Article

Theory & Psychology
23(3) 351–370
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DOI: 10.1177/0959354312469732
tap.sagepub.com

Sexualization: A state of injury

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Abstract
I shall contend that avowedly feminist media and policy discussions of "sexualization" in the UK have risked inadvertently problematizing not sexism but propriety. As a result, these discourses on sexualization have contributed to what Wendy Brown has called a "state of injury": a situation in which representations of wound or threat are mobilized within identity politics on behalf of a dominated group in society, and this strategy backfires by supporting social and state institutions in regulating and normalizing precisely this very group. Rather than challenging the sexist division of unmarried women into pure and impure, innocent children and whores, I shall show, using the *Papadopoulos Review*, that feminist discourses on "sexualization" have risked tacitly affirming this division, situating the sexuality and desires of young women as deviations from their true essence. Moreover, a further unintended consequence has been to provide support to a neo-liberal political agenda in the UK, which contrasts the innocence that should be the property of unsexualized girls with the self-reliance that should characterize adult citizens and can only be hindered by welfare state protections.

Keywords
feminism, identity politics, sexualization, Wendy Brown

What is changing?

Several profound shifts are occurring today which impact upon the way that women are enjoined to recognize themselves and behave as feminine subjects, producing new configurations of identity politics. The most insightful scholar of these changes has been Rosalind Gill. Gill (2008) agrees with Foucault that "power operates here not by silencing or suppressing female sexual agency, but by constructing it in highly specific ways" (p. 42). Examining media representations of women, as a particularly visible

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location to observe a broader set of discourses, Gill traces “the construction of a new figure: a young, attractive, heterosexual woman who knowingly and deliberately plays with her sexual power and is always ‘up for it’ (that is, sex)” (pp. 54–55). Based on this analysis, she contends that “a new version of female sexual agency is on offer that breaks in important ways with the sexual objectification and silencing of female desire,” but that “in refiguring female sexual agency in these particular ways, it raises new problems and challenges” (pp. 54–55).

On the one hand, in the media representations analysed by Gill (2008), women are depicted not as “passive, ‘dumb’ or unintelligent sex objects” but as “active, beautiful, smart, powerful sexual subjects” (p. 40). On the other hand, this depiction is also problematic. Gill terms the way in which this figure is situated as an ideal for subjects’ “compulsory sexual agency” (p. 40), identifying the simultaneous operation of agency and compulsion. Just because compulsion is present does not mean that women are not acting with meaningful agency, and as such should be treated as dupes. Just because agency is present does not mean that women are free from oppression. Rather, oppression acts through the agency enjoined upon women, and agency operates through assembling practices out of the available cultural resources. These cultural resources include a greater range of sexual identities and opportunities for women. However, they are also structured by oppressive elements.

Attentive to the ethical polyvalence of the changing discourses on femininity within and beyond advertising discourses, Gill (2008) argues that

> in some respects, this shift is a positive one, offering modernized representations of femininity that allow women power and agency, and do not define women exclusively as heterosexual. In particular, it is striking that … women’s sexual agency is flaunted and celebrated, rather than condemned or punished. (p. 52)

Yet in other respects, this development is problematic, and retains a misogynistic thread. “Possession of a ‘sexy body’ … is presented as women’s key (if not sole) source of identity,” and women remain held responsible for the “monitoring, surveillance, discipline and remodelling” of this body (Gill, 2006, p. 244). Thus, despite the changes in the ideal of femininity, women still are enjoined to act as

> the monitors of all sexual and emotional relationships, responsible for producing themselves as desirable heterosexual subjects, as well as for pleasing men sexually, protecting against pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections, defending their own sexual reputations, and taking care of men’s self-esteem. (Gill, 2006, p. 257)

Gill (2008) makes two particular criticisms of discourses that construct women as powerful sexual agents, free of constraint. She sees these two concerns about contemporary cultural forms as an expression of “questions that have long been at the heart of women’s liberation movements” (p. 45). Firstly, these discourses “cannot account for why the look that young women seek to achieve is so similar: if it were the outcome of everyone’s individual, idiosyncratic preferences, surely there would be greater diversity, rather than growing homogeneity organized around a slim yet curvaceous, toned, hairless, young body.” Secondly, “the emphasis upon choice simply sidesteps and avoids all the important but difficult questions about how socially constructed ideals of beauty are internalized and made our own" (p. 44).

The acuity of this analysis can be seen in turning it to an analysis of the recent feminist "Slut Walks," a global movement launched after a policeman in Toronto told students that, to protect themselves from sexual assault, women should avoid "dressing like sluts" (Urwin, 2011). In the rallies, "[t]he drums banged, the crowd yelled: 'Hey hey, ho ho, yes means yes and no means no. Whatever I wear, wherever I go, yes means yes and no means no"' (Mills & Angelina, 2011, para. 1). With the rise of "compulsory sexual agency," signifiers of female sexuality are increasingly visible outside the conjugal home. However, such signs of a woman who is "up for it" have long been interpretable through the lens of misogyny to mean that a woman is necessarily "asking for it." The gains associated with compulsory sexual agency have facilitated the politicized subject-position of the marchers, who felt able to own and display signifiers of female sexuality as a form of protest against rape culture. As the SlutWalk Manifesto states: "Being in charge of our sexual lives should not mean that we are opening ourselves to an expectation of violence, regardless if we participate in sex for pleasure or work. No one should equate enjoying sex with attracting sexual assault" (SlutWalk Toronto, 2011, sect. "Why," para. 4).

