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Sexual Assault Support zines as a Pedagogy of Hope:

An exploration of zines as a method of integrating community voices into the research process

JoAnne Gordon

ABSTRACT

This essay explores how sexual assault zines (self-published magazines) reflect a pedagogy of hope as they integrate community efforts of working collectively to generate positive social change and challenge dominant discourses and responses to sexual violence in our communities. Through critical discourse analysis of a multiplicity of sexual assault zines, such as Learning Good Consent, Support Zine, and Ask First, my research reveals that these zines challenge the unquestioned assumption that the criminal legal system is a friend of the anti-violence movement. Instead, these artifacts seek to mobilize communities around radical alternatives to hegemonic structures of oppression and violence. I argue that these works operate in a feminist framework that produces counter-hegemonic sites that seek to connect and communicate. Additionally, these zines offer radical and practical alternatives and approaches to ending structures of violence, with the aim of moving toward creating communities of accountability. This research explores the use of zines as a method of challenging prevalent discourses around sexual violence, by providing cultural and political interventions through resisting the culture of domination. Most importantly, this essay demonstrates how the use of zines is a viable and underutilized research method that can act as a creative and alternative avenue to integrating community voices into the research process.

Introduction

This essay explores how sexual assault support zines reflect a pedagogy of hope as they integrate community efforts of working collectively to generate positive social change. I argue that these zines work to challenge the dominant discourses and responses to sexual violence in our communities by offering practical tools that can be utilized towards ending structures of violence, with the aim of moving towards communities of accountability. The aim of this research is to take seriously the personal, political and theoretical work that sexual assault zines perform. I am particularly interested in the theoretical contributions that these zines enact through changing discourses and responses to sexual violence. More explicitly, this research explores the use of zines as a method of challenging prevalent discourses around sexual assault support, by providing cultural and political interventions through resisting the culture of domination.

This research is intended to operate as a framework for looking at sexual assault zines, and is by no means an exhaustive analysis of the ways that sexual assault zines provide interventions in dealing with sexual violence in our communities. In order to demonstrate how sexual assault zines operate as a pedagogy of hope, I conducted a discourse analysis of three well-circulated zines related to sexual assault support: *Support*, *Learning Good Consent*, and *Ask First!*.

My paper first provides an overview on the history of zines, and then moves on to discuss their value as a site of analysis. Next, I lay out the theoretical framework used for my analysis of sexual assault support zines as a pedagogy of hope. I then proceed to explain my methodological framework utilized in my analysis, followed by a discourse analysis of *Support*, *Learning Good Consent*, and *Ask First!*, where I explicitly highlight and analyze information pertaining to consent, support and accountability. Lastly, this essay reveals how

the use of zines is a viable and underutilized research method that can act as a creative and alternative avenue to integrating community voices into the research process.

What is a zine?

According to feminist theorist Alison Piepmeier, zines are: “quirky, individualized booklets filled with diatribes, reworkings of pop culture, iconography, and a variety of personal and political narratives. They are self-produced and anti-corporate. Their production, philosophy, and aesthetic are anti-professional” (2009, p.2). Stephen Duncombe (author of the first full-length scholarly book on zines) refers to them as “scruffy, homemade little pamphlets. Little publications filled with rantings of high weirdness and exploding chaotic design” (as cited in Piepmeier, 2009, p.2). Most importantly, zines defy any strict set of rules related to what they can or cannot be. Zines originated out of what are called “fanzines” in the 1930s, which were created as a way of sharing science fiction stories and critical commentary with one another (Duncombe, 1997, p.6). Over time, starting in the 1980s, zines began to emerge in the punk scene relating to music and the alternative punk lifestyle; these zines remain the largest genre of zines in the United States today (Duncombe, 1997, p.9). Contemporarily, zines can cover every subject imaginable; from recipes, to migrant justice, to thrift shopping, to radical parenting, with the overlapping trend being that they carry personal and political narratives (Piepmeier, 2009).

