging.

## **Academia post #MeToo**

Encouragingly, universities have begun to implement ways of changing

the academic environment with ["bystander" initiatives](#), such as the US-based [Green Dot](#), that ask for individual commitments from all those that work in universities to collectively change norms in small (but significant) ways to stop sexual harassment within universities.

Perhaps this is a small but significant step toward an environment where the norm is not institutional inequality, silencing and limiting the production of sexual knowledge. I hope that this is the case. If we are ever to move forward from #MeToo we need to understand the conditions and contexts that led to it – but in order to do that we need [research](#) environments that encourage, rather than inhibit, women from doing pioneering sexuality work.

Perhaps then we can work towards changing norms around sex and relationships and formulating consent laws that better fit the sexuality and experiences of [women](#).

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