The resignification of the word "slut" from an abject identity to an ironic and political banner mirrors Gill's attention both to compulsion and to agency. It encapsulates confidence that the cultural forms and identities made available by a history of patriarchy can not only be parodied but also be turned to meaningful uses such as politics and pleasure. There is liberal confidence that "yes" can indeed mean "yes," rather than false consciousness. Yet the resignification of the word "slut" simultaneously encapsulates anger that the Madonna/whore dichotomy remains active as an injunction upon women not to appear "impure" or "dirty" (Greer, 2011) in a society in which dominant discourses assert that gender equality has already been achieved.

As with the effects of compulsory sexual agency itself, the slut walk received criticism. This criticism has not only come from conservatives, committed to a heteronormative ideal of public decency and the signification of purity through the avoidance of "provocativeness" as the best defence of a woman from rape: "Showing a little restraint isn't old-fashioned or repressed. And it certainly won't put off the kind of men most women want to attract" (Parsons, 2011, last para). It has also come from feminists, who have argued that "slut" cannot be reclaimed from the history and present operation of misogyny, operating through race and class (Black Woman's Blueprint, 2011; Jones, 2011).

Sexualization and "states of injury"

Whilst Gill's narrative has remained consistent, the term "sexualization" has shifted from one of her key terms to being rejected from her vocabulary. In the period 2006–2011, Gill made extensive use of the concept to refer to the way in which women were enjoined to compulsory sexual agency. A little history and semantics can help contextualize why it was an apt tool in some ways for this task. The term "sexualization" originally emerged a portmanteau of the words "sexual socialization" (see Spanier, 1975). As a portmanteau, “sexualization” brings into a mismatched “disjunctive synthesis” (Deleuze, 1969/1990, p. 55) two powerful themes: “socialization” as a passive process of enculturation that occurs during youth, and the “sexual” as any aspect of gender identity, physical development, or erotic desires and experiences. “Sexualization” as a nominalization (a noun turned into a verb) focuses attention on the process through which something or someone is endowed with “the sexual.” The concept of “sexualization” therefore focuses attention in the same direction as Gill’s two key feminist questions: why the ideal of femininity is a “young body,” and how “ideals of beauty are internalized” as people grow up.

Gill deployed the term “sexualization” to try to pick out the way in which acceptable forms of femininity are those that engage in compulsory sexual agency. This use of the concept “sexualization” in her texts coincided with, and contributed to, its rise to prominence within British media and policy discourses (Duschinsky, 2012). However, whereas Gill’s analysis of “sexualization” was attentive to the complexity of the changes taking place in constructions of femininity, these media and policy discourses generally used the term to tell a much simpler tale. Recently, Gill (2012) has stated that she has become dissatisfied with the term “sexualization,” which directs attention to the innocence of children and “towards judgments about ‘explicitness’ and ‘exposure’ rather than questions about equality or justice” (p. 741).

A representative instance of work which mistakes Gill’s point in problematizing “sexualization” is a recent study by Malson, Halliwell, Tischner, and Rúdólfsdótter (2011), published in *Feminism & Psychology.* The authors express surprise and delight that the discourses of the female students in their focus group research did not instantiate the “sexualized” discourses they expected to find but instead “converged significantly” with the “critical feminist analyses” of Gill. They found that a “sexualized” young woman was understood by their participants “not as an image of liberated female desire and gender equality but as ‘slutty’ and ‘look[ing] like a prostitute’” (p. 90). Her sexualization, however novel in some ways, is nevertheless recuperated back into longstanding, culturally entrenched, derogatory stereotypes. These researchers find themselves lauding these “distinctly non-feminist” assumptions, since they correspond to what they see as the “critical feminist” perspective, “indicating a critique, along the lines of Gill’s” (p. 90; cf. Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1997).

In *States of Injury*, Wendy Brown (1995) offers a framework for analysing how issues such as “sexualization” may be mobilized by feminist discourses to pick out gender-specific injuries and threats, only to be co-opted. Liberal discourses divide subjects into those who are fully responsible, and those who have been victimized, abstracted from the subject’s social and material conditions; this means that often identity politics has to be framed in terms that actually direct attention from the real cause of the harms. Brown terms a “state of injury” a situation in which representations of wound or threat are mobilized within identity politics on behalf of a dominated group in society, and this strategy backfires by supporting social and state institutions in regulating and normalizing precisely this very group. Offering a criterion for assessing a “state of injury,” she asks, “In a given historical context, what kinds of powers produce … claims that might become the instruments of what kinds of regulation or domination even as they confer recognition or redress of subject-specific injuries?" (Brown, 2000, p. 477). Whilst her focus is on feminist attempts to use the law to redress injury, she explicitly extends her argument to apply "in other political registers" such as policy and psychological discourses (Brown, 1995, pp. 66, 75). In line with this, Brown (2002) herself suggests that her work in political theory can serve as effective psychological theory to the extent that psychological discourses are incited by the need to evidence harms in order to counter liberal discourses of autonomy and choice in the course of identity politics.