The “typical” – though typical is a problematic homogenous term – form of a zine is somewhere in between a personal letter and a magazine (Duncombe, 1997, p.10), or alternatively, a blog on paper (Piepmeier, 2009). Zines are often printed on a standard copy machine, and then can be folded and fastened together in a variety of ways and sizes depending on the creator (Duncombe, 1997, p.10). A typical zine runs anywhere from ten to forty pages, but at the same time they can be as small as a few pages to as large as over one

hundred pages (Duncombe, 1997, p.10). Zines are intriguing from the onset because they come across as disjointed due to the fact that a single zine can jump from a highly personalized editorial, to a questionnaire, and then conclude with reviews of other zines or resources for further reading. As Duncombe (1997) points out, zines explicitly reflect at do-it-yourself culture, “with unruly cut-and-paste layout, barely legible type, and uneven reproduction” (p.11). You can find zines through a variety of outlets, but they are most readily available in urban centres through independent bookstores and on average cost under five dollars (Poletti, 2008, p.338). Zines are also available through online zine libraries, available to be printed in PDF file, on sites such as zinelibrary.info. Zines can also be obtained through a barter system or by mail, either directly from the creator or through zine distribution services, such as Microcosm Publishing (Poletti, 2008, p.338).

What’s the point?: The value of zines as a site of research

Andi Zeisler explains how zines act as projects that express the way feminism plays out in young lives: “inconsistently (the patriarchy sucks! But I really want to make out with that cute guy!), with periodic bravado (fuck corporate America! I’ll never work in an office!), and as a work in progress” (2009, p.xiii). The fact that zines are unabashedly content with coming across as a work in progress, and at the same time comfortable with revealing the contradictions in people’s lives and trying to negotiate those spaces, reveals how zines reflect communities in a state of progress. Additionally, zines give a voice to the everyday anonymous person because they often do not easily reflect a distinct author (Spencer, 2008, p.18).

Regardless of the fact that many zines remain to be written anonymously, or without a date, “the writing within remains as proof that those thoughts, that anger, that hope were once urgent and alive” (Zeisler, 2009, p.xiv). From this we can see that zines are an

important feminist project, regardless of one's ability to easily identify the author or date, because they reflect ongoing conversations and activism. As Andi Zeisler attests in the introduction of the book, *Girl Zines*, "for both readers and creators, [zines] are education and revelation, empowerment and healing, giddy secret and proud f-you" (2009, p. xiv). Scholar, Adela Licona explains that the activist potential of zines is present because of their ability to be "irreverent, parodic, utopian, and imaginative; thus, in a sense, zines perform the difference they are trying to make" (2005, p.109). Duncombe, in *Notes from Underground*, discusses the way that zines offer a different possibility for communicating what he calls "angry idealism" (1997, p.3). For Duncombe, zines act as a, "medium that spoke for a marginal, yet vibrant culture, that along with others might invest the tired script of progressive politics and meaning and excitement for a new generation. Perhaps most important, zines were a success story" (1997, p.3). I argue that zines continue to be a success story by the mere fact that they complicate reality by giving personal voice and experience to political projects. Additionally, analyzing zines provides researchers with a method for examining communities' responses to particular issues, because of the researcher's ability to draw on the communities' successes and failures with various tools of change (Schilt, 2003).

I will now move on to a discussion of the theoretical framework that I have used to shape my discussion of zine's as a pedagogy of hope. Then I will proceed to an overview of my methodology and how it connects back to my theoretical framework.

Theoretical framework

Support opens with an introduction by Cindy Crabb, long-time zinester and author of *doris*. In her recognizable and playful handwriting Crabb states that: "this is a zine about supporting people who have been sexually abused. no formulas, no simple answers, just trying to peel

back the layers – the heart of it, the hurt and fear and aloneness, the helplessness and failures and how we have pulled through, what we have learned, how we have grown, what we can teach each other” (2002, p.1). Crabb proceeds to outline what her ideal world pertaining to the treatment of sexual abuse survivors would resemble, concluding with a much larger and emphasized section in the middle of the page stating that: “in my ideal world, none of us would have been abused in the first place” (2002, 1). While Crabb, and the rest of the contributors of this zine, acknowledge that this ideal world is not a reality at this moment, the zine intends to help folks who haven’t been abused learn how to support those who have, but also serves the explicit purpose of being beneficial to those who have experienced violence. The one-page of introduction in and of itself does so much to counter dominant ways of talking and thinking about sexual violence; as it includes an acknowledgement of the possible “triggering” nature of the content, the importance of community-based support techniques, an envisioning of an ideal world, and concludes with toll-free support lines due to the sensitive nature of the topic. It is Crabb’s ability to personalize, politicize, and envision the possibility of change, while at the same time acknowledge that these are not formulas or simple answers to complicated structures of dominance, that precisely make *Support*, and other zines explored in this research, examples of how sexual assault support zine’s operate as a pedagogy of hope.

