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What does sexualisation mean?

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Abstract
'Sexualisation' has been dismissed by some as no more than yet another moral panic about youth and sex. However, it is striking that the term appears to have helped galvanise feminist activism, speaking in some way to the experiences of young people. Building from a history and analysis of the term, I propose that 'sexualisation' has served as an interpretive theory of contradictory gender norms, using the figure of the 'girl' to gesture towards an intensifying contradiction between the demands that young women display both desirability and innocence. In addressing sexist dimensions of gender norms through the figure of the 'girl', a minor, discourses on sexualisation can help circumvent liberal objections about free choice. However, I also express concern that the term has facilitated a focus in media and policy texts which attends less to gender inequity than to sexuality as a contaminant of young femininity.

Keywords
Feminism, girls, identity politics, sexualisation, social policy

Introduction

Though widely used and seemingly identifying important social changes, the term 'sexualisation' has been criticised as being remarkably opaque (Attwood, 2006; Egan and Hawkes, 2008; Gill, 2008; Buckingham et al., 2010; NSPCC, 2011). My goal here is to interrogate the concept of 'sexualisation', building upon and drawing together my previous work on the topic. My interest in debates on sexualisation has arisen partly from an academic concern with psychological discourse and identity politics. It has also arisen from a personal concern with the way in which gender power can provide a context for callousness, isolation and suffering for young people – which is missed and left unaddressed due to blind-spots in heteronormative assumptions about sex and gender. To date I have conducted an analysis of the class rhetoric in discourses on sexualisation (Duschinsky,

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2010), a genealogy of the concept in US and British media discourse (Duschinsky, 2013b) and an analysis of its use in contemporary British social policy (Duschinsky, 2012; Barker and Duschinsky, 2012).

'Sexualisation' has, to date, had no agreed definition. Yet this does not imply that 'sexualisation' discourses are meaningless, to be dismissed as a mere 'moral panic'. Attwood and Smith are right when they suggest that '[t]he ''sexualization debates'' can be understood both as part of a tradition of suspicion – of media technologies, sex, and young people – and as part of a series of responses to real changes in the significance of sex in contemporary western societies' (2011: 235). An indication that the term 'sexualisation' is somehow doing important interpretive work is that the availability and use of the term 'sexualisation' has been identified as a 'force in animating and inspiring a new generation of feminists' (Gill, 2012: 741). One instance is the Welsh Government cross-party group on 'Children, Sexualities, Sexualisation and Equalities', which has led to commissioned research on children's own perspectives and experiences regarding gendered inequalities in relation to sexuality. Another instance is the SPARK ('Sexualization Protest: Action, Resistance, Knowledge') Movement in the USA, which engages in activism and blogging to 'reject the commodified, sexualized images of girls in media and support the development of girls' healthy sexuality and self-esteem' (www.sparkmovement.org)

Certainly an advantage of the term 'sexualisation' for feminist discourses is that it helps connect with a public agenda more generally concerned with the sexuality of 'girls'. Furthermore, I think Tolman is correct in her assessment when she suggests that the contrast between 'sexualised' and 'healthy sexuality' in her academic writing and in the discourse of SPARK has helped to raise awareness of the 'uninterrupted reproduction of gender inequities in heterosexual relationships' and the entitlement of young women to sexual pleasure and sexual safety (2012: 753). A division between 'sexualised' and 'healthy sexuality' has been shown to be useful in engaging with young people on themes of sexual empowerment, agency and authenticity. However, concerns have also been raised about the kinds of discourses facilitated by use of the term 'sexualisation'. Gill, for example, has identified that such discourses 'seem to pull us back into a moral domain, rather than one of politics or ethics – they pull towards judgments about ''explicitness'' and ''exposure'' rather than questions about equality or justice. Might it not be more productive to talk about sexism rather than sexualization?' (2012: 741).

