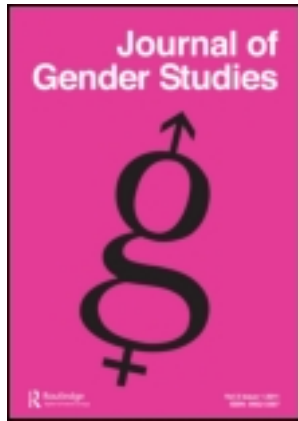


This article was downloaded by: [41.185.166.9]

On: 29 July 2011, At: 07:52

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Journal of Gender Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cjgs20>

Because looks can be deceiving: media alarm and the sexualisation of childhood - do we know what we mean?

Kirrilly Thompson ^a

^a School of Psychology, Social Work and Social Policy, University of South Australia, Adelaide, South Australia, 5001, Australia

Available online: 17 Dec 2010

To cite this article: Kirrilly Thompson (2010): Because looks can be deceiving: media alarm and the sexualisation of childhood - do we know what we mean?, *Journal of Gender Studies*, 19:4, 395-400

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2010.533492>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

This article may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

FORUM

Because looks can be deceiving: media alarm and the sexualisation of childhood – do we know what we mean?

Kirrilly Thompson*

School of Psychology, Social Work and Social Policy, University of South Australia, Adelaide, South Australia 5001, Australia

(Received 23 December 2009; final version received 13 October 2010)

This article considers ongoing moral outrage over the assumed sexualisation of young girls by the media. It questions this taken-for-granted association between the media and the sexualisation of children. It suggests that this visceral anxiety reflects a particularly adult-centric view of children's behaviour and considers how this may serve to discipline girls' sexuality in particular. Whilst child welfare and wellbeing are paramount, this article suggests the need for a more nuanced and ethnographically informed debate around the relationship between childhood, the media, and sexualisation. It calls for ethnographic research with children, to understand their perspectives of what adults view as sexualised behaviour. A number of questions are raised throughout the article to stimulate further research within anthropology and the social sciences more broadly. The article considers the extent to which attention could more usefully be shifted from the control of extrinsic factors such as the media to teaching critical thinking skills in primary and secondary schooling. It thus argues for a critical anthropological engagement with a debate currently dominated by adult-centric understandings and framed against a demonisation of sexuality and the media.

Keywords: childhood; sexualisation; media; ethnography; anthropology; curriculum; critical thought

Delaying the sexualisation of children: do we know what we mean?

I have been following debates in the media about the sexualisation of girls for the past few years. I have awoken to morning television presenters remonstrating against pre-pubescent magazine cover girls, the sexualised poses of a photographer's daughter (Taylor 2009), an infantilised catwalk model (see also Egan and Hawkes 2008a) and the availability of padded bras, g-strings and high-heels for pre-pubescent children (see Chambers 2002, Williams 2010). Whilst I have not conducted a systematic analysis of media content, the message that I have received from an everyday engagement with television, radio and print media has been clear and consistent: sexualised behaviour and childhood should not mix.

This message is revealed in fears of children adopting markers of adult sexuality (in clothing, make-up, dance, posture, etc.). It is clear in the backlash against non-sensual pole-dancing classes for children in New Zealand (Nash 2010) and the postures and presentation of children in beauty pageants. As one mother is reported to have said:

*Email: Kirrilly.thompson@unisa.edu.au

There has to be a loss of innocence in treating these kids as mini grown-ups. Some of the boys [in a child modelling competition] were striking provocative, sexy poses. (Brennan 2010)

I have been fascinated by adult concerns over what is interpreted as sexualised behaviour amongst children. As an anthropologist, I have wondered to what extent these concerns might be 'adult-centric', whereby adults assume that children share the same meaning they attribute to particular behaviours, and understand those behaviours on adult terms. In some cases, the fear is precisely that children don't understand what they do or what it *means* (in adult terms).

To advance a critical anthropology of the relationship between childhood, sexualisation and the media, this article's aims are four-fold:

- (1) to establish a cultural incongruence between childhood and sexuality;
- (2) to propose that debates over childhood and sexuality are adult-centric;
- (3) to suggest a need for ethnographic research to understand children's perspectives; and
- (4) to propose that children should be taught critical thinking skills in order to question the representations with which they are frequently faced.

In terms of childhood and sexualised behaviour, this article is primarily concerned with the mimicking of behaviours attributed to adult sexuality such as dancing, clothing and posturing.