The main theoretical approach of my research is to demonstrate how sexual assault zines function as a pedagogy of hope. In her book *Teaching Community*, hooks defines a pedagogy of hope in relation to educators “who have dared to study and learn new ways of thinking and teaching so that the work we do does not reinforce systems of domination, of imperialism, racism, sexism, or class elitism” (2003, p.xiv). I am adopting the use of pedagogies of hope from Allison’s Piepmeier’s work on grrrl zines where she states that

these zines function as small-scale acts of resistance (2009). I am interested in the way that she frames zines as having the possibility to make political interventions by modeling process, providing active criticism and imagining the possible for change (Piepmeier, 2009, p.160).

Methodology

It is important to remember that the aim of this research is to take seriously the personal, political and theoretical work that sexual assault zines perform; and that I am particularly interested in the theoretical contributions that these zines enact through changing discourses of responses to sexual violence. To begin my methodological overview, I did a discourse analysis of three sexual assault support zines that I actively utilize in a variety of circumstances: *Support*, *Learning Good Consent*, and *Ask First!*. The zines that were selected for this research are based on my experience as a campus-based women's resource centre coordinator, a community-trained sexual assault support worker, as well as an anti-sexual violence activist and community educator. From there, I narrowed my focus down to three topics: consent, support and accountability. I choose to select zines that are explicitly intended to be used as "toolkits" for people and community activists working to challenge sexual violence; rather than zines that solely focus on personal experiences of sexual violence (not that these are devoid of merit). I selected these topics because they occurred frequently in the zines and are also innovative ways for communities to resist, challenge and cope with sexual violence.

For the purpose of my research I have selected feminist critical discourse analysis as my methodology. I am particularly interested in Foucault's understanding of discourse as a system of representation, rather than just solely linguistic concept (Hall, 2003). As Hall (2003) explains, "Foucault [when referring to discourse] meant a groups of statements which

provide a language for talking about – a way of representing the knowledge about – a particular topic at a particular historical moment” (p.72). As I am focusing on sexual assault support zines’ ability to make interventions in the discourses, responses to, and ways of speaking about sexual violence, I feel that Foucault’s understanding of discourse as particularly relevant within the context of my research. More specifically, I am using critical discourse analysis (CDA) because it is:

a type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies that way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context. With such dissident research, critical discourse analysts take explicit position, and thus want to understand, expose, and ultimately resist social inequality (Van Dijk, 2003, p.352).

Additionally, CDA is important methodological tool in relation to analyzing community responses to sexual violence because it is known for it’s overtly political stance that situates discussions of social inequality and injustice at the centre of it’s analysis, rather than at the margins (Lazar, 2005).

Moreover, I am specifically using feminist CDA because it provides the researcher with the skills to demonstrate the workings of power that sustain oppressive social relations and structures. Additionally, feminist CDA can reveal “forms of ‘analytical resistance’ that contributes to on-going struggles of contestation and change” (Lazar, 2005, p.6). Feminist CDA helps me to reveal my argument that sexual assault zines demonstrate how communities, operating within existing organizational structures, negotiate and challenge dominant ideologies and power structures, as well as offer possibilities for change. Additionally, the “radical emancipatory agenda [of feminist CDA] makes a ‘praxis-oriented research’, centrally based upon a dialectical relationship between theory and practice... [a] mobilizing theory in order to create critical awareness and develop feminist strategies for resistance and change” (Lazar, 2005, p.6). I see zines as a space where feminist explorations

of the uneasy tension between the personal and the political come to the forefront to challenge academic scholarship's grip on authentic knowledge production and dissemination in relation to discussion or, and responses to, sexual violence.