More generally, Ringrose has noted that public discussions of 'sexualisation' have 'become polarised between a condemnation of sex and calls to more heavily regulate young people's use of various media, and those who critique the ''sexualisation thesis'' as part of a moral panic that robs children of their rights, sexuality and agency' (2011: 99). I shall here attempt to make sense of the way that media and policy discourses addressing 'sexualisation' have tended to lose focus on gender inequality, and frame a debate between those who treat young female media use and sexual choices as either risky or empowering. This is potentially quite problematic. Yet I want to firmly acknowledge, right from the start, that it is

an open question whether an alternative discourse would be able to achieve either or both of the advantages listed above.

A starting point for my investigation is provided in a finding from the empirical research conducted by Buckingham, Willett, Bragg, Russell and Dorrer (2010) in preparation for their report on the sexualisation of young people to the Scottish government. The researchers observed that there was no particular set of qualities or traits that parents would pick out as 'sexualised' in their own children. One's own children might be at risk of sexualisation, but it could only ever be other people's children – particularly those with less economic and cultural capital – who are sexualised. The researchers also found that young people did not perceive sexualisation to be a threat to themselves, but only to those younger than themselves or with less economic and cultural capital. These findings suggest that 'sexualisation' is not primarily a representational concept mapping certain coherent phenomena, distinguishing this from that. I would suggest that 'sexualisation' could instead be understood as operating primarily as an interpretive theory, in the sense given by Brown: 'theory does not simply decipher the world, but recodes it in order to reveal something of the meanings and incoherencies with which we live' (2010: 139). I find Brown's definition of theory suggestive in that, rather than placing emphasis on whether a discourse is oriented by academic or non-academic concerns and abstractions, it highlights the way that particular concepts are able to give sense to the work we do in navigating at the interstices of countervailing cultural forces.

'Sexualisation' as portmanteau

In attempting to discern what the term 'sexualisation' might be 'recoding' and 'revealing', I am inclined to follow Juliet Mitchell's suggestion that a grapple on a theory is best achieved when one gains 'access to the material from which it arose' (2005: 38). The operation of 'sexualisation' as more a theory than a representational concept can be contextualised by noting that the term emerged as a portmanteau. As Attridge (1988: 197) points out, 'the portmanteau word... denies that single words must have, on any given occasion, single meanings' (1988: 197). Deleuze furthers this analysis of portmanteau words, identifying the implications of their lack of a simple, agreed definition. He explains that, in bringing together the possible connotative meanings of different words, the portmanteau produces a 'disjunctive synthesis': it articulates together different streams of cultural production. Deleuze therefore urges that the portmanteau cannot be given a simple representational definition and that 'the disjunctive synthesis offers the real definition of the portmanteau word' ([1969] 1990: 54–56). The implication is that the meaning of the term 'sexualisation' will remain ambiguous until we observe the way it threads and ramifies the possible meanings of its component streams (which themselves undergo change in part through this ramification).

The term 'sexualisation' emerged as a portmanteau of the words 'sexual socialisation'. Spanier (1975) coined the term in his influential sociological investigation of the familial and educational contexts that influence the likelihood that a young person will have engaged in 'premarital sexual behaviour' by the end of secondary education.[1] Spanier defined 'sexual socialisation', 'also referred to as sexualisation', as 'having three major components: development of a gender identity; acquisition of sexual skills, knowledge, and values; and development of sexual attitudes or disposition to behave' (1975: 34–35). The capacity of the noun-stem 'sexual' to mean *gender* or *erotic* desires, experiences and practices was thus deployed, from the emergence of the term 'sexualisation', to both address the interrelation of the two, and to give greater salience to the latter in terms of both causes and outcomes. The second stream composing sexualisation as a portmanteau is 'socialisation', a passive process of enculturation that occurs during youth. Spanier, for example, distinguishes between 'formal education' at school and 'informal education' from 'peers, parents and other sources' as components of the socialisation a young person receives in sex (1975: 34).

