

Sexuality, youth and the perils of endangered innocence: how history can help us get past the panic

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Popular discourses on the problem of sexualisation are beset by emotively charged rhetoric that all-too-often promotes a visceral and affective response as opposed to reasoned and nuanced examination. Drawing on materials from the Social Purity Movement (1860–1910) as well as contemporary anti-sexualisation literature, this article argues that a historical-situated perspective may help authors, activists and advocates offer a more reflexive perspective on ‘the problem of sexualisation’. We forward a historically informed discourse analysis to render visible the longstanding, and deeply problematic, assumptions of childhood, gender and class at work in current concerns on sexualisation.

Keywords: sexualisation; cultural studies; history; girlhood; critical theory; social class

Introduction

It is a drip, drip effect. Look at porn stars, and look how an average girl now looks. It has seeped into everyday: fake breasts, fuck-me shoes . . . We are hypersexualising girls, telling them that their desirability relies on being desired. They want to please at any cost.

– Linda Papadopoulos, author of the *Home Office Report to the British Government* (2010).

Today young women have embraced their own degrading objectification. Seeming to have abandoned the hope of real equality with men, women and girls enact prostitution. Pole dancing, once the exclusive province of women in strip clubs, has moved to women’s homes and exercise classes. Lap dancing and pole dancing have become mainstreamed as women’s and girl’s sexuality.

– Melinda Tankard Reist, *Getting Real: Challenging the Sexualization of Girls* (2009).

Reading the critiques forwarded by Linda Papadopoulos and Melinda Tankard Reist are chilling to say the least. The boundaries between adult and child, respectability and ruin as well as sexual corruption and innocence have eroded to the point where girls, once sexualized, seem to embrace their “degrading objectification” (Papadopoulos quoted in Travis 2010). Both Tankard Reist and Papadopoulos draw upon the American

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Psychological Association (APA) in their discussions of sexualisation as a social problem. The APA Task Force argues that sexualisation corrupts or moulds the sexuality girls ‘into stereotypical adult sexuality’ (APA 2007, 3). Consumption spurs this transformation. Sexualizing images and messages are “as ubiquitous as air” and pose a toxic risk to girls (Levin and Kilbourne 2008, 4; see also, Bailey 2011; Walter 2010; Papadopoulos 2010; APA 2007 Rush and LaNauze 2006). As Gigi Durham states our contemporary media is littered with representations of ‘sexy little girl[s]’ and ‘baby faced nymphet[s] with preternaturally voluptuous curves and whose scantily clad bod[ies] gyrate . . . in music videos, pose . . . provocatively on teen magazine covers, and populate . . . cinema and television screens around the globe’ (Durham 2008, 24). This problem is compounded by the proliferation of commodities (thongs, bralettes, dolls, computer games, etc.) aimed at tweenaged girls (Levin 2005; Tataro 2006; Farley 2009; Klein 2009; C. Hamilton 2009; M. Hamilton 2009a, 2009b; Bailey 2011; Carey 2011). The combination of graphic sexuality, pornography and sexualised commodities have had a ‘filtering down’ or ‘drip drip’ effect and its pressures are felt from toddlerhood onward (Papadopoulos quoted in Travis 2010).

Although objectification is clearly an issue in the literature, the greater threat is the impact of sexualisation on behaviour and subjectivity. Sexualisation produces pathological outcomes that are behavioural, cognitive and emotional and in so doing, limit aspirations and hinder interpersonal relationships now and in the future (Egan and Hawkes 2007, 2010; Duschinsky 2011; Renold and Ringrose 2012). Eventhough ‘act[ing] out in sexually provocative ways’ may be the result of modelling, the APA warns that in the end girls are not ‘freely choosing these behaviors’ (APA 2007, 18–9). Activists caution that sexualised girls are more likely to fall prey to older men offering romance and to engage in a litany of other risky behaviours such as sexualised games and exhibitionism to more extreme actions such as intergenerational sex and commoditised sex (Levin 2005; Rush and La Nauze 2006; Durham 2008; Levin and Kilbourne 2008; Farley 2009; C. Hamilton 2009; Reist 2009). Australian Emma Rush illustrates this with her question, ‘[I]s it wise to actively encourage girls of primary-school age to have romantic fantasies about older men? How do we then expect them to behave if an older man approaches apparently offering romance’ (Rush 2006)? Reception induces a deeply disturbing metamorphosis (APA 2007; Durham 2008; Levin and Kilbourne 2008; Opplinger 2008; Klein 2009; Reist 2009; M. Hamilton 2009a, 2009b; Carey 2011). To this end, childhood itself is threatened by the spread and sway of sexualisation.