The incongruence of childhood and sexualised behaviour can be understood through Douglas' concept of 'matter out of place' (1966, p. 203) whereby childhood, a state that many people believe should be protected from impurity, is contaminated by the sexual representations that we associate with adults. That is, that adult sexual behaviour is 'out of place' in childhood. Thinking about the contexts in which sexuality and sexualisation can be understood as 'in' or 'out' of place, highlights the ways in which our attitudes towards sex, sexualised behaviour and sexual representations are culturally contextualised. As noted by Ross and Rapp, 'the bare biological facts of sexuality do not speak for themselves; they must be expressed socially' (1981, p. 51). Judith Butler's work on performativity (1993), for example, emphasises the culturally inscribed ways in which gender and sexuality can be 'performed' (see also Morris 1995). From this perspective, children's imitation of adult sexualised behaviours could be considered a performance of adulthood (without children understanding the implications or adult context of that behaviour). Reciprocally, our anxiety around and control of children's behaviours and influences could be understood as an attempt to 'child' children. This is undermined by children's attempts to 'adult' themselves, contributing to parents' and adults' feelings of lack of control and their emotional reactions.

In particular, cultural assumptions amongst adults underpin popular reactions to what is perceived as the sexualisation, perversion or pornification of childhood together with the loss of innocence. As noted by Montgomery, the idea of the sexually innocent child is '... central to Western beliefs about appropriate childhood experiences' (2008, p. 11). Sexualised behaviour is generally considered appropriate for adults (assuming it is expressed in socially acceptable ways). It follows that sexualised behaviours such as dressing, dancing or posing provocatively are considered inappropriate for children. However, this 'appropriateness' is defined by adults and based on a negative construction of sexualised behaviours as harmful in childhood. When we express revulsion at what we interpret for young women as their pornification, we are often referring to asymmetrical relations that exploit girls' desires to please, fit in and mimic their role models with the

moves, language, look, clothing and self-presentation that adults interpret as sexual. Rarely is sexualised behaviour amongst girls understood as the harmless mimicking of behaviours associated with adults, decontextualised from adult meanings. We seem happy for little girls to play with kitchen sets, shopping trolleys and other apparently benign symbols of normalised adult womanhood. However, we seem to draw the line on play when it strays into behaviours that, to adults, represent sexuality. This is often because we believe that children are too naive to understand adult sexuality. Rather than infer that sexualised posturing would therefore be meaningless, or hold a different, non-adult meaning for girls, we fear that their naiveté may render them vulnerable. However, it is likely that young girls understand 'sex' and 'sexualised behaviour' in different ways to adults, and in as many different ways as adults do.

We rarely present sexuality to children as something positive, if at all. Rather, we have become increasingly led to believe that paedophilia is rampant and that we live in a society where childhood is objectified, sexualised and capable of being 'lost'. Of course, these are justifiable worries. One integrative review suggests a child sex abuse prevalence of 16.8% for females and 7.9% of males in North America (adjusted for response rates) (Gorey and Leslie 1997).

According to the American Psychological Association's Task Force on the Sexualisation of Girls:

The work on the cognitive and physical decrements associated with self-objectification suggests that sexualisation practices may function to keep girls 'in their places' as objects of sexual attraction and beauty, significantly limiting their free thinking and movement in the world. (2007, p. 22)

Similarly, anxieties over girlhood and sexualisation could function to delay empowerment. Concerns that girls are endangered by sexualised behaviour could derive from an underlying belief that sexuality should be controlled or constrained and that female sexual empowerment is to be feared. Whilst the sexualisation of young girls has been described as a 'Lolita effect' (Durham 2008), this obscures the ways in which Lolita's power and influence emanates from her combination of youth and sexuality. There may be a risk that the repression, surveillance or control of sexualised behaviours serves to control and 'discipline' girls and female sexuality (Foucault 1978) or interferes with the transitional period from girl to woman.

Anthropological studies of ritual have often focused on 'liminality', a state of being between states (van Gennep 1960 [1909]). Whilst the transition from girl to woman is marked physiologically by menarche, the age at which this occurs can conflict with social constructions of adulthood which vary culturally and legally. Incongruence can lead to a period of time during which a girl can be said to exist in a liminal period, waiting for physiological markers and socio-cultural approval of adulthood to coincide. The liminal state is characterised by a loosening of social norms and structures (van Gennep 1960 [1909]). It has long been considered a period in which the individual is vulnerable or in danger, and is simultaneously dangerous to others (Douglas 1966, Turner 1969). Visceral reactions of horror at the sexualisation of girls, and attempts to limit sexualised behaviour amongst girls, might constitute an attempt to mitigate the social dangers implied by the liminal, transitional phase from girl to woman.

