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# The 2010 UK Home Office ‘Sexualisation of Young People’ Review: A Discursive Policy Analysis

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## **Abstract**

This paper offers a discursive policy analysis of the 2010 UK Home Office *Sexualisation of Young People Review*, authored by Linda Papadopoulos (2010a). It will scrutinise the narrative presented by the text of the danger posed by cultural representations to healthy development, and trace the way that the text links this danger to catastrophic outcomes: child sexual abuse, exploitation and trafficking. Examining this narrative, the article will propose that the UK Review deploys spatial metaphors to naturalise a gendered account of childhood, sexuality and danger, evoking the creeping influence of a corrupting culture on a girl’s most private self. The article will also demonstrate that this spatial narrative underpins the epistemological structure of the text – its separation of the primary from the secondary, the real from the artificial.

## **Introduction**

The UK Home Office *Sexualisation of Young People Review* (henceforth: the UK Review) (Papadopoulos, 2010a) was commissioned in 2009 by Jacqui Smith – member of the Labour Government and Home Secretary (Travis, 2009). Jacqui Smith was the first-ever female Home Secretary, and described herself as having a ‘feminist background’ (Smith, in Hattenstone, 2009). The psychologist Linda Papadopoulos was selected to write the report, known to the 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 books such as *Mirror, Mirror: Dr Linda’s Body Image Revolution* and *The Man Manual: Everything You Wanted to Know About Your Man*. Whereas the Scottish Executive selected the Open University’s Professor David Buckingham (2010) to engage in research and deliver a report, the Labour Government’s choice of Papadopoulos indicates that the UK Review should be regarded as the effect of a governmental concern to produce glamorous, high-profile policy discourse, appearing to contribute to the empowerment of women.

I have explored elsewhere both the historical context of contemporary discourses on sexualisation (Duschinsky, 2012a), and also media and policy responses following the UK Review (Duschinsky and Barker, 2012). My intention here is to use ‘discursive policy analysis’ to offer a sustained consideration of the text of the UK Review itself. This approach treats the language of policy as both shaped by broader cultural and political structures, such as institutional forms and social practices, and as a fundamental mechanism through which these forms and practices operate and achieve legitimacy. Based on this assumption, discursive policy analysis attempts to document the way that relations of power, emotion, meaning and identity are concretely produced, reproduced or transformed in such texts (Mottier, 2008). Discursive policy analysis therefore can show how particular contingent practices, processes and forms of subjectivity come to be represented as true, discrete, natural and inevitable in a text, shedding light on how these processes organise and naturalise particular visions of appropriate social policy.

In presenting here a discursive policy analysis of the UK Review, I recognise that my own discourse is not neutral. I fully acknowledge that the present state of the battle-lines place any concern expressed about the problematisation of sexualisation on the same side as discourses with which I do not sympathise. For instance, commercial discourses have contested the problematisation of sexualisation as a threat to ‘consumer freedom’; child liberationist discourses have argued that there is no problem with the ‘sexual expression’ of those currently classified as minors. Yet whereas the UK Review is willing to situate gendered relations of power and commercial processes in society through the lens of the threat posed by impurity to purity, I concur with Grosz (1995: 56–7) that scholars, including those who wish to combat gendered relations of power, ‘are not faced by pure and impure options. All options are in their various ways bound by the constraints of patriarchal power’, and so the ‘crucial political questions’ are to do with ‘what are the costs and benefits of holding these commitments?’. In such a light, scrutiny is necessary, not in order to dismiss ‘sexualisation’ as a moral panic from a position on high, but in order to discern forms of critique and intervention that are less prone to the uncritical instantiation of sexist assumptions (see Duschinsky, 2010, 2012b).

### **The 2010 Home Office *Sexualisation of Young People Review***

The UK Review states that it has no ‘intention’ of independently considering ‘the precise definition of sexualisation’ (Papadopoulos, 2010a: 17). Rather, in defining ‘sexualisation’, the UK Review cites the American psychologist Deborah Tolman (2002): ‘in 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: 23). This passage, however, does not come from Tolman’s

(2002) *Dilemmas of Desire*, but from the American Psychological Association (APA) report of 2007, in turn indirectly citing Tolman's *Dilemmas of Desire*. The APA report was co-authored by Tolman. However, the argument of the APA report diverges strongly from *Dilemmas of Desire*, which argued that young women need to be able to recognise 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 organised and managed. To the extent that we believe that adolescent sexuality is under control, it is adolescent girls whom we hold responsible. (2002: 15)

Nevertheless, the APA Report (2007) and the UK Review (2010) cite *Dilemmas of Desire* to authorise 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 UK 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 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 UK Review argues, 'being "sexy" is no longer about individuality' or about girls being true to their 'authentic voice' (2010a: 34, 58). Young people have been displaced from the natural form of 'who they are' by the intrusion of sexualisation (Papadopoulos, 2010a: 4).