Brown has been criticized for, in *States of Injury* (1995), disparaging claims for redress made on the basis of shared experiences of pain (e.g., Gatens, 2008; Lever, 2000; McNay, 2010). In her later work, she goes on to draw a distinction between "galvanizing moral vision and a reproachful moralizing sensibility" (Brown, 2001, p. 22). Yet such criticism and qualification tempers, but does not undermine, the acuity of the argument of *States of Injury*, in which Brown (1995) notes that

> to suggest that rights sought by politicized identities may cut two (or more ways)—naturalizing identity even as they reduce elements of its stigma, depoliticizing even as they protect recently produced political subjects, empowering what they also regulate —is not to condemn them. Rather it is to refuse them any predetermined place in an emancipatory politics and to insist instead upon the importance of incessantly querying that place. (p. 121)

Specifically, treated as a theory of psychological discourses, the idea of the "state of injury" helps direct attention to an assessment of what sleight of hand might be necessary in order to depict identity in such a way that such shared pain can be publicly acknowledged. Minow (1996) puts this well, drawing on Brown:

> The potentially multiple, fluid qualities of any person's identity seem to disappear in the assertion of one trait but considerable power must be marshalled to accomplish this disappearing act, given the nonessential, intersectional, and incoherent qualities of group-based identities. The question, then, is not whether identities are fluid and contestable—they are. Rather, the question is why we ever forget this. (p. 672)

The *Papadopoulos Review*

If, as Minow states, "considerable power must be marshalled to accomplish this disappearing act," it might well be fruitful to see if we can catch this operation "in the act" through discourse analysis. I shall examine the UK Home Office *Sexualisation of Young People Review*, by Linda Papadopoulos (2010a). A clinical psychologist, Papadopoulos is known to the UK public for her appearances on the TV show *Big Brother* and her column in *Cosmopolitan* magazine. Though her academic publications have been on psychodermatology, Papadopoulos has written popular psychology books such as *Mirror, Mirror: Dr. Linda's Body Image Revolution* (2004) and *The Man Manual: Everything You Wanted to Know About Your Man* (2005). The *Papadopoulos Review*, published in February 2010, has served as an important policy text in shaping public and policy discourses in the UK. Reviewing the deployment of sexualization discourses in recent years in the UK, Penny (2010) notes:

> The word wheedled its way into the language of women's liberation like a semiotic sleeper agent. It was seen in headlines as early as 2007, but after the Home Office report on the sexualisation of young people last February, it was suddenly everywhere. (lines 1–4)

Looking back, Papadopoulos (2011) has remarked that "since my review came out, the wrong things have been focused on," which run "against the feminist" goals of her Home Office Review. I do not believe that this focus on the wrong things is a simple co-option, but rather it was facilitated by the discourse on sexualization of the Review itself, which produced a "state of injury." Specifically, the use of "sexualization" as a developmental narrative focused on "girls" to highlight misogyny in wider society has succeeded in centring moralizing attention on young women and sex, rather than critical attention on sexism. In attempting ineffectively to pinpoint the issues highlighted by Gill, the *Papadopoulos Review* constructs femininity as equivalent to childhood. Discussing the subjectivation of women in terms of innocent girls—as minors, prior to a capacity to consent—does discursively protect female subjects from the threat of being "sluts," asking to be raped. Such a strategy, however, reaffirms the misogynist division between innocent and wanton, pure and impure, protected and abandoned forms of femininity. This is a division coded and organized along classed and raced lines, and policed by the threat of rape. Discourses on sexualization such as the *Papadopoulos Review* have inadvertently buttressd a narrative in which the sexuality and desires of young women are rendered pathological and morally unacceptable as judged by a conservative standard of public decency and innocent subjectivity.

Femininity and propriety

Following its executive summary, the *Papadopoulos Review* sets out by stating that it has no "intention" of itself considering "the precise definition of sexualisation" (Papadopoulos, 2010a, p. 17). Rather, in defining "sexualization," the Review cites the American psychologist Deborah Tolman (2002): "[I]n the current environment, teen girls are encouraged to look sexy, yet they know little about what it means to be sexual, to have sexual desires" (Papadopoulos, 2010a, p. 23). This passage, however, does not come from Tolman's *Dilemmas of Desire* (2002), but from the American Psychological Association (APA) report of 2007, in turn indirectly citing Tolman's book. The APA Report was co-authored by Tolman, but this argument diverges strongly from the results of her earlier qualitative research (Tolman, 1994), and her recent theoretical work on adolescent capacity for sexual subjectivity and desire as "normative" (Tolman & McLelland, 2011; likewise cf. Lamb, 1999, another co-author of the report). In *Dilemmas of Desire*, Tolman (2002) had argued that young women need to be able to recognize their desires in order to make safe and healthy life-choices, in a continued environment of unequal and gendered relations of power: "Representations of girls' lack of desire serves as the necessary linchpin in how adolescent sexuality is organized and managed. To the extent that we believe that adolescent sexuality is under control, it is adolescent girls whom we hold responsible" (p. 15).

Nevertheless, the 2007 APA Report and the 2010 *Papadopoulos Review* (Papadopoulos, 2010a) cite *Dilemmas of Desire* to authorize discourses of concern about teenage girls, who are taken to "know little" about the state of being a person imbued with sexuality or desire. This knowing, relatively lacked by teenage girls, is not merely the possession of abstract information, but knowledge as the experience of deep and abiding familiarity. The APA Report and the *Papadopoulos Review* assume that the very being of teenage girls is unfamiliar with and thus pure of sexuality and desire, though the text observes that in practice it is clear that they behave otherwise. This behaviour, contrary to their essence, is caused by "the current environment," which "encourages" girls to take on the artificial appearance of sexuality and desire. They therefore come to "look sexy" in a way that disturbs the prior match between the behaviour of girls and how they should, in truth, "be." As a result, the *Papadopoulos Review* argues, "being 'sexy' is no longer about individuality" or about girls' being true to their "authentic voice" (Papadopoulos, 2010a, pp. 34, 58). Young people have been displaced from the natural form of "who they are" by the intrusion of sexualization (p. 4).

