

The Sexual Politics of Ascriptive Autonomy

Elizabeth Ben-Ishai
Assistant Professor
Department of Political Science
Albion College
ebenishai@albion.edu

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1. Introduction

The headline of a recent story in the *New York Times Magazine* poses the question: “What do women want?” The cover of the magazine, in bold letters, demands, “What is Female Desire?” atop the provocative photograph of a woman’s face, head back, lips parted in apparent ecstasy.¹ Before reading the article, on the basis of image and headline alone, I imagined what the content might be. Would the article be evidence of an era in which women’s desire has become a pressing area of inquiry? Does this suggest a society in which women are no longer seen as reproductive vessels, or bearers of a culture’s moral code that must be appropriately guarded, but rather sexual agents entitled to experience their own bodies outside of a masculinist notion of pleasure? Would paying attention to women’s sexuality on its own terms be a liberating exercise? In fact, the article, which (I turned the page to see) is subtitled “A new generation of postfeminist sexologists is trying to discover what ignites female desire,” disappoints. Indeed, it provoked a firestorm of letters to the editor, most of which angrily reject the “postfeminist” label, point out the relations of power and domination obscured by the “scientific” claims of the research presented, and reject the naturalization of women’s passivity and weaker desire. Retaining the conventional understanding of women’s sexuality as seen through the lens of the male gaze, the experts in the article fail to convince (at the very least) many of the letter writers.

I do not wish to offer an analysis of the problems found in the magazine article. However, I refer to the article and the readers’ responses to it because they seem to point to an important question for feminist theorists of both sexuality and autonomy. This question, which I pursue in this paper, asks what the *risks* of ascribing sexual autonomy (or agency) to women – a practice that I argue at least initially appears to be liberatory – might be. That is, while the subject matter of the article itself raises hopes that we can interrogate and take seriously women’s desire on its own terms, the very attempt to do so in a manner void of contextual and material details (i.e. without examining patriarchy and capitalism as fundamental participants in the production of “female desire”) and the ensuing “postfeminist” label seem to suggest that such hopes are fleeting. Here the ascription of apparent sexual agency to women obscures relations of domination and oppression. As one reader writes in a “letter to the editor”:

Wondering why women gravitate toward sexually passive roles? The answer has far less to do with evolution than with the ways women are shamed for expressing aggressive desire and with the pervasive idea that women who pursue their own satisfaction are asking to be raped.²

Addressing women’s sexual agency without attention to gender oppression fundamentally distorts our understanding of it. Moreover, as the reader’s point about the dangers of sexual violence associated with women expressing desire suggests, the

¹ Bergner, Daniel. 2009. What do Women Want? *The New York Times Magazine*, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/25/magazine/25desire-t.html>.

² Friedman, Jaelyn. 2009. Letters: What do Women Want? *The New York Times Magazine* (February 8, 2009), http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/08/magazine/08Letters-t-WHATDOWOMENW_LETTERS.html.

ascription of autonomous agency in this case may result in the concomitant ascription of *misplaced* responsibility.

In this paper, I both explore the terrain of sexual agency with the aim of further elucidating the range of tools available for feminist theorists and practitioners to overcome gender oppression, and I use this terrain as a “case study” for exploring the notion of ascriptive autonomy.³ I use the term “ascriptive autonomy” to refer to the sense in which autonomy is, in part, constituted by the conferral of the *status* of “autonomous individual.” I define autonomy, then, as both a capacity to determine one’s own ends and a status granted by the acknowledgment or recognition⁴ of our autonomy by those around us. Thinking about autonomy in this ascriptive sense has liberatory implications, I argue, not only because social relations that lead us to rightly acknowledge another individual’s possession of the capacity for autonomy importantly point to conditions of respect.⁵ In addition, it is also because ascription can be understood as linked to the *development* of the actual capacities necessary for autonomy. That is, if others – especially those in positions of power – recognize me as autonomous, even if I lack some of the requirements associated with the capacity for autonomy (for example, self-esteem or a sense of self-worth) or if my autonomy is limited by material or institutional constraints, the very ascription of autonomy may cultivate this autonomy. In turn, if others refuse to recognize me as a self-governing individual, I may be utterly incapable of conceiving of myself as such, and therefore lack (or continue to lack) the psychic and institutional resources necessary for the development of autonomy. But there are risks that we might associate with this notion of ascriptive autonomy as a developmental tool; in addition to pursuing the enabling effects of this tool, it is one of these risks that I am particularly interested in this paper.

