

Engaging with the Bailey Review: blogging, academia and authenticity

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This article reproduces and discusses a series of blog posts posted by academics in anticipation of the report on commercialisation, sexualisation and childhood, ‘Letting Children Be Children’ by Reg Bailey for the UK Department of Education in June 2011. The article discusses the difficulty of ‘translating’ scholarly work for the public in a context where ‘impact’ is increasingly important and the challenges that academics face in finding new ways of speaking about sex in public.

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Introduction

In this article, I (Feona Attwood) talk about a series of blog posts I organised in anticipation of the report on commercialisation, sexualisation and childhood, ‘Letting Children be Children’ by Reg Bailey for the UK Department of Education in June 2011. The posts came about as part of an ongoing series of discussions over the past few years about developing conversations with others beyond the academy (see Attwood & Smith, 2011), and more specifically the difficulty of ‘translating’ scholarly work into media stories; a particular source of frustration for academics who regularly talk to journalists and other media producers only to find the ideas and evidence they have put forward discarded for bolder claims, unsupported by evidence and typically drawing on conservative views of gender and sexuality. At the same time, as research ‘impact’ becomes increasingly important, the presence of academic work in public and accessible contexts has also become a concern for institutions and funding bodies, putting new pressures on academics to find ways of making their work more widely available. The pressure to achieve impact is complicated not only by the media preference for simple and sensational views of sex but by a trend towards ‘policy-based evidence making’ (Boden & Epstein, 2006); the process by which

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evidence is commissioned or selectively chosen to support policies which appear to have already been agreed on. In this context, academics whose work challenges the status quo may find their attempts at public engagement frustrated or compromised.

The sensationalist reporting of sex is widely favoured over reasoned and evidence-based accounts, and government policies in this area increasingly seem to rely on and seek backing for approaches which more reliable evidence would not support. Both often rely on the widespread misreporting of data and on a range of stereotypes, for example, of sex workers as abused victims, and pornography consumers as addicts. Evidence counts for little in these types of accounts; an example is the commissioning of a Rapid Evidence Assessment by the UK Justice Department on the ‘harm’ of ‘extreme pornography’ (Itzin, Taket, & Kelly, 2007) which has been described as a ‘scabrous’ piece of work written by academics with no background in media research and based on an extraordinarily out of date set of theoretical and methodological approaches to media consumption (Barker, 2007). Most recently, a set of questionable representations of ‘sexualised’ young people – especially young women – as deeply damaged by changes in sexual behaviour and in media representations of sex has emerged. There is a danger of a highly conservative, poorly informed and anti-academic approach to sex being normalised – as the two government reports on sexualisation, authored, respectively, by celebrity psychologist, Linda Papadopoulos (2010), and Chief Executive of the Christian organisation, the Mothers Union, Reg Bailey (2011), suggest. In this context, it is more important than ever that academic research on sex and sexuality is as visible as possible.

Although far from common, blogging about sex is something that some academics do very well; Petra Boynton’s blog, Dr. Petra,¹ on sex, relationships and health and Laura Agustin’s *The Naked Anthropologist*² on the sex industry are two well-known examples. Other sex commentators and educators such as Marty Klein,³ Cory Silverberg⁴ and Charlie Glickman⁵ are also widely respected for their blogs. Blogging about sex is something that has really interested me in my own work. The group of writers, producers, performers, editors and bloggers – described by Violet Blue (herself a prolific and highly acclaimed sex blogger)⁶ – as ‘the new porn professionals’ suggest new forms of culturally aware, inventive and reflexive erotic labour (Attwood, 2010). The confessional accounts created by the previously anonymous but now ‘out’ sex bloggers, Belle de Jour⁷ and Girl with a One Track Mind⁸ have also excited considerable public debate and controversy, especially given the context of a new visibility of women’s sex talk in popular literature and media, exemplified by *Sex and The City* and *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (Attwood, 2009b). The anonymously written commentary which makes up *Bitchy Jones Diary*, the subject of the other articles in this special issue, is related to both of these developments and I will return to these examples at the end of this discussion.

Sexualisation, the Bailey Review and blogging

My interest in public engagement developed from a small British Academy-funded project with Clarissa Smith in the United Kingdom which ran from 2008 to 2010 and aimed to examine ways of developing research on young people’s sexual cultures. We were keen to speak to youth, health and educational agencies who were expressing concern around aspects of young people’s sexual cultures, based on health issues such as high rates of sexually transmitted infections (STDs), as well as a perceived increase in young people’s engagement with sexually explicit media such as pornography. We worked in the context of a spate of publications that claimed that young people were being ‘sexualised’ (from policy reports including APA 2007 – to popular books such as Levy, 2005; Paul, 2005; Tankard Reist, 2009 – to press reports such as Cox⁹ and Aitkenhead¹⁰). Yet, these contained nothing

in the way of convincing evidence and seemed to be underpinned by views of sex and culture as inherently dangerous and of young people as easily corruptible and harmed.

The expression of concern about sexualisation has become more commonplace since then, and when we received funding from the Arts and Humanities Research Council to establish an international research network to investigate the new visibility or ‘onscenity’¹¹ of sex in commerce, culture and everyday life, sexualisation was one of the things that we wanted to focus attention on. We also hoped to develop links with relevant individuals and groups, both within and beyond the academy and to build a knowledge base that could be accessed by a range of organisations, professionals, practitioner communities and individuals and by the public. A small group within the network, including myself, Meg Barker, Clarissa Smith and Clare Bale began to meet to discuss ways of increasing public engagement around these issues. The idea of a set of blogs came out of these meetings. I had organised a letter to the *Times Higher Educational Supplement* once the Bailey consultation was announced¹² and expected to organise another when the Review was published.¹³ I was aware that this seemed like a fairly negative intervention which, although necessary, did little to open up a space for further discussion and was not the positive kind of contribution that I knew we wanted to make. For this reason, I sent out an email request to academics who I knew had written on the topic and who I thought might be able to find time to contribute a post. The aim was to create a source of information and discussion about sexualisation that would be an alternative to what seemed likely to be the media response when the Review appeared.¹⁴

The posts can be found on the Onscenity website.¹⁵ Here, I introduce a selection of them, under the headings: What is the evidence? Contextualising Sexualisation, Parenting and Sexualisation, Porn Culture and Taking Young People Seriously.

What is the evidence?

In the posts by Danielle Egan, Gail Hawkes and Alan McKee there was a sharp questioning of the available evidence and whether this tallies with many of the claims made about sexualisation. Danielle and Gail focused on reviewing a range of statistical findings that contrast strikingly with the idea that young people’s sexual behaviour has changed dramatically and for the worst:

What’s the evidence about young people’s sexual behaviour?

Danielle Egan and Gail Hawkes

For sexualization activists, the negative consequences of sexualization – depression, eating disorders, precocious sexual activity and even sex work – are assumed to be self-evident, while scholarship that has complicated these facile claims are ignored. Research involving women that did not examine sexualization as a phenomenon at all have been used, after the fact, as ‘proof’ of sexualization (Egan & Hawkes, 2009, 2007). The use of emotive terms like ‘objectification’ and ‘passive victims’ evokes oppressive patriarchal structures from the mid-twentieth century and encourages assumptions fed by unconscious fears. Legitimation is ensured by rhetoric and common sense replaces scholarly argument and empirical research. But have we actually found ourselves in a world where tweens armed in their bralettes are ready and waiting to jump at the first chance for oral sex with an older man? Are they really just a hop, skip and a thong away from the sex industry? Are they watching, buying and listening their way to a future of depressive self-destructive behavior?

The insistent claims for the inevitable damage associated with sexualization centre round the distortion of young women’s ‘normal’ sexual development, where increasing promiscuity and declining self-worth and harm are presented as inevitable. Yet recent studies of young people’s sexual behavior in all three Anglophone countries, present evidence for responsible and thoughtful sexual behaviour in both young men and young women. The National Survey of Sexual Health and Behavior in the US (Herbenick et al., 2010) found that in 62% of boys and

40% of girls (aged 14–16) masturbation was the most common sexual practice. 9% of boys and 11% of girls had vaginal intercourse in the last twelve months while 79.1% of males and 58.1% of females used a condom in their last ten acts of heterosexual intercourse. In 2011 a Scottish study of 1800 14–16 year olds revealed that 32% had sexual intercourse at a median age of 14, and that 51% of these had used condoms. A 2008 study of 16–18 year students in Australia reveals a strikingly similar set of figures. Of 5000 young people interviewed, 78% had some form of sexual activity in the past year. Sexual intercourse contributed to 40% of this figure with 30% having 3 or more sexual partners. 50% of the sample used birth control pills and 69% used condoms for the last sexual intercourse (Smith, Agius, Mitchell, Barrett, & Pitts, 2009).