Ethnographic research with children is required to determine the extent to which children appropriate adult behaviours and make them meaningful in and on their own terms. In particular, the following questions require research: what do children think about behaviours that adults describe as sexual? Do children associate being 'sexy' with sexual

intercourse? Does their mimicry of sexual poses or behaviours render them vulnerable? To what extent might adults contribute to a child's vulnerability? These are all lines of enquiry that warrant ethnographic research with children to identify their beliefs and opinions.

In addition to understanding children's perspectives of what adults consider sexualised behaviour, there is a need to develop children's ability to critically appraise extrinsic influences such as the media. The media is typically portrayed as the 'bad guy' in debates about the sexualisation of children (see, for example, Festival of Light Australia 2008). However, critical media literacy skills could help mitigate the influence of sexualised content on children. Indeed, children could be taught to take a critical view on society broadly, including topics as diverse as poverty, family, socio-economic status, religion, consumption, materialism, the environment, mass production of animals for consumption, animal experimentation, drug use, alcohol sponsorship, fast food advertising and the behaviour of 'role models' such as sports heroes and celebrities. The incorporation of critical, philosophical perspectives into the curriculum of primary and secondary schooling could undermine the often consumerist and capitalist trends that promote sexualised images of childhood. That is, critical thinking skills may contribute to the development of a generation less likely to be influenced by sexualised imagery because they are more critical of its consumption and production.

In summary, we need to examine and clarify what exactly are the adult concerns about sexualised behaviour amongst children, and what does behaviour that adults describe as sexualised actually mean to children? Without this reflection, our concern for children could unintentionally create other problems. For example, in what ways might adult revulsion of sexualised behaviour in children contribute to sexual 'hang ups' and shame in children's futures, or the construction of girls as passive recipients of their sexuality (Egan and Hawkes 2008b). Critical reflection is required by adults on the social and cultural causes of their concerns, together with the development of equally critical skills amongst children. The latter could contribute to children's wellbeing and agency regardless of the images and representations that confront them. It is a gift that the humanities and social sciences, especially media studies, philosophy, cultural studies and anthropology can give to educational systems that are increasingly concerned with the professions.

More than being part of the curriculum, the humanities and social sciences need to engage with public debate. For example, anthropology's drive to suspend judgment and privilege 'insider' or 'other' points of view can help to clarify the issues and perspectives at stake in the debate over childhood and sexualisation. Such clarification requires critical, ethical and ethnographic examination of the meanings of sexualised imagery from a child's perspective. It could provide a basis for determining the extent to which children are influenced by, and can mediate, extrinsic influences such as the media. Child-centric understandings can then be compared with those of adults, to identify potential areas of incongruence. Theoretically, we need to scrutinise the relationship between sexualised behaviours and childhood and explore the extent to which this relationship is adult-centric. Contextually, we need historical and cross-cultural descriptions of childhood and sexuality that provoke critical and reflexive thought on our own milieu (building on Kelly-Byrne 1989, Morton 1996, LeVine 2007, Lancy 2008, LeVine and New 2008; and the work reviewed by Davis and Whitten 1987). Empirically, we need to extend an anthropology of sexuality and gender (see, for example, Tuzin 1991, Vance 1991) by conducting ethnographic studies of childhood which focus on children's understandings of both sexuality and behaviours understood by adults as sexualised (building on work such as Montgomery 2008, pp. 181–200). Practically, we should consider the importance of

teaching critical thought to children, developing reflexive thinking and thereby minimising extrinsic influences such as 'the media'. This research and education agenda would benefit from anthropologists collaborating with psychologists, physiologists and educators. Such diverse ways of looking at childhood, sexuality and the media can collectively address the many ways in which looks can be deceiving.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Professor Drew Dawson for his comments on this article and conversations around the topic in general.

Notes on contributor

Kirrilly Thompson is an anthropologist and postdoctoral research fellow in the Centre for Sleep Research and Human Factors and Safety Management Systems at the University of South Australia, where she is a member of the group 'Healthy Kids Australia'. Kirrilly's research into the socio-cultural dimensions of risk includes studies on: children's understandings of health and wellbeing; passenger experiences of crowding on metropolitan rail systems; psycho-cultural determinants of food waste; and risk perceptions amongst horse riders.

