



*Extended Abstract*

## **These Wars are Personal: Feminism's Double Entanglement with Therapy Culture**

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*Accepted:*

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The organisation of life into the public/private nexus has long been a site of contestation for feminism. In the highly politicised culture of the 1960s and 1970s, second-wave feminists argued that the public/private nexus was repressive in nature and function because the purportedly 'natural' assignment of women to the private realm represented their exclusion from social and political life (Rossler, 2005), thus rendering them publically invisible and depriving women of their civil liberties. Feminists then, fought to dismantle this gendered categorisation via twofold grounds. First, they sought to increase the visibility of women in public life, and secondly, sought to politicise 'the personal' by arguing that the self of the private realm had its roots in wider social, political and economic contexts, and was ultimately organised in, and regulated by, the public sphere. By carrying the slogan 'the personal is the political', feminists expanded the boundaries of contestation beyond socioeconomic distribution, to include housework, sexuality and reproduction. Consequently, 'the problem with no name', which was previously characterised as isolated and individual, was now recognised as a social-systemic struggle—predicating a collective identity for women *as* women (Ang, 2001) and enabling a politicised interpretation of needs to enter public discourse and the agenda of the welfare-state (Fraser, 2013). While this paradigmatic change in the meaning of 'political' promised to invoke a gender-sensitive revision of democracy and justice (Markus, 1995), it is my thesis that this political imaginary has been grossly distorted some fifty years later through its appropriation by contemporary feminism.

By examining in some detail the discursive registers of *Everyday Sexism*<sup>1</sup>, an online feminist campaign that puts forth the claim of systemic sexism by cataloguing personal life narratives from women across the globe, I argue that contemporary feminism is engaged in a dangerous double entanglement with the highly individualised idiom of therapy culture. Dovetailed with ascending neoliberalism, this liaison threatens to depoliticise the political, and undo the doings of second-wave feminism.

## DISCUSSION

Today, in a digitally mediated world, the partition between the public/private is arguably dissolved as technologies such as the mobile phone invoke an “intersection of worlds” (Schegloff, 2002, p. 286) and as the public sphere becomes saturated with the exposure of private life (Burkart, 2010). Through the widespread publicising of private matters via acts of confession, a therapeutic sensibility premised on emotionalisation has become one of the dominant ways in which actors express, shape and understand themselves and society (Furedi, 2004; Illouz, 2007). This is evidenced in a plethora of social and cultural sites, for example, in social media (i.e. Facebook’s ‘What’s on your mind?’), Internet dating, reality TV, celebrity ‘tell all’ interviews, and the growing corpus of self-help and autobiographical literature.

The blurring of the public and the private and the emotional turn is a manifestation of, and tribute to, therapy culture (Furedi, 2004; McGee, 2005; Ouelette and Hay, 2008). Therapy culture is marked by the spill of the therapeutic ethos from clinical spaces, in which it emanated, into wider cultural structures, institutions and vernaculars. At the crux of the therapeutic ethos is the belief that “the psychological self, as opposed to the physical or social self or the wider society, is the source of its problems and the main resource for providing potential solutions to these problems” (Swan, 2008, p. 88). As a large body of literature has noted, a key feature of therapy culture is its neoliberal rationality in which “citizen-subjects” (Ouelette and Hay, 2008) are trained to see themselves as “individualized” (Larner, 200, p. 13) and responsible for their own well-being and well-doing (Hazleden 2010). Therapy culture then, predicates the formation of new political subjectivities and forms of selfhood.

### Feminism and therapy culture

*Everyday Sexism*, the hugely popular feminist website<sup>2</sup> rolled out to 17 countries within the first year of its inception, is representative of a larger cultural shift whereby contemporary feminism has not managed to secure immunity from the influences of therapy culture. Rather, the two are engaged in a “double entanglement” (McRobbie, 2004).

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<sup>1</sup> *Everyday Sexism* was established in April 2012 by a 25-year-old English woman named Laura Bates. To date, *Everyday Sexism* has accrued 80,000 testimonials of sexism worldwide.

<sup>2</sup> While *Everyday Sexism* began as a website-based campaign, it has, as campaigns do in digital media cultures, expanded onto various social media platforms. *Everyday Sexism* was also published into book form in 2014.

On one hand, the affective makeup of *Everyday Sexism*—the fact that it relies on therapeutic techniques of confession and emotionalism as the basis of its activism, appears to foster the politicisation of the personal by creating discursive spaces for women’s personal pains to gain legitimacy in the public sphere. This invokes Lauren Berlant’s notion of “intimate publics” (1997) whereby individuals form community through mutual affective ties, in this case, a collective suffering through sexism. The 80,000 testimonials collected by the campaign worldwide have indisputably contributed to the resurgence of public discussion and social self-reflexivity about sexism. Further, since political participation is enacted through the medium of talk (Fraser, 1995), *Everyday Sexism* mobilises participation by volunteering a feminist vocabulary to its actors, which, as Maria Markus has noted, is a necessary tool for participation in public discourse (Markus, 1995).

At the same time that therapy culture mobilises these opportunities for feminism and the feminist subject, a problematic co-existence of challenges also exist. The emphasis on individualised anecdotes and experiences in *Everyday Sexism* catalyse a rhetorical reframing of sexism that is personalised and isolated rather than thematic and systematic. This mobilises a feminist subject that translates sexism from a structural problem to an individual affair and cultivates an imperviousness to the role of social, cultural and economic forces in producing inequalities, therefore espousing the therapeutic rationality which renders the life of the individual as a private matter. Consequently, this results in *Everyday Sexism*’s feminist collective being fragmented into a sum aggregation of atomised, autonomous and self-governing persons (Rimke, 2000), which sit in contraposition to feminist precepts of solidarity and collectivity.

Should contemporary feminism continue its dangerous flirtations with the individual idiom of therapy culture, it will mobilise a world where the individual once again becomes the site to which societal problems are raised and where it will be perceived they need to be resolved, thus depoliticising the political, and threatening to undo the victories of second-wave feminism.

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