The *New York Times Magazine* article points to one risk I associate with the practices by which ascriptive autonomy is conferred. Paradoxically, there is an important component of ascription that is built around the practice of *misrecognition*. That is, one of the enabling effects of ascribing autonomy may be the product of affording recognition to individuals as autonomous when they are not entirely so in order to facilitate the development of that autonomy. Yet, by engaging in this misrecognition, I note, we may also fail to recognize the conditions under which the limitations on autonomy exist in the first place. For example, by ascribing full sexual agency to women in the study of desire, we may also be led to accept the conviction that we are in a “post-feminist” era, as the article suggests. That is, where is the role for feminism in an era of full sexual emancipation? Though such ascription might be intended to help create conditions to overcome patriarchy, it may also give the impression of the deed done.

³ I take this term from Mika LaVaque-Manty’s work. The same term is used in a somewhat different manner in an earlier article by Richard Fallon. See, LaVaque-Manty, Mika. 2006. Kant’s Children. *Social Theory and Practice* 32 (3):365-388.; Fallon, Richard H. 1994. Two Sense of Autonomy. *Stanford Law Review* 46 (4):875-905.

⁴ I use these terms casually here, without meaning to refer to the more complex notions of recognition that I will discuss later, but simply to refer to some process by which some group or individual perceives another individual in a particular way, and signals this perception in some fashion.

⁵ This would fall under the category of “recognition respect” on Stephen Darwall’s account. See further, Darwall, Stephen. 1977. Two Kinds of Respect. *Ethics* 88:36-49.

I explore this risk of ascriptive autonomy through the lens of women's sexual agency. I consider the arguments of "pro-sex" feminists regarding the use of transgressive sexual practices as a privileged means of achieving liberation. Pro-sex feminists seek to shift the debate about women's sexuality to look not only at the dangers of sexual violence but also those of failing to recognize women as "sexual subjects." As Carol Vance writes, "The horrific effects of gender inequality may include not only brute violence, but the internalized control of women's impulses, poisoning desire at its very root with self-doubt and anxiety."⁶ I take this as a case wherein ascribing autonomy to women is seen as a form of resistance to patriarchal power, yet also one where the aforementioned risk applies.

The risk I identify suggests that we must be particularly sensitive to the contextual details that frame practices of ascribing autonomy. It does not suggest, however, that a notion of ascriptive autonomy as liberatory is misplaced. Indeed, I want to suggest that practices associated with ascriptive autonomy as deployed in this particular case are ultimately enabling. Moreover, when framed specifically as a practice of ascribing autonomy, the controversy around the pro-sex argument is sharpened and potential ways of contending with the sometimes conflicting implications of the argument may come into view. Finally, I suggest that this is the case in part because of the performative quality of ascriptive autonomy: that is, the performance of a form of selective, purposeful misrecognition.

2. Ascription as Liberation: A Politics of Misrecognition

In his article "Kant's Children," Mika LaVaque-Manty suggests, "[a]utonomy is [...] at least partly ascriptive: I am autonomous if someone ascribes self-authorization to me."⁷ The experience of being recognized as an autonomous individual, he argues, is actually itself an element of autonomy. Indeed, on both a material and social relational level, such ascription may be key to granting access to some of the most basic requirements of an autonomous life. Moreover, ascriptive autonomy is also intimately linked to the development of the actual capacities necessary for autonomy. LaVaque-Manty writes, "There is a complex interaction between acquiring the capacity for responsible agency and coming to be recognized (in one's closer and wider social environment) as capable of being responsible."⁸ In his analysis, LaVaque-Manty emphasizes the potential for those in power – those who have the "power of interpretation," as he puts it – to falsely deny ascription of autonomy to those whom they would like to remain, in Kantian terms, in a state of immaturity. Such "abuses of ascriptive autonomy" are intended to apply considerable constraints to the individuals who have been denied the status of autonomy. For example, paternalistic social welfare programs in the U.S. have of late been founded on the idea that those in need of public assistance lack the autonomy to pursue their desired ends (which, the proponents of these programs claim, are the same as all Americans: to have a job and nuclear heterosexual

⁶ Vance, Carole S. 1989. *Pleasure and Danger: Toward a Politics of Sexuality*. In *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, edited by C. S. Vance. London: Pandora Press, p. 4.

⁷ (LaVaque-Manty 2006 369)

⁸ Ibid.

family).⁹ In response to this perceived lack of autonomy (or “competence”), such programs make welfare conditional on the fulfillment of various expectations, which themselves limit the recipients’ autonomy in significant ways. In this example, by abusing its “power of interpretation,” the state not only denies the status of autonomy to welfare recipients, but also restricts the development and exercise of their *capacities* to act autonomously.