References

- APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls, 2007. *Report of the APA task force on the sexualization of girls* [online]. Available from: <http://www.apa.org/pi/women/programs/girls/report-full.pdf> [Accessed 11 September 2009].
- Brennan, Z., 2010. Would you let YOUR 10-year-old son pose like this in a beauty pageant? *Mail Online*, 25 June [online]. Available from: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-1289420/Would-let-YOUR-10-year-old-son-pose-like-beauty-pageant.html?ito=feeds-newsxml> [Accessed 22 July 2010].
- Butler, J., 1993. *Bodies that matter: on the discursive limits of 'sex'*. London: Routledge.
- Chambers, S., 2002. Outrage as Argos sells g-strings for children. *Mail on Sunday*, 14 April [online]. Available from: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-109621/Outrage-Argos-sells-G-strings-children.html> [Accessed 22 July 2010].
- Davis, D.L. and Whitten, R.G., 1987. The cross-cultural study of human sexuality. *Annual review of anthropology*, 16 (1), 69–98 [online]. Available from: <http://arjournals.annualreviews.org/doi/abs/10.1146/annurev.an.16.100187.000441>.
- Douglas, M., 1966. *Purity and danger: an analysis of concepts of pollution and taboo*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Durham, M.G., 2008. *The Lolita effect: the media sexualization of young girls and what we can do about it*. USA: Penguin Group.
- Egan, D.R. and Hawkes, G., 2008a. Girls, sexuality and the strange carnalities of advertisements: deconstructing the discourse of corporate paedophilia. *Australian feminist studies*, 23 (57), 307–322 [online]. Available from: <http://www.informaworld.com/10.1080/08164640802233278> [Accessed 15 September 2009].
- Egan, D.R. and Hawkes, G., 2008b. Endangered girls and incendiary objects: unpacking the discourse on sexualization. *Sexuality and culture*, 12 (4), 291–311 [online]. Available from: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s12119-008-9036-8>.
- Festival of Light Australia, 2008. *Submission on the sexualisation of children in the contemporary media environment to the Senate Standing Committee on Environment, Communication and the Arts*.
- Foucault, M., 1978. *The history of sexuality, vol. 1: an introduction*. New York: Pantheon.
- Gorey, K.M. and Leslie, D.R., 1997. The prevalence of child sexual abuse: integrative review adjustment for potential response and measurement biases. *Child abuse and neglect*, 21 (4), 391–398.
- Kelly-Byrne, D., 1989. *A child's play life: an ethnographic study*. New York: Teachers College Press.

- Lancy, D.F., 2008. *The anthropology of childhood: cherubs, chattel, changelings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- LeVine, R.A., 2007. Ethnographic studies of childhood: a historical overview. *American anthropologist*, 109 (2), 247–260 [online]. Available from: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1525/aa.2007.109.2.247>.
- LeVine, R.A. and New, R.S., eds, 2008. *Anthropology and child development: a cross-cultural reader*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Montgomery, H., 2008. *An introduction to childhood: anthropological perspectives on children's lives*. Singapore: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Morris, R.C., 1995. All made up: performance theory and the new anthropology of sex and gender. *Annual review of anthropology*, 24, 567–592.
- Morton, H., 1996. *Becoming Tongan: an ethnography of childhood*. USA: University of Hawaii Press.
- Nash, K., 2010. Kids' pole antics just 'a sport'. *The New Zealand Herald*, 27 June [online]. Available from: http://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=10654748 [Accessed 21 July 2010].
- Ross, E. and Rapp, R., 1981. Sex and society: a research note from social history and anthropology. *Comparative studies in society and history*, 23 (1), 51–72 [online]. Available from: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/178382>.
- Taylor, C., 2009. Art and moralism. *Philosophy*, 84 (3), 341–353 [online]. Available from: <http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayAbstract?fromPage=online&aid=5806668&fulltextType=RA&fileId=S0031819109000357> [Accessed 2009].
- Turner, V., 1969. *The ritual process*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Tuzin, D., 1991. Sex, culture and the anthropologist. *Social science and medicine*, 33 (8), 867–874.
- van Gennep, A., 1960 [1909]. *The rites of passage*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Vance, C.S., 1991. Anthropology rediscovers sexuality: a theoretical comment. *Social science and medicine*, 33 (8), 75–884.
- Williams, R., 2010. Too much, too young? Retailers still selling over-sexualised clothing to kids. *The Guardian*, 16 April [online]. Available from: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2010/apr/16/children-clothing-survey-bikini-heels> [Accessed 22 July 2010].