'Sexualisation' as feminist discursive strategy

Beginning with Schiro's (1981) article in the *New York Times*, the term 'sexualisation' has been increasingly utilised in media discourse in a narrative that suggests that sexist cultural representations have been undermining the confidence and social power of young girls, and putting them at sexual risk by blurring the crucial line between 'normal' women and the 'unhealthy' lifestyle of strippers or prostitutes. The frequency of articles making this argument intensified from 2003, and they tended to position themselves as speaking from an avowedly feminist perspective, and to draw on established feminist tropes for the critique of rape culture and pornography. Among the most important of the media texts of the period were La Ferla (2003), Levy (2005) and Dalton (2005). Citing each of the texts, the American Psychological Association stated in its influential report on the sexualisation of girls that the 'Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls was formed in response to these expressions of public concern' (2007: 1). As with these articles, 'it is feminist theory itself that is the (largely uncredited) inspiration for the entire APA Task Force report' (Lerum and Dworkin, 2009: 272).

The APA Task Force argues that:

> Sexualization occurs when [1.] a person's value comes only from his or her sexual appeal or behavior, to the exclusion of other characteristics; [2.] a person is held to a standard that equates physical attractiveness (narrowly defined) with being sexy; [3.] a person is sexually objectified – that is, made into a thing for others' sexual use, rather than seen as a person with the capacity for independent action and decision making; [4] and/or sexuality is inappropriately imposed upon a person. (2007: 2)

The report argues that 'in the current environment', 'teen girls' are encouraged to 'look sexy' – though 'they know little about what it means to be sexual, to have sexual desires, and to make rational and responsible decisions' (2007: 3).

In the media and psychological discourses that brought the term 'sexualisation' into the public eye, a theory was thus presented of the role of sexist cultural forms in contemporary society, using the figure of the 'girl' to show how women are socialised in harmful ways. This move was facilitated by the disjunctive synthesis enacted by the term 'sexualisation', in bringing together 'the sexual' with 'socialisation' as a passive process of enculturation occurring during youth. In addressing 'girls', discourses on 'sexualisation' could address themselves through a displaced 'substitute' figure (Brown, 2001: 54) to the subjectivation of women. The frame of 'sexualisation' provided legitimacy for feminist discourses on the role of sexism in society at large, which may otherwise have been dampened by liberal retorts about personal choice (Duschinsky, 2013a). Rather than addressing the adults, these discourses on sexualisation addressed 'daughters… volunteering to be sex objects' (Dalton, 2005).

It is hard, perhaps impossible, to say 'well, that's her choice' when someone identifies the effects of patriarchy on individual decision-making when the person in question is a minor. The term 'sexualisation' offered a means of highlighting the importance of gender and enculturation whilst circumventing liberal choice discourses. It is this circumvention which explains both of Gill's important observations about the term 'sexualisation': that it has been a force in 'animating and inspiring a new generation of feminists', and also that it has served to 'reinstate the terms of the ''sex wars'' of the 1980s, with their familiar polarizations' between free choice and cultural constraint (2012: 741). For a divisive construction of 'pro-' and 'anti-sex feminist' camps becomes more probable when the way that gender power and culture shape subjectivities and behaviours is debated is over the body of a minor – incapable of meaningful consent (Duschinsky, 2013a).

'Sexualisation' as a theory of contradiction

The potential of 'sexualisation' discourses to circumvent liberal arguments has, however, also been deployed by right-wing Anglophone discourses, which have worked to co-opt ownership of the term 'sexualisation', especially since 2006. I have tried to demonstrate in another article (Duschinsky, 2012) that the door was opened to these right-wing discourses by the narrative within texts oriented by feminist concerns that sexuality is a force or substance that comes from outside the innocent 'girl', who 'know[s] little about what it means to be sexual' (American Psychological Association, 2007: 3). It was also facilitated by the polyvalence of the term 'sex', noted above. However, in contrast to the feminist discourses that brought the issue of 'sexualisation' into the public eye, in these right-wing discourses changing norms of femininity become framed as a problem not of sexism, but primarily of public decency.