On LaVaque-Manty’s reading of Kant, while ascription must be a question of human interpretation in practice, “even though autonomy is ascriptive, it is still a matter of *reasons*, not of power.”¹⁰ That is, an individual’s autonomy as such still exists only where he or she has the capacity to give reasons to account for his or her own choices and actions, even if in practice this is, unjustly, not the criterion for recognition. But, he notes, “power and authority blur in the real world,” meaning that given the “right” power relations one individual’s *stipulation* that another individual or group lacks autonomy, may translate into the diminished capacity for autonomy. The reverse holds, too, and LaVaque-Manty’s discussion of Kant’s treatment of children’s education begins to demonstrate this. Rejecting more paternalist measures of educating children, Kant suggests that giving children certain choices is critical to the development of their agentic capacities. Children may not be fully autonomous agents, but treating them as autonomous in some respects may be an important manner of facilitating the further development of autonomy. Indeed, even if some (controlled) harm comes to a child as a result of these choices, it may be a useful exercise in the development of autonomy. Still, here, autonomy is for the most part ascribed to those who have the capacity to give reasons for their actions, even if it is only in some arenas. Importantly, by way of this conception of ascriptive autonomy, LaVaque-Manty stresses the partial, particular, and fluctuating nature of autonomy, an account of autonomy that I agree with here.

It is this second use of ascriptive autonomy that I am most concerned with: that which is applied to those who for whatever reason may not have a full(er) range of capacities for autonomy, but who are nonetheless afforded the status of “autonomous agent,” either on the basis of capacities they do not have or on the basis of their embodiment of *some* capacities, but not others. That is, just as the realities of differential power relations suggest that some powerful individual or institution can stipulate that someone who is indeed autonomous is *not* autonomous, and in part make it so, so too can those in power recognize others as autonomous, where his or her “reasons” do not in fact exist. Whereas a failure to ascribe autonomy might deny someone recognition for the capacity for autonomy that he or she genuinely has, here I am less concerned with the accuracy of the ascription, and more concerned with the effects of that ascription. The experience of being recognized as autonomous via such ascription may itself foster the development of the capacity. People can be autonomous in different degrees at different times; moreover, they may have some but not all of the capacities associated with autonomy at any one point in time over the course of a lifetime. Having access to the “status” of autonomous individual by way of these ascriptive practices serves an

⁹ See Mead, Lawrence M. 1997. *The new paternalism: supervisory approaches to poverty*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press.

¹⁰ (LaVaque-Manty 2006 386)

important function in accounting for the fluctuating, unstable, nature of autonomy. Moreover, following from an understanding of autonomy as always existing in the context of social relations, is the case that there will always be both relationships that constrain and those that enable its development. We often think about the structures that constrain autonomy, but less so those that are enabling. The relational configuration that is generated by the act of ascription, even (or especially) in cases where autonomy is lacking or constrained, is an important instance of this enabling type of relationship.

Given this potentially developmental or enabling quality of ascriptive autonomy, we can view ascription of autonomy (in the context of whatever specific social practice it takes form) as an empowering mechanism, particularly when such ascription is oriented toward those who are vulnerable and marginalized. If autonomy is ascribed to a marginalized individual who, as a result of this marginalization, experiences either institutional or psychic barriers to autonomy in some arenas, the experience of being nonetheless treated as autonomous may help to on the one hand, endow the individual with the ability to resist and contest the institutional barriers, and on the other hand, enable the individual to recover the relations-to-self that are so critical to the realization of autonomous agency. Yet, there may be risks associated with embracing ascriptive autonomy as a tool of liberation, and it is these risks that I am interested in considering here.

The particular risk I consider here is that of misplaced ascription.¹¹ Paradoxically, part of the liberating quality of ascriptive autonomy is an element of what we might think of as misrecognition. That is, if ascribing autonomy to someone who does not necessarily fulfill all the capacities associated with autonomy may nevertheless prove to be an enabling force, it is in part by virtue of this “overly generous” ascription of autonomy that the practice is itself enabling. In order to understand this risk, it is worth reviewing the notion of misrecognition in its more typical negative sense. In his classic essay on the politics of recognition, Charles Taylor argues that “our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by misrecognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves.”¹² Taylor suggests that this “mirroring” back of a demeaning image is particularly destructive insofar as it fails to reflect the individual’s “authentic self.” By the late eighteenth century, Taylor writes, the moral significance of being human in a way that “is my way” emerged.¹³ Given the calling to live our lives in accordance with our own “ways,” if we are not “true” to ourselves, we “miss the point of [our lives].”¹⁴ Misrecognition, then, is defined by dominant groups’ failure to recognize the authentic selves of marginalized individuals. In turn, the misrecognized individual’s sense of self is deeply distorted.