Within the literature sexualisation occurs in three interrelated domains: the social, the interpersonal and the psyche (Egan and Hawkes 2008). “Moreover it denotes an outcome, a condition (to be sexualised) and a type of action—sexualisation is a pathological state, one which girls reproduce and pass onto their friends.” We have argued at length elsewhere that this tautological conception leaves little room for manoeuvre or negotiation and moves the analysis away from cultural critique and towards stigmatisation (Egan and Hawkes 2008, 2009). Jessica Ringrose further illustrates the danger of this logic, ‘rather than critiquing the sexism of the cultural field, however, the public debates on sexualisation place the blame on girls’ sexuality’ (Ringrose 2012). Linda Duits and Liesbet van Zoonen highlight that the psychologisation of the issue moves feminist analysis from the politics of heteronormativity and sexism towards more dangerous territory where girls become the problem (Duits and Van Zoonen 2011). David Buckingham and Sara Bragg show that the generalisations forwarded by media reception theory (consumption- effect) fail to capture the complexity of media consumption in the lives of children (both boys and girls) nor do they speak to the

complex ways in which parents make meaning of sexualised media in the lives of their children (Buckingham and Bragg 2004). These insights as well as further research shaped the empirically driven report written for the Scottish Parliament (Buckingham 2010). The narrow conceptualisation of whom and what is endangered in the literature on sexualisation has also been critiqued.

Emma Renold and Jessica Ringrose highlight that sexualisation narratives rely upon and reproduce dominant fantasies of middle-class childhood and its heteronormative presumptions (Renold and Ringrose 2008, 2012). Barbara Baird deconstructs the assumptions of whiteness and the reaffirmation of nationalism in her analysis of antisexualisation literature in Australia. R. Danielle Egan's analysis of sexualisation literature (in terms of conceptualisation, its deployment of affect as well as in its use of language) illustrates how this discourse relies upon long standing Anglophone anxieties regarding the instability of class, gender, racial and age distinctions and middle class attempts to secure such boundaries (Egan forthcoming). "Potent and deeply seductive, both the innocent and sexualised, are persistent figures (sights of displacement) within the Anglophone cultural imaginary because they provide adults a clear enemy within an increasingly unmanageable and fragmented social epoch (Egan forthcoming). Finally, it is noteworthy that the predictions offered within much of the literature, including the APA Task Force Report, as well as in the recent Home Office reports written by Reg Bailey and Linda Papadopoulos in the UK often ignore or discount the vast amount of ethnographic and public health research which renders girls' behaviours, beliefs and practices far more complicated (Veera 2009; Atwood et al. 2011; Egan, forthcoming). The nuanced critique that has developed over the past five years has often gone unheeded in the production of popular literature and in other governmental reports on this topic.

It is our contention that this is in part due to the use of affect in the literature as well as the conceptualisation of sexualisation as a new and present danger that is wrecking havoc on the lives of young girls. Departing from this perspective, we argue that the current discourse on sexualisation deploys many of the same epistemological foundations, albeit with different causes, as the Social Purity Movement that took place in the Anglophone west between 1850 and 1905. More specifically, we posit that the current discourse on sexualisation draws on and reproduces many of the same deeply problematic assumptions regarding the child and its sexuality as purity advocates did over a century ago. Situating the discourse on sexualisation within a socio-historical context can begin to remedy its conceptual and political limitations by shedding light on longstanding preoccupations that render some of the sentimental tug of this discourse intelligible. As feminist scholars interested in social change we believe that reformatory efforts that are cognizant of their own histories may be more reflexive and, as a result less, reactionary in their construction of sexual problems and in their political responses.

Sexual corruption and sexual innocence in the social purity movement

One of the greatest responsibilities of the parents lies in the direction of imparting proper knowledge at the proper time. The influences which children are sure to encounter at school, upon the playground, along the streets, and even in their own homes, makes it imperative that they be forearmed against danger by being forewarned. (Ella Kellogg 1895)

Ella Kellogg¹ chronicled the peril children faced at the hands of corrupting influences and the need for parental action in her 1895 address to the congregants attending the National Purity Congress in Baltimore, Maryland. She argued that the influence

exerted by the dirty talk of disreputable individuals would induce masturbation and other solitary pleasures in the child. The damage wrought by this outcome threatened not only the child but the future of society more generally.² The eradication of licentious influences (e.g. the theatre, dance halls, bawdy jokes, lewd talk in school yards and prostitution) along with the sound instruction offered by an education in purity could shape, train and direct a child's sexual instinct towards more chaste and socially beneficial ends. To this end, the teaching of proper child rearing in order to curb moral turpitude in the future became a central platform of purity reform (Boyer 1968; Pivar 1974; Porter and Hall 1995; Mort 2000; Swain, Warne, and Hillel 2004; Darby 2005).

Purity advocates argued that a child's surroundings could stimulate particular sexual outcomes. For example, girls raised by "prostitutes" were said to be infected by their mother's desire for vice which produced defiant behaviour such as "going to theatres, dancing, flirting with boys, keeping late hours and associating with other girls of questionable reputation" in the future (Mahood 1995, 23). The poor were considered particularly perilous, even infectious, because their everyday practices were believed to violate 'the boundaries of the civilised body' and as such 'the boundaries which separated the human from the animal' (Stallybrass and White 1986, 132). Without sustained intervention in the tenets of social purity, activists believed that middle-class children would be drawn into a life of masturbation and later degeneracy (Stallybrass and White 1986; Mort 2000; Egan and Hawkes 2007, 2010). Although the threat of moral pollution was considered primarily a working-class condition, it could also be present in middle class households. A disruptive and 'ill-ordered domesticity' served as an indicator of bad mothering in all the social classes and 'could, it was believed, take many damaging forms, all of which might lead to sexual stimulation' (Gorham 1982, 55). The catalytic potential for sexual deviance in the lives of boys and girls demanded intervention and social transformation. Although risk existed in the home, the menace posed by nasty-minded individuals in the streets, back alleys and school yards in new urban environments were thought to be far worse.