Placed in opposition to a prior state of purity, the combination of sexuality and economics contained in "sexualized" cultural forms is problematized as producing "a jungle of exploitative imagery" which "grows around us" (Papadopoulos, 2010a, p. 33), and to which young women are dangerously "open" (p. 39). The *Papadopoulos Review* is adamant that a woman is not to "blame for an attack if she was out in public wearing sexy or revealing clothes" (p. 12). Indeed, positioned as "minors" by the text (p. 47), young women cannot be understood as choice-making agents in such a way as to potentially be held to moral judgement. Yet the *Papadopoulos Review* states that "sexualisation devalues women and girls sending out a disturbing message that they are always sexually available" (p. 74). This passage situates "women and girls" as morally demeaned by the corrupting forces of sexualization and, as a result, separated from the inviolability allocated to male subjects and normally allocated to female subjects by social and legal conventions. Sexualization is seen to draw women away from their natural and proper form, focusing their efforts on "physical appearance" rather than "aptitude and accomplishment" (p. 78). As a result of sexualization, the text proposes that "there is a lack of aspiration and ambition amongst a large number of Britain's teenage girls" (p. 80). To combat this, the *Papadopoulos Review* proposes to "put together a working group of inspirational working women" with whom girls can "gain work experience" (p. 78); the repetition of "work" emphasizes that "sexualization" has undermined the ability of young women to serve as economically productive national subjects.

Sexualization, taste, and social status

Since distance from the imputed ideal is presumed to reflect the work of sexualization as a corrupting substance or force, "vulnerable" individuals and populations are assessed in terms of their degree of contamination—though implicitly they code other variables, such as class and race. Bracketing issues of taste cultures and social class, for example, the *Papadopoulos Review* argues that educated young people can "filter out" unhealthy messages, but other "young people don't have these opportunities" (Papadopoulos, 2010a, pp. 34, 55). The *Papadopoulos Review*'s depiction of a "lack of aspiration and ambition amongst a large number of Britain's teenage girls" (p. 80) can also be seen as an implicit warning regarding the cultural values associated with social class.

According to the *Papadopoulos Review*, those without further or higher education are less able to "filter out" unhealthy cultural messages (Papadopoulos, 2010a, pp. 34, 51). Whilst also admitting that the "evidence base" is inadequate on "the impact of sexualisation on black and minority ethnic groups" (p. 84), the *Papadopoulos Review* asserts that "young black girls," more than their non-black peers, are vulnerable to "glamorised versions of pimp/ho chic." "Young black girls" are taken to believe that this lifestyle offers "a means of gaining personal and social power" (p. 51). The involvement of such individuals with forms of culture considered to be corrupt or degenerate is contextualized not with reference to differential access to cultural and economic capital, but through individualizing narratives within a psychological register (cf. Cruikshank, 1993). As Papadopoulos (2004) states elsewhere: "Someone who has a good level of self-esteem, respect for and the confidence to stand up for themselves and what they believe in can be described as having reached 'autonomy'" (p. 12).

Commenting on American and Australian public debates, Egan and Hawkes (2008) have argued that sexualization discourses have been mobilized in part to police the symbolic boundaries between high-status and low-status culture. Terms such as "kinderwhore" or "prostitot" speak of the "infiltration of working class feminine sexuality" into the "uncontaminated domain" (p. 306) of middle-class white childhood, via practices associated with consumption and gendered, raced, and classed embodiment. This, Egan and Hawkes (2010) argue, should be understood in the context of a history of concern regarding the threat of working-class female sexuality as a source of moral contamination and biopolitical degradation contrasted to a middle-class feminine ideal (see also Foucault, 1976/1978; Walkerdine, 1997). Such assumptions can be observed in contemporary UK media discourses on sexualization: Hunt (2009) frames her discussion of sexualization with the question, "Why do 'nice' parents let their young daughters dress like tarts?" and Mooney (2010) frames hers by asking, "What have we come to when middle-class girls like this see whoring as a career choice?"

The risk run by young women in displaying attitudes or behaviours (e.g., choice of clothes, forms of desire, presence in particular spaces, manner within those spaces) that breach the limited domain of proper femininity is that they will be positioned as "whores" or "prostitutes"—commercialized, sexualized, and legitimate objects for sexual violence. As Buckingham, Willett, Russell, and Dorrer (2010, pp. 25–26, 33–35) found in their qualitative study commissioned by the Scottish government, parents expressed concern about the sexualization of girls because they were anxious that signs of sexuality would remove the conventional attribution of propriety that protects their daughters from the accusation of having solicited sexual advances. Buckingham et al. report that, whilst working-class young women are tacitly situated within sexualization discourses as already "sexualized," middle-class pubescent girls are tacitly positioned as the main object under threat in the present.

The *Papadopoulos Review* pits (working-class, racialized) sexuality against (middle-class) childhood and femininity, and spatial narratives of the movement of corrupting forces against a natural and undisturbed state. The physical attributes, social behaviours, physical movements, personal desires, *inter alia*, of young women are assessed according to criteria stabilized by this semantic organization. The *Papadopoulos Review* argues that "women are revered—and rewarded—for their physical attributes" (Papadopoulos, 2010a, p. 5). This reverence tends to be differentially assigned, however, based on factors such as class, race, and sexual orientation. Especially for those whom these factors situate outside the tacit norm, reverence can be withdrawn along with social protections if the sexuality of young women becomes positioned as "provocative," as breaching gendered propriety.