The UK Review offers instruction to the reader, proposing that 'as parents, as educators and as citizens we can take responsibility for creating safe and supportive environments for our children' (2010a: 4). The social, legal and moral register established by combining 'responsibility', 'citizens' with the polyvalent 'for', discursively positions the task of combating sexualisation in more than one way. This task is both *enacted through* the nurturance of the nation's children through the purification and regulation of their environment, and as such *enacted legitimately* due to the civic consecration received by practices carried out in the name of childhood. The UK Review suggests that without such actions, both the mental and physical health of the nation will be endangered, since 'sexualised content may be jeopardising the mental and physical well-being of young people in the UK' (2010a: 17).

'Parents' are placed, in the first instance, in the 'role' of responsibility and authority, 'protecting and educating' their children (2010a: 22). Without the care and monitoring provided by parents, children are 'more likely to have more

frequent and more prolonged exposure to inappropriate material' (2010a: 64). A sense of excess is evoked by the repetition of 'more', 'more'. Yet even the natural relationship between parents and children is capable of deviating from the pure ideal of a 'safe and supportive environment', since 'parents can also contribute to the sexualisation of their children in very direct ways' (2010a: 10). There is already the dangerous potential for contamination within the love shared between parents and children, since it can be deformed from caring to consumption. What is necessitated, therefore – 'as parents, as educators and as citizens' – is for the text itself to take on the position of civic educator, to supplement the inadequacies of the parent in securing the safety and support of the nation's children.

Though the parent will be invoked as a source of authenticity and moral authority for discursive claims, it will be the ultimate responsibility of the text to judge what 'most responsible parents would not allow' in the lifestyle of their children, and to achieve a 'broad consensus' regarding what is proper and what is improper for young people (2010a: 82–3). For example, the author notes that 'from meeting with parents, I appreciate that expecting them to take complete responsibility for their children's digital literacy is both unrealistic and unfair' and that action from educators and the state is required to deal with the problems associated with young people as media consumers (2010a: 78). Part of this action, prescribed by the UK Review, is the censorship or age-restriction of inappropriate material, and part is the increase of funding to psychologists and educators monitoring and working with young people. The text also demands institutional support for discourses on sexualisation, such as websites that 'allow the public to voice their concerns' and 'parents a forum to raise issues' (2010a: 15), and the establishment of 'a new academic periodical' and 'annual conference series' focusing 'solely on the topic of sexualisation' (2010a: 16).

### **Gendering childhood and sexuality in the UK Review**

The semantic structure of the text is organised by representations of children and of sexuality. Discursively situating these two clusters of signs, and managing their interaction, is the notion of 'sexualisation'. The text initially delineates 'sexualisation' as 'the imposition of adult sexuality on to children and young people before they are capable of dealing with it' (2010a: 6). However, a few sections later, the text acknowledges that 'the term "sexualisation" is used to describe a number of trends' (2010a: 24). For instance, the term is also deployed in the text to refer to a property of adult women (e.g. 2010a: 7, 40), media images and language (e.g. 2010a: 35) and consumer goods (e.g. 2010a: 83). It is also used to refer to the manner and experience of consumption, as when the text describes television characters that 'children strongly identify with in a highly sexualised way' (2010a: 38).

As Egan and Hawkes (2008a, 2008b) have noted in their analysis of discourses on sexualisation in the USA and in Australia, this semantic sliding in the UK

report produces a 'hypodermic' narrative: the ascription of sexualisation to media vectors means that young people who come into contact with them are *necessarily* and *indelibly* corrupted by this association. They become themselves sexualised and sexualising when they display 'overt' signs of sexuality or desire. Such signs are presumed to be caused by the personal acceptance of sexualised cultural representations, since 'young people who choose to present themselves and to behave in this way are simply following a script' (Papadopoulos, 2010a: 51).

