

Sexualisation: constructing the issue

*This article looks at how 'sexualisation' came to be defined as a social issue in the UK in the late 2000s. In some ways, it's a case study that shows how social issues get framed and defined, and how the media relate to social policy, more generally. It was written for the Media Magazine, targeting 16-18-year-old students, in 2012, and I have adapted it slightly here. I did a fair amount of research on children's and parents' perceptions of 'sexualisation' around the same time: this can be found in a couple of articles – [with S. Bragg] 'Global concerns, local negotiations and moral selves: contemporary parenting and the "sexualisation of childhood" debate', *Feminist Media Studies*, 13(4), pp.643-659, 2012; and [with S. Bragg, R. Russell, R. Willett] 'Too much, too soon? Children, "sexualisation" and consumer culture', *Sex Education* 11(3): 279-292, 2011. Both of these are on my Academia.edu website.*

How do some things come to be seen as social issues in the first place, and others do not. 'Issues' aren't just out there in the world: they are not natural events, like the weather. Things have to be defined or *socially constructed* as issues. So how do things come to be regarded as social issues, or indeed as social problems? Why do some things become issues, and others don't? Who does the defining, why do they do it, and how? And what role do the media play in the social construction of 'issues'?

In this article, I want to explore this in relation to a specific example, the issue of 'sexualisation' – and particularly the sexualisation of children. This is a term that has only come to public attention in the UK in the last five years: but it has very quickly become the focus of books, newspaper articles, TV programmes, campaigns and even government reports. It may well be true that the sexualisation of children is a real and growing problem; but we still need to ask how the issue came to be identified in the first place, how it is defined, and who gets to speak about it. And as Media Studies students, we particularly need to look at how the media *represent* this issue, because it's in the media that much of this social construction of issues takes place.

Constructing issues

There's a body of research – mainly conducted in the US – that has looked at the whole question of 'social problems' and how they are constructed. This approach gives us some useful tools with which we can analyse public controversies. Three ideas are particularly useful here:

Framing is about how particular issues are identified and defined. Putting something (like a picture) into a frame draws it to our attention; but the frame also excludes certain things. So we can begin by asking what's in the frame and what isn't in the frame, and what the consequences of this might be.

Secondly, we can look at how particular individuals or organisations claim *ownership* of a given issue. Which people claim to be the 'experts' on the issue, what are their motivations or interests, and how do they try to establish their authority to speak about it? Which people are not heard or consulted?

The third issue is *rhetoric* – that is, persuasive language. How do people use language to persuade us of their own definition of the issue, to appeal for our support, and to restrict what it's possible to say about it? Of course, this can involve looking at visual 'language' (the use of dramatic or authoritative images, for example), as well as verbal language.

The sociologist Joel Best has used this approach to look at a wide range of social issues, from obesity to gay marriage to identity theft to climate change. Best describes a 'social problems marketplace', in which different parties – campaigners, experts, professional interest groups – compete for control over how the issue is framed and understood. Best pays particular attention to how people try to justify their claims, for instance by appealing to scientific evidence, providing dramatic examples, and pressing emotional 'buttons'.

These ideas can be used to analyse how an issue like 'sexualisation' is constructed: how did it come to be identified in the first place, how is evidence about it compiled and presented, how are opinions about it asserted, circulated and marketed, and how do people claim the authority to speak about it?

The story of 'sexualisation'

In 2009, the UK Home Office appointed the child psychologist Dr. Linda Papadopoulos to produce an official report on the 'sexualisation of young people'. The report was part of a broader Home Office review of domestic violence against women, instigated by the then Labour Home Secretary Jacqui Smith. Smith did not stay in office long enough to see its publication, however: she was obliged to resign when it emerged that her husband had been watching soft porn movies on pay-TV and that she had put the charges for this on her parliamentary expenses claim. This is just the first of several ironies that characterised the whole debate.

In thinking about the origins of the Home Office report, we need to consider the connection between the victimisation of adult women and the sexualisation of girls. It seems to imply that if women become the victims of violence, this is because they present themselves in ways that invite violence: they dress or behave in inappropriately 'sexy' ways, and they learn to do this from the media. In this respect, the *framing* of the issue seems to reflect a 'blame the victim' approach, in which women are somehow seen as being responsible for their own victimisation.

The term had rarely been used before the mid-2000s, but by the time of the Home Office report, 'sexualisation' was already well established as an issue in the United States – often regarded as a much more sexually puritanical country than the UK. The American Psychological Association, which is well known for its concerns about the allegedly harmful effects of media on children, had published a report on the issue in 2007; and several more popular books for parents, with titles like *Too Sexy Too Soon* and *The Lolita Effect*, had appeared towards the end of the decade. The UK had its own version of such books, in the form of *Where Has My Little Girl Gone?* by Tanith Carey (a journalist formerly known as the official biographer of Russell

Brand). You might want to consider the verbal and visual *rhetoric* of these book titles and their covers.

For politicians, the issue of 'sexualisation' was clearly seen as a vote-winner, perhaps particularly in attracting women voters. In the run-up to the 2010 election, Tory leader David Cameron and his Liberal Democrat coalition partner Nick Clegg both condemned the 'creepy sexualisation' of girls in music videos, fashion advertising, teenage magazines and other media.