Inviolability

Walter Benjamin (1925/1998, p. 87) suggested that Western societies ascribe a certain "purity" to persons as the foundation for their physical inviolability and their entry into the social community of human beings. Following Benjamin, Agamben argues that if subjects work to correspond to the designation of human essence established by social and political apparatuses, then they are assigned "dignity," a basic level of purity, inviolability, and sacredness of life by social and state institutions (Agamben, 1995/2000, p. 34; 1999/2002, p. 61; Duschinsky, 2012). Brown (1995) identifies the gender politics involved in this division between pure and impure forms of femininity:

> Operating simultaneously to link "femininity" to the privileged races and classes, protection codes are also markers and vehicles of such divisions among women, distinguishing those women constructed as violable and hence protectable from those women who are their violation, logically unviolable because marked sexually available, marked as sexuality. Protection codes are thus key technologies in regulating privileged women as well as in intensifying the vulnerability and degradation of those on the unprotected side of the constructed divide between light and dark, wives and prostitutes, good girls and bad ones. (p. 170)

Women tend to be "revered" if they match the essence which is discursively imputed to them through the construction of their social, economic, and sexual choices, and they risk losing their social protections if they are understood to diverge in visible, "marked" ways (Deborah Cameron, 1992) from this essence. Sexualization discourses enact such a differential allocation of the status of "human being" between gendered individuals based on their class, race, and the propriety of their attitudes and behaviours. The *Papadopoulos Review* proposes that "the 'sexualisation of culture' is a sign of cultural degradation," and that "in many ways, sexualisation leads to dehumanisation" (Papadopoulos, 2010a, pp. 24, 65). For instance, "prolonged exposure" to pornography leads individuals to consume "harmful" material or "what the UK government labels 'extreme' sexual behaviours such as violent sex and bestiality" (p. 69). The differential allocation of the status of full, proper "human being" confers varying degrees of access to social privileges and physical and sexual protections. Whereas men in contemporary society are often treated as retaining a relative and unmarked purity and a status of inviolability no matter what their heterosexual experiences or practices,[1] the marked social construction of their embodiment subjects women to a marked differentiation between pure–good–proper–clean and impure–bad–wild–dirty (Bordo, 1993; Grosz, 1994).

The *Papadopoulos Review* (Papadopoulos, 2010a), rather than analysing this process of cultural classification, instantiates it. The text mobilizes a division between a pure, natural state of childhood and a corrupted, sexual state to justify social and self-regulation of young women, demanding the maintenance of a proximity to an imputed essence of femininity/childhood. The narrative of sexualization as a form of corruption offers a strategic explanation as to why in practice young women deviate from an imputed norm, proposed implicitly as their true and proper nature. In this way, "sexualization" discourses resolve the tensions and inequalities that attend the construction of a proper form for young women into discussions of propriety.

The regulatory activity justified by the discourse of protection is not seen to impinge on the imputed natural state. Purity/impurity discourses are deployed to construct a separation between that which deviates from a natural state, and that which merely affirms or expresses such a state. This can be seen in the *Papadopoulos Review* (Papadopoulos, 2010a) in the assertion that "femininity" has been subjected to "hyper-sexualisation and objectification," whereas "males" have been "hyper-masculinised" (pp. 3, 10). The constitutive tensions produced by this double standard are managed through the "hyper-" prefixing both terms, which allows discursive constructions of the respective essence of each gender to be covertly produced precisely via representations of what is being *added* to this originary state. The appeal to purity and impurity of the sexualization narrative in the *Papadopoulos Review* serves to make a contingent classification of different types of subject seem outside of history or power relations. This classification, in turn, constructs these subjects as legitimately sexually violable to varying degrees depending on their relative possession of economic and cultural capital. Discursively constructed as an innocent minor, the true and proper young woman can appear in the *Papadopoulos Review* to be the mere expression of a neutral and universal essence attached to "childhood." An interior, private sphere prior to politics, economics, technology, or sexuality can thereby seem to be the natural but externally threatened expression of essence, rather than a strategic construction (see Steedman, 1995). Appeals to purity/impurity allow sexualization discourses to performatively construct a division between acceptable and unacceptable forms of young femininity in terms of the proximity or distance from an imputed essence.

Innocence and the neo-liberal subject

The *Papadopoulos Review* asserts that "young children do not have the cognitive skills to cope with persuasive media messages," which thus enter the subject on an "emotional" rather than "rational" level (Papadopoulos, 2010a, pp. 6, 27). There is a double textual movement here. On the one hand, representations of vulnerability are extended from children to older teenage girls. For example, the text acknowledges that cultural objects "will mean different things to a three-year-old, an eight-year-old, and a 14-year-old" (p. 25), but proposes that with regards to the processes that underpin sexualization, "older children are just as susceptible" (p. 39). On the other hand, representations of overt displays of sexuality and desire are extended back in time from older teenage girls to young children, as sexualization is taken to be "happening to younger and younger children" (p. 6).

