

Big Brother and Sexual Assault

how far we have come or how far we have to go?

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A recent incident between housemates on the reality-TV show Big Brother has generated heated debate in the community about the dividing line between sexual behaviour and sexual assault. This article looks at public reactions to the incident and what these may reveal about the influence of feminism on young people and on community attitudes. It also discusses the rise of 'raunch' in popular culture and whether this represents a forward or backward step.

What 'Really' Happened?

At around 4 am on 1 July, the internet-streamed footage of Big Brother (BB) showed 20-year-old 'Ashley' and 21-year-old 'John' inviting 22-year-old Camilla into their bed, implying that they were going to play some kind of joke on her¹. Camilla warned them that if they tried to 'turkey slap' her: 'I'll hurt you if you do. I'll come and bite it'. In bed, Ashley pushed his penis in her face (a so-called 'turkey slap') while John held her down. Afterwards the three continued laughing with other housemates. The BB managers stepped in soon after and evicted the two male housemates from the show.

According to their official statement from the show's producers, Camilla had not wanted Big Brother to take any action taken against the men. The producers contacted Queensland police who then interviewed Camilla but she did not wish to the matter further [Big Brother Australia 2006].

On the show the next day, Camilla said 'We laughed it off. As soon as I said "enough's enough" it stopped ... It was something that happened just in fun and I wasn't offended, as such. But I did think they took it a little bit too far' [reported in Stafford 2006]².

The next day, the show's host Gretel Killeen interviewed the two men. 'Ashley'

and 'John' conceded 'maybe we didn't read Camilla properly' and said they hadn't wanted to 'hurt' Camilla. 'Ashley' later told the *Herald Sun*: 'If Camilla considers it wrong, then I will definitely apologise. We never felt she was ever distressed in any way, or angry - she was laughing with us and tickling me and John afterwards' (9 July 2006: 3). But they also complained that the show had encouraged them to behave in a sexual way. They said their behaviour was intended as 'a joke' and the producers had damaged their reputations by blowing the incident out of proportion.

The incident is different to most cases of sexual assault reported in the media, because the complaint was raised by the producers, and not by the 'victim'. It's hard to know how much the reactions of those involved were influenced by the pressure of being filmed, or by how the incident was managed by the show's producers.

The Reaction

The producers took action based on advice from Associate Professor Catherine Lumby from the University of Sydney. She, along with Karen Willis from New South Wales Rape Crisis Centre, had been engaged by the producers last year to review guidelines about housemate conduct. This was after a similar incident on last year's show.

"Two housemates have gone way over the line, I think," Ms Lumby told ABC Radio today. "What the producers did, certainly what I advised them to do . . . was to give

1. The footage was never aired on TV.

2. After the series ended, Camilla (who was the runner-up winner) was reported to have said 'I was uncomfortable for a split second in time, but the boys' behaviour doesn't make them any less loveable to me' [The Age August 2 2006: 5].

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(Camilla) their full support, to offer her the opportunity to have a counsellor if she wanted one, to offer her the opportunity to take any action she wanted to, and certainly to evict the guys from the house and send a strong public message that this stuff is not OK." [The Age 3 July 2006: 3]

Immediately after the incident, news headlines reported that a sexual assault had occurred in the house.

Communications Minister Helen Coonan told the media that the show is demeaning for women. The Prime Minister called for the 'stupid' show to stop. The Labour party agreed and said the show should donate advertising revenue to a Centre Against Sexual Assault [ABC Online, 3 July 2006].

Federal sexual discrimination commissioner Prue Goward was reported to have said that behaviour met several of the tests for harassment:

It was sexual in nature and a reasonable person could see it as harassment. "I would expect that putting your groin in someone's face is, I think, pretty close to sexual harassment," she said. But the final test would only be met if Halliwell was "offended, humiliated and/or intimidated" (Herald Sun [Online], 5 July 2006).

Goward said Camilla was 'embarrassed by it and I guess that is the test for sexual harassment' (Sydney Morning Herald [Online] July 4, 2006).

Perhaps surprisingly, right-wing commentators and Christian groups quickly agreed that a sexual assault had occurred. Many called for the show (often referred to as 'Big Brothel') to be taken off-air, and 75 per cent of those polled in *The Herald Sun's* voteline agreed. Families First senator Steve Fielding said 'Big Brother is nothing but sex, smut and sleaze. It is ruining our children's minds' (Fielding 2006). National Vice President of the Australian Family Association, Bill

Muehlenberg said that sexual assault '...is the logical outcome of a format that puts sexed-up kids into a sexed-up house, and bids them to party, party, party' [Mullenberg, 2006a).