Activists warned that children faced new and untold risks in cities where there were 'no fixed standard of right or wrong, in relation to sex' (Blackwell 1884, 32). Disconnected from the norms and rules of rural life, the sexual instincts of children were said to be activated 'two or three years earlier in the city than in the country; and four years younger, there, than nature ever designed' (Gregory 1848, 56). A hot-bed 'for all the passions; ripening all the powers too early', city life caused sexual and moral decay in the hearts and mind of the child (Gregory 1848, 56). Under the influence of these new social forms, sexual thoughts created the 'undue prominence of [the sexual] instinct' and thus gave rise to vice and autoeroticism (Blackwell 1884, 16). Given the climate children were being subjected to and its potential consequence, campaigners asserted that 'the time had ceased when there is any safety for parents or children in the quiet serenity of ignorance' and urgently declared that curbing social impurity required 'the need of increased reverence and practical knowledge of sex life and its relationship to every human interest' (National Christian League for the Promotion of Purity 1909, 17; see also Olson 1913). Although activists espoused that moral education could curtail sexual intemperance they also acknowledged that the prevention of childhood autoeroticism was a herculean task given the temptations found in the urban landscape.

Parents were advised to be vigilant if they wanted to suppress the 'pernicious habit' of masturbation. If left unprotected children would engage in acts of self-pollution 'well before puberty' (White 1897, 13). Physician and purity advocate Richard Kellogg (1877) warned that if adults were to ask 'any discreet, watchful and observing male

or female teacher of any one of the primary schools in town or country', they would be told that the practice of self-abuse 'is next to universal in children' (206). Dr Calhoun (1858) formed a similar diagnosis writing that 'the effects of this horrible vice are more pernicious the earlier it is practiced' and that it was known 'to tender childhood, before the true sexual passion itself has been developed' (5). Once undertaken self-pollution would become an 'uncontrollable passion' and lay waste to the 'vital forces debilitating the system' (White 1897, 13, 15).

Given the tone of this literature one might assume that children were always already on the verge of masturbation making enlightened innocence and the training of sexual instinct a conceptual impossibility. As we argue elsewhere, the ambivalent nature of the sexual child (as educable and as insatiably autoerotic) within reform materials renders the endeavours of the purity movement inherently unstable at best. Nevertheless, purity activists writing on masturbation also insisted, as Richard Arthur (1903, 1) did, that 'the essential difference between the boy [or girl] and the man [or woman] consists in this – that the boy [or girl] is, truly speaking, a sexless being'. Elizabeth Blackwell (1902, 41), espoused an analogous argument stating that the essential elements 'which give such mighty stimulus in the adult are entirely latent in the child'. We contend that this contradiction illuminates an irresolvable tension underpinning the social purity movement – a controlled and thus dormant sexual instinct in the child placed alongside an equally unquenchable and unyielding sexual instinct that is both ungovernable and dangerous (Egan and Hawkes 2007, 2010). The incongruity of the present and absent nature of childhood sexuality is not a problem unique to purity reform – it is a tension present in many reform movements we studied and continues to underlie contemporary ideas on sexualisation, albeit in different ways. However, before we move back to a discussion of anti-sexualisation literature, it is important to answer the question, how did the social purity movement attempt to resolve this paradoxical construction of the sexual child?

As we have illustrated in detail elsewhere, purity campaigners constructed a category against which their definition of enlightened innocence could be juxtaposed and defined (Egan and Hawkes 2007, 2010). Sexual innocence was assured because its lack was found in another – the corrupt companion. As a result, the sexuality of the child was made intelligible in a divided manner – *as present in some and absent in most* (Egan and Hawkes 2007, 2010). If sexual curiosity or, worse still, precocious activity was present in a formerly innocent child, its manifestation was the result of a deviant outside influence. Varley (1884) in his *Address to Young Boys* advised that the only way to avoid a moral crisis wherein all boys 'as early as seven years of age' would masturbate was to keep them away from the 'corrupting influence of fellow classmates' (1884, 5). Richard Kellogg asserted, 'the brain, precociously stimulated in one direction, receives fresh impulse from evil companionship and evil literature, and even hitherto innocent children of ten are drawn into temptation' (Kellogg 1877, 27).