Constructed as children, young women are therefore disqualified as appropriate sexual or desiring subjects—a move that, though it might intend the opposite, strongly risks affirming gendered mechanisms of disenfranchisement, subordination, and exploitation. Young women are treated as belonging to an interior domain naturally prior to the intrusion of politics, economics, or sexuality. Young masculinity is less readily situated as a state of innocent minority since it is presumed to already "contain the seeds" of full and responsible sexual, economic, and political subjectivity (Renold, 2005). This haunting of young masculinity by its future adult sexuality leads to the presumption in the *Papadopoulos Review* that the additional sexuality imbued by "sexualization" renders the masculine subject pathologically and indiscriminately sexual. Hence the otherwise tendentious logic that leads the text to cite, in an "evidenced-based" review, anecdotal evidence that every male who views pornography tends to move "seamlessly from adult women to children" in his viewing habits (Papadopoulos, 2010a, p. 47). Young femininity, in contrast, is situated as an innocent or corrupted girlhood, and thereby subjected to a high degree of social and self-regulation. "The girl" as a discursive figure is haunted by her future care-giving role and practical association with infancy; she is thereby placed in discursive proximity to "the natural" (whether characterized as pure and docile, or as impure and wild) at the base and boundary of the human. Moreover, the girl is haunted by the "trouble" (Butler, 1990) she will suffer and be held responsible for in negotiating what has been constructed as full (masculine) responsible sexual, economic, and political subjectivity.

Lerum and Dworkin (2009) have argued that discourses on the "sexualization of young people" tend to conflate sexuality with sexualization, positioning female sexuality or desire as always already an external and inauthentic imposition. This situates young women as unable to stand as full adults and to give true consent. The choices made by young women are alleged to be not the result of true agency, but caused by a prior corruption by sexualization. Such arguments within discourses on sexualization circumvent liberal discourses, which contend that each citizen should be free to decide such matters for him- or herself. Papadopoulos (2010b) wrote in the *Daily Mail* in May 2010 about the danger of sexualized cultural forms such as the music of Rihanna, which, in her view, should not be permitted on national radio. She specified, however, that "had it not been for my daughter's presence in the car, I probably wouldn't have batted an eyelid. After all, it was a mainstream station and she's a mainstream singer" (para. 3; see also Richardson, 2011).

What is particularly noteworthy about this circumvention is that purity/impurity discourses help problematizations of sexualization to mobilize an integral aspect of liberal discourses. Liberal discourses tend to treat individuals, in the first instance, as if they were primarily legal entities with certain rights and responsibilities vis-à-vis the state and one another, so as to abstract them from their particular conditions of possibility and enter them into a universal political domain (Brown, 1995; see also Lister, 2003; Pateman, 1989). "The child" is situated in liberal discourses as still developing "reason" as civil competence, in contrast to the full subject, who is thereby imputed to have the faculties and resources to exercise this "capacity" as "understanding, reasoning and control of conduct" in their everyday practices (Hart, 1968/2008, p. 227; see also Brewer, 2005). For instance, in contemporary discourses on the limits of meaningful consent in the USA, Harkins (2009) has found that "children function as the naturalized outside" to three areas of neo-liberal decision-making subjectivity: political consent, sexual consent, and consumption and entrepreneurship. As a result, "the negation of children's capacity for consent holds out the reality of consent proper, the legibility of consent as the mark of real civil and sexual agency granted to proper citizens" (pp. 195–197).

The mobilization of women as children in feminist discourses problematizing sexualization draws upon the long-standing liberal narrative which separates autonomous and responsible subjects from those not adequate to this status. However, the child is re-deployed in "neo-liberal" discourses on sexualization in the subjectivation of responsible consumers and entrepreneurs, coding cultural and material inequalities as individual pathology and irresponsibility. Whereas classical liberalism suggests that freedom and market processes need to be extracted from the excesses of political governance, "neo-liberal" discourses re-position the state as needing to re-structure both itself and market forces in order to return citizens to their natural state as autonomous, responsible consumers and entrepreneurs. And whereas prior forms of conservative discourse suggested that state intervention is necessary to defend the nation from the threat of degradation, "neo-liberal" discourses re-position much the same activity of moral governance as ensuring the social conditions in which adult subjects can be "responsible" for their decisions, their socio-economic fate, and the fate of their family.

The figure of the innocent child is the constitutive outside of such neo-liberal discourses, since deficient in responsibility compared to the adult, who must therefore be "responsible" in the prescribed economic and moral manner. Proper childhood is also a covert training ground in proper choice-making, so as to stabilize the tension between the natural and desirable state of neo-liberal subjects. Buckingham and Bragg (2003) have suggested that contributing to the emergence of discourses on sexualization has been a "personalization of the public sphere" in Western societies. This has included the increased visibility and availability of marked signifiers of female sexuality as a lexicon, deployed by both sexes for forming narratives about the self. It is in the context of this shift that, in the same countries in which "responsible subjectivity" has become a key target of neo-liberal biopolitical discourses over recent decades, the innocent child has become a significant discursive figure as the constitutive outside and training ground of this responsible subject (see, e.g., Baird, 2008; Berlant, 1995; Mankekar, 1997).

Gendered tensions are produced in contemporary discourses on contemporary sexual morality and public health by a bracketing of the whole issue of *inequalities* by neo-liberal discourses in their construction of full responsible sexual, economic, and political subjectivity. Through a discursive frame that assesses young women in terms of their correspondence to a natural (childhood) essence, these tensions can be framed as the pathology and deviancy of individual young women. Themes of purity/impurity are therefore significant to the stabilization of essentialized divisions between forms of subjectivity, demanding protection for some but at the same time managing the discursive tensions that permit the "responsible subject" demanded by contemporary neo-liberalism to be situated as both natural and necessary.