Such use of the term 'sexualisation' can be identified in the recent report, *Letting Children be Children*, issued by Reg Bailey in June 2011 on behalf of the UK's Department for Education, having been commissioned by the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition government. In Appendix 1, the Bailey Review suggests that 'sexualisation' is present when content and practices:

1. are 'sexually suggestive' in the public domain;
2. treat women as 'sexual only';
3. encourage 'children to think of themselves (or others to think of children) as adult or sexual';
4. are 'glamorising or normalising ''deviant'' behaviour' (2011: 4).

A comparison between the four criteria of the Bailey Review and the four criteria of the APA Report is instructive. Whereas the APA Report focuses on misogyny, folding the inappropriate imposition of sexuality (on to 'girls') into the mix as an additional fourth component, the Bailey Review definition envelops and largely denatures sexual objectification through a dominating concern with propriety. As Meg Barker and I have documented elsewhere, through its fourfold construction of 'sexualisation', gendered relations of power are not simply hidden from view in the Bailey Review, but covertly deployed by the text (Barker and Duschinsky, 2012). They buttress a narrative on the threat of sexualisation to 'girls' in which young women are situated as innocent children, their sexuality and desire rendered pathological and morally unacceptable as judged by a conservative standard of decency. Managing the meanings and incoherencies of contemporary norms of femininity is framed, through the concept of 'sexualisation', as the responsibility of individual young women.

In the cases of both the feminist media discourses which brought the term into the public eye and the right-wing discourses which have worked to co-opt it, 'sexualisation' can be observed serving as a theory, interpreting meanings and incoherencies in contemporary society. As a portmanteau, it situates the question of the changing role of sexual signifiers and practices within normative gender expression in terms of young people's susceptibility to influence. Playing out discussions of changing gender norms over the bodies of 'girls' helps to circumvent liberal arguments about choice, allowing claims to legitimately be made about the existence of a social problem in the operation of these gender norms. Yet a disadvantage of this framing is that, rather than inquiring further into how and why these changing gender norms are operating, the issue becomes the threat posed by sexuality to innocent or irresponsible 'girls' – re-emphasising rather than criticising an ideal of feminine innocence coded as middle class and white (Duschinsky, 2010; Egan, 2013).

'Sexualisation' and schizoid femininities

Renold (2008) and Renold and Ringrose (2008, 2011) have described how, increasingly in contemporary society, 'girls can invest in culturally ''diverse'' femininities

(thus exercising choice) so long as they project coherent intelligible heterosexualised femininities (upholding the logic of sameness). The pushes and pulls of the simultaneous demand for compulsory innocence and compulsory heterosexuality *and* the diversification and fixing of class/race/gender/age norms', are conceptualised by Renold and Ringrose as a schizoid dynamic (Renold, 2008: 130, emphasis in original; Braidotti, 2006). With their use of the term 'schizoid', they call attention to the way in which young women are enjoined to 'just be themselves' by meeting both intensifying norms of free, self-possessed desirability and established norms of feminine modesty in a context of denied ('postfeminist') gender inequities. Young women must walk a tightrope of assumptions in performing an identity perceived as assertive but not aggressive, successful but not square, sexy but not a slut (Ringrose, 2013). Even the most privileged young women feel the punitive pressure of these countervailing demands (Holford, 2012), though they are likely to be most painfully felt by those without the economic or cultural resources to manage the associated performative tensions (Ringrose and Renold, 2012). The term 'sexualisation' gestures towards the contradictions and incoherencies in gender norms which Renold and Ringrose theorise more explicitly as 'schizoid femininities'. Yet the tactical polyvalence of discourse does not imply that discourses do not *facilitate* particular kinds of meaning-making, and these meanings may risk running counter to the expressed intentions of actors.