What does it mean to speak of “the authentic self”? Taylor resists the notion of an authentic self as “monologically” constituted. Describing what he calls “the crucial

¹¹ There are other risks, to be sure. I am unable to explore these here.

¹² Taylor, Charles, and Amy Gutmann. 1992. *Multiculturalism and the politics of recognition : an essay*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press. p. 25

¹³ *Ibid*, p. 30

¹⁴ *Ibid*.

feature of human life”—to wit, its “fundamentally dialogical character”—Taylor refers to a broad notion of language or expression, explaining, “[p]eople do not acquire the languages needed for self-definition on their own.”¹⁵ Rather, according to Taylor (and in line with feminist theories of relational autonomy), we gain these “assets” or capacities from our interactions with others, through dialogical means. Despite this emphasis on the socially constituted nature of the authentic self, Taylor’s emphasis on a notion of “authenticity” seems to suggest that he does in some way embrace a notion of a “true self” that is discoverable, and therefore recognizable.

Patchen Markell finds in Taylor two senses of the notion of recognition. One of these is “the constructive sense” of recognition, wherein recognition is something like the act of ascription: it is defined “not as a knowing but a doing, which like a chairperson’s recognition of the speaker, actively constitutes the identities of those to whom it is addressed.”¹⁶ But he notes that Taylor also seems to endorse a “cognitive sense” of recognition: “proper relations of recognition must be founded on accurate mutual knowledge among the people and groups involved.”¹⁷ Throughout his analysis of theories of the politics of recognition, Markell is critical of this latter sense, which he argues, aspires to an impossible and destructive sovereign agency. He charges recognition theorists like Taylor with harboring “the aspiration to be able to act independently, without experiencing life among others as a sources of vulnerability, or as a site of possible alienation or self-loss.”¹⁸ Such aspirations to sovereign agency, he suggests, may in fact represent the underpinnings of the injustices of so-called misrecognition that these theorists set out to combat: on Markell’s account, injustice is the desire to have a certain type of sovereign agency and withhold this agency from others. This agency cannot *in fact* exist for either the oppressed or oppressor, but in seeking it out, the oppressor creates the conditions that subjugate and exclude the oppressed.

The purposeful and selective misrecognition that I suggest can be a component of the enabling nature of ascriptive autonomy complicates the debate around the aspiration to “sovereign agency” that Markell is critical of. On the one hand, in ascribing autonomy to someone lacking in some of the capacities associated with autonomy, there is some sense that there is a way in which an individual *can* one day achieve that full autonomy and thenceforth be recognized, rather than misrecognized, as an autonomous individual. Yet, I think ascriptive autonomy muddles the critique of the pursuit of sovereign agency by virtue of the fact that the “truth” of the autonomous individual that may be the long-term aspiration is never specified, and need not be. Though on LaVaque-Manty’s account of the abuse of ascription by those in power, there is a failure to recognize some authentically autonomous self, on the “reverse” account of ascription as an enabling tool of selective misrecognition, there is instead a sense of the ambiguity and potentiality of this authentic self, rather than an actually delineated form of such autonomy. Who will the more autonomous self that is the *developed* product of conditions under which autonomy is ascribed be? We don’t necessarily know. To put it in more concrete terms that I will develop below, if we recognize women as sexual agents insofar as our

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 32.

¹⁶ Markell, Patchen. 2003. *Bound by recognition*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press. p. 41

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 40

¹⁸ Ibid. p. 12

engagement in “transgressive sexual practices” may be seen as radical and subversive, even under conditions where this sexual agency may in fact be limited by patriarchal and capitalist relations of power, we create the space for a fuller sexual agency to emerge. What the “true sexual agent” will emerge as is not necessarily clear, but her emergence in conjunction with the erosion of those limiting factors may be enabled by such *misrecognition*. This means that the aspiration undergirding ascriptive autonomy is, unlike the notions of recognition that Markell is critical of, necessarily socially constituted (ascription is necessarily relational) and, in a sense, indeterminate. Though there is an aspiration to some autonomous self, it is a self that is autonomous by virtue of its social constitution.

But what are the boundaries and implications of such selective, purposeful misrecognition? One potential risk of engaging in practices that reflect this approach is that the context out of which the limitations on the individual’s capacities for autonomy have emerged, particularly if it is one that exercises such constraint via forms of oppression or domination, may be obscured. That is, by ascribing autonomy we may actually be applying a “band-aid” solution to the underlying problems which constrain autonomy in the first place, absolving institutions and individuals from responsibility of providing the resources, material, social, psychological, etc., necessary to overcome these constraints. If sexual agency is legitimately constrained by patriarchy and capitalism, the risk of ascribing sexual agency to women *despite this* constraint as a tool for the development of autonomy is that it will be seen as the only necessary tool for the existence of such autonomy. The risk is that ascription may be taken as sufficient evidence of the elimination of constraining factors. In order to better understand this risk, I turn now to a debate over the treatment of sexuality in feminist thought, reinterpreting it through the lens of ascriptive autonomy.