It appears that 60 and 70% of young people in the age group under discussion are *not* engaged in intercourse. The most common method for seeking sexual pleasure is solo masturbation and, for partners, safe sex is a priority. That sexualization activists, who claim their priority is the protection of young girls, apparently ignore such evidence is inexplicable. We suggest that this anomaly goes unremarked within the wider community because despite protestations of ‘what about the children’, academic and social commentators are deeply uncomfortable with the reality of the active sexual lives of young people, and (as we have illustrated elsewhere) this cultural discomfort has a long history (Egan & Hawkes, 2010).

This lack of fit between evidence and rhetoric was taken up more particularly in relation to the claims that pornography is responsible for deteriorating relationships between men and women by Alan, who noted how this view contrasts with what we know about really quite recent history, and has become, in an astonishingly short space of time, established as a well-known ‘truth’:

Life before Internet porn: the golden years?

Alan McKee

I’ve noticed a strange tendency in recent discussions about pornography and its influence on young people – an increasing romanticization of the world before the Internet, and of relationships between the sexes in those innocent days.

Take the ‘Reality and risk’ project¹⁶ for example, which aims to ‘promote critical thinking among young people about pornography and the messages it conveys about women, men and sex’. Their report states:

Young people are exposed to porn at unprecedented rates . . . They are seeing it more frequently, through more media, and what they are seeing is harder and more aggressive. Young people are living in an era of new sexual expectations, acceptance and practices. And, significantly, porn is normalising sex acts that most women in the real world don’t enjoy, and may find degrading, painful or violating. There is evidence that many young people are enacting porn scripts . . . The young women we interviewed talked about young men trying things they’d seen in porn, sometimes without even asking.

The language throughout this piece is of change. Young people are seeing porn at ‘unprecedented’ rates, ‘more frequently’, through ‘more media’. It’s ‘normalising’ sex acts – which clearly were not ‘normalised’ before. The effect of this change is that men are ‘trying things’ that women ‘may find degrading, painful or violating’, ‘sometimes without even asking’. The implication is clear – before Internet porn, men did not try to impose their sexual desires on women. If we could get rid of it then there would be no problems with consent or negotiation. There would be no issues with different sexual interests in couples. In the good old days before Internet porn, the argument runs, men treated women better. They took more interest in their sexual needs. They were more thoughtful, respectful lovers.

This worries me. Let me state this very simply: relationships between men and women have improved markedly since the 1970s. Young men these days have attitudes towards women that are better than their fathers had – and light years ahead of their grandfathers. We know this through empirical research – our survey for the book *The Porn Report* showed that young men had the best attitudes towards women of all the age groups. And if you doubt that it’s true, have a look at the writings of feminists before the advent of Internet pornography. Reviewing the 1970s, Gloria Steinem (1980, p. 23) wrote at the end of the decade that:

Masculine dominance and female submission were still defined as ‘natural’; so much so that even violence towards women was accepted as a normal part of sexual life, Saturday night beatings and the idea that women ‘wanted’ to be forced were all accepted to some degree . . . rape was finally redefined in the 1970s and understood as an act of violence . . . not a ‘natural’ sexual need . . . [and] ‘battered women’ was a phrase that uncovered a major kind of violence that had long been hidden. It helped us to reveal the fact that most violence in America takes place in our homes, not on the streets.

It’s true that things these days are far from perfect. Young women are still not encouraged to grasp sexual agency for themselves, whether they choose to use that agency to remain celibate, to have rampant sex with many people, or anything in between. And young men are still not encouraged to be reflective about what they want sexually and why. We still need, as Moira Carmody has argued¹⁷, more extensive and systematic education in sexual ethics and consent for all young people. What we don’t need is to stick our heads in the sand and pretend that things were better in the good old days before Internet porn. Things weren’t better. Those weren’t the good old days. They were the bad old days, and relationships between young men and young women have improved immeasurably since then.

Contextualising sexualisation

Laura Harvey, Liesbet van Zoonen and Jamie Heckert all used their posts to put concerns with sexualisation into a broader context. Laura’s piece focused on the way that the sexualisation debate generally misses the relationship between sexuality and capitalism in which individualism and consumption work to structure sexuality; and that it draws on a distaste for ‘bad’ and ‘dangerous’ female sexuality, as well as the working class. Laura drew attention to the particularly British context of a coalition government dominated by conservative politicians and its response to economic instability which has so far focused on cutting jobs and public services. In this context, protection becomes a form of surveillance and control as well as a means of distracting attention away from social inequalities:

We need a wider analysis of inequality, not the surveillance of young people

Laura Harvey

The Government’s ‘Review of commercialisation and sexualisation of children’ is being conducted in the context of wide ranging debates within academic, activist and popular media. It is a complex terrain for academics to research, with thorny questions of production, consumption and the relationship between media representations and behaviour at its heart.

The most recent Government review takes as its starting point a concern that children are being ‘sexualized’ at an early age. The aim of the review is ‘to address parents’ concerns that children are being pressured into growing up too quickly.’¹⁸ Prime Minister David Cameron outlined his concern with this issue in the run up to the General Election last year in a comment piece in the *Daily Mail*. He set out his campaign against the ‘Products and marketing that can warp their minds and their bodies and harm their future. That can take away their innocence, which I know most parents would agree is so precious and worth defending’.¹⁹

US academics Danielle Egan and Gail Hawkes contend that recent writing in this area tends to collapse concerns about corporation and media practice and consumption, ignoring historical and cultural variation. Rather than an examination of the diverse ways that children and young people access, read and understand media representations, the debate becomes condensed into concern about the contamination of ‘childhood innocence’ by sexual representations and products.

This is particularly evident in the way that young women and girls’ bodies and desires are represented in mainstream media debates about ‘the sexualization of children’. The images and stories that accompany news reporting in this area almost always focus on girls, drawing strict boundaries around the ‘appropriate’ or ‘good’ expression of feminine sexuality as innocent and passive, in contrast to the ‘bad’ or ‘dangerous’ expression of female sexuality as active and overt. Not only do such boundaries deny the existence of childhood sexuality

and experimentation, they reinforce wider sexual norms on children, particularly girls, from a young age. ‘Good’ sexuality is typically therefore presented as heterosexual, monogamous and eventually productive of children. Signs of sexual desire outside of these boundaries are presented as negative and damaging to young people. Such boundaries are culturally specific and historical. James Kincaid (2004) has explored the investments that adults have in the production of childhood as non-sexual and non-erotic, and the foundations of such anxieties in the valorization and, paradoxically, the sexualization of purity and innocence in adult sexuality from the nineteenth century onwards.²⁰

The sharp policing of the boundary between ‘innocence’ and ‘danger’ in sexuality reflects and reinforces strong class anxiety. Imogen Tyler (2008) has analysed the rise of the abusive term ‘chav’ as a product of class disgust. Tyler explores the figure of the ‘chav mum’ as specifically vilified for her ‘excessive reproduction’ that does not fit the neoliberal narrative of participation in the workforce for greater economic growth. This anxiety is particularly reflected through language that signals disgust and marks out certain forms of consumption as respectable, and others as vulgar.

In Cameron’s comment piece above, as with some of the policy-led reviews on the subject, a link between the clothing young people are wearing and violence against them is made. Distaste for particular clothing is thus collapsed into a blame narrative. This perception that women and girls are responsible for sexual assaults perpetrated against them is concerning as a basis for policy. Such arguments lead towards policies that focus their attention on the surveillance and control of children, rather than on developing an understanding of the causes and effects of sexual violence.

In my view it is important that we explore the relationship between neoliberal capitalism and sexuality. The rise of individualism and narratives of empowerment through consumption form some of the conditions in which young people in the UK learn and start to experience their sexuality. As academics, policy-makers and activists we should seek to understand how young people negotiate these moments in all their complexity, from multiple social positions such as ethnicity, ‘race’, disability, class and gender.

However, the specific and repeated focus of analyses of ‘sexualization’ in isolation from a wider analysis of structural inequality is problematic. As David Buckingham and colleagues pointed out in the conclusion to their 2010 report on ‘sexualised goods’ aimed at children, the current framing of policy discussions about sexualization ‘may distract attention from other, more fundamental – and perhaps more intractable – social problems.’ Social inequalities such as those that lead to sexual violence and poverty cannot be addressed through the lens of consumer choice and lobbying. Indeed, some of the greatest threats facing children in our society take shape in the reduction of council budgets that will lead to the closure of children’s centres and libraries, and in the job losses and benefits cuts that face parents in the coming years.

Like Laura, Liesbet highlighted discrepancies between the rhetoric of care and the government’s actions and the need for practical help for young people rather than an ‘endless circle of symbolic politics’. She also drew attention to the ways in which young people regularly resist sexualisation and commercialisation through their involvement in all kinds of subcultures, often drawing on media to do this.

Getting Real about Sexualization

Liesbet van Zoonen

Was there ever a more hypocritical government than the current UK one? On the one hand, the Department of Education told the chairman of the Mother’s Union, Reg Bailey, to produce a review of the commercialization and sexualization of childhood, ‘because so many parents feel their children live under pressure’. On the other hand organizations actually doing something against sexualization, for instance in the area of teenage pregnancy, have been subject to heavy budget cuts, or have simply been axed such as the Poppy Project, a London based housing project for victims of sexual trafficking.