Within discourses on sexualization, a disruption of subjective and embodied purity occasions adulthood; but proper adulthood, and the role of the state, is constructed as the attempt to defend purity from the threat posed by heterogeneity, foreignness, or inferiority. The figure of "the girl" is placed as an expression of a natural essence that needs to be supplemented by geographical, social, and legal enclosure within cultivated culture, and nourished by the correct processes of training in belonging. Such discourses thereby permit a "natural essence" to be constructed, without this seeming to be an artificial imposition, by using the invocation of purity/impurity to problematize some of the practical means through which it is socially and materially constructed as inessential, and to classify others as no more than cultivations of a pre-existing interior essence. This is a crucial strategy for the enactment of processes of subjectivation in "neo-liberal" societies, since state intervention is marked and problematized except where it is situated as protecting public life or returning the private citizen and private interactions to their uncorrupted form.

Within this "neo-liberal" configuration, adult citizens are impelled to take responsibility for themselves and "children" by finding meaning and pleasure in combating forces coded as impure and by preserving/cultivating sources of purity. Minors are included within the identities of their protectors within such discourses; this protection, depicted as no more than the conservation of a pre-existing purity, actually serves as the cover for a covert training and normalization through control over the environment and choices of minors. In turn, the successful enactment of this protective and regulatory practice grants the authority's acts and their social identity a degree of consecrating purity, serving as a species of "symbolic capital." Though the departure from subjective and embodied purity occasions sexual and political adulthood, it can be re-found as an external source of moral consecration through work to defend sites of purity against the threat of perforation and contamination by impure forces.

Drawing on themes of purity and impurity, sexualization discourses construct sexuality and desire as a cultural contagion, coming from outside the (middle-class) home, from which girls need protection by parents and other social authorities. Race, class, and gendered relations of power in society are re-coded as the effects of this cultural contagion. The result is a justification for the social and self-regulation of young female subjects as inadequate economic, social, and (hetero)sexual choice-making agents. Commenting on the issue of sexualization in a BBC report (Ryan, 2010), "Siobhan Freegard, founder of the website netmums" (sect. "Lock Up Your Daughters," para. 1), urged public and political recognition of the fact that "children are being sexualised earlier": "It has probably been going on for generations but it seems very obvious with multimedia. It is very difficult to control now. You used to be able to lock up your daughters" (sect. "Lock Up Your Daughters," para. 9).

To take another example, Alibhai-Brown (2009) describes herself as a "left-of-centre commentator" (para. 3) and "a defender of the rights of women and girls" (para. 4). Yet she states that it is "no betrayal of what I have always believed in" (para. 5) to characterize comprehensive sex education as a "sexualization" of children, and demand a more "basic" syllabus. She states that "for an old feminist like me, the gains we made were many, but we have failed to equip young females with the tools they need to withstand the pressures put on them" (para. 27). For Alibhai-Brown it is "quite scandalous that the fourth richest nation in the world is still unable to find its moral centre and to prevent such levels of sexual incontinence and irresponsibility" (4th para. from bottom).

Discursive strategies which aim to change society through the regulation of social and sexual behaviour have long been mobilized by feminist actors in ways that have been open to appropriation by other discursive actors; this is not, in itself, problematic, which is why accusations of "moral panic" lack analytical precision (Atmore, 1999; Bray, 2008; Reece, 2009). Feminists writing on sexualization have occasionally recognized that they are advocating an alliance with right-wing biopolitical interests in demanding measures to regulate the sexuality of young women. For example, Durham (2008) expresses her enthusiasm for the way that sexualization as social problem finds "supportive people on both ends of the political spectrum" (p. 5). Yet in addressing the subjectivation of women through the figure of the "girl," prior to the age of consent, feminist discourses on sexualization have entered into an uncritical discursive coalition with those that demand the control and regulation of young female sexuality—as a key site for intervening in the present and the future reproductive, social, and economic life of the nation. Control over the female body enables the gendered subject to be used as a site of social and biological reproduction (cf. Mullen, 1994; Skeggs, 1997): it facilitates the discursive, material, and affective reproduction of particular social entities—such as social class, the heterosexual family, or the nation—as themselves seemingly discrete essences. Female subjects are coded pure/impure in their position as "border guards" (Yuval-Davis, 1997) for these cultural units: charged with responsibility for reproducing these aspects of identity as ostensive essences, female sexuality becomes situated in particular as the site at which the contingencies that attend the material and discursive construction of essences must be both managed and occluded through social and self-regulation.

David Cameron

In particular, discourses on sexualization have been increasingly mobilized as a form of political capital by Conservative politicians in the UK. David Cameron, Leader of the Conservative Party and now Prime Minister of the UK, has made numerous statements on the issue of sexualization, arguing that "the protection of childhood innocence against premature sexualisation is something worth fighting for" (as cited in Crerar, 2006). In producing authoritative discourses that operate in the name of true childhood/femininity, a mandate is provided for controversial political, economic, and moral measures. Since 2006, Cameron has frequently mobilized the "growing sexualisation of our society, where sex is aimed at an ever younger audience and it's cool to treat women like sex objects," to decry the "moral collapse" (Chapman, 2007, para. 16) of UK society (see David Cameron, 2009; Shipman, 2010).