Disreputable companions catalysed deviance by providing instruction on sexual vice, in the 'dark recesses of the school yard' (Arthur 1896, 5). Advocates warned that 'bad girls' were as commonplace as 'bad boys', so parents were instructed to be equally vigilant in the protection of their sons and daughters. Knowing companions were usually 'sexually precocious and have acquired some viciousness through having been corrupted' by another child who is usually a 'little older' (Arthur 1896, 4). 'Incurable' and contagious, one bad child could 'corrupt a whole school of boys or a whole neighborhood of playfellows, by teaching them sexual stories and sexual acts he knows' (Arthur 1896, 4). These lessons were particularly dangerous because once the seeds of

sexual vice were ‘sown in the child’s mind’ the effects would persist throughout life (Arthur 1896, 7).

The discursive production of the corrupt or knowing child, within purity literature, was an attempt to disentangle the ambivalent construction of childhood sexuality within the social purity movement (Egan and Hawkes 2007, 2010). Purity reformers attempted to resolve these paradoxical positions by making the sexually knowing child a scapegoat. Associated with incendiary knowledge and the spurring of the sexual imagination, the sexual child fostered sexual vice and moral pollution in urban spaces away from the prying eyes of adults. Although the training in purity could serve as a deterrent for pre-sexual children, the knowing child, due to its unrestrained instinct and sexual imagination, was beyond moral intervention. The construction of the child beyond redemption is transformed into a more genotypic problem to be solved shortly thereafter in the hygiene movement.

Reviewing this short summary of Anglophone social purity literature produced between 1850 and 1905 renders visible the epistemological assumptions underpinning the social construction of the sexual child and its place within the movement. What becomes clear is that the construction of the child and its sexuality are beset by contradiction and ambiguity. Within this discourse, the sexuality of the child was conceptualised paradoxically as both present (in its biological capacity) and absent (as a subjective expression) and moreover the emergence of sexuality in children was believed to be the result of an external catalyst, e.g. contact with a person or group deemed deviant and in need of social regulation (corrupt companions, prostitutes, etc.). To this end, once sexualised, the child became a danger to itself and the broader social order and, thus, in need of management. Finally, as evidenced by the construction of the corrupt companion and its connection to the urban landscape, we can see that within the purity movement the panic surrounding childhood sexuality was not really about children *per se* – instead, we contend that the fragile nature of the child and the need to protect its sexual innocence was a metaphor for larger social disquiet around issues of cultural insecurity, such as urbanisation (Egan and Hawkes 2008, 2010). It is our contention that while the conceptualisation of the problem (city life and corrupt companions) and proposed outcomes (moral education) are clearly different within the two movements under discussion, the assumptions about the child and its sexuality are strikingly contiguous. Notwithstanding, we would also note that sexualisation narratives differ significantly from purity literature in their gender-specific focus. Due to time and space constraints, we are unable to fully articulate why concerns have moved from the child to the girl. It is our belief that this discourse reflects larger anxieties regarding gender and respectability in contemporary culture; one response evident in some, but not all, of the sexualisation literature has been a regression back to a more essentialist perspective (Charon 2006; Tataro 2006; Oppliger 2008; Farley 2009; Klein 2009; C. Hamilton 2009; M. Hamilton 2009a, 2009b; Bailey 2011; Carey 2011). This is evident in the differences between sexualised and innocence which seem to imply that to be sexualised is to be cast outside of girlhood and femininity.

Catalysing girlhood sexuality in contemporary culture

Sexualisation, within our contemporary culture, is said to cause promiscuity, mental health problems, cognitive damage and self-destructive behaviour. Sexualising materials, within this discourse, catalyse and encode sexual desire, subjectivity and the psyche. Activist Julie Gale director of the Australian organisation, KidsFree2BKids

illustrates this contention in her 2008 interview with the Australian version of *60 Minutes*. '[W]ell, clearly the evidence says that we have children in crisis. We have an increase in anxiety, an increase in depression, self harm, body image problems, sexually transmitted infections . . . you know the evidence is in' (Gale 2008). The question posed repeatedly to the audience during the *60 Minutes* segment entitled 'Stealing Innocence', 'Are children being psychologically damaged by being prematurely robbed of their innocence?' was only ever rhetorical. About to be stolen or already lost, sexual innocence was on the line; as such the only acceptable and socially responsible answer could be – an emphatic 'Yes'.

Thus, it is that in many discussions of sexualisation methodological critiques of the APA reports, the Australia Institute or other such documents become erroneous or go unmentioned because the problem itself exceeds the need for proof.³ Sexualised sexuality is always already the result of 'theft' and therefore in ruin. Sexualised girls are *de facto* the walking wounded. To this end, the discourse of sexualisation relies upon a logic of exnomination. For Roland Barthes, exnomination occurs when a particular phenomenon evades the need for explication due to its taken-for-granted and naturalised status (Barthes 1972). It goes unquestioned because its nature is understood as self-evident. Within narratives on sexualisation, commodity objects and representations are presupposed in their effects and a girl's reaction predetermined. Variation in meaning-making, impact, culture, class, race and sexual orientation in terms of sexualisation are obscured— but gender remains a constant.