Was there ever a dumber government than the current UK one? The review is built on three previous reviews (Buckingham, Bragg, Russell, & Willett, 2009; Byron, 2008; Papadopoulos, 2010); not from the 1950s but from the last two years. Together these reviews have listed numerous very concrete and clearly written recommendations. But that was all done under Labour rule. Apparently, the current government considers sexualization and commercialization a party specific issue, and it needs Reg to produce particular Con-Libbish ‘robust and challenging recommendations’. I know a challenging recommendation, and a cheap one, that isn’t in the previous reports: ban the Page Three Girl of *The Sun*. If there is in-your-face sexualization, it is there.

Was there ever a government more blind than the current one? Do they really not want to see how children and teens resist and ignore sexualized and commercialized culture? It was in the UK wasn’t it, that a girl was banned from school for wearing a chastity ring vowing to abstain from sex until marriage? She is a devout Christian, but devout Muslim girls also refuse to submit to the pressures of sexualized culture. And one does not need a faith to resist sexualization and commercialization as the ‘straight edgers’ and ‘hard liners’ would know. Pony girls, hockey girls, Goths, queer girls, geek girls, they all have other priorities than sex and commerce.

Is there ever a government beyond redemption? No, and there is hope for this one if it cuts the surrogate action and ‘gets real’. Worried about childhood? Ask children themselves what their main concerns are, instead of having a vaguely defined group of ‘parents’, set their agenda. Family conflict and bullying could come out as their biggest problem, definitely before sexualization and commercialization. So focus the scarce government money on these areas even more than happens already, instead of moving reviews, reports and recommendations around in an endless circle of symbolic politics.

Jamie’s post also highlighted the ways in which protection can be used to justify control; arguing that a narrow focus on sexualisation misses the point that our economy depends on commercialisation. Written in a more personal style, and drawing parallels between the response evident in policy and a recollection of a ‘concerned’ response of his own to pornography in a public place, he argued that the rush to act instead of listen does great harm, destroys empathy, ignoring the real need to nurture autonomy and to ‘help each other face the challenges of our times’:

Nurturing Autonomy

Jamie Heckert

While on a youth club field trip to the beach, a young man put his phone in front of my face. It was playing a porn film. I remember feeling disgusted and concerned. Knowing that this is one example among many, I can relate to the desire to ‘protect’ children and teenagers from the commercialisation of sex. At the same time, I ask myself, should I try to stop everything that makes me feel uncomfortable? Or can I allow myself to feel discomfort or even disgust without necessarily rushing to do *something*? If I support moves to ‘protect’ children, is it for their sake or mine? These are questions we might all be asking ourselves when we are called upon to save the children.

The language of protection can be used to justify control. Many of us are fed up with ‘health and safety’ regulations which are often more about protecting institutions from lawsuits than human health or safety. And a whole history of colonial profiteering, including the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, has been justified with stories of protecting women. Neither war nor censorship does women or children any favours. Both do great harm, making women and children into helpless victims who always need ‘protecting’ by someone else who is big and strong. A big brother.

Government actions are often like this – creating the appearance of well-being rather than actually nurturing it. To nurture well-being, in ourselves and each other, we might nurture autonomy. No one can do this for us. No law can make it happen. Autonomy means developing the skills to govern ourselves, to speak for ourselves, to listen to each other. As the award winning author Ursula K. Le Guin once wrote, ‘All of us have to learn how to invent our lives, make them up, imagine them. We need to be taught these skills; we need guides to show us

how. If we don't, our lives get made up for us by other people.' How might we all nurture imagination and empathy in ourselves so that we can be guides for each other?

I'm concerned that the problem isn't just the commercialisation of sex, but the commercialisation of everything. The official economy depends on continual growth and prioritises profit over human dignity and the integrity of the ecosystem of which we are a part. Instead of simply trying to stop children from accessing corporate representations of sex, we might focus on nurturing a network of cooperative economies consistent with love, imagination and comfort with bodies. In this way, we can nurture autonomy in people of all ages and genders so that we are all able to care for ourselves and each other.

Instead of turning certain images of sex into forbidden fruit, making them all the more tempting, let's acknowledge their existence and have open, gentle conversations about relationships, bodies and desires. Younger people are not dupes, not victims of culture. Like those of us who are older, they too have a mix of feelings, questions and stories about their experiences. To help each other face the challenges of our times – including corporate uses of sex for profit we would do well to listen to each other. To really hear another, their voice must not be drowned out by our own thoughts and feelings. So before rushing to *do something*, I invite you to sit with thoughts, with feelings, to become comfortable with their presence. In my experience, this helps create space for the empathy and imagination needed to act with love.

Parenting and sexualisation

Other posters focused on particular groups and the way they are positioned within debates about sexualisation. Sara Bragg, Jan Macvarish and Adrienne Evans wrote about parenting and parents, the group who the Bailey Report appears to speak on behalf of. Sara drew attention to the ways that anti-sexualisation campaigns create a false sense of consensus and of a 'widespread concern' which is not borne out by research, their invitation to 'us' to unite against an 'other', and their manufacturing of outrage. Contrasting the survey used in the Bailey Review and the Sex Ed Show's 'Stop Pimping our Kids' campaign with the research carried out for the Buckingham report on sexualisation, which she helped to produce for the Scottish Parliament, she showed how inane and misleading 'policy-on-a-plate' approaches are:

Nine out of ten parents feel that their views on sexualisation are misrepresented. Probably.

Sara Bragg

There's a useful test you can run on any campaign slogan: add 'not' to it. If it then turns into something that no sane person would be likely to support, you can be fairly sure that the original is equally nonsensical.

The sexualisation debate provides plenty of opportunities to try this out. The most recent series of Channel 4's *Sex Education Show*²¹, for instance, was entitled 'Stop pimping our kids'. But who is making a case for 'more sexual exploitation of minors now'?

Being inane, however, does not mean ineffective: these slogans compel our assent, and indeed in the case of Mumsnet, emptiness and circularity are fundamental to reaching its audience. The campaign invites us to be part of a 'we' who know true girlhood, against a despicable 'other' who is at best ignorant and at worst bent on destroying it. Attempt to define what girls are or should do, however, and this cosy conspiracy will soon unravel: some associate girls with piano-playing and horse-riding, as if a privileged middle class existence is attainable and desired by all; feminists are unlikely to warm to the virtues of 'pink tea parties and frilly dresses' extolled by others; and those for whom 'playing with dolls' encapsulates innocuous girlishness presumably airbrush Bratz out of the picture.

Failing to define key terms, that is, makes a broad appeal more likely: it is a tactic helping anti-sexualisation campaigns persuade us that sexualisation is a 'fact' universally acknowledged by all persons of right mind and particularly by all who would lay claim to being a 'good parent'.

Other tactics include referring to ‘widespread concern about sexualisation’, usually without evidence; although occasionally one encounters substantiating statistics, like a recent government press release announcing that ‘Almost nine out of 10 parents think that children are being forced to grow up too quickly’.²²

Is public opinion really so unanimous? – These figures were generated by the Bailey Review of the Commercialisation and Sexualisation of Childhood, publicity for which explained that Reg Bailey ‘wants to hear from parents and carers about the pressures on their children to grow up too quickly’ via a survey. The first survey question listed ‘factors said to put pressure on children to grow up too quickly’, asked respondents to tick which ‘had the most influence on their own children’, and then to provide their own examples ‘of children being put under pressure to grow up too quickly’. In these circumstances, the real story is surely that ‘One in ten parents evades manipulation by survey’?

Another tactic is to embed a thoroughly partial view in what parades as simple description, thus disallowing any possible dissenting perspective. You may have read of the evils of pamper parties, which provide *lessons in make up and fake champagne*. How sinister – and how utterly unlike those carefree celebrations involving *face painting and fizzy drinks*.

The *Sex Education Show* adopted this approach, raging over the sale of *studded pink hot pants* (er . . . *sparkly shorts*?) for children. ‘We were shocked and so was the public’ declared presenter Anna Richardson, cutting to footage of ‘the people’ duly shaking their heads and tutting. But the makers had cued these responses by first asking them to interpret giant photos of single items before producing the petite actual merchandise, and by making it very clear what the ‘correct’ reaction would be.

I don’t want to single out this programme – one can’t stay cross for too long with a show otherwise so dedicated to filling our TV screens with close ups of wrinkled scrotums. Others have manufactured outrage in similarly artificial ways, as did the *Sun* newspaper’s campaign against a padded ‘paedo bikini’. But one has to ask why such devious tactics are necessary if the sexualisation case is as clear-cut and universally agreed as is claimed.