For instance, following a hypodermic definition of 'body dissatisfaction' as 'the discrepancy between someone's actual body size and the ideal body size presented in the media', the UK Review proposes that girls will 'inevitably' be inflicted by 'feelings of inadequacy' when they see representations of thin women. As a result, sexualisation causes a 'distillation of their self-worth'; it is constructed by the text as a chemical process, performing an inverse purification of the childhood of the 'girl'. Processes of 'self-objectification' are understood to be intensified by sexualisation, at the expense of a homogenous and originary state in which a girl is naturally at one with her own body and her own feelings (2010a: 56, 64). The UK Review notes that 'it is overly simplistic to make a direct link between cause and effect' between media representations and emotions or behaviour, but already in the term 'cause and effect' there lies a presumption of a determined causal chain, with only the specific links in question (2010a: 48).

Semantic sliding also occurs in representations of the young people who are the ostensive subject of the UK Review. The text 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 (2010a: 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 fourteen-year-old' (2010a: 25), but proposes that with regards to the processes that underpin sexualisation, 'older children are just as susceptible' (2010a: 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 sexualisation is taken to be 'happening to younger and younger children' (2010a: 6).

To justify such significant claims regarding the causal impact of sexualisation, the UK Review cites the findings, by American psychological studies, of links between media consumption and social behaviour. Citing Stice *et al.* (2001), the UK Review confesses that experimental studies have shown that 'there was *no statistical relationship* between long-term exposure to thin images, the internalisation of the thin ideal and body dissatisfaction, dieting and bulimic symptoms'. Yet, despite the absence of the statistical relationship which would support its argument, the UK Review claims that 'vulnerable viewers were suffering adverse effects' (2010a: 58). To take another example, the report admits

that, counter to their expectations, psychologists have found that 'soft-core pornography was . . . negatively associated with the likelihood of rape and actual rape behaviour' (2010a: 70). Nonetheless, 'people who are already predisposed', the UK Review contends, are made more aggressive and sexually deviant by pornography consumption (2010a: 69). In both cases, the scene of sexualisation as a danger to the health of the nation is implicitly shunted back in time, in order to allow it to serve in the discursive present as a viable threat to adolescent girls, who are constructed as a generally vulnerable population of social and legal 'minors' (2010a: 47). This narrative is supported by an account of contemporary culture as 'promoting premature sexualisation', deferring into the future the proper site of female sexuality and desire (2010a: 7).

In presenting an account in which contemporary culture in general is situated as pathogenic, the UK Review acknowledges that it risks 'indiscriminately' applying 'the notion of sexualisation so that any expression of sexuality by children is seen as wrong or problematic'. To combat this risk, it contends that 'self-motivated sexual play' can be a part of 'healthy sexual development' (2010a: 23). However, the text also notes that the conditions for such 'play' rarely obtain, in contemporary sexualised and sexist culture. Excluded categorically from classification as self-motivated sexual play, 'early sexual relationships' are, in particular, constructed as necessarily ridden with 'power dynamics', 'performance anxiety' and 'complex emotional nuisances' (2010a: 64). Perhaps the author intended to write 'emotional nuances', emphasising teenage girls' inability to discern power relations and complexity, and subsequently act in an appropriate and responsible way. However, indicative of the wider analysis, the UK Review situates the experiences of sexuality in teenage girls as a 'nuisance', a troubling intrusion.

The UK Review asserts that whereas 'femininity' has been subjected to 'hyper-sexualisation and objectification', 'males' have been 'hyper-masculinised' by contemporary culture – two processes which 'perpetuate and reinforce each other' (2010a: 3, 10). The UK Review is here following a study by Dill and Thill (2007: 856), who discern 'sexualisation' in instances where 'the figure's sexuality was stressed such as by showing cleavage, wearing provocative dress, or displaying provocative poses', whereas 'males were coded as hypermasculine if they had distorted male characteristics such as exaggerated arm and chest muscles'. The UK Review cites this study to show the greater vulnerability of girls to the sexual imagery contained in contemporary media representations, given that '60 per cent of female characters were portrayed in a sexualised way' but 'the equivalent figures for male characters were 1 per cent' (Papadopoulos, 2010a: 47). In both the analysis of Dill and Thill, and in the UK Review, different organisations of gender, sexuality and desire are taken to operate in men and women: an increase in the overt signs of adult sexual status signify an increase in *masculinity* in 'males', but an increase in *sexuality* in 'femininity'.