For the application of my methodology, it is important to note that the three zines that I have utilized for this research should be read and understood as a case study, with the intent of demonstrating how this process can be used more in-depth to explore other aspects of sexual assault support zines. As Alison Piepmeier points out in her justification for her selection of grrrl zines¹, "they are examples of rather than being representative of, and my readings of them offer hints and possibilities, showing the layers of meaning that become visible" (2009, 58). As scholarly work on zines is at a minimum, and scholarly work on sexual assault zines is yet to be disseminated, I have based my methodological framework off of the ways in which other academics scholars have used zines as sites of analysis (such as Duncombe, 1997; Licona, 2005; Piepmeier, 2009; Schilt, 2003; and Spencer, 2008).

It is important to note that another methodological restraint of using zines is that it is mainly white, middle-class (culturally, if not financially) folks' experiences that inform zines and underground culture (Duncombe, 1997; Schilt, 2003). This is partly due to the fact that zine making requires access to time and resources, as well as the ability to absorb the costs of printing and shipping upfront (Schilt, 2003). However, in the context of what can be deemed "successful" or innovative sexual assault support zines, I argue that contributors are beginning to challenge who produces zines; this is seen most evidently through the contributors of the zine anthology *The Revolution Starts at Home: Confronting Intimate Violence within Activist Communities*. I will now move onto the practical application of my methodology, in demonstrating how sexual assault support zines provide interventions in the

¹ "grrrl zines" refers to zines that are created by girls and women. Zeisler explains that they are spaces where women and girls construct identities, communities, and explanatory narratives (2009, p.2).

ways of responding to sexual violence through consent narratives, learning how to do support, and accountability measures.

Consent Narratives

Cindy Crabb introduces *Learning Good Consent* by reminding the reader that, “talking about our experiences with consent, our struggles, our mistakes and how we’ve learned, these are part of a much larger revolutionary struggle” (2008, p.2). Moreover, talking about consent and how to negotiate consent are important skills for people to have, especially due to the fact that most people are not taught how to talk about consent. I argue that sexual assault support zines offer readers an important opportunity to learn how to define, negotiate and ask for consent.

Support integrates a list of 83 questions, which also re-appear in *Learning Good Consent*, that challenge the reader to introspectively examine and reflect on how being supportive means ensuring that you yourself are not doing things that may be abusive. These questions are innovative and important for two reasons. Firstly, they openly acknowledge that there are no right or wrong answers for a lot of the questions, which is important because it reaffirms that ending sexual violence does not have simplistic, linear or binary solutions (2002, p.2). Secondly, these questions help to complicate and extend consent narratives to include things such things as negotiating boundaries (“22. Do you think about affection, sexuality and boundaries?”), safe(r) sex practices (“77. Do you initiate conversations about safe sex and birth control (if applicable)?”), and personal responses to sexual rejection (“Do you whine or threaten if you’re not having the amount of sex of the kind of sex that you want?”) (2002, p.2-4). I argue that these questions are important because they serve to acknowledge the complicated nature of negotiating consent in our relationships, while simultaneously providing the reader with a variety of ways to question their own

understanding(s) of consent and what consent looks like to them in their own relationships.

Another example is present in *Learning Good Consent*, where there is a one-page consent self-reflection questionnaire. This page, originally compiled by hysteria collective, encourages the reader to complete the questionnaire and then “keep it in your pocket”, as a reminder of your own boundaries (2008, p.10). The page, which can easily be photocopied and used in workshops or for community outreach, requests of the reader to reflect on ways to “ask” and “define” consent, as well as to write a list of goals for future sex, and a list of current boundaries (2008, p.10). The page clearly outlines from the onset that, “here are some ways to ask [for consent] in the heat of the moment. but don’t forget talking about it when you’re not half naked is always better” (2008, p.10). The quip of humour at the end of the introduction helps to ease the reader into the proceeding questions, which can sometimes be difficult to answer given we are not taught how to discuss consent in a tangible way. However, I argue that this section of the zine accomplishes the goal of giving readers tangible ways to talk about consent by giving them handful of fill-in-the-blank questions to essentially practice negotiating consent, such as:

may i _____?
 touch _____?
 kiss _____?
 put my _____? (2008, 10)

Fill-in-the-blanks such as these help the reader to begin to visualize and actualize the ways in which we can consensually articulate our desires and sexual practices, with the end goal being to get an enthusiastic “yes” or a respected “no”.