Put the questions differently and adults – like young people – readily admit the difficulties and uncertainties of these issues²³. Does an item of clothing on its own mean anything, or do you have to know something about who’s wearing it, when and where, and in combination with what (as when tiny shorts are worn with thick leggings and long tops)? What if all your kid’s friends have got them? Are girls’ shoes with heels acceptable if worn only for parties? Why are the cheaper chainstores more often targeted than, say, high-end ‘mummy-daughter’ boutiques selling scaled-down versions of womenswear for girls? Who has the right to declare a product ‘tasteless’ – is this just class prejudice in disguised form? Why is so much more attention paid to products for girls than for boys?

Go down this route and you’ll find yourself disappointingly short on ready-made solutions and policy-on-a-plate soundbites. But at least there’s a chance you’ll hear something other than what you think you already know.

Jan’s post drew attention to the way the sexualisation issue has become so prominent in a context where parents are simultaneously expected to be responsible for their children’s behaviour yet depicted as the ‘key risk-factor in their own children’s lives’ – fully expected to fail because the world has become such a scary, new, unknowable place. Although sexualisation debates appear to take parents seriously, they are part of a broader discourse which emphasises their ineffectiveness and sets parents against children, representing them as though they were different species living in entirely separate worlds:

Are we seeing the sexualization of children or the infantilization of adults?

Jan MacVarish

Although few people seem to have a clear idea what ‘the sexualization of childhood’ actually means, there is a commonsense consensus that children today are ‘growing up too fast’. While

lacking any clear definitions, compelling evidence or apparent causes, the sexualization issue is gaining international prominence because it brings together the many confusions and anxieties about intergenerational relationships, the boundaries between adulthood and childhood and the authority of parents. It contains a powerful dichotomy that lies at the heart of today's parenting culture: parents are increasingly held responsible for all aspects of their child's development but they are required to exercise this responsibility in a context that is pessimistic about the nature of contemporary childhood and that continually questions the capacity of parents to make the right choices on their children's behalf.

We have been told for the past decade or more that the accumulated decisions parents (or more usually, mothers) make are the ultimate determinates of a child's future life-chances. What women eat or drink during pregnancy, whether they breast or formula feed, what they cook, how often they speak, sing or read to their children have become things about which childcare 'experts', politicians, health professionals and celebrity chefs have strong opinions. Parents are caught in a maelstrom of competing yet dogmatic advice which casts them as the key risk-factor in their own children's lives and which assigns the everyday, petty decisions of child-rearing an unprecedented significance not just for the individual child, but for the future of society. This culture of intensified yet expert-colonised parenting unsurprisingly makes parents feel relatively estranged from their own knowledge, values and instincts when it comes to raising their own children.

Parents are further disempowered by the strong cultural belief that past ways of raising children are irrelevant in a rapidly changing world. The idea that parents have little to offer children in the way of guidance and advice pops up continually in newspaper columns and everyday parental conversations. Books such as 'Toxic Childhood' by Sue Palmer²⁴, highly publicised reports such as the Unicef Innocenti Report Card on child well-being in rich countries²⁵ and most importantly, government policy frameworks such as Every Parent Matters²⁶ assert that children today are growing up in a dramatically different environment to that experienced by their parents whether through globalization, commercialization, technological advances or family breakdown. The message is that the experience and values of parents and the wider adult community have little relevance to the lives of 21st century children.

In the sexualization discussion, it is the overwhelming force of 'the market' that is blamed for prematurely sexualizing children whether by the sexual images used to sell goods to adults 'infecting' the world of children or by the direct marketing of 'adult' products to children. Parents are said to be ill-equipped to guide their children through a more visibly sexual culture without greater regulation or expert guidance and education. This ignores the fact that parents live within this same world, use the internet and presumably possess at least a modicum of experience of actual sexual relations. Initiatives like the Bailey review into sexualization reinforce the myth that 'everything has changed' and that normal family life is under siege from malign forces such as 'the market' or new technology. The idea that the world has been turned upside down, with children knowing more than their parents, is a disturbing myth that does not match the reality of most families but that nonetheless reflects the disorientation that many adults feel towards the future and appeals to our worst inclinations to give up and abdicate responsibility for raising the next generation as we see fit.

If we want childhood to be distinct from adulthood, we need to be clear about what it means to be an adult. Infantilizing parents by telling them that the world is a scary place from which they cannot protect their children without government reviews, censorship, regulation or even more intrusive expert advice is not a good place to start.

Adrienne, like Sara and Jan, drew on her own research to discuss the implications of the way that parents are encouraged to take up a liberal position which condemns them if they do not speak about sex to their children yet renders that speech fraught with difficulty. Exhorted to be candid, open and positive about sex, but within a framework in which sex is understood as risky and dangerous, and in relation to a continuing double standard about women's sexuality, this injunction to speak functions as a form of regulation and a source of anxiety:

It's good to talk: Liberal parenting and the sexualization of children

Adrienne Evans

Apparently we need to talk more to children. In BBC3's reality TV series *Sex with Mum and Dad*, 'upfront Dutch psychologist' Maria Schopman encourages families to talk candidly about their sex lives with the aim of combating the risky sexual practices engendered by keeping sex secret. Channel 4's *Sex Education Show* appealed to the same logic. Following complaints aimed at the show, Channel 4 released a statement claiming that 'The series is aimed at families and we hope it will act as a starting point for a family discussion about the important issues raised'. On the website that accompanies the book *So Sexy So Soon* suggestions for 'proactive parenting' include limiting children's exposure while also going beyond saying 'no' to children's demands for sexualized products – these claims are managed through an invitation to talk more. Official reports include the advice that we should 'encourage parents to talk to their children', with suggestions that 'parents can make sexualization visible by discussing media and other cultural messages with girls'. Given this trend, it is likely that the forthcoming report on the Commercialisation and Sexualisation of Childhood will also offer the advice that talking is a responsible parental practice.

In my research on the sexualization of culture, I was not seeking discussions on children's sexuality – my focus being instead on how adult women made sense of a developing consumer culture of sexiness. I was surprised, therefore, at how much the women I spoke to wanted to talk about the sexualization of children. Moreover, women's discussions of this sexualization oriented towards ways of speaking that allowed these women to present themselves as liberal free thinking parents, which I would argue offer new forms of regulation and uncertainty for both mothers and children.

One way the idea of the liberal parent came across in the interviews was through the assumption that openness equated to freedom and choice. For example, one woman said 'I'm quite free with sex and provided that they're making choices for themselves, and they're being intelligent about contraception and sexually transmitted diseases, I think it's fine'. What was evident in these discussions was that 'freedom' and 'choice' were available to the child; but these *freedoms* and these *choices* should also conform to privileged ideas surrounding the apparent dangers of teenage pregnancy, risky sexual practices and sexually transmitted diseases.

Forms of control offered by liberal parenting were also diametrically opposed to parents who did not discuss sexuality at all; 'if you grew up, for example, in a household where sex is not talked about...then your first full on images of sex are what you would see online'. In as much as 'repressive parents' had no say in their children's sexual education, they were deemed responsible for producing individuals who sought out 'unhealthy' and 'unrealistic' representations of sex. The repressed child was understood as necessarily looking to pornography to learn about sex (rather than, for example, formal sex education or indeed a sexual relationships with another person).

Finally, representing oneself as a liberal parent also meant that the women I spoke to self-monitored their own performance of motherhood. For mothers of young girls especially, women were torn between two contradictory ideas. On the one hand, women wanted to present themselves as liberal, yet on the other were aware of the wider moral panic and motherly concern as a response to the sexualization of girls. Combined with the forms of regulation discussed above, the liberal parent represented a new double standard for both mothers and young girls.

None of this is to suggest that talk is bad. Rather we need to construct new ways of talking about sexualization with children and young people that elide these regulatory discourses.

Porn culture

Three posters – Sharif Mowlabocus, Amber Martin and Susanna Paasonen – looked more closely at pornography and sex shops – key aspects of so-called porn culture which are frequently invoked as symbolic of the sexualisation of culture but often remain unexplored in

any depth. Sharif began by drawing attention to the heteronormativity of the sexualisation debate; a focus which reveals an apparent concern only with those young people it is able to cast as ‘normal’ and ‘innocent’. Calling for the recognition of LGBT youth, he also noted the need to queer the way that porn engagement is understood, and to acknowledge the many significances it may have:

Queering the perspective: A call to recognize LGBT youth in the sexualization of children debate

Sharif Mowlabocus

Throughout almost all of the public discussions regarding the sexualization of young people, the focus has overwhelmingly been heterosexual. If children are being robbed of their innocence, it is a heterosexual innocence that is at risk. When we talk of young girls being pressured by the media into dressing in ways that are deemed ‘inappropriate’, the fear of such inappropriateness is that it will be read through the lens of heterosexual masculinity. And when we express concerns regarding young men’s consumption of pornography, and the effects it might have on their attitudes towards sexual partners, the material in question is almost always presumed to be pornography made for heterosexual men and the imagined sexual partners are always posited as female.