Whereas boys are assumed to already be masculine by virtue of being males, and to become more so through sexualisation, 'femininity' – the cultural manner of being female – becomes no longer merely a way of 'doing' a sex, but instead a state vulnerable to impurity in the form of the intrusion of an unnatural (hetero)sexuality. For instance, the UK Review notes that whereas 'wanting to be desired is natural', a hyper-sexualised form of femininity is oriented by a 'dominant desire . . . to be desired' by men (2010a: 31). By contrast, a hyper-masculinised male consumes pornography which makes them 'sexually callous', and with fewer feelings 'of guilt, repulsion and disgust' (2010a: 31–3, 68–9). Disgust therefore allows men to distinguish within heterosexual objects between those that are appropriate and those that must be inviolable because of their purity. Were it not for this division between pure and impure forms of subjectivity, the UK Review suggests that 'male desire' would be trained on girls, since it would be 'acceptable to relate to children in a sexual way' (2010a: 36, 38). The vital importance of purity, within the narrative of the UK Review on the danger of sexualisation, is that it stands as a barrier that holds back masculine desire, and thus offers a crucial measure of protection to those forms of subjectivity that successfully manage to embody it.

The UK Review also makes gendered claims about young people, sexuality and morality in arguing for sexualisation as caused by and contributing to 'pornification of society' (2010a: 11). It proposes that the statistical correlation found in a study by Carroll *et al.* (2008) evidences a 'clear link' between 'acceptance of pornography' and 'risky sexual attitudes and behaviours, substance abuse and non-marital cohabitation values' (Papadopoulos, 2010a: 69). Such appeals to psychological findings serve as a strategy of legitimation within the text. They ground, in the objectivity of a scientific register, assertions about the true nature of men and women, in contrast to what are taken as their debased present forms of subjectivity and behaviour. Depictions of hyper-sexualised femininity in the UK Review construct an image of individuals deviating from the pure and 'natural' feminine state of wanting to be desired by men and 'having a family and raising children'. Depictions of hyper-masculinised males in the UK Review construct an image of animalistic male sexual desire – normally held in check by guilt and disgust – now directed towards violent and risky behaviours and inappropriate heterosexual objects, 'outside' of 'stable' monogamous relationships (2010a: 46, 69). For instance, the UK Review quotes an article by Dines (2008) which uses anecdotal evidence from interviews with eight incarcerated males in the USA to suggest that male use of online adult pornography always leads to the desire for more and more deviant sexual objects, such that consumers 'moved seamlessly from adult women to children' (Papadopoulos, 2010a: 47, citing Dines, 2008: 140).

Representations of moral and social deviation are thus underpinned through tacit appeal to purity and impurity by implicit narratives regarding the natural

and normal heterosexual development of young people. The UK Review claims that, as a result of sexualisation, girls can be led to 'highlight sexual characteristics that they do not yet possess' (2010a: 39), as for example in the case of 'a pre-teen who wears a push-up bra to get the attention of boys' (2010a: 53). This developmental narrative, grounded in the changing upper and lower body of the 'girl', supports and is interleaved with an account of horrific dangers in wider society:

When girls are dressed in miniature versions of adult clothes, there is the danger that people will project adult motives, responsibility and agency on girls, and that this in turn may have the impact of normalising the sexual abuse of children. (2010a: 39)

The text follows the American Psychological Association Report in proposing that 'sexualisation occurs on a continuum', with the mild objectification of oneself or others as the minimal form and the sexual abuse of children as the ultimate consequence (2010a: 25, 53). From the most extreme and visible forms of gendered violence to the most banal, each is underpinned and supported by the process of sexualisation. This renders the fight to defend young people from sexually objectifying cultural forms vitally important:

Sexual objectification ... enables – a host of other oppressions women face, ranging from employment discrimination and sexual violence to the trivialisation of women's work. (2010a: 11)

Sexualisation, situated as a spectrum, can therefore be conceptualised as 'the interaction of these different social cues or behaviours' with varying degrees of severity (2010a: 53). 'Taking any one in isolation is usually dismissed as a moral panic', but seen through the lens of sexualisation the UK Review argues that these different phenomena can be recognised as part of a single severe social problem on a vast scale (2010a: 53; see also, Papadopoulos, 2010b). The UK Review marks out the most severe pole of this spectrum through its assertion that even 'the extreme end of the spectrum of consequences of sexualisation' is very common indeed, with 'child abuse' affecting 'over 2 million' children in the UK (2010a: 13, 71). It is notable, however, that the NSPCC text lauded and cited by the UK Review in support of the figure that '2 million' children experience abuse, Cawson *et al.* (2000), does not in fact contain this claim. Rather the NSPCC research in fact sets out to argue the widespread nature of sexual contact between teenage peers, rather than the sexual predation of little children by adults as the UK Review implies. More generally, the UK Review struggles to maintain its strong claims regarding sexualisation as a 'spectrum' and a single process. This can be seen, for example, in the case of the relationship between sexualisation and the manufacture and consumption of images of child abuse. Though the UK Review begins by arguing that the 'sexualisation of girls is contributing to a market for child abuse images' (2010a: 13), after reviewing the available research it states that