In the central speech of the 2009 Conservative Party conference, entitled "Putting Britain Back on Her Feet," Cameron mobilized the threat of sexualization to childhood as a legitimation strategy for financial measures to incentivize heterosexual marriage, and to shift governmental functions towards a market model and radically scale back the welfare state. Only in this way would Britain be "back on her feet," behaving responsibly—free of "her" fiscal debt and of "her" sexual/moral dissolution:

> Why do so many magazines and websites and music videos make children insecure about the way they look or the experiences they haven't even had? And it's about our society. We give our children more and more rights, and we trust our teachers less and less. We've got to stop treating children like adults and adults like children. It is about everyone taking responsibility. The more that we as a society do, the less we will need government to do. But you can't expect families to behave responsibly when the welfare system works in the opposite direction. (David Cameron, 2009, "Family," paras. 9–11, "Welfare," para. 1)

A few days before the publication of the *Papadopoulos Review* (Papadopoulos, 2010a), Cameron argued that "more and more today, sexual-provocative images are invading public space—space shared by children" (David Cameron, 2010, para. 8). He suggested that this degradation of the true form of public space and public morality is causing the "premature sexualisation" of young people, as British culture continues "dumping a waste that is toxic on our children. Products and marketing that can warp their minds and their bodies and harm their future. That can take away their innocence" (para. 2).

Like the sexualized subject, the protective authority in such discourses on sexualization is positioned as distant from the natural essence represented by "childhood," though as a supersession of the natural (feminine) origin, rather than as an unnatural deviation. Elsewhere (Duschinsky, 2011), I have traced the historical roots of this narrative to 19th-century discourses on middle-class childhood, showing how such cultivation sets out to establish the proper manner and objects of adult desire, thus generating the interior life and social practice of a cultivated (masculine) subject who is relatively pure in an utterly unmarked way (see also Egan & Hawkes, 2010; Robson, 1998; Steedman, 1995). To the extent that normative behaviour is coded as relatively pure as part of its establishment as a social norm, the analysis of the *Papadopoulos Review* (Papadopoulos, 2010a) indicates that this is an effect of the discursive construction of acceptable desires as cultivated forms of a natural human essence, considered to be prior to heterogeneity. Childhood as a period of "innocence"—once experienced, but now surpassed by the social authority mobilizing sexualization discourse—serves as a legitimating discursive figure in this narrative: "It's about remembering the simple pleasures of our own childhood—and making sure our children can enjoy them too" (David Cameron, 2010, last para.).

The issue of sexualization was headlined as the centre of the Coalition government policy on families and children. The Coalition's *Programme for Government*, issued by the Cabinet Office in May 2010 (Cabinet Office, 2010), stated that since "strong and stable families of all kinds are the bedrock of a strong and stable society," the government must "take action to protect children from excessive commercialisation and premature sexualisation" (p. 19). Leaving aside the Home Office's *Bailey Review* (Bailey, 2011), which I have considered in detail in two other articles (Barker & Duschinsky, 2012; Duschinsky & Barker, in press), there have been several other mobilizations of the issue of sexualization in justification for conservative social policy. For instance, in order to further fight the "premature sexualisation of children," Communications Minister Ed Vaizey has begun discussions with UK service providers regarding a moral filter on the internet, censoring "filth," except for those who make an official request to registered agencies (Gray, 2010). On 4 May 2011, Conservative MP Nadine Dorries won a vote on the floor of the House of Commons for a Bill to go for further consideration, which proposed the compulsory teaching of abstinence in sex education to 13- to 16-year-old girls in British schools. Such measures are necessary, she argued, because of the "sexualisation of young girls." Even feminist public figures, Dorries suggests, agree that women's "sexual liberation in the 1960s" had done "damage" to "society," and that "girls" have been irresponsible with these freedoms (Parliament.uk, 2011).

Concluding reflections

At stake in discourses on sexualization are questions regarding the extent to which young women can be seen as responsible for themselves, and the extent to which they are able make appropriate choices as economic, (hetero)sexual, and political agents in contemporary society. With liberal arguments otherwise making such actions difficult to justify, purity and impurity facilitate essentialist strategies within feminist discourses on sexualization which serve to construct young women as "minors" within a sexist/sexualized society. This semantic structure, in turn, operates and legitimates a social logic in the *Papadopoulos Review* (Papadopoulos, 2010a) which constructs young women as unable to stand as effective choice-making sexual, cultural, and political agents without protection and control by state, medical, and familial authorities. Social and self-regulation and normalization are tied to the threat that, especially for those already outside the imputed norm by virtue of their race or class, unmarried women who breach norms of propriety risk the retraction of the social protections that otherwise attend the status of full human being.

The narrative of the corruption of the "natural" state of young girls invokes purity and impurity to smuggle assumptions into an ostensibly objective set of psychological discourses about "sexualization": both ascribing certain properties to female subjects and those who are placed with responsibility for them, and hiding the operation of this process of ascription. Sexualization can therefore appear as an objective and pressing social problem, precisely through the unwarranted and political assumptions it smuggles into the separation between normal and abnormal forms of behaviour and subjectivity. In the mobilization of purity/impurity, this division occurs, in particular, in relation to a separation between clean and dirty forms of femininity. The former are constructed as children, cultivated forms of an imputed natural essence. The latter are constructed as both corrupted and corrupting, and as violable. The politics of purity in discourses on sexualization have also facilitated a neo-liberal mobilization in the UK in which the figure of the innocent girl stands as the constitutive outside of the self-reliant citizen, responsible for himself and without any need of welfare state protections.

Funding

This research was supported by the Economic and Social Sciences Research Council, UK.

Note

1. Exceptions to this tendency are notable as instances where the definition of masculinity and the definition of the full human being are *simultaneously* at stake, such that normal protections are suspended (cf. Graham, 2006).

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