Arguments regarding young people, the media and sexualization often neglect to recognize queer and non-normative sexual identities, practices or desires. This oversight is perhaps understandable (though not forgivable) given the fact that so much of the existing rhetoric posits those who need to be saved as ‘normal’ and ‘innocent’ – words that are almost wholly substitutable for ‘heterosexual’.

We need to queer this debate and in doing so we need to recognize the fact that, just as adults read and interpret the media in a plurality of ways depending on their beliefs, politics, desires, identities or backgrounds, so children and young people will inevitably understand and use the media they consume in multifarious ways.

Scholars ranging from Richard Dyer (1992) to Linda Williams (1992) to Brian McNair (1996) have argued for a more complex understanding of pornography, and of queer peoples’ consumption of pornographic material. Broadly speaking these researchers all identify the affirmative potential that such material can have for LGBT audiences. While acknowledging the fact that there may be issues of concern within queer pornographies that require further consideration (such as the representation of race, gender and uneven power relations), they identify the fact that, in a culture that privileges heterosexual relations and symbolically annihilates the desires and lives of queer people, queer pornography provides a space in which non-heterosexual bodies, practices and identities can be viewed and it validates such bodies, practices and identities. It says that male-male sexual desire is not only to be tolerated but can be ‘regular’. It suggests that lesbian sex that does not get ‘resolved’ or ‘straightened out’ by a male interloper is legitimate. It gives a voice to sexual desires that struggle to be heard in other media contexts and in doing so, it offers its audiences an opportunity to see their own desires reflected back in positive and affirming ways.

In spite of a raft of supportive legislation, the slowly increasing visibility of gay men (and to a much lesser extent lesbian, bi and trans people) in the media and the affordances of digital ICTs, queer youth still grow up in a society that presumes heterosexuality and privileges it as natural, normal and ‘healthy’. If proof were needed, one need only consider how many times one has heard a young boy or girl ‘come out’ as straight. Queer kids continue to experience a sense of isolation, atomization and loneliness growing up in such environments. Suicide figures for LGBT youth paint a grim picture that only serves to further underscore this assertion (Ryan, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2009).

The answer to such isolation does not lie solely with pornography. It cannot, because queer people are more than just desiring beings. However, the queering of the ‘sexualization and children’ discussion allows us to move beyond the binaries of ‘yes–no’ or ‘good–bad’ and recognize the different ways in which different young people might be using different types of pornography for different reasons.

Amber's post focused on the complex significance of sex shops on the high street – a development that is almost always seen as driven by sexualisation – noting how the new visibility of this 'feminised' sexiness has actually been partly driven by shifts in regulation. The 'light, playful, fun and sexy' style embodied by these shops is similarly more complicated in its implications for female consumers than is usually acknowledged, crying out for more critical attention:

Sex Shops: from the back streets to the high streets

Amber Martin

Sex shops in the UK have traditionally been viewed as masculine consumption spaces, frequented in the margins of both the city and the clock – in decaying urban zones, hidden from view and visited under the cover of darkness. But in recent years, more and more new sex shops and 'erotic boutiques' such as Ann Summers and Coco de Mer are appearing on the high street, which are constructed as feminized sexual consumption spaces. Rather than being seen as seedy spaces in dangerous back streets, they are presented as light, fun, acceptable and safe, and above all, spaces for women to explore their sexualities.

The migration of sex shops to the high street has occurred because of changes in the sex shop licensing system. A proliferation of sex shops in Soho from the 1960s to 1970s, and a massive rise of sex shops in the rest of the UK, aroused concern over the ability to control them. This concern, alongside resistance from local communities, led to the creation of the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1982, which meant that, by law, sex shops had to have a license to continue trading. However, a loophole in the licensing act, which states that a sex shop is only a sex shop if a 'significant degree' – usually considered to be 10% – of its stock is sex related (usually meaning pornography and sex toys). This meant that shops could continue to trade unlicensed if they reduced the proportion of sex articles they sold and increased the proportion of non-sex articles sold (usually in the form of lingerie).

The increase in the amount of lingerie sold encouraged a shift towards some shops being targeted towards the female consumer and led to the development of what I call the 'feminized' sex shop. This feminization is often marked by a more design led and fashion orientated style, emphasizing that they are light, playful, fun and sexy as opposed to seedy, dark and dangerous. Paradoxically then, the licensing system that was set in place to try and control the proliferation and location of sex shops, has actually helped put shops selling sex on the high streets. Yet while traditional sex shops are met with protests, feminized sex shops are often celebrated which is ironic as several Ann Summers shops are actually next to children's toy shops.

The licensing system neglects to look at how sex shops for women market their products with advertising images of models with the 'perfect' female sexual form, which promotes the idea of women's sexual fulfilment being equated with female beauty. Yet the opportunity for women to buy sex toys in a friendly, accessible, nonjudgemental retail environment is a step forward for female sexual liberation. It would seem that the transition of sex shops onto the high street requires greater critical attention, especially concerning how this affects female sexual empowerment.

Like Amber, Susanna's post made clear the way that the tension between hiding sex and making it visible produces 'sex' in very particular ways, at the same time adding to the charge it has for all of us. As she explained, the continuing popularity of porn suggests that far from deterring consumers, regulation may increase its desirability. She concluded that not only do we need much more discussion about the ethics of sex and of porn production, we will be unable to get very far with this unless we start listening instead of moralising:

Pornography: A filthy fruit**Susanna Paasonen**

Throughout its history of some 200 years, the cultural status of pornography has been very much bound up with acts of policing and regulation. It can even be argued that the cultural status of porn has been dependent on the attraction of the forbidden fruit: As that which stands for the obscene, the filthy and the culturally worthless, porn has been cleared away and screened off from the public eye. At the same time, according to existing surveys, porn is popular in virtually all social groups and its popularity does not seem to increase in the course of filtering and regulation. Quite the contrary.

Concerns over pornography, and visual pornography in particular, tend to be based on its assumed power to impact its viewers directly. While porn does indeed regularly get under one's skin, this viscerality may not be best understood as a corrupting force that people, and the young in particular are unable to resist. Porn is certainly visceral, as is horror, another popular genre. It does not, however, follow that porn holds some magical power to orient the drives and desires of those watching it. People do not simply repeat the acts shown on the screen in their everyday lives. The scenes and acts may resonate, titillate and interest but they are equally about distance and othering: for people also like to watch that which they would not themselves wish to do.

Since the Victorian era, the low cultural status of porn has been connected to its focus on the lower regions of the body that have equally been tied to notions of shame, secrecy and filth. It is perhaps even too easy to notice the Puritan underpinnings that seem to drive public debates on youth, sexuality and porn and turn them into moral panics. This is particularly the case in the United States but similar undertones are noticeable also elsewhere as debates on pornography become mapped onto particular notions of obscenity and filth, as well as particular understandings of proper or healthy sexuality.

In Nordic countries, the landscape looks somewhat different. Considered from a Nordic perspective that tends to highlight sexual health (as sexual autonomy and active sexuality) and sex education, the question is one of education that is capable of addressing pornography, of tackling the differences between porn as a media genre and sex as a set of physical practices, as well as acknowledging the variation between different pornographies. Porn is well known as sex education that precedes any institutional guidance on things sexual and since it focuses on sexual pleasure rather than the details of procreation or STDs that are popular in formal sex education, it enjoys a different kind of popularity. If simply screened off or forbidden, the attraction of porn is likely only to increase. And where there is interest, there will always be means of accessing pornography, independent of the filtering practices deployed.

Alan McKee has argued that the role of experts in matters pornographic has depended largely on them being unfamiliar with the topic, for it is considered a virtue not to know much about pornography. This is obviously not a sustainable stance to take in developing policies on pornography. At the same time, public memoranda and reports on the 'pornification of culture' far too often draw on anecdotal evidence and opinions rather than empirical research. They may even contradict empirical evidence, presenting opinions as facts. They tend not to listen to the young people concerned, thereby supporting the unhelpful view of adolescents as voiceless victims devoid of agency in terms of their own sexuality.

We need discussions on pornography and ethics, both sexual ethics and the ethics of porn production. We simply do not know enough about current production cultures of pornography to make any overarching arguments concerning them. Neither do we know enough about porn consumers and their experiences. We need to listen to these experiences in order to understand how pornography is both sensed and made sense of. Debates based simply on moralizing are of little help in understanding the changing role and position of pornography in media culture. They are guaranteed to miss the mark.

Taking young people seriously

The need to find new ways of talking about sex was also a key theme in the posts that focused on young people by Anne-Frances Watson, Ludi Valentine, Jessica Ringrose,

Emma Renold and Naomi Holford. Anne-Frances described her experience of becoming an academic and the way that this had allowed her to talk openly and productively about sex, contrasting this with other forms of speech and silence around sex:

Sexuality education is stuck in a rut, and these ongoing sexualization debates are in part to blame

Anne-Frances Watson

Academics have been talking for years about how young people need a more comprehensive sexuality education. They've done a lot of research to back this up. As far back as 1982, Stevi Jackson spoke about sex education denying young people as sexual subjects. But, no matter how much research has been conducted (by some very smart people) we still aren't telling young people enough about sex.