It might seem that these reactions reflect the influence of feminism. But the language used suggests that these commentators are more concerned about 'decency' and 'lewd conduct' than they are about women's rights. This panic seems connected to fears that the show encourages young people to have sex. For many of these commentators, it is not just sexual assault that is 'demeaning' to women, but any overt form of sexual expression by women themselves. Their comments downplay the role of gendered power relations, and instead suggest that it is sexual permissiveness that causes sexual assault.

Assumptions about Consent

The mother of one of the men felt that Camilla's behaviour implied consent. Rosanna Cox said: 'It was inappropriate but there was no "sexual assault" ... she willingly got into bed with them. If it was unwelcomed she wouldn't have done that, would she?' [cited in Ambrose 2006]. In letters and on internet discussions, many agreed with her. But others observed that the men hadn't obtained consent. One internet blog commentator said: 'I have no problem with them having a threesome, I have a problem with the fact that they sprang something on her with no possibility of consent being obtained' [Armaniac 2006, posted 3 July]. The fact that one of them held her down, as others have pointed out, suggests they may have known that Camilla wouldn't want what they were going to do.

Pro-feminist academic Michael Flood said in *The Advertiser* that young men often have different ideas to women on what is acceptable when it comes to sexual acts,

and they often think breaking sexual taboos and humiliating others is funny. Making assumptions about women's consent or comfort is dangerous, he said:

It's a kind of behaviour that's fraught for men to engage in because it's possible a woman will see it as a joke, if they're lucky, but it's quite likely they'll be uncomfortable... If she sees it as a joke, then they get off but it does not mean it's always acceptable (quoted in Novak 2006).

Flood acknowledges that that in practice, educating young men about what not to do isn't simple and there may always be a "a fuzziness" about lewd acts' [cited in Novak 2006]. But he believes that attitudes are improving, and the important lesson is for young men to examine why they think such acts are funny³.

Several commentators have also said the incident demonstrates the need for a government-funded campaign to educate young people about what constitutes consent to sexual acts⁴.

The Perception of the 'Victim'

What complicates the reading of the incident as sexual assault is the idea that the woman in this incident did not seem to perceive herself as a 'victim'. Camilla she said that she had spoken up when she felt uncomfortable and the men had stopped. Her view seems to be based on her perception of the intentions behind their actions - she said the act was meant 'in fun' and that 'there was no malice intended' (Big Brother Australia 2006).

3. Michael Flood has provided 'Tips for Good Sex' workshops for young people, in which he emphasises the importance of checking consent at every stage of sexual activity. See Flood (2002) .

4. Such a campaign was undertaken earlier this year by the UK Home Office. This was following a change in the *Sexual Offences Act 2003*, which established that consent means making an active decision to say yes, and an assumption of consent is not enough. Men aged 18-24 were targeted, and one campaign tagline read: 'If you don't get a yes, don't have sex', otherwise men risk being charged with rape. The campaign was applauded by some women but attacked by others who argued that obtaining explicit verbal consent in all situations was an 'unrealistic' expectation, and that the campaign implies that women are passive and that the entire responsibility rests with men [see for example, Sarler 2006].

Journalist Farah Farouque asked in an article in *The Age*: 'If an alleged victim denies there is a sexual assault, and so does the accused, can it still constitute assault?' (2006: 5). She interviewed service providers who pointed out that just because someone doesn't want legal action taken, it doesn't mean that an assault didn't occur; and that many women are unaware what behaviour constitutes sexual assault in the first place. But on internet blogs and in newspaper letters, several commentators felt that Camilla could not have been a 'victim' because of the way she behaved after the incident (for example, she hugged one of the men). She also cried and apologised to them when they were evicted, a response which feminist Germaine Greer described as 'baffling' (Greer 2006).



One blog commentator pointed out that when a person has been subjected to assault, they are often confused about what happened and how to react:

What needs to be remembered however is that John and Ashley's actions were entirely inappropriate, despite Camilla's conflicting opinions. Her real or perceived promiscuity has no bearing on the matter. What matters is that she was not given any choice in the matter during the incident, and this clearly counts as an example of sexual assault. Camilla's difficulty with the situation is not uncommon for victims of this type of crime. Many women in the same circumstances are torn between loyalty to their assailants, and a depressing feeling that they have been violated (ludditedotcom 2006).

Yet others observed that the image of 'a victim' may be something that women are reluctant to identify with. For example, 'The Eye' blog commentator strongly felt that the act was a violation of Camilla's rights, but suggested that Camilla may not have wanted to accept the role of 'victim'

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because it implies a certain powerlessness and passivity:

... the sad aspect is that Camilla will now forever be 'the girl who was sexually assaulted on Big Brother'... Camilla has shown ... that she has an awareness of it being wrong, by the sheer fact that she reconstructs [the incident] to make her appear stronger than she really was. That's not a surprise, she is trying to grab back the power. Perhaps the part of her excusing the behaviour (she was clearly torn) is simply doing so to paint herself not as a victim. If you were victimised, it could seem quite understandable that you would not want to see yourself in this way' [The Eye 2006].