For the media themselves, the issue provided a useful means of being seen to take the moral high ground, while at the same time featuring examples of the objectionable material. The *Sun*, for example, complained on its front page that 'It's Paedo Heaven On Our High Street', only a turn of the page away from one of its 'barely legal' topless Page 3 models. The *Daily Mail* condemned Rihanna's raunchy performance on *The X Factor*, calling on Ofcom to ban such material, while simultaneously including several images of the said performance on its website.

Ask Dr. Linda

Linda Papadopoulous, the author of the Home Office report, is a clinical psychologist who is also employed at the University of North London. Her own research has been mainly in the field of dermatology. However, she is also a glamorous celebrity: she has appeared as the resident psychologist on *Big Brother*, and is regularly used as an 'expert' on breakfast television. She has also featured on programmes such as *Celebrity Mastermind* and *Celebrity Fit Club*. 'Dr. Linda' (as she prefers to be known in these contexts) also runs a private beauty consultancy for women, which markets its own range of beauty products.

Papadopoulos's report was published in February 2010, shortly before the general election, but the issue was quickly taken up by the incoming Conservative government. A further review was commissioned to suggest ways of putting her recommendations into practice. The author was the Chief Executive of the Christian charity the Mother's Union, Reg Bailey (not himself a mother, we can assume). Bailey's report, *Letting Children Be Children*, was published last summer: it recommended a range of restrictions on media and marketing that are currently being followed through.

In terms of *ownership*, we can see how certain people have attempted to take charge of the public definition of the issue; and we can ask about their motivations for doing so, and the kind of knowledge or expertise they possess. The story of how sexualisation became an 'issue' illustrates the ways in which public debates are now frequently tied up with the operations of the media and celebrity culture. It also indicates many of the contradictions – and indeed, the many forms of hypocrisy – that are often entailed.

Reading the evidence

Papadopoulos's report is dominated by psychological theories of media effects, of the kind that are often used in research about media violence: media audiences are seen here largely as passive victims of an all-powerful media influence. The media show us 'sexy' images, and we copy them. The report does not consider the many criticisms that have been made of this kind of research; not does it consider alternative approaches from sociology or Media Studies.

Papadopoulos's statements to journalists tend to offer a very one-dimensional view of media effects, and of contemporary femininity:

It is a drip, drip effect. Look at porn stars, and look how an average girl now looks. It's seeped into every day: 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. (The Guardian, 25th February 2011)

As media students, you might ask whether this is an adequate account of how people (in this case, young women) understand and use the media. And as you study Dr. Linda's own media image, you might also wish to consider some of the contradictions in her apparently critical stance.

Numerous academics strongly challenged the report's approach. They questioned the way in which 'sexualisation' was defined – a definition so broad that it could potentially include almost any image of a human form. They questioned the validity of the evidence that was cited, much of which derived from psychological experiments conducted with American college students. And they challenged the social and cultural assumptions – for instance, about 'inappropriate' sexual behaviour – that seemed to inform the approach. The evidence was highly questionable, although many campaigners and media commentators seemed to accept it as scientific truth.

Framing childhood, framing media

The idea of childhood is a powerful tool in the social problems marketplace. For campaigners, childhood provides an emotional 'hot button', a convenient symbol that helps to focus much broader fears about social change. It also helps to bring together people with quite different concerns: nobody wants to be accused of not caring about children.

Thus, the concern about sexualisation seems to unite two otherwise quite different groups. Traditional religious moralists see it as an index of the moral depravity of the modern world; while some feminists see it as part of the continuing oppression of women – although this is a view that other feminists would dispute. Both groups use the idea of childhood as a focus for these much broader concerns; yet in doing so, they inevitably define children in sentimental terms, as innocent and vulnerable.

Sex, it would seem, is something children do not know about – or *should* not know about. Introducing children to sex is inevitably a matter of moral or political corruption – and the media are often represented in these debates as the source of

corruption. There's little consideration of the possibility that children might make their own judgments about media, that they might interpret media in different ways, or that they might not simply copy what they see. As is always the case, children's voices are almost entirely excluded from the debate.

These particular ways of framing the issue lead to policies that verge on the absurd, as though we could isolate the bad elements and remove them, leaving only the good. For example, Reg Bailey's report includes the proposal for 100-metre exclusion zones around schools, from which sexualised imagery would be banned. Such strategies would be hard to enforce – not least because advertisers and campaigners might well have very different views about what *counts* as 'sexualised'. They would also be very unlikely to reduce children's exposure to such imagery. Yet that may be beside the point: perhaps the main aim of such proposals is to enable politicians to look as though they are 'doing something', while enabling parents to feel better about it all.

The 'sexualisation of children' may or may not be a real social problem. I am not suggesting that there is nothing here to talk about, or even to worry about. Rather, I have tried to question how the issue is defined, who gets to speak about it, and the ways in which they speak. In this case, the debate has been framed in very narrow and moralistic ways, which actively prevent us from engaging with the broader issues that might be at stake. The story of 'sexualisation' is just one example of how social issues tend to be constructed: you might want to consider how these kinds of questions can be applied to other social issues.

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