I'm becoming an academic. It sounds so boring. Luckily for me, my particular brand of academia includes talking openly in coffee shops about things like masturbation, sexuality, and pornography – in detail. My conversations draw embarrassed, humorous, and sometimes shocked looks from nearby coffee drinkers.

Growing up, I too was embarrassed and shocked about anything to do with sex. It wasn't discussed in my house, and it certainly wasn't discussed in my school. That is, unless you count the playground talk, which was all highly inaccurate and very confusing. Everything that I heard about sex pointed to it being wrong or dirty.

I blame these sexualization debates for much of the fact that sexuality education finds it so difficult to move forward. Refusing to talk to young people about sex for fear that they will immediately go out and start humping like rabbits at the mere mention of it seems more than a little bit counter-productive to me.

Young people are having sex. As much as we like to think back to the good old days when all sixteen year-olds were virginal and precious, we're caught up in a mass delusion – those days never existed.

We need to start talking to young people about sex. We need to tell them that it's natural, and healthy, and something they already know – it's enjoyable. The media is too often blamed for telling them all of these things. Some of those smart academics have found that in fact, it's their friends who are telling them quite a few things; it's just been left to the media to give them the truth. If my childhood is anything to go by – their friends are telling them some very strange ways that they can fall pregnant.

Why has it been left to the media to deliver positive messages about sexuality? Instead of screaming for their heads, maybe we should thank them. Maybe we should say, how about we work together now, and give young people the information they so desperately want, and need?

Ludi's post echoed some of the points made by other posters about the broader context in which industries have grown up around beauty, sex and relationships. She went on to discuss the way that, despite media alarmism about sexualisation, her experience as an activist working with young people suggested that they were well informed and socially conscious and that adults might learn from those who were 'busy making history':

In a world dominated by global capitalism, even our sexualities are up for sale

Ludi Valentine

Sex has been commodified. The idea of sexuality being something we can work out and learn ourselves, the idea that it can be straightforward, simple and instinctive, has been replaced by an industry that sets up mystique and misinformation, then sells solutions. Let's talk about the mechanics at work here.

The process of commodification works by identifying discrete categories of people (or defining new ones through the media), then creating categories of goods to match, assigning these goods prices, stimulating demand and then fulfilling that new, self-made demand. Markets

quickly become saturated and prices drop: new markets are always needed, so new areas of demand are constantly being created. People are categorized into increasingly specialized areas, which offers businesses an advantage because their ‘needs’ can be more specifically and aggressively targeted.

A classic example of this process at work is what author Naomi Wolf has called ‘the beauty myth’. The beauty industry creates and maintains its own ideals: the current concepts of beauty, as defined by the industry, did not exist until there became ways to spend money on them. Today, hundreds of companies target goods to a myriad of different consumer needs, many arising directly from mainstream beauty ideals: Lynx sell men deodorant by offering sexually available women, and Fair and Lovely offer employment and romance to Indian women who use their skin-lightening creams. Cynically, even the backlash has been commodified: Dove criticise the mainstream and successfully use their ‘Campaign For Real Beauty’ to sell soap. All these brands are owned by the same company: Unilever.

More recently, a relationship industry has appeared around what I’ll call the Mars-Venus myth. Gender differences are exaggerated in the media to reinforce the popular belief that communication between genders is impossible without guidance. External insight and expertise are marketed as essential for heterosexual fulfilment and partnership. In practice, much of this involves teaching heterosexual women to sell themselves to men. It’s also interesting to note the heavy use of economic terms in the dating scene: people speak of ‘being in the market’, of ‘getting’ a partner, ‘keeping’ them and ‘upgrading’ if they can. A glance at a magazine shelf will show a dozen different ways to market these myths. *Nuts*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Men’s Health* and *Good Housekeeping* all sell heterosexual fulfilment in various ways to people of different ages and social classes.

Nowadays, there are popular media claims that young people are inappropriately sexualized, overly affected by the clamour of consumerism and unable to make independent, informed sexual choices. It’s important to remember that this is the same media that propagates the above myths – newspapers must be sold, too.

Personally, I’ve collaborated with many young people in the anti-cuts movement. Despite media alarmism, my experience is that many young people are questioning these aggressively marketed myths and are educating themselves and their peers in more balanced, straightforward views of sexuality as part of their attack on capitalism as a whole.

The kids are fine: they’re well-informed, sensible and socially conscious. They’re increasingly open to alternative ideas and actively work to expand their worldviews. In the anti-cuts movement in particular, I’ve seen conversations spanning different classes and backgrounds, and many young people simply seem too busy making history to concern themselves with appearance or consuming prepackaged romance. In these spaces, capitalism seems to be losing its grip.

I’ve wondered before whether adults can protect young people from the harmful effects of sexualization while we ourselves are entangled in the beauty myth and besieged by the relationship industry. It may be that we instead have a great deal to learn from the ways in which young people are already questioning and challenging their world.

Emma, Jessica and Naomi contributed a post reporting on a symposium they organised on sexualisation and girls which they devoted to mapping the ‘messy realities’ of girls lives in a range of spaces across class and age groups. As they noted, popular literature on sexualisation is more often concerned with an ideal of girlhood than with real girls, while research with girls shows how they are regulated by, but also resist and rework the expectations they face:

The sexualisation of girls: beyond the moral panic

Naomi Holford, Emma Renold & Jessica Ringrose

We’ve just come back from a Gender and Education conference where we organised a symposium on sexualisation and girls. We pulled together the session to respond to the moral panic

aspects of the public debate with some empirical data with girls. Despite extensive debate there is still very little qualitative research on girls' everyday sexual cultures and 'sexualisation'. We have seen a tendency in some of the debates to either fix girls as either objectified passive victims of sexualisation or as agentic savvy navigators of sexualisation (usually with limited or no data with young people themselves). But we feel strongly that such binary positions do little to help us map the messy realities of how girls are living their sexualities in specific contexts. Our symposium looked at girls' lives in different public, domestic and institutional spaces – e.g. social network sites, streets, elite and state schools. When young people's experiences are made central to the analysis, we see how they can be positioned in multiple different ways simultaneously.

The day offered critical commentaries from educational scholars, paying attention to the wealth of assumptions, silences and myths around the seemingly ubiquitous sexualisation discourse. We wanted to ask: what are its effects on different groups of girls, in schools and beyond?

Claire Charles (Deakin University, Australia) put the sexualisation moral panic in context, taking a look at the proliferation of books by journalists and cultural commentators which bemoan the 'sexualisation of girls' from a popular feminist perspective. These books are targeted at concerned teachers, parents and health professionals. But at the same time, they form part of the same wider consumer culture that sells sexualisation, and often reinforce the neoliberal idea of the feminine, heroic, individual, can-do entrepreneur as the ideal for young womanhood – an ideal that ignores the realities of many girls' lives.

Emma Renold (Cardiff University) and **Jessica Ringrose** (Institute of Education, University of London) talked about three ethnographic case studies of girls living in urban and rural working-class communities, and explored how young girls are navigating the contradictory expectations of young femininity. Teen girls were regulated by 'new' and 'old' sexual and gender regimes, which wanted them to be both 'innocent' and 'sexy' (often simultaneously). But at the same time, the girls reworked and resisted expectations – and they could take up ambivalent positions, and use signs and symbols of 'sexualisation' (like the Playboy bunny motif) in their own ways.

In contrast to this research on working-class girls, **Naomi Holford** (Cardiff University) spoke about the experience of white, middle-class teen girls, focussing the spotlight on girls whose identities are often seen as unproblematic and taken for granted. These girls had to walk a thin line, between being sexually desirable, competent and knowing, but not too knowing. The culture of 'sexualisation' had by no means created an environment where 'anything goes'. Instead, many traditional conservative gendered double standards were still in evidence. Girls who didn't follow peer group 'rules' – not showing enough moderation, having sex outside a relationship or not 'looking after themselves' properly – were often socially punished, and often judged each other (and were judged) in ways that maintained class prejudices. But within these constraints, they often found spaces to express their own sexualities.

Alexandra Allan (Exeter University) focussed on privileged groups of young people in elite single sex schooling, using ethnographic longitudinal data. This context is often seen as a 'safe haven' from sexualisation – girls' schools have been marketed as a space to prolong the wholesomeness of childhood. Girls as well as teachers often bought into this idea of the 'safe space', and saw it as positive, but as Allan's data showed, the reality was much more complicated. Teachers had to work hard to regulate the space, an often difficult task. As the girls got older, this regulation became much lighter (sometimes lighter than the girls themselves expected), and the young women negotiated their sexualities and ideas of risk in multiple ways in and outside the school – the single-sex, elite school wasn't a singular and separate space.