An Overreaction?

While many were highly critical of the perpetrators and said their behaviour 'exposed a popular form of misogyny' (Szmerling 2006), other commentators were reluctant to condemn the behaviour of the young men as entirely 'bad'.

For ethicist Leslie Cannold, most commentators, (an 'uneasy coalition of radical anti-porn feminists and Christian crusaders') had been too simplistic in judging the behaviour of the young men (Cannold 2006: 6). She questions 'whether the behaviour of the men merited eviction, condemnation, or both, on moral grounds.' Cannold implies that she doesn't agree that the incident was a 'sexual assault', and believes that the young men ended up showing 'a solid understanding of the key feminist principle' that 'no means no'. She felt that the men should offer Camilla a 'sincere and profound apology' for their 'forceful act of restraint and sexual domination' to which she had not consented early in the incident. However, she argues that the men's reaction showed some redeeming features, which most commentators had ignored:

... it seems an act of deliberate blindness to ignore the alacrity with which the men responded to her insistence that they back off. Surveys continue to show a disturbing number of men continue to believe women really mean "yes" when they say "no". John and Ashley, however, don't appear to be among them (Cannold 2006: 6).

Women, Cannold states, should be free to choose to engage in any form of sexual activity, including acts that may appear degrading to others (such as 'threesomes and S&M'), and provided there is consent, 'neither the label "victim" nor "slut" should apply'.

Pioneering Australian feminist Eva Cox was also reluctant to label Camilla a 'victim' of sexual assault. *The Age* reported that she said: 'They waved their privates and she (Camilla) told them to put it away ... If it was an assault, it was a minor one, and she has the right to decide if she does not want to pursue this'[cited in Farouque 2006: 5]

In an email discussion, Cox expanded on her comments:

My concern is that pushing women to complain when they don't feel they want to take on that role needs to be examined with more nuances than often present. If we are talking about preventing further acts of violence in the future, there is another dimension, but some of this was bad taste crap that was encouraged by a particular situation which stopped fairly promptly - so why make her the pointy end of others' indignation as this behaviour was not likely to be repeated! There are elements of moral panics and witch hunts that worry me about the reactions to the incident and the passion to pursue a relatively minor sin.

I think we need to take a look at some of the issues of violence with more understanding of women's agency. I'm not into blaming women but moving them from being always

seen as passive victims. Unless we recognise the complexities of human emotions, the capacities of some women as well as men to be stupid, tasteless, violent and sometimes evil, we undermine the full humanity of women and make them and ourselves one-dimensional. [19 July 2006].

Germaine Greer, herself a brief participant in Britain's *Celebrity Big Brother*, felt that this was a 'non-event' and an example of how of the 'trivial adventures of housemates' are manipulated by the producers to generate ratings. She didn't advocate criminal sanctions for the men's behaviour: 'Sexual harassment is a part of daily reality; it might have been more useful to have allowed Australian Big Brother viewers to see how housemates coped with it, instead of slinging the perpetrators out holus-bolus' (Greer 2006).

The Influence of 'Raunch' Culture

A broader phenomenon that provides a backdrop for this incident is the influence of what has been called 'raunch culture'. Big Brother is often held up as a prime example of the impact of raunch in popular culture (see for example, Roberts 2006).

According to Ariel Levy, who wrote the much-publicised book *Female Chauvinist Pigs: women and the rise of raunch culture*, marketers have pushed and many women have embraced the idea that it is empowering to be sexy and sexually active - a 'lustful, busty exhibitionist' (Levy 2005: 200). She argues that young women have modelled their ideas of sexiness on representations from pornography - so it's now fashionable to take pole-dancing fitness classes, have breast implants and wear the Playboy bunny logo. Sexual equality is now where women have become like men and sex is just meaningless fun⁵.

Paris Hilton, the 'mascot' of raunch according to Ariel Levy, expresses such views on her new album. Her lyrics reflect a common theme in pop and hip-hop - that women can use their sexuality to control men; and that women can confidently

expect that 'no means no'. She describes one of her songs:

'Turn You On' is about turning this guy on, dancing with him, but then at night it's like, 'Go take a shower because I'm not going to do anything' . . . I think women should be confident and strong, and they often underestimate themselves (quoted in Hattenstone 2006).