'the sexualisation of girls could potentially contribute to a market for images of child abuse' (2010a: 72).

### **Sexualisation as a topological narrative in the UK Review**

As we have seen, the UK Review is organised by gendered constructions of sexuality and childhood that are, in turn, embedded in a narrative that separates healthy sexual development from dangerous and abnormal attitudes and forms of behaviour. The emotional power of this narrative is associated with the depiction of the intrusion of sexuality *into* childhood, and through this the spread of a catastrophic danger and abnormality into the life of every child in the UK. This characterisation of reality is achieved through appeal to spatial metaphors in the text, which invoke representations of purity and impurity. Representations of purity/impurity map a distinction between homogeneity and heterogeneity onto a distinction between primary and secondary. Deviation, within this discursive framing, is therefore understood to be the same as dirt and corruption intruding through natural boundaries, since *difference* from the imputed origin is identified with the *intrusion* of heterogeneous, foreign or inferior elements into a pristine and bounded essence.

The UK Review argues that 'the "sexualisation of culture" is a sign of cultural degradation' (2010a: 24). Placed in opposition to a prior state that is more originary, homogenous and valuable, the combination of sexuality, technology and economics contained in 'sexualised' media culture degrades individuals and populations such that they become debased and dissolute. This degradation is depicted – drawing explicitly on feminist theoretical discourses whilst missing their critique of sexism – as a male substance or force that brings about impurity as it presses ever inwards towards the feminised core: 'research illustrates that children absorb the "male gaze"' (2010a: 41). As 'a jungle of exploitative imagery' increasingly 'grows around us' (2010a: 33), this substance or force produces a 'sexualised landscape' or 'hyper-sexualised environment' (2010a: 12, 56). The formerly natural space 'around us' grows ever more corrupted. Most troublingly, the 'values perpetuated' by sexualisation now 'encroach further and further into childhood' (2010a: 37), penetrating 'into' our most inward and vulnerable form of life. No matter what barriers we put up to separate childhood from catastrophic danger and corruption, inner from outer, 'the line between sexual immaturity and maturity' has been blurred as 'sexualisation lowers important barriers to child sexual abuse' (2010a: 38, 74). A topological narrative is in play here as sexualisation is constructed as an impure and masculine force or substance, encroaching on a pure and valuable inner space through commercial processes.

Closing down a more complex, effective discussion of the manner and commercial context in which young people engage with sexist cultural forms, the UK Review identifies 'internalisation' as the mechanisms through which cultural

representations influence attitudes and behaviours, which is defined as ‘the process by which an individual “buys in” to social norms’ (2010a: 30). ‘The process of internalisation’ in which these values become a part of individuals ‘is gradual and insidious’, and ‘as images that would have been found shocking just a few years ago flood the mainstream, so the boundaries get pushed back further’ (2010a: 34, 51). The interface between spatial metaphors and the narrative arc produces a textual image of encroachment, which impels the reader to fight to conserve an originary and inner identity against the debasement of natural standards. Sexualisation is here constructed as both the temporal moment and the spatial point at which the female subject is expelled from their true self into a state of inauthenticity, from a private and enclosed sphere into a space of lewd public consumption. No longer interested in ‘having a family and raising children’ (2010a: 46) through a continued residence within this originary private space, girls are constructed by the UK Review as troubling desiring and desirable agents within a dangerous public domain. Spatial representations of an impure threat to a pure inner state are thereby situated in a temporal narrative, which implicitly draws upon and affirms a gendered division between private and public in critically judging female subjects on the basis of their distance from an imputed essence.