Additionally, questions such as, “how do you define consent? (2008, p.10), aids the reader to challenge themselves to think critically and introspectively about what consent looks like to them in practice. Arguably, having the reader introspectively reflect on what consent looks like to them after they have used the fill-in-the-blanks acts as an opportunity for the reader to determine their own comfort level with asking and being asked similar

questions, and how this might play into their understanding of consent.

Learning how to do Support

Support highlights an integral aspect of providing support: listening. While this seems like a simple mechanism of providing support, *Support*'s section entitled "listening", explains that, "[listening is] supposed to be this universal thing we all know how to do, but in reality, there are a million different ways to listen (2002, p.8). There is listening that is silent, like confession, and listening where you quickly come up with your own opinions, or your own experiences, and like a discussion, you add them in as soon as you get an opening" (2002, p.8). Then with a large gap consisting of void space between the end of that section, in effort to stimulate what one can surmise to resemble the very act of listening, the author states, "Think about listening" (2002, p.8). This section prompts the reader to self-reflect on their own listening habits and styles, and to question whether or not these foster space for people to have their concerns and experiences heard and validated (2002, p.8). Anna Poletti, in her research on the use of lists in zines, explains that these types of extended moments of narrative form "is used both to disrupt linear narrative and to gesture to all that could have been said, but wasn't" (2008, p.344).

After the exercise in self-reflexivity, the contributor lays-out some particular skills for active listening; which is framed as a successful tool in relation to sexual assault support (2002, p.8). Active listening skills are useful for all relationships, but especially when supporting a survivor of sexual violence, as it is shaped around the idea that the person who is speaking has their experiences validated. As the contributor points out:

the purpose is to show that you're interested, that you've not only heard [them], but that you understood (or are trying to understand) what she said. It helps check your accuracy of decoding what she's saying. It gives [them] a chance to breathe. It lets [them] know that you're actually there. It communicates acceptance. It fosters the person doing their own problem-definition and problem-solving and keeps the responsibility on [them], not you" (2002, p.9).²

These skills are particularly important because they offer survivor-directed support, in that they create spaces for survivors of violence to name their own experiences and to explore for themselves how support can look like for them, as well as what tangible steps they want to take in the healing process. As stated in *Ask First!*, "always listen to and believe survivors. it is often hard for them to talk about their experience, so try to be respectful & non-judgmental" (no date, p.16).

Ask First! also provides a section called "things to remember", the title written with endearing hearts around it connoting some steps you can take to support someone in a loving way. This section is important in relation to support because it serves to complicate the experiences of survivors of sexual violence in relation to how they will choose to "cope" or seek support around their experiences. Cheyenne provides insight such as, "survivors may seem uninterested, amused, or torn apart by their assault. let them deal with it their way. don't be perplexed by their display of emotions or lack thereof; it is their event and their healing process, and everyone is different" (no date, p.16). Sexual assault zines also take the notion of support past the notion of solely supporting the survivor by placing importance on support and self-care mechanisms for the person providing the support. As *Ask First!* explains in the "taking care of yourself" section, "don't 'should' yourself. try to remember that you're doing what you're capable of, not what you think you should be capable of. act within your capacity and be okay with what you're able to do" (no date, p.22).

Alison Piepmeier explains that these actions of providing tools for community support, "counter the cultural imperative to keep distant and distrustful, alienated, lonely and

² The original text uses the pronoun "her", which I have replaced with "they" in order to demonstrate how these skills can be used to support anyone who is dealing with their experiences of violence; regardless of gender.

safe” (2009, p.86). I argue that providing communities with the resources to support one another in a non-judgmental and validating way serves to de-stigmatize sexual violence and foster spaces for personal and community healing to occur.

Accountability

Ask First!, a zine filled with resources for supporters, survivors, and perpetrators of sexual assault is particularly interesting because it is among a small, yet growing, movement in sexual assault zines to address the way that perpetrators of sexual assault can be accountable to themselves, the ones they have perpetrated sexual violence against, and their communities. As Cheyenne, the creator explains, “a LOT of work needs to be done in this area of the whole sexual assault/abuse arena –without healing for perpetrators as well as survivors, we’re not going to make a lot of progress” (no date, p.30).