As feminist psychologist Melissa Farley (2009) highlights:

Today, children are enacting the sex of prostitution. Casually fellating boys at parties is normative for girls, according to a recent Canadian article. One girl repeated the classic pimp's argument for prostitution, noting that if she was already fellating two or three boys every weekend at parties for free, she might as well do the same with five or six boys and get paid for it. (Farley 2009, 120)

Given the gravity of these claims – that child prostitution is afoot in Canadian suburbs – one would assume that the confirmation of it would be linked to peer-reviewed empirical findings. Instead the dire and disturbing nature of this rhetoric and the conceptualisation of its cause eclipses substantiation. Media effects are linked to a hypodermic model – consumption causes sexualised outcomes. As David Buckingham and Sara Bragg illustrate, this model presupposes that children are 'powerless to resist the "messages" to which they are "exposed"'. They are assumed automatically to believe what they see' (Buckingham and Bragg 2004, 10). Objects and images are encoded to stimulate a singular effect.

Maggie Hamilton in *What's Happening to Our Girls* forwards this conclusion in her discussion on how sexual exhibition and promiscuity have become the norm for tweens. She chronicles the plight of girls, as young as ten, 'photographing themselves topless, then sending these photos to peers', an increase in the desire for cosmetic surgery, 'tongue-kissing' and how lewd behaviour is running rampant in 'a growing number of pre-school and kindy' aged children (M. Hamilton 2009a, 56). Children, have become so desensitised by the media, that they have come to believe that oral and anal sex are 'just like kissing' (M. Hamilton 2009a, 56). Once sexualised, 'upgrading to the "real" thing', sexual intercourse, gets increasingly 'normalised' in the lives of tweens and eventually becomes 'no big deal' (Klein 2009, 132).

What is clear within this literature is that the hazard lies *within* the girl's body and imagination, dormant yet intensely susceptible to distorted awakenings. Sexual

innocence is a particular fragile state and thus susceptible to becoming ‘slutty’ quickly (and inevitably) upon exposure (C. Hamilton 2007; for critiques of this position see Egan and Hawkes 2007, 2008, 2010; Renold and Ringrose 2012; Ringrose 2012). The epistemological construction of the child and its sexuality (as inherently corruptible and, once ignited, unstoppable and thus a threat to self and society) exnominates both the problem and the outcome. As we noted earlier, the gendered nature of this discourse is a departure from early reform movements which lamented the permeable sexual instincts of boys and girls. Nevertheless, it finds resonance with another story – the history of ideas on the dangerous and menacing nature of female sexuality and pleasure (Hawkes 2004).

A clear and more present danger

Like purity activists before them, anti-sexualisation advocates argue that children are in jeopardy now more than ever due to an unprecedented and uniformly harmful change – the emergence of a hypersexualised culture. Distinguishing sexualisation as a phenomenon ‘unlike anything faced by children in the past’ campaigners perpetuate a rhetoric of crisis and in so doing legitimate exigency as the only suitable mode of response (Rush 2009, 42). The appeal to new and unparalleled risk has been a facet of most discourses on childhood sexuality since the late eighteenth century (Egan and Hawkes 2007, 2008, 2010). Whether it was purity activists expressing concern over the licentious quality of new urban centers, or sexual hygienists warning of the perilous threat of recent immigrants and dysgenics, the insistence that children’s sexuality is endangered from a contemporary and corrupting presence in its life is anything but new. In his 1953 text entitled *Seduction of the Innocent*, Dr Fredric Wertham highlights the peril children face at the hands of the new comic book industry. He argued that children, from good homes as well as bad, consumed these salacious stories at a feverish pace and, once hooked, found it difficult to redirect their minds to other pursuits. Filled with ‘vast amounts of waywardness, infidelity, cheating, lying and assorted kinds of trickery’, love comics were harmful to young girls because their dangerous messages would hamper femininity, marriage and mothering long into the future (Wertham 1953, 39). ‘Highlight’ comics were equally damning to young boys since they ‘stimulat[ed] their sexuality with drawings of ‘protruding breasts’ and ample ‘hips’ (Wertham 1953, 39). Comics, in this regard, posed a threat not only to adolescents but ‘very young children as well’ (Wertham 1953, 40). Wertham’s recommendation was not unlike purity advocates of the past or anti-sexualisation activists in our contemporary culture – he vehemently stated that society should rid the child’s environment of such menacing material.

Sociologist David Evans (1993) in his text *Sexual Citizenship* analyses the cyclical nature of moral panics surrounding popular media and its effects on the sexuality of children. Narratives on the risks associated with dangerous novels in the 1890s, comic books in the 1950s, television in the 1980s and the Internet in our contemporary culture, share a similar plotline – fears about, the corruption of innocence and the concomitant need for protection. Cumulatively, the hazards of popular media in the life of the child have been a reoccurring theme of moral panic over the past 150 years (Egan and Hawkes 2007, 2008, 2010). As Buckingham and Bragg note these arguments presume that ‘there was an earlier time in which childhood was somehow free from commercial influences. As ever, we are encouraged to look back to a gold age of innocence, well before the media led us all to carnal hell’ (Buckingham and Bragg 2004,

15). To this end, this discourse foregrounds a crisis mentality and mode of nostalgia that obliterates history as well as cultural and individual variation.