The problem with 'raunch', according to Levy, is that what we have accepted as 'sexy' and liberating is actually one-dimensional and limiting. We may think that raunch signifies an empowered post-feminist age, but she believes it is quite the reverse - and the joke is on us. She says if we think this is feminism, then 'we are selling ourselves unbelievably short' and propping up male power by objectifying ourselves (Levy 2005: 198)⁶.

Some feminists have criticised Levy for blaming young women for participating in their own objectification, rather than blaming society. Many particularly object to her book title 'female chauvinist pigs' (see for example, Cochrane 2006).

Several commentators noted the potential impact of 'raunch' in the Big Brother incident. One said that many young women put up with behaviour such as turkey slaps because of peer pressure: 'current "raunch" culture has a big problem in labelling any woman who objects to being sexually degraded as simply "unadventurous" or wowserish, which is the social kiss of death' [tigtog 2006]⁷.

5. Christian commentators, like the Australian Family Association's Bill Mulenberg, have heartily agreed that 'raunch' is a problem, but say the remedy is the need for 'personal sexual integrity' and a biblical world view (Mulenbergh 2006b).

6. Levy's views were widely promoted by pop singer Pink in her 2005 hit song 'Stupid Girls' (which included the line 'What happened to the dreams of a girl president? She's dancing in the video next to 50 Cent').

7. A female contestant in an earlier series of Big Brother, Irena Bukhstaber, also observed that there was pressure to behave 'like the blokes' in the house (Bukhstaber 2006).

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But some feminists strongly reject claims that 'raunch' is a backward step for feminism⁸. They refute the idea that they are victims of false consciousness, and argue that the rise of 'raunch' is genuinely progressive because it encourages women to feel good about their bodies and to take the lead in sexual encounters.

Discussion around the impact of 'raunch' culture raises some important questions for feminism: To what extent are young women the victims of men, themselves or society, or are they making active, informed choices? Does raunch represent how far women have come or how far we have to go?

The 'Beginning of a Conversation'

What has been agreed upon by most commentators is that the behaviour that occurred on Big Brother is common. Recent incidents reported in the media involving footballers, the armed services and cruise ships have raised community awareness about the prevalence of sexual violence.

Christian groups, right-wing commentators and many politicians think the answer is to remove shows like Big Brother from screens. But removing BB won't make sexual harassment and assault go away, though it might appease the sensibilities of some.

As Catherine Lumby argues, shows such as Big Brother can play a useful role in the lives of young people, many of whom 'are

very passionately involved in the program and actively debate the rights and wrongs of what they see' [cited in Moses 2006]. The swift and cautious action taken by Big Brother's producers has been a positive public step as it raised questions about what's ok and what's not in sexual behaviour. But if we as a community are genuine about protecting women from assault, then we also need to call on the government to put greater resources into prevention and education programs, and encourage open debate about issues of sex and sexuality, consent and coercion⁹. And as feminists, we need to continue to engage with debates in popular culture.

In the words of Tim Brunero, a finalist on last year's Big Brother:

What we need to do is let this be a beginning of a conversation, led by Australian women, about what is appropriate behaviour and how negative images of women in the media and elsewhere contribute to inappropriate behaviour (Brunero 2006).

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8. See for example, Kate Taylor's article (2006) 'Today's ultimate feminists are the chicks in crop tops' in which she says that 'old-style' feminists who lecture young women don't understand that 'their way is not the only way to achieve equality with men'; or Kara Jesella (2005), who writes: 'Plenty of us have assembled our sexual identities from bits and pieces of our personal histories, pop-culture experiences and elements of raunch culture that don't feel oppressive'.

9. In 2004 the Federal Government cancelled the *No Respect No Relationship* prevention campaign for young people, which would have addressed similar issues to those raised by the recent Big Brother incident.

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National Personal Safety Survey Released

On 10 August, the Australian Bureau of Statistics released the results of the first national Personal Safety Survey presenting information about women's and men's experiences of violence.

For the 2005 Personal Safety Survey (PSS) violence was defined as any incident involving the occurrence, attempt or threat of either physical or sexual assault. PSS respondents were asked about their experiences of the different types of violence, since the age of 15, by different types of male and female perpetrators (including current partner, previous partner, boyfriend/girlfriend other known person, and stranger).

This publication includes comparisons with the 1996 Women's Safety Survey where relevant.

The findings include the following figure:

- 4.9% (367,300) of men experienced violence from a previous partner compared to 15% (1,135,500) of women.

Further details are in Personal Safety Survey: Summary of Results, Australia 2005 (cat. no. 4906.0) or see the website <http://www.abs.gov.au/>

DVIRC will feature a summary of this research in the next edition of DVIRC Quarterly