Mindy Blaise (Hong Kong Institute of Education) returned to the heart of the 'sexualisation of children' moral panic, talking about her own experience as a researcher with 3–4 year olds. She looked at young children's own understandings of sexuality and gender, through observations and talk about toys in early childhood settings. Her research was the subject of media coverage asking 'Why can't we let children be children?' – positioning the research as the problem, rather than looking at the ways it showed that children already held complex ideas

about gender and sexuality. She called for a childhood sexuality research movement that went beyond the white, middle-class driven panic of contemporary sexualisation debates, paying attention to social and cultural differences, and looking at young children's understandings and negotiations of 'race' and social class, together with gender and sexuality.

While she couldn't make it to the conference **Lucy Emmerson's** powerpoint addressed issues of sexualisation from the perspective of non-governmental organizations (Lucy is based at the Sex Education Forum). Her presentation would have drawn on the views of young people from online discussion forums and practitioner consultations to look at the role of sex and relationships education (SRE) in discussions about sexualisation. Her work explores adults' lack of awareness about children's understandings of sexuality and relationships, the mixed messages about young sexuality, and the problematic idea that talking or learning about sex and relationships 'sexualises' young people. She is thinking about how SRE might support 'healthy sexual development' as a positive alternative.

The symposium brought together research on very different groups of girls. But all the work shared a determination to take girls' experiences and perspectives seriously, while remaining committed to exploring how those perspectives are shaped by cultural and social contexts. The public debate around 'sexualisation' is often based in anxiety and sometimes simplistic binaries of innocence versus sexuality. But the complexities of girls' lives deserve to be given space.

Media agency

Our blog posts were up well before the Bailey Review appeared in early June 2011. I was delighted by the willingness and ability of fellow academics to contribute such good and lively posts. I was momentarily disappointed by my frustrated attempts to engage journalists and other cultural commentators in what we were doing – though given my previous experiences, perhaps I should not have been surprised. I was delighted again when established bloggers joined forces with us. Kitty Stryker wrote two posts on her site *Purrversatility*²⁷ and Charlie Glickman²⁸ wrote a response to our *Oncenity* posts, while Jane Fae²⁹ referenced *Oncenity* in her debate on sexualisation for the *Guardian's* *Comment is Free*. Petra Boynton³⁰ linked to the *Oncenity* posts in her own commentary and I was fascinated to watch her combine blogging and tweeting, creating and sustaining discussion in a perfectly timed flurry of activity as the Review emerged. Petra describes how

people with an interest in this area were ready to respond as soon as the report went live. Interestingly, it was bloggers and folk on twitter who found the Bailey Review online and started sharing it and inviting comment before the Department of Education was sharing widely on twitter. The Department of Education also set up a hashtag #baileyreview where they clearly wanted to encourage promotion of their report. This was used by many folk on twitter to critique it – and share their blogposts for it for others to read. The result of this was people were asking questions about the review, the cost of it, what it was for and the robustness of the work behind it. It meant a variety of people writing from a variety of backgrounds all shared their views and began to deconstruct and critique it. Interestingly, what began as a hashtag set up by a formal department became the place where people were able to tackle the findings and approach of the Bailey Review.

In the week of its publication, a number of tweets, blog posts³¹ and the occasional interesting media response³² provided a contrast to the mostly sensationalist and predictable press coverage. Many of these were helpfully compiled in Petra's roundup on the topic, including contributions from Meg Barker,³³ Nelson Jones,³⁴ Brooke Magnanti³⁵ and Ministry of Truth.³⁶

In their article for this special issue, Meg Barker and Ros Gill (2011) contrast Bitchy Jones' voice with academic forms of speaking, noting how bold she can be because she is unrestricted by academic rules, and how her blog provides a safe space to say things that cannot be discussed in a newspaper or academic journal. Yet, although there are differences between her more personal account and the Onscenity posts which draw on academic work, there are also a number of correspondences. Bitchy Jones' account is not only personal; indeed as Lisa Downing writes in this issue, its particular strength depends on its combination of confession and critique. The Onscenity posts also use a broader range of speaking strategies than most academic writing that appears in books or journals, combining expert knowledge and evidence with more direct, questioning, ironic, polemical, challenging and sometimes personal statements.

The attempt to find new ways and spaces to speak about sex is echoed in Melissa Gira's (2008) description of a form of 'sex work' as 'talking sex' that includes 'producing sexual media, theorising and studying sex and educating about sex'. It is also evident in the events that have drawn together academics, artists and activists around sexual issues in recent years; for example, at the Art and Politics of Netporn conferences in Amsterdam,³⁷ the Sex 2.0³⁸ and Arse Electronica³⁹ conferences in the United States and events such as the annual Feminist Porn Awards.⁴⁰ Writers like Violet Blue and Audacia Ray (2007, p. 30) have also demonstrated what Kaarina Nikunen and Susanna Paasonen have called 'exceptionally flexible media agency'; Ray has been a sex worker, researcher, author, model, film director\producer, editor, blogger, art curator, activist and currently works as a communications consultant for sex work and women's health projects. This kind of media agency, along with the need to combine critique with other types of speaking voice, is likely to become more important still for academics who are interested in public engagement around sex.

Testimonies

Despite the important contributions made by those who speak publicly about sex, this activity carries low status for bloggers and academics. Audacia Ray (2007, p. 101) has described how in the wider blogging community writing about sex is 'viewed as a cheap trick to get more hits, links, and controversy'. Academics who work on sex frequently meet with amusement or suspicion at work, and speaking in more public arenas may make it even more difficult to be taken seriously in an academic context (Attwood, 2009a). Finding safe spaces in which to speak about sex is not easy for anyone. This is partly because of what Martin Barker (2011) has called the 'stickiness' of sex talk, whereby 'to talk about sex is to invite other people to look at you and ask: is that what you are like?'. Given that terms like 'pornography', 'kink' and 'sexualisation' are frequently used to signify such a wide range of negative things (e.g. Barker notes that in the broadsheet press the term pornography is a code word for weakness; self-indulgence; loss of contact with your real self, the world or other people; wasted time and uncontrolled attention; lack of finesse or critical judgement; and excessive attention to feelings, emotions, sensations and bodies), it is hardly surprising that expertise in these kinds of area is problematic for those who have developed it, wherever they work.

The stickiness of sex talk as it relates to sexualisation carries the implication that the speaker is too concerned with the normal, the status quo, the generic and the mainstream or that they are a supporter or 'dupe' of sexist and capitalist society. As Kaye Mitchell (2011) notes in her article for this issue, drawing on Ariel Levy's work (2005), sexualised culture is often seen as a fake, inauthentic impersonation of sex. This view of a 'real' sex\uality somehow spoilt or 'broken' underpins much discussion around sexualisation as it does the

final post of *Bitchy Jones Diary* where she describes her decision to bring the blog to an end. As Alex Dymock (2011) notes in her discussion in this issue, this brokenness figures BDSM as ‘silenced by normalisation’ or as Bitchy Jones puts it, ‘patriarchy eroticising bullshit’. Meg Barker and Ros Gill also note this concern with the way that radical, challenging, transgressive and different sexualities may so easily be appropriated, and that there is, as Ros notes, no authentic place to occupy, nowhere ‘outside’ to go.

Authenticity is also an issue in the Onscenity posts. One focus is the way that the sexualisation debate focuses our attention on ‘objectification’, ‘passive victims’ or ‘ideals’ of girlhood; on the ‘normal’ and the ‘innocent’, and on the ‘enacting of scripts’, rather than on real people with mixtures of ‘feelings, questions and stories’. Another is the way that the debate itself is partly borne out of a manufacturing of outrage, driven by ‘tutting’ and the ‘shaking of heads’ and structured in accordance with myths about the way ‘everything has changed’ and a nostalgia for a rosy past that never existed. The ‘reality’ presented in this myth-making depends on its ability to register multiple anxieties, becoming something that is strongly felt to be ‘true’. But the solutions that are sought often work to ‘create the appearance of well-being’ rather than ‘getting real’, making invisible the diversity and ‘messiness’ of people’s lives as well as the specific social, economic and cultural contexts in which these are lived. Looking closely at the messiness of young people’s lives, at the way pornography and sex shops are variously experienced, at the materiality of people’s sexual practices and at the attitudes and attributes of real men and women may reveal a very different set of realities than those that are routinely claimed in debates about sexualisation.

Given the competing claims to be speaking ‘the truth’ about sex, it is understandable that the authenticity of speaking and writing voices has become a distinct and important issue. The anonymous writers of the *Belle de Jour* and *Girl with a One Track Mind* blogs were the subject of intense speculation about their authenticity and the issue was also prominent in the widely discussed accounts of women’s sex lives as represented in *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (1996) and *Sex and the City* (1998–2004). *Bridget Jones’s Diary* was simultaneously hailed as authentic and false because of its self-deprecating tone and relentless recording of the everyday. The voices of the characters in *Sex and the City* achieved their authenticity by combining elements of ‘learning and self-improvement, confession and self-doubt’ from elsewhere in women’s popular media with ‘character comedy, witty phrases, moments of insight and minor revelations’ (Bignell, 2004, p. 171). For Carrie Bradshaw, in particular, it was a combination of detached observation and intense emotional involvement in her own life (Arthurs, 2003, p. 94) which made her, for many, a credible narrator of her own story – though for others she remained a glamorous and unbelievable character.

As Fiona Handyside (2011) points out in her article in this issue, the authenticity of the diaries of both Bridget Jones and Bitchy Jones is created through speech which invites identification, feels ‘right, convincing and appealing’ to readers and acts as the starting point for the creation of a sense of community. Of course what registers as ‘right, convincing and appealing’ is not universal. Speakers of very different political persuasions invite identification through an appeal to authenticity. Women who have embraced aspects of contemporary sexual culture often use testimony to express their pleasure and sense of liberation in doing this (Attwood, 2005), but personal stories are also often used to express a stance that is ‘oppositional or corrective of dominant liberal or third-wave feminist discourses of “choice” or “empowerment”’ (Simic, n.d), and a confessional mode drawing on a Christian tradition of testifying has also become prominent in anti-sexualisation and anti-porn discourse. Campaigners like Shelley Lubben,⁴¹ a former porn performer, draws

on a narrative of abuse and damage to reveal the ‘reality behind the fantasy’ of porn, while Michael Leahy uses the story of his own sex addiction as the basis of his ministry to America’s ‘porn nation’.⁴² How we develop a sense of being ‘authentic’ without moralising about sex becomes a more complex challenge in this context.

Telling the truth

Academic attempts at public engagement around sexual issues are currently taking place in a crowded marketplace where competing claims for authoritative and authentic speech about sex are increasingly set against each other and where it is hard to know who to believe. In this context, simple stories told with strong feeling are most often presented as an authentic ‘site of truth and ethics’ (Irvine, 2009, p. 235), while academic work may appear less concerned, engaged and passionate. Sometimes it is included in debate only to be made invisible. The Bailey Review, having absolved itself of the need for definition or evidence in its first few pages, based its claim to authenticity on its status as a record of parents’ voices, pretty much ignoring the academic review (Phoenix, 2011) that accompanied it. Elsewhere in discussions of sexualisation, academic writing has met with hostility. In the edited collection, *Getting Real*, Clive Hamilton (2009, p. 95) describes an ‘unholy alliance . . . between certain post-modern academics and the most aggressive agents of consumerism, the marketing industry’ and in the anti-porn feminist book, *Everyday Pornographies*, academic work on pornography is dismissed as an ‘intellectual game’ (Boyle, 2010, p. 30).

Blogs are now an established and familiar feature of what has been called ‘participatory culture’ (Jenkins, 2006), associated with new, democratic and more accessible forms of knowledge creation, with a shift towards ‘produsage’ in which the distinct roles of producer and user have become insignificant (Bruns, 2008, p. 2), and with collaborative communal ways of working. Given the speed of technological change it is hard to say what their long-term impact may be, but they provide a useful and important site for academics to experiment with forms of public engagement and new kinds of voice.

Reflecting on their extensive experience of this kind of engagement, one of the Onscenity posters described how strenuous and distracting from research and teaching it can be, though worthwhile if it ‘suit’s one’s style’. Another listed a number of advantages to blogging and tweeting as an extension of their work; providing a valuable way of deconstructing poor research, highlighting good practice, advertising events, making contact with people they would otherwise not have met, forming useful alliances and airing problems about media engagement. Another with experience of activist blogging described how they found it ‘an interesting experience trying to write something that sat between academic style writing and activist writing’, though they were concerned about ‘the culture of abuse that goes on in online comment\blog forums...especially to writers coming from a feminist perspective’. For this reason, writing a piece as part of collective had felt more of ‘a supportive and thoughtful community action’. Another who had not written a blog post was a little worried about how it might be interpreted, but felt that blogging, while relatively unlikely to reach many new readers, was likely to be really useful in bringing together communities that already existed.

Blogging challenges us to think not only about what we say but how and where we say it. The forms of speech we might use, the invitation to identify, the importance of evidence and how to open up and sustain a place for discussion are important areas to explore further. In her article in this issue, Fiona Handyside calls for the creation of spaces in which ‘multiple authenticities debate meaning’ and this seems a good way forward for thinking about the characteristics of productive forms of speech. Instead of closing down debate around

simple and narrow positions of agreement, these kinds of speech open up debate; invite others in – though not at the expense of a pretended consensus; and suggest a commitment to ‘holding the tension’; a state that Meg Barker⁴³ has described as particularly crucial for developing discussions of sexualisation. Blogging may be useful in this respect if it allows the development of larger conversations that allow for contradiction, uncertainty and ambiguity, and if it allows us to experiment with combining confessional and critical, personal and political modes, and to work with and develop through those tensions, rather than flattening out messiness and complexity. These experiments may represent further risks for academics whose work on sex already puts them in a risky position, but they also present us with new opportunities for public engagement and for ‘talking sex’.

Notes

1. <http://www.drpetra.co.uk/blog/>
2. <http://www.lauraagustin.com/>
3. <http://www.sexed.org/>
4. <http://sexuality.about.com/>
5. <http://www.charlieglickman.com/>
6. <http://www.tiny nibbles.com/>
7. <http://belledejour-uk.blogspot.com/>
8. <http://girlwithaonetrackmind.blogspot.com/>
9. <http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/features/article2348839.ece>
10. <http://www.psychologies.co.uk/family/are-teenagers-hooked-on-porn/>
11. The term is from Linda Williams’ book, *Porn Studies* (2004, p. 3).
12. ‘Let evidence be your guide’, 17 March 2011, <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storyCode=415531§ioncode=26>
13. Which I later did. ‘Disservice to young people’, 30 June 2011, <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storycode=416673>
14. See <http://andytoots.wordpress.com/2011/06/05/yippee-ki-yay-mrs-dorries/> for a light hearted discussion of some of the coverage
15. <http://www.onscenity.org/sexualization/> and <http://purrversatility.blogspot.com/2011/04/trigger-warning-innocence-lost-or.html>
16. <http://www.dvrcv.org.au/eroticising-inequality/>
17. <http://www.sexualethics.org.au/>
18. http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/N11/Newsroom/DG_193021
19. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-1252156/DAVID-CAMERON-Sexualisation-children-too-young.html#ixzz1JuOAenb2>
20. <http://blog.lib.umn.edu/puot0002/qd2010/direct%20engagment.pdf>
21. <http://sexperienceuk.channel4.com/stop-pimping-our-kids>
22. www.education.gov.uk/childrenandyoungpeople/healthandwellbeing/a0076619/almost-nine-out-of-ten-parents-think-children-are-being-forced-to-grow-up-too-quickly
23. <http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/s3/committees/equal/reports-10/eor10-02.htm>
24. http://www.suepalmer.co.uk/modern_childhood_books_toxic_childhood.php
25. <http://www.unicef.org/media/files/ChildPovertyReport.pdf>
26. <http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/everychildmatters/resources-and-practice/IG00219/>
27. <http://purrversatility.blogspot.com/2011/04/pants-to-pants.html>
28. <http://www.charlieglickman.com/2011/05/sex-positivity-and-sexualization/>
29. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/jun/06/sexualisation-bailey-review-children> and see also <http://sexualitymatters.wordpress.com/2011/04/21/its-the-autonomy-stoopid/>
30. <http://www.drpetra.co.uk/blog/unpacking-the-bailey-review-on-commercialisation-and-sexualisation-of-childhood/>
31. See, for example <http://www.lexferenda.com/07062011/bailout-five-reasons-to-doubt-the-bailey-review/>

32. See, for example <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/organgrinder/2011/jun/06/children-parents-and-parenting?intcmp=239> and http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2011/jun/08/tv-watershed-not-for-children?CMP=tw_t_gu and <http://www.guardian.co.uk/global/2011/jun/09/playboy-bunnies-poor-kids>
33. <http://learn.open.ac.uk/mod/oublog/viewpost.php?post=73398>
34. <http://www.newstatesman.com/blogs/the-staggers/2011/06/bailey-review-children-sex>
35. <http://sexonomics-uk.blogspot.com/2011/06/bailey-report-on-sexualisation-first.html>
36. <http://www.ministryoftruth.me.uk/2011/06/07/wont-you-fuck-off-reg-bailey/>
37. <http://networkcultures.org/wpmu/netporn/>
38. see <http://melissa.tumblr.com/post/112362442/keynote-sex-2-0-our-program-was-produced-by-ten>
39. <http://www.monochrom.at/arse-elektronika/about.html>
40. http://goodforher.com/feminist_porn_awards
41. <http://www.shelleylubben.com/>
42. <http://www.pornnation.org/>
43. <http://learn.open.ac.uk/mod/oublog/viewpost.php?post=73398>

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