Finally, like the sway of the corrupt companion within purity narratives, sexualisation creates an indelible mark – once present never to be erased. Sexualised girls are, at best, beyond hope and, at worst, beyond redemption and thus deserving social isolation. They are, quite simply, damaged goods. An excellent example of this can be found in the cautionary tale Renate Klein (2009) offers of a fictional girl she calls ‘Emma’. Hoping to find her first boyfriend, Emma seeks advice from numerous tween magazines. After reading beauty advice found in the tween magazine *Dolly*, Emma becomes bulimic in the hopes of attracting boys. Once in a relationship she is ‘keen on having three Gardasil injections so she won’t get cervical cancer from sex’, but instead develops a body rash from the prescription (Klein 2009, 133). Thinking that the Gardasil is enough, Emma has unprotected sex with her boyfriend, only to find herself dumped and covered with ‘blisters’ after her third injection. Exhausted and dejected, Emma’s grades plummet. The butt of jokes and ridicule, both in person and online, Emma finds herself isolated and alone. Adding insult to injury, she becomes pregnant and in need of an ‘abortion’. Not surprisingly, depression sets in and she must start taking ‘SSRI antidepressants’ in order to cope, but always seems to feel that ‘she is a total failure’ (Klein 2009).

Accordingly, sexualisation begets sexual behaviour which brings about a host of dangerous mental health effects encompassing everything from ‘contagious acts of self-harm’, to crippling depression and even thoughts of suicide (Rush and La Nauze 2006; APA 2007; Durham 2008; Oppliger 2008; M. Hamilton 2009a, 2009b). No matter how many times a girl attempts to rid herself of its influence, the stamp of sexualisation endures. There is no fairytale ending possible only a future of ‘risky behaviour’ (APA 2007). Girls, within sexualisation narratives, face a damned fate indeed, simultaneously stimulated and destroyed. What do we make of this? It is our postulation that the discourse of sexualisation is plagued by a contradiction and ambivalence – if sexualisation is as ubiquitous as ‘the air we breathe’ and seemingly uniform in nature, one has to wonder if sexual innocence is ever truly possible in the lives of girls. Given the fragile and highly permeable nature of a girl’s sexuality, how can sexualisation be anything but a *fait accompli*? Nevertheless, anti-sexualisation advocates insist that the movement is working towards ‘a re-personalisation of girls – and women – in which we recognise that all are unique and deserve respect’ and their message is one of ‘hope’. Is this possible? Critically interrogating the conceptualisation of sexualisation as a process, problem and outcome in the lives of individual girls, the public sphere and on the global political economy make their resolution of a hopeful future naïve at best and completely paradoxical at worst. The question then becomes, how do activists deal with this contradiction in order to render their vision of the problem and the future intelligible for their readers? The discourse of sexualisation relies upon an antagonist in order to resolve their contradictory logic – the ‘white trash’ sexually loose tweenager. Innocence then is secured through the construction of the working-class ‘prostitut’.

Class contagion and the construction of the prostitut

Writers, feminist and non-feminist have called the sexualised girl a ‘skank’, ‘prostitut’, ‘kinderwhore’ and ‘sex bait’, have said she dresses ‘like a stripper’ or wears ‘hooker chic’, ‘skank chic’, ‘dumpster chic’ ‘porn chic’ or ‘trailer park fashion’, engages in ‘freaky dancing’, ‘pole dancing’, ‘sexually precocious’ or ‘slutty’ behaviour, and actively takes part in ‘hooking up’, ‘causal fellatio at parties’ ‘no strings attached sex’

and even ‘prostitution’ (Crowley 2006; Ryan 2010; Durham 2008, 82; Oppliger 2008, 2, 4, 9; Farley 2009, 119; Reist 2009). She embraces her own ‘degradation’ and wants to ‘please at any cost’, she likes to be ‘hot’ or ‘sexy’ instead of ‘cute’ and definitely wants to ‘attract attention (Kilbourne quoted in Cabrera accessed 5–24–08; see also Crowley 2006; Oppliger 2008)’. She enjoys playing with toys that resemble ‘prostitutes’, ‘sluts’ or ‘hookers’ and watches shows like *The Real World*, *Jersey Shore* and *Gossip Girl* (Oppliger 2008, 4, 7, 18). She is low culture embodied with her thongs, stripper poles and bralettes. All flesh and wanton desire – she is the girl your parents warn you about and she is the woman who had preoccupied social reformers more than a century ago. She is a danger that must be contained.

Unpacking the gender and class assumptions within this discourse highlights its moralising undertones. Sexualised girls reject innocence in favour of sexuality and in so doing fissure bourgeois conceptions of the child. The classist assumptions underpinning sexualisation echo the anxiety of the middle-class populations more than 100 years ago (Walkerdine 1997; Mort 2000; Cross 2004; Egan and Hawkes 2010). Thought to be more bawdy and immoral, the working class was considered ‘ungovernable’ in its desires (Stallybrass and White 1986). Both social purity reformers and sexual hygienists constructed working-class women as both more ‘erotic’ and as potential ‘moral pollutants’ (Mort 2000, 37). Terms such as ‘kinderwhore’ ‘skank’ and ‘prostitut’ illuminate middle-class fears about the infiltration of ‘white trash’ sexuality into the uncontaminated domain of bourgeois child rearing.