3. Ascribing Sexual Agency: Debating “Pro-Sex” Feminism

Thought the debate between “sex-positive” feminists and anti-pornography feminists has been underway for some time, falling out of the spotlight in more recent times, Elisa Glick’s 2000 article, “Sex Positive: Feminism, Queer Theory, and the Politics of Transgression,” sheds new light on the implications of the theoretical claims and related practices emerging from this debate.¹⁹ For my purposes here, Glick’s critique of “pro-sex” feminist theory provides a concrete example of how the risks I have indicated may accompany the use of ascriptive autonomy as an enabling mechanism may manifest themselves. In the article, Glick takes aim at “those contemporary pro-sex and queer theories that encourage us, as feminists and sexual minorities, to fuck our way to freedom,” as she provocatively puts it, referring to Pat Califia’s rhetorical rejection of the strategy of overcoming gender oppression via sexual practice.²⁰ Glick responds to the pro-sex feminist school(s) of thought, which she believes effectively argued in the 1980s

¹⁹ Glick, Elisa. 2000. Sex Positive: Feminism, Queer Theory, and the Politics of Transgression. *Feminist Review* 64 (Spring):19-45.

²⁰ Ibid. p. 19. Glick refers to Califia-Rice, Patrick. *Macho sluts : erotic fiction* (1st U.S.). Alyson Publications 1988.

“that radical feminism’s representation of women as disempowered actors fails to see women as sexual subjects in their own right.”²¹ In turn, pro-sex feminists have worked to ascribe sexual agency to women, particularly those engaged in the practice of conventionally marginalized (both within and without feminist circles) sexualities.

Glick agrees with the critique of radical feminism at the core of pro-sex feminist theories. However, she points out that pro-sex theorists and activists in fact share a similar (problematic) logic with radical feminists. That is, both “have a liberatory view of sexuality that is grounded in an ahistorical and individualistic concept of freedom as ‘freedom from repressive norms.’”²² Whereas radical feminism argues that a “good” feminist sexuality ought to be rooted in the rejection of male sexual violence and aggression, pro-sex feminists argue that a “good” feminist sexuality is one that transgresses gender, or engages in “genderfuck.” Both are troubling, Glick argues, insofar as they focus on personal emancipation (here with regard to sexuality) as the means to political change – an ideological move that, on her reading, replicates certain capitalist notions of market freedom. Moreover, in keeping with the potential risk of ascriptive autonomy that I discuss above, the focus on personal emancipation underplays the context of gender oppression under which such transgressive sexual practices are enacted, according to Glick. Ascribing sexual agency to such practices, and those who practice them, in the presence of the oppressive conditions out of which they emerge is an example of the selective, purposeful misrecognition that I refer to above; Glick’s critique points to the potential problems we might associate with this strategy.

Pro-sex and radical feminists seem to disagree on not just the value of sexuality as the conduit to liberation, but also the possibility of sexual agency as such in a context of sexism and gender oppression. Glick explains that as they advocate the use of state repression to contain sexual violence against women, radical feminists “tend to deny the possibility of individual or collective resistance through sexuality, even as they prescribed the parameters for a properly ‘feminist’ sexuality.”²³ On the other hand, in making their claim for the “centrality of sexual freedom in women’s struggles against oppression,” pro-sex feminists “claim that dominant configurations of power do not prevent women from exercising agency.”²⁴ Writing for the “pro-sex” camp, Glick argues, Judith Butler embodies this latter perspective. In her argument for the “troubling” of gender categories and the notion of gender as performance, Butler suggests that we cannot and will not have a normative sexuality that exists prior to power relations; in fact, the aspiration to such a pre-political sexuality, her argument suggests, closes off the possibility that sexuality can be rethought as subversive.

²¹Ibid., p. 20. In this account of the debate, the label “radical feminists” designates those anti-pornography feminists who call for greater state regulation of some elements of sexuality, while “pro-sex feminists” designates those who argue in favor of a greater focus on pleasure and sexual liberation via the practice of transgressive sexual practices.

²²Ibid. p. 21, citing Sawicki. See Sawicki, Jana. 1991. *Disciplining Foucault : feminism, power, and the body*. New York: Routledge.

²³ Ibid, p.22

²⁴ Ibid.