The classic theorist of contradiction, Hegel, hypothesised that a term may come into use not because it precisely represents or distinguishes coherent phenomena but because of its ability to evoke the movement of contradictory processes (Hegel, [1832] 2010: §11.321–325, §12.24). Renold and Ringrose explicitly and analytically attempt to call attention to this movement by referring to contemporary young femininities as 'schizoid', and my analysis suggests that this is also being tacitly achieved through the use of the term 'sexualisation' as a theory in media and policy discourse. As a portmanteau word, 'sexualisation' necessarily lacks a single meaning, but instead speaks to the contradiction between established age and gender norms of feminine innocence and a shift in which learning to display signs of heteronormative sexual desirability has become a normative part of feminine enculturation. Yet Hegel also goes on to warn that the terms able to discursively evoke such contradictory processes may also simultaneously have the potential to mask them, directing thought away from the contradictions themselves and instead framing them in a simple narrative of the contamination of essence. This is precisely my concern regarding the disjunctive synthesis achieved by 'sexualisation', in ramifying 'the sexual' (gender; erotic desire, experience and practice) with 'socialisation' (passive enculturation).

Unless otherwise specified, the semantic organisation of the word 'sexualisation' suggests a narrative of contamination, with 'isation' implying that the base noun 'the sexual' is transferred to the direct object at a given moment (Duschinsky, 2012). The term thus gestures to the contradictory demands on young women to signify 'sexy' but not 'slut', but suggests a ramification of its component parts which frames this contradiction as a gendered narrative of threat, responsibility and spoiled identities. 'Sexual' evokes the way that sexuality is becoming a

compulsory part of an acceptable young female gender performance, but at the same time hides this by focusing on the threat of sexuality to young women rather than on punitive gender norms. 'Socialisation' evokes the way that these gender norms are enculturated, but at the same time hides this by implying a passive process of reception of sexual content and highlighting the youth (and minority) of the subject threatened by sexual content. This does not determine, but rather facilitates an account in which the issue at stake is the danger posed by the reception of sexual media content.

'Sexting' offers an illustration. The increasing availability of pornography and the rise of pornographic tropes in mainstream media are framed in political and media discourses as triggering a desire in young women to take and share indecent images. The term 'sexualisation' is then deployed as sufficient explanation for how this triggering occurs (e.g. Diane Abbott, cited in Mason, 2013), evacuating attention to the schizoid double-pull of countervailing gender norms operating within the peer context. As Ringrose et al.'s (this issue) research has documented, the possession of sexy images of classmates can serve as a potent form of symbolic capital for the successful performance of masculinity. New media technologies may facilitate the extraction of the surplus sexual value from the bodily performance of young women, but the context for their deployment and meaning is the cultural relations of gender power in which desirability is the condition of feminine acceptability, but in which a 'slut' is perceived as deserving her exploitation and commodification. The surplus sexual value of the resulting image, reified from its context, can then circulate as symbolic capital in the economy of masculinities. 'Sexualisation', when serving as a theory and apparently sufficient explanation, can help frame the issue as a matter of the direct threat posed by media content to impressionable girls. Gender inequities as the relations that facilitate such mediated production, and which are supported by it, then fade out of view.

Yet even if, as this viewpoint has set out to explain, discourses on 'sexualisation' do indeed 'pull towards judgments about "explicitness" and "exposure" rather than questions about equality or justice' (Gill, 2012: 741), the term is also necessarily capable of other kinds of usage. 'Sexualisation' as a disjunctive synthesis of problematic assumptions about sex and socialisation theory is likely to exact a price when used for critique, but that could be one that we are willing to pay depending on what we perceive as the most pressing danger. If the most pressing matter is to identify the punitive contradiction between gender norms faced by young people, then 'sexualisation' could be a useful and powerful, if dangerous, concept. In particular, it is possible to accept the reservations presented here, and still see potential where gender inequity can be explicitly spoken in the same breath as 'sexualisation'. SPARK and the Welsh Government cross-party group 'Children, Sexualities, Sexualisation and Equalities'[2] have shown and continue to show that speaking of 'sexualisation' can, in circumventing liberal 'choice' objections to critique, *quicken* the energy and legitimacy contained in the identification of gender inequity.

Notes

1. Yes, this is the Graham Spanier of the Penn State child sex abuse case.
2. For further details see http://youngsexualities.org/2013/02/20/current-research-young-sexualities-equalities-and-well-being-childrens-perspectives-and-experiences (accessed 8 June 2013)

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