As Walkerdine (1997, 171) states, social class ‘plays a central role in the regulation of femininity and the production of Otherness’ in discourses on the child. Innocence requires the bypassing of sexuality and it is for this reason that low culture ‘in so far as it presents the intrusion of adult sexuality into the sanitised space of childhood’ is considered harmful to girls (Walkerdine 1997). Gary Cross further illuminates this class concern when he argues that in the past our culture

might have expected this [sexualized form of dress] from working-class or minority neighborhoods, whose parents presumably failed to protect their children from evil. Today, it seems, we see the same kind of rebellious behavior of children from college-educated, even church-going suburbanites. (Cross 2004, 11)

In their discussion of middle-class fantasies surrounding sexualisation and working-class media consumption, Buckingham and Bragg insightfully remind us, that ‘in a world in which social class will not go away, we should bear in mind the persistence of such constructions and their resonance for issues of sexuality’ (Buckingham and Bragg 2004, 141) (Figure 1).

Narratives on sexualisation reinforce long-standing historical constructions of working-class sexuality and conceptions of working-class parenthood. The result of this contagion is the rupturing of sexual innocence and the transformation of middle-class girls into ‘Britney [Spears] wannabes’ (Hymowitz 2002). To this end, sexualising materials produce girls more interested in ‘hooker chic’ or fellatio than the interests represented by the quintessential middle-class consumer object, the American Girl Doll who is said to have ‘hopes as big as the New Mexico sky’. Anti-sexualisation advocates reinforce the increasingly fragile boundaries of middle-class childhood and childrearing through the specter of a historically reoccurring enemy – the figure of the morally suspect and sexually voracious working-class female. As we noted earlier, feminists writing on sexualisation espouse the ‘re-personalisation of girls’ as their primary aim (Reist 2009, 28). However, as we have illuminated, the language used in the service

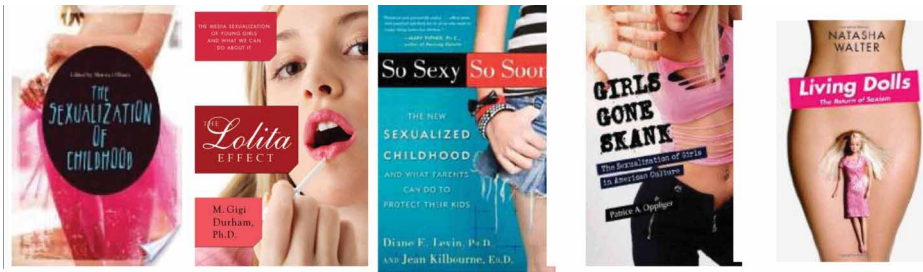


Figure 1. Book covers from Walter (2010), Olfman (2008), Durham (2008), Levin and Kilbourne (2008) and Opliger (2008) highlight the assumptions of sexualised girlhood reviewed in this article. All girls figured are white, scantily clad (partially unzipped and in barely-there skirts), nude or consumed by their own gaze. Conceptualised as broken they are visually represented in a fractured manner – exposed torso, hand holding onto a short skirt, doll over genitals and open mouthed. Ironically, these images reproduce the very representations of girlhood that the authors critique in order to sell their own messages of rescue.

of this mission belies the inclusive and even feminist nature of this plea. While researching this piece, we were struck by the *Urban Dictionary* entry for the term prostitot:

Prostitot (n.)

1. A young girl with too much makeup and not enough clothes.
2. An obviously underage girl who dresses like a whore . . .

The junior high just let out . . . look at all them prostitots . . .

3. A child resembling, or working as a prostitute. Usually the result of admiring britney, xtina or their skanky-ass mother.

Stacy put on her assless chaps and went out to play on the swings/pick up men.

Fuckin prostitot.

4. (n) 1. Young Girl who dresses in a scandalous [*sic*] manner. 2. Female preteen intent on attracting adult men.

That prostitot is showing her diaper.

5. A dyslexic 12-year-old girl who thinks she's 21 and dresses accordingly. Thongs, tank tops, short skirts and other revealing clothes are the hallmarks of the prostitot.

Prostitot: Want a lapdance?

Guy: What are you, like 12? I'm no pedophile

Urban Dictionary (accessed 1/2/2010).

Particularly disturbing is the resonance between many of the descriptions and presumptions at work in the anti-sexualisation literature we examined and the *Urban Dictionary*. Both prefigure the sexualised girl as damaged, insatiable and dangerous.

Her denigration and abjection are taken for granted and naturalised. This raises an important question about the ways in which classist and patriarchal assumptions can be made acceptable and even embraced in the name of protection. Can one be concerned about the representation of children and commodities without deploying these deeply problematic assumptions of childhood, sexuality, class and gender? It is our hope that the answer to this question is yes. Nevertheless, in its current form, anti-sexualisation narratives move feminist thinking away from a deconstruction of dominant patriarchal culture by vilifying sexuality and reproducing a proscriptive and painfully narrow window of sexual acceptability (Egan and Hawkes 2009, 2010 see also Duschinsky 2011; Renold and Ringrose 2012).