Carol Vance similarly points to the unproductive and paralyzing nature of avoiding sexuality as a platform for resistance because it exists within the realm of oppressive power relations. She asks,

Do we distrust our passion, thinking it perhaps not our own, but the construction of patriarchal culture? Can women be sexual actors? Can we act on our own behalf? Or are we purely victims whose efforts must be directed at resisting male depredations in a patriarchal culture.²⁵

Trapped within the context of patriarchal culture, if we imagine that a “genuine” (feminist) sexuality *outside* this context exists, we avert the possibility of women’s sexual agency until this illusory outside can be reached – that is, we permanently forestall women’s sexual agency. In response to this paralysis, Glick describes Butler’s work as arguing “for a model of localized resistance from within the terms of power.”²⁶ Butler wants to “resist[] constructing sex as a prediscursive utopia beyond the law.”²⁷

Yet, although the possibility of rethinking the terms of sexuality so as to upset and subvert oppressive constructions of gender is an appealing one, Glick argues that on its own, such an ambition mistakes revaluation and transgression for genuine political change. This is in part, she argues, because pro-sex feminists like Butler pick up on an inconsistency within the work of Foucault, who has been influential for some of the most important representatives of pro-sex feminism.²⁸ According to Glick, Foucault makes both the claim that sex is an instrument of domination and the claim that sexuality can be resisted through a reformulation that positions it as transgressive of disciplinary power.²⁹ (23-24). That is, he “seeks to locate a de-repressive theory of sexuality alongside a transgressive aesthetics.”³⁰ Thus, in replicating this inconsistency, pro-sex feminists argue for a revaluation of marginalized sexual practices as a tool of resistance, yet they do not always address the tensions between this goal and the ways in which relations of power have first, constituted this very marginalization and second, structured the marginalized sexual practices themselves.

Glick argues that the economic and political conditions that have led to marginalization in the first place are obscured in particular by the shift in focus from the collective to the individual that has accompanied pro-sex feminist arguments for the liberation of pleasure and the radical nature of transgressive sexual practices. While “the personal is political” has long been a feminist slogan, in this case, says Glick, the political dimension of the renewed focus on the personal may be lost. Moreover, since certain sexual practices are seen as “vanguard” or as particularly privileged sites for resistance and transgression, not only is a notion of “correct” feminist sexuality replicated (in like

²⁵ (Vance 1989 p. 6-7)

²⁶ (Glick 2000 p. 23)

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Glick also categorizes Gayle Rubin’s work as following Foucault and therefore replicating the inconsistency described below. See Rubin, Gayle. 1993. Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality. In *The Lesbian and gay studies reader*, edited by H. Abelove, M. A. Barale and D. M. Halperin. New York: Routledge.

²⁹ (Glick 2000 p. 23-24)

³⁰ Ibid p. 24

manner to that which is criticized in the radical/anti-pornography feminist movement), but these privileged positions are underinterrogated. In particular, because their performative nature is in part what makes them emblematic of sexual agency, that which is being performed is absolved of political responsibility; this critique has been particularly relevant to discussions of drag, S/M, and “camp.” Glick writes, “Before promoting such cultural practices as forms of political resistance, we must consider how these practices operate in a system of racist and capitalist social relations.”³¹

This debate, I argue, fleshes out my earlier discussion of potential risks and benefits associated with the sort of purposeful, selective misrecognition that I have suggested is an element of an understanding of ascriptive autonomy as a tool of liberation. Let me recap the debate in the terms of ascriptive autonomy.³² The pro-sex feminist critique of radical feminism’s preoccupation with the regulation of sexuality as a means for resisting sexual violence and objectification of women can be understood as emerging from the concern that women’s sexual agency is entirely obscured by such an approach. That is, while pro-sex feminists do not want to suggest that sexual violence and other forms of repression are irrelevant, they believe an approach focused purely on these constraints assumes a singular conception of autonomy as existing on an all or nothing basis. Vance writes, “[t]o focus only on pleasure and gratification ignores the patriarchal structure in which women act, yet to speak only of sexual violence and oppression ignores women’s experience with sexual agency and choice [...]”³³ As I have suggested above, a theory of ascriptive autonomy has at its core a notion of autonomy as something that exists in degrees. As LaVaque-Manty notes, some of the “practical usefulness of the idea of ascriptive autonomy” is to be found in the fact that “it makes autonomy context-dependent: you can count as autonomous in different ways in different contexts” (384). Although I have referred to autonomy sometimes as (in addition to being a status) a capacity, it is really a *set* of capacities. As Marilyn Friedman explains:

Autonomy is a matter of degree, which means that selves who are relatively more autonomous come to harbor, within the range of capacities they can exercise separately from others (although they needn’t exercise them separately), a greater assortment of the capacities for reflective agency, or harbor them to a more effective degree than do selves who are relatively less autonomous.³⁴

Pro-sex feminists suggest that the capacity for sexual pleasure – via sexual agency – must be a component of our evaluation of and aspiration towards greater autonomy for women.

