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Sexualisation's Four Faces: Sexualisation and Gender Stereotyping in the *Bailey Review*

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This paper explores the considerations of sexualisation, and of gender stereotyping, in the recent United Kingdom government report *Letting Children be Children*. This report, the *Bailey Review*, claimed to represent the views of parents. However, closer reading reveals that, whilst the parents who were consulted were concerned about both the sexualisation *and* the gender stereotyping of products aimed at children, the *Bailey Review* focuses only on the former, and dismisses the latter. 'Sexualisation' has four faces in the *Bailey Review*: it is treated as a process that increases 1) the visibility of sexual content in the public domain, 2) misogyny, 3) the sexuality of children, and 4) the mainstream position of 'deviant' sexual behaviours and lifestyles. Through this construction of 'sexualisation', gendered relations of power are not only hidden from view, but buttress a narrative in which young women are situated as children, and their sexuality and desire rendered pathological and morally unacceptable as judged by a conservative standard of decency. Comparison of the treatment of sexualisation and gender stereotyping in the review is revealing of the political motivations behind it, and of wider discourse in these areas.

Keywords: Bailey, gender stereotyping, girls, sexualisation, Sex and Relationship Education (SRE).

On 6th June 2011 the United Kingdom government published *Letting Children be Children*, an 'independent review of the commercialisation and sexualisation of childhood' (front cover) put together by Reg Bailey, the Chief Executive of the British Christian charity, the Mother's Union. This *