Sexualised images ‘impact not only’ the ‘body image’ of girls ‘but on their sense of self, penetrating through the body and into the self such that, increasingly today, ‘sexiness and desirability form the core of a girl’s value and identity’ (2010a: 57). They are drawn away from their authentic interiority by commercial forces that ‘sell identities to children especially girls, allowing a child, for example, to adopt a “rock chic” look one day or a “bo-ho hippy” look the next’ (2010a: 39). Such an unbound movement of ‘identity’ rends a previously homogenous self into a multiplicity, undermining the singularity and authenticity of ‘ones (*sic*) own subjective feelings, and internal awareness’ (2010a: 56). ‘Young people’s sexuality is commodified and ultimately used against them’, leading the desires of young people into a circuit via inauthenticity and exploitation to a now-corrupted interior self (2010a: 56, 64). As a consequence of this circuit, the ‘sense of self and self-worth’ of young people becomes damaged and distorted by the intrusion of elements foreign to what is imputed to be the true nature of this self (2010a: 51). Attitudes or behaviours in young people, particularly in girls, that are taken to display difference from the singularity and authenticity that we impute to childhood, are thereby framed as deviation and as damage, caused by the corrupting effect of sexualisation.

Internalisation is described using a highly medicalised discourse, anchoring it metaphorically in images of the medical dangers posed to pure or relatively pure states by chemical toxicity. There is a debate in the literature on how to interpret these images: Lerum and Dworkin (2009) have noted this tendency to deploy such metaphors in discourses on sexualisation in the US. However, they have been criticised by Else-Quest and Hyde (2009), who argue that a

language of 'exposure' is very common in psychological studies and does not indicate that a medicalisation of consumption has occurred. Yet the UK Review does not just use the term 'exposure', but a range of biomedical terms in characterising sexualisation as a pressing, objective danger to the health of the nation. For example, it notes that 'evidence suggests that even brief exposure to images of thin models can lead to acute body dissatisfaction', which can 'compromise that healthy developmental process' associated with 'developing sexuality' (Papadopoulos, 2010a: 31, 57). The language of 'acute' dissatisfaction and 'compromised' development conjures an image of a natural and integral boundary, breached by sexualisation. These images of cultural contagion and infection resonate in the text with an account of sexual disease, grounding moral designations of appropriate and inappropriate behaviour in narratives of medical danger. Though all are affected by the sexualisation that surrounds us, children are positioned by the UK Review as especially vulnerable because 'children on the other hand lack these cognitive filters' that would keep out the debased culture (2010a: 38). The UK Review asserts that 'sexualised imagery in advertising and TV has become so "naturalised" that children typically lack the ability for a cultural critique of sexism' (2010a: 41). The scare quotes around 'naturalised' position sexualisation as, despite appearances, both non-natural and unnatural, as artificial and as impure.

The threat posed by such corrupting representations is that 'depicting young girls dressed or made up as sexually mature older women may serve to normalise abusive practices', since 'people may associate adult motives and even a sense of adult responsibility onto the child' (2010a: 13). In ordinary language, motives more commonly tend to be associated 'with' or 'to' an indirect object; 'onto' here imagines the child as passively receiving the 'responsibility' with which they have been charged. In this way an 'association', a cognitive link between two things, is permitted to textually mirror the 'abusive practices' that are logically invoked as the consequence of sexualisation, evoking an image of a girl-child crushed under the bodily bulk of adult motives and responsibility.

This emotive spatial narrative, mobilised even at the expense of conventional syntax, can be seen again in the UK Review's argument that 'sexualised clothing ... opens up young girls to being exploited' (2010a: 39). The 'young girl' is positioned as a sphere whose proper nature is to remain closed, but which will be very easily punctured or penetrated unless propriety is maintained, and the teenager or child themselves nurtured and controlled. Rather than undermining the pure identity of childhood, this nurturance and control is depicted as no more than a supplement, helping to 'build up their confidence so that they feel secure in their own identity' (2010a: 64). The pivoting construction of natural identity as both an untouched purity, and in need of regulation as a potentially impure object, means that a 'natural purity' can be constructed here in the name of merely cultivating or building up the natural.

### Purity and epistemology

The epistemological assumptions of the UK Review also echo and reaffirm this topological narrative regarding the purity of originary identity, and the threat posed by corrupt and corrupting cultural representations. In line with much other contemporary policy discourse (Ball, 2008), the UK Review excludes and devalues forms of discourse besides those in a foundationalist register, which take language as a perfect mirror for objective realities. The desired result of the UK Review's expulsion of non-foundationalism is a perfect, 'clear' correspondence between quantitative research findings and social realities, so as to cure the present of its error and impurity (Papadopoulos, 2010a: 11, 54, 74). The appeal to empiricism in the UK Review is partly achieved through the devaluation of qualitative empirical research. Though 'others have pointed out that C.J. Pascoe's research in the same area found hardly any mention of "sexting"', lewd text messages sent through mobile phones (see Pascoe, 2011), the UK Review (2010a: 49) does not agree with these 'others', and insists that quantitative measures show that sexting is a widespread and pressing social problem.