Conclusion

By moving the analysis away from representation to problematic media effects, the discourse on sexualisation unwittingly affirms the purity and innocence of some girls at the expense of others. Deploying hyperbole and pathologisation foments a rhetorical strategy that foregrounds sexualisation as a crisis of sexual behaviour as opposed to a sexist culture (Egan and Hawkes 2009; Ringrose 2012). Moreover, it obscures the middle-class conception of the working class other and its sexuality used to define the boundary between normal and pathological within this discourse. Like its historical counterparts, innocence in anti-sexualisation literature is defined through and against the sexualised which is always already a classed category. To this end, the girl child remains bifurcated in the literature and in so doing unwittingly reaffirms enduring patriarchal assumptions regarding femininity, eroticism and respectability. This is evident in the derogatory language deployed by some anti-sexualisation authors, feminist and non-feminist, that in any other context would be deemed problematic at best and definitively anti-feminist, patriarchal and misogynist at worst. Although hyperbole can help spur an activist response, it can also obscure and possibly hurt the very population activists want to protect – girls. Although not all feminists writing popular work on sexualisation fall into this category, some do and as such, we want to address why feminists should be particularly wary of forwarding the epistemological and political assumptions at work in the literature on sexualisation reviewed in this article.

The work of postcolonial scholars Jane Haggis and Ann Stoller show us that the pleas for ‘protection’ forwarded by white female missionaries often provided a public and morally acceptable platform for Anglophone women that was otherwise absent during the height of empire; however, such access came at the expense of the colonised woman who were constructed as backward, lesser and suspect and thus in need of saving within these movements (Stoller 1995; Haggis 2003). Historian LeeAnn Whites (1998) examines the implications of protection politics in the USA in her analysis of American suffragette and first female senator Rebecca Latimer Felton. Felton’s campaign to defend the virtue of white southern women in the late 1800s was built upon racialised constructions of gender difference. Her dictate that white men should ‘lynch a thousand black men if it would save one white woman’ is particularly illustrative of what can go wrong in the name of protection. Although Fenton decried the raping of black women at the hands of white men, she proposed a ‘family solution’ not a lynch mob. To be clear, we are not saying that antisexualisation advocates are akin to Fenton, rather we wanted to briefly touch upon the problems with rescue and the dangers of constructing a discourse of protection that is based on the logic of innocence. As we have illustrated innocence always already demands others to secure its boundaries (see also Egan and

Hawkes 2010; Faulkner 2010; Ringrose 2012). We take seriously Kristin Luker's advice that feminists should be wary of the 'double-edged sword' of reform agendas which can unwittingly create inequality in the name of protecting women and children from social evil (Luker 1998, 629). Historical understanding can temper the seduction of rescue and innocence by reminding scholars and activists of the classist, racist and even colonising imperatives underlying previous campaigns aimed at sexual and/or gendered protection. Being cognizant of the history of protection movements instills the humility and reflexivity needed when thinking about sexualisation and the tweenaged girl.

Philip Jenkins has shown how the child within political discourse, from the left and the right, serves as a metaphor for larger issues of social apprehension (Jenkins 2004). The child is used in what he terms the politics of substitution or as a code for other social issues. Our research on the history of ideas further illustrates how the child was a signifier for angst regarding urbanisation, venereal disease and monogamy within social movement literature produced by social purity campaigns and in the sexual hygiene movement (Egan and Hawkes 2010). Due to length constraints, it is impossible to offer an in-depth perspective into the metaphorical quality of the child within anti-sexualisation literature; however, we are particularly interested in how sexualisation might be a code for greater anxieties about the increasingly fragile boundaries between parent and child and the challenges of parental supervision with the rise of mobile technologies. Notwithstanding how this discourse might be helpful for adults, the ways in which class and gender function in this discourse make a more reflexive approach crucial.

Reflective reticence about employing a discourse of protection should not lessen feminist critiques of consumer culture or disturbing representations of children found therein. Nor does it mean that scholars, feminist or otherwise, should stop questioning cultural representations or engage in political change – quite the opposite. Historical attention complicates reductionist thinking by encouraging a holistic and humble approach and in so doing works towards continuing attempts to remedy the pitfalls of the past. Ultimately, it is our hope that historical reflexivity might inspire collaboration instead of rescue.

Notes

1. She is noted in the text as Mrs J. H. Kellogg, but I decided to use her full name as opposed to her husband's.
2. Purity advocates rejected the mechanistic theories of and treatment for masturbation espoused by the nineteenth-century physicians. However, they shared with the medics who perpetuated masturbation phobia a concern for the dangerous impacts of masturbatory activities on children who practiced what they conceptualised as vice.
3. We have noted the methodological and conceptual flaws inherent to the APA report and media effects research on sexualisation see Buckingham and Bragg (2004), Egan and Hawkes (2008, 2009) and Veera (2009) for more details.

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