In the glossary section of *Ask First!*, Cheyenne outlines what an accountability process looks like, stating that it is:

a plan for healing following a traumatic event. an accountability process can be self-imposed by a perpetrator, it can be the product of an intervention, or requested directly from a survivor or liason. accountability is about accepting responsibility for actions, making efforts to accommodate the needs expressed by community/survivor to correct behaviour, and so forth. each accountability process is different because each situation is different (date unknown, 2).

Her cut-and-paste approach to key term definitions in the glossary provides a clear visual cue to some of the contestable, and often misunderstood, terms relating to sexual violence. She lays out her definitions for terms such as consent, perpetrator, survivor and triggering, which serve to contextualize what she is referring to when she utilizes those terms throughout her zine.

The accountability measures laid out in *Ask First!* can be understood to contribute to what is known as building community accountability. A simple definition of community accountability is: “any strategy to address violence, abuse or harm that creates safety, justice, reparations, and healing, without relying on police, prisons, childhood protective services, or

any other state systems” (Chen, Dulani & Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2011, p.xxiii). Instead, these strategies rely on mechanisms that are both more accessible and more complicated; complex responses to complex problems (Chen, et al., 2011, p.xxiii).

Ask First! includes a list of ten suggestions for calling people out on abusive behaviour that was originally compiled by a radical/punk community under the title, “Taking the first step: Suggestions to people called out for abusive behaviour”. It includes suggestions like, “Be Honest, Stay Honest, Get Honest”, “Never, Ever, Blame the Victim”, “Respond to the Wishes of the Survivor and the Wishes of the Community”, as well as number 10, “Take Responsibility...Stop Abuse and Rape Before It Starts”. *Ask First!* must be understood and engaged with not simply in terms of content but in existence as a material object, as it “can be altered to mark the passage of time and changing opinions” (Zeisler, 2009, p.5).

Sexual Assault Support Zines as a Tool for Change & Innovative Research

As Crabb states in the introduction of *Learning Good Consent*, “Hearing people talk about their own experiences with consent helps me feel less crazy and less alone. It gives me hope that we will be able to change the world we live in – that we will be able to change what gets taken for granted, and how we see and understand eachother” (2008, p.2). I argue that the cultural and political interventions that sexual assault support zines provide through resisting dominant responses and discourses of sexual violence act as a pedagogy of hope because their interventions are, in the most simplistic way, hopeful of creating communities that are supportive, consensual and accountable.

More explicitly, these interventions use a range of strategies and counter the linear notion of progress that provides creative and multifaceted resistance techniques (Piepmeier 2009, p.157). It is important to recognize that these pedagogies are actively doing political work because they provide the reader with tools for change. While Piepmeier’s work focuses

on grrrl zines, her reflection of feminist zines as sites of hope holds true for sexual assault support zines. Piepmeier attests that “by teaching strategies for change, reflecting on their own process of creation, and providing space for seeing and feeling differently, these zines allow their readers to hope – and they show that hope can be a political intervention” (2009, p.158). More importantly, for these hopeful pedagogies to be successful they must have the ability to mobilize communities. Zines produce what Zeisler terms “embodied communities”, stating that zines have the power to “instigate intimate, affectionate connections between their creators and readers” (2009, p.58). Sexual assault support zines engage in a political intervention and invite their readers to do the same. Additionally, zine making in and of itself is another way of fulfilling hope, in what is often a seemingly hopeless situation. As Piepmeier reveals, zine production “is one component of zine’s embodied community: their ability to transmit the corporeal experience of hopefulness and the pleasures of resisting the resignation of a cynical culture” (2009, p.189). Licona attests that zinesters reflect what she called a “coalitional consciousness” through their efforts to build community, produce knowledge, and share information (2005, p.121). This process calls on authorized knowledges and knowers to be accountable and accessible to the communities they are supposedly representing – something that zines seek to challenge (Licona, 2005, p.122).

This brings me to the last aspect of sexual assault zines, or zines more broadly, as pedagogy of hope. As has been demonstrated in this essay, zines pedagogically act as a way of integrating community voices into research processes because they represent community responses to specific issues, in a way that is removed from the bias of the researcher. I conclude by stating that zines, especially sexual assault zines, have been an underutilized aspect of the research process and that utilizing zines may help to fill gaps in research based on community needs.

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