The UK Review therefore claims that there is a strong imperative to search 'behind' distorted appearances to the central truths, which take the form of quantifiable measures of the frequency of sexual harm: 'behind the social commentary and headlines about inappropriate clothing and games for children, there are real statistics, on teenage partner violence, sexual bullying and abuse' (Papadopoulos, 2010a: 3). As a result, the UK Review is able to state that the 'arguments presented within this document are not based on conjecture', or 'opinion', 'but on empirical data'. This objective data are, in turn, 'presented as objectively as possible so that a public debate could ensue' (2010a: 3). The reason for this need for objectivity is that public understanding has deviated from reality, due to the distorting effects of cultural representations. This purity narrative in the UK Review dovetails with the marketing of Papadopoulos' own commercial range of health products, *Psy-Derma* – in which scientific truth is situated as pure and therapeutic. The psychological, scientific truth that Papadopoulos offers in her writings is also embedded in the labels of her products, such as 'Enlightenment Day Moisturising Treatment' (£32), 'Pure Thoughts Cleansing and Toning Water' (£13.50), and 'Cleansing Thoughts Foaming Cleanser' (£13.50) (Hill, 2009).

The work of the UK Review on sexualisation is intended to further inspire 'initiatives aimed at encouraging society' to fight unreality more generally, by taking 'a more critical and questioning approach to the perpetuation of unrealistic ideals' (Papadopoulos, 2010a: 57). The text proposes that the only level of cultural content relevant to discussions of safety and harm is the frequency of sexual or deviant behaviour, which serve as a model for young people. To take an example:

It's seemingly acceptable to use photographs of barely clad actresses and models, along with sexually explicit strap lines, on the covers of mainstream magazines. . . High street stores sell

video games where the player can beat up prostitutes with bats and steal from them in order to facilitate game progression. The message is clear – young girls should do whatever it takes to be desired. For boys the message is just as clear: be hyper-masculine and relate to girls as objects. (2010a: 33)

'The message is clear' depicts a transparent culture, in which a set of signifiers representing certain behaviours pass the signified, as knowledge and values, directly into the interiority of the viewer. Yet in its strict focus on processes of mainstreaming and gendered internalisation, the methodological exclusion of context by the UK Review produces an implausible account. Immediately after noting the widespread availability of video games where the player can 'beat up prostitutes with bats', the text argues that such representation as this will make 'young girls' believe that they 'should do whatever it takes to be desired'.

Justifying this approach, the text is adamant that 'the fact' of sexualisation precludes analysis of contextual meanings: 'Maybe these games are supposed to be "ironic" but the fact is that they normalise topics ranging from cosmetic surgery to marrying for money' (2010a: 45). Unlike many 'parents' who 'do not fully understand the realism or the themes that these games contain', the UK Review is able therefore to discern in them a pressing danger (2010a: 9). The opposition between reality and unreality thus underpins an emotive and authoritative discourse, which situates any discussion of children, gender and sexuality that departs from the sexualisation narrative as in league with unreality. Addressing processes of sexualisation that occur through advertising, the text proclaims starkly that 'It has an effect – so to say that its impact on young people hasn't been proven is disingenuous' (2010a: 64). Such disingenuousness, 'under the guise' of irony and 'being open-minded', has caused us hitherto to avoid 'all important debates' on the dangers of sexualisation (2010a: 53). In contrast to those allied with unreality, the text positions itself as able to discern and police the topological boundary between the inside and the outside, the safe and the dangerous, the stable and the wild, the originary and the artificial, the pure and the impure. It also, notably, affirms the position of psychological discourse, and of the State which commissioned the Review, as arbiters of full humanity.

### Concluding reflections

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 the text; my suggestion has been that tacit assumptions made in the UK Review itself have facilitated this focus. Upon its publication in February 2010, the UK Review generated a great deal of attention to the issue of 'sexualisation'. Some commentators in the left-wing press judged the claims of the UK Review to be unsubstantiated by the evidence it presented, though they accepted its general narrative on the threat to girls identified by the report. For example, an editorial in



*The Guardian* (29 February 2010) following the publication of the report asserted that ‘childhood is a jealously guarded concept. Above all, it is about innocence’, a state which is under threat from sexualisation. However, the article concludes that ‘sexualisation itself needs a definition and then a link between it and other social problems needs establishing. More thought, maybe, and less posturing.’