One way of establishing greater sexual autonomy for women, the account of ascriptive autonomy I have given above suggests, is to ascribe this very autonomy – to recognize women as sexual agents. Yet, we know at the same time that this might constitute an instance of misrecognition. The sexual self that is differentiated and separate from patriarchy does not exist. Vance, who writes in support of a turn to a

³¹ Ibid. p. 28

³² This is perhaps an oversimplification of a complex debate, but I think the fundamental questions of ascription and (mis)recognition hold.

³³ (Vance 1989 p. 1)

³⁴ Friedman, Marilyn. 2003. *Autonomy, gender, politics, Studies in feminist philosophy*. Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press. p. 17-18

feminism that includes not only “danger” but pleasure, acknowledges this. Given the threat of sexual violence that women face, compounded by the fact that acts deemed sexual agentic may be seen to invite such violence, women’s sexual agency is no doubt constrained. She explains, sexual agency is a particularly risky endeavor where it is ingrained that “women must think not only about the consequences of their sexual actions for themselves, but also about the consequences for men, whose sexual ‘natures’ are supposedly lustful, aggressive, and unpredictable.”³⁵ Nonetheless, say Vance and other pro-sex feminists, we must still recognize women as sexual agents in the face of such constraints. She concludes, “Feminism must insist that women are sexual subjects, sexual actors, sexual agents; that our histories are complex and instructive; that our experience is not a blank, nor a mere repetition of what has been said about us, and that the pleasure we have experienced is as much a guide to future actions as the brutality.”³⁶

This language of insistence, this urgent call for a sexuality that is not *merely* the product of patriarchy, points to the impulse that underlies ascription of autonomy. It is with such cognizance of the great constraints that women face that pro-sex feminists want to proceed with the ascription of sexual agency, and in doing so to promote the development of some form of sexual agency that erodes those constraints in its exercise. Ascriptive autonomy “opens up a space for politics,” creating “a conceptual *agon* where controversial claims to authority and authorization are made and countered.”³⁷ For pro-sex feminism, this space of contestation, this political arena, is colonized by the personal – the two blur as the claims themselves take the form of sexual acts. If the revaluation of transgressive sexuality is an effective means for enhancing women’s sexual agency, then the political struggle that emerges from the type of misrecognition I have described is one that takes place on the body and through the body.

The critique, then, of this strategy, comes with the form that this political struggle takes. Though women’s sexual autonomy is ascribed in the face of the constraints that actually exist in our patriarchal culture with the hope of creating the space to challenge this culture, Glick worries that the challenge *stops* with the ascription of autonomy. The political space that is opened becomes only a personal one. The misrecognition that is meant to be a conduit to some form of recognition in the long run becomes an ongoing misrecognition, with the effect being the depoliticization of the still necessary struggle for women’s freedom and autonomy.

Ascriptive autonomy – as a politics of “misrecognition” – is in a sense founded on contradiction, framed around inconsistency. But this, I want to suggest, may be its virtue. Ultimately, while Glick’s argument about the problems emerging from the pro-sex feminist approach is very important and well founded, I think there is value in ascribing sexual agency to women in the face of conditions of patriarchy and other constraining factors. Glick does not, I think, want to do away with this strategy, as she aligns herself in important ways *with* the sex-positive movement she critiques. I think framing the project(s) of pro-sex feminism in terms of ascriptive autonomy may be a helpful way of both highlighting the emancipatory effects of the emphasis on women’s sexuality as a site

³⁵ (Vance 1989 p.4)

³⁶ Ibid. p. 24

³⁷ (LaVaque-Manty 2006 p. 369)

for pleasurable transgression, as it were, and emphasizing the need for a combined effort to resist the structural conditions that have made this struggle necessary to begin with. The contradiction that Glick identifies as following from Foucault – the trouble with acknowledging the nonexistence of an “outside” of power, yet using sexuality, which is necessarily embedded in power relations, to resist this power – is engaged in a productive way by the notion of ascriptive autonomy as misrecognition. That is, this use of purposeful misrecognition might be away of engaging in a *performative* resistance to power relations, whilst acknowledging that it is a performance; we knowingly ascribe autonomy to those who are not fully autonomous by virtue of the constraining context out of which they emerge. We know that this autonomy is incomplete, partial, and constrained; the performance of this ascription is an attempt to spur on resistance on a personal/political level to the constraints of that context.