Despite such qualifications, the overall response to the Review was positive from both the left-wing and right-wing media. Lichtenstein (2010), writing in *The Daily Mail*, used the narrative of the UK Review on the threat of sexualisation to support her argument that ‘today’s fashion-conscious pre-teen is a paedophile’s dream – all the innocence of childhood with the suggestion of womanly attributes . . . Let us stop pandering to this dangerous trend and dress our daughters as the little girls they are, and let them have the childhood they deserve. Quite apart from the sheer distasteful nature of the tacky garb on offer, we must teach our girls what’s valuable and worth striving for.’ Also writing in *The Daily Mail*, Jones (2010) highlighted the psychological credentials of Linda Papadopoulos, and agrees with the UK Review that sexualised media content is ‘corrupting a generation who simply don’t have the moral guidance that would lead them to turn it off’. Similarly emphasising Papadopoulos’ credibility as a well-known psychologist, an article in *The Times Educational Supplement* by Bloom (2010) presented a summary of the contents of the UK Review: under the line ‘sex is all around us’; the article then lists several commercial products that illustrate the claims of the UK Review, regarding the threat posed by sexualisation to ‘little girls’, such as ‘Babies’ bibs reading “All daddy wanted was a blow job”.

The problematisation of ‘sexualisation’ as a threat to innocent ‘girls’ by the UK Review cemented this narrative within policy and media discourses in Britain. Though appearing oriented by feminist concerns, the UK Review devalues and ignores feminist qualitative research relevant to the topic and reaffirms dehumanising discourses about young women. In the UK Review, full humanity is discursively constructed as a ‘state’ of lost or fragile purity, essentialised as the ground for rights and social protections. The potential for effective feminist critique and intervention is undermined, however, by this essentialisation which problematises the destruction of a prior natural state (public morals, girls’ innocence) rather than the sexist imperatives faced by women in contemporary society, where both purity and sexiness are demanded of women in coercive and punitive ways. It is not that any appeal to purity is dangerous, but that such discourses make particular constructions of young women or the public sphere appear outside of history or relations of power (Duschinsky, 2011a, 2011b).

This focus on threatened purity meant that an opportunity was missed to engage in and further facilitate a critique of the misogynistic aspects of the forms of female subjectivity ‘proposed, suggested, imposed’ in contemporary society (Duschinsky, 2012b). This effective critique would recognise, like Gill (2006:



255–7), that women are too often enjoined to 'conform to ever narrower judgments of female attractiveness' and to act as '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'. Adding to Gill, what I feel should be our focus are two further, fundamental issues: (1) the differential access to material and cultural resources of young women, and (2) the competing cultural imperatives (e.g. be sexy, but not a slut) they face such that each is haunted by the spectre of failed femininity. That is to say, we should attend more closely to the multiple, competing demands on young people, and the differential access to material and cultural resources which shape the strategies they use for responding to these imperatives.

Such an approach has oriented some recent discussions of the topic. In the policy domain, the Welsh Government's 'Childhood, sexuality, sexualisation and equalities' cross-party group has made some progress in advancing beyond a concern with propriety to address themes of sexism and poverty. There has also been some excellent research in this direction. For example, Renold and Ringrose (2011) have described the way in which the 'Playboy Bunny' icon may be mobilised by young women to mean both innocence and sexiness, though each sign appears to formally exclude the other. Renold and Ringrose document that young women are neither cynically nor naively 'buying into' patriarchy. They are mobilising cultural resources in ways that are simultaneously normative and disruptive, in the context of embedded material and gendered inequalities. Strategies free of complicity with oppressive forms of gender power are only ever available by degrees, and must be recognised to be more scarce for young women with fewer privileges, opportunities and safety-nets. Likewise, Walkerdine (2011) has suggested that 'ladettes' should not be regarded as simply 'buying in' to sexualised culture. Their vulgar acts, 'outside the norms of respectable femininity', might be read as simultaneously a form of self-exploitation and a means of becoming 'larger than life' and 'seen' in contrast to their 'familiar space of humiliating normalization' at 'the very poor end of the job market'.

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