In her response to Glick, Irene Gedalof suggests that Butler’s approach, following from Foucault, is not oblivious to the “inconsistency” Glick points to.³⁸ Rather, Gedalof notes that on the hand, Butler is cognizant of the limits of performance and the significance of political and economic context. Glick disagrees with Butler, she argues, because they have a fundamentally different view of politics. On Gedalof’s reading, Glick’s vision of political resistance as rooted in “a conventional model of emancipatory politics,” wherein “resisting subjects with agency can only function from a subject position that allows the to stand outside the parameters, framework or logic of an undesirable power relation.”³⁹ In contrast, Butler’s postmodern vision of politics suggests that there is no “authentic” form of resistance that exists from the position of transcendence. Rather, Butler “contests both the possibility and the desirability of a position of transcendence from prevailing power relations, arguing that one can only resist from within the space of those power relations.”⁴⁰ I want to suggest that perhaps a notion of ascriptive autonomy as purposeful misrecognition can occupy some middle ground between the two perspectives. First, retaining a notion of autonomy at its core, even with an unspecified “authentic” subject as the ultimate aim of ascribing such autonomy, holds in place what I think ought to remain a key principle for feminists: the pursuit of conditions and practices that enable women to live in accordance with their own life plans, or to pursue their own ends. With this in mind, ascriptive autonomy can open up a space for politics that both acknowledges the embeddedness of ascriptive practices in power relations, yet retains a transformative and emancipatory aim in its relationship to/with those power relations. The performance of misrecognition suggests a possible manner of thinking about a politics that at once resists the paralysis that comes from seeking out some transcendent positionality from which to engage in resistance *and* helps us to navigate the uneasy tensions that necessarily emerge from the practices of resisting from *within* power relations

³⁸ Gedalof, Irene. 2000. Power, Politics and Performativity: Some Comments on Elisa Glick's 'Sex Positive'. *Feminist Review* 64 (Spring): p.49-52.

³⁹ Ibid. p. 51

⁴⁰ Ibid. p. 52

4. Conclusion

Theorists of recognition often debate the nature of misrecognition; is it, for example, a problem that manifests itself in psychological damage or institutional barriers to social status, or both?⁴¹ In this paper, I suggest a different way of viewing misrecognition: I make the somewhat paradoxical claim that misrecognition – the term so often used to describe social relations that profoundly distort human experience, on various levels – may be a useful tool, when used purposefully, for enabling the development of autonomous agency. Certainly, many of the concerns that motivate my interest in the notion of ascriptive autonomy in this paper are similar to those held by recognition theorists attempting to construct a politics that averts, remedies, or reframes what they call misrecognition. Yet ascriptive autonomy, I have begun to suggest in this paper, offers a different way of thinking about what it means to be “recognized” as an autonomous individual. If recognition theory, as Patchen Markell suggests, aspires to a kind of certainty about the nature of the “authentic self” that cannot and perhaps should not be sought out, ascriptive autonomy suggests a way in which the emancipatory aspirations of recognition theory can be reconciled with the uncertainty that accompanies all of our fluid experiences of autonomy. Without pinning down the “truth” of the autonomous individual, but still retaining the underlying commitment to the pursuit of a life determined for ourselves as an essential component of struggles for liberation, the value of ascriptive autonomy and the practices that generate it may be found in its explicitly social and performative nature.

The case of women’s sexual agency starts to demonstrate how this notion of ascription might be a tool with which to navigate the tensions that occur in contemporary struggles for freedom. By reframing the pro-sex feminist vs. radical feminist debate in the terms of ascriptive autonomy, I have tried to model its value as a liberatory notion, specifically through the use of a different understanding of misrecognition than we are used to discussing. At the same time as it sheds light on the enabling potential of ascriptive autonomy, this debate also highlights a potential misuse of the notion, wherein misrecognition is treated as an end state. Rather, we should see the use of misrecognition in practices of ascription as a conduit through which to achieve more fully transformative solutions to the problems of (in this case) patriarchy and gender oppression. Ascriptive autonomy, as LaVaque-Manty notes, may be particularly valuable insofar as it opens up a space for politics. The politics of misrecognition that I suggest here are only the beginnings of, and certainly not a wholly unproblematic starting point, for the use of this space. But as a way of rethinking debates over recognition, autonomy, and political change, ascriptive autonomy may offer new possibilities for both theoretical and practical interventions.

⁴¹ See for example Fraser, Nancy, and Axel Honneth. 2003. *Redistribution or recognition? : a political-philosophical exchange*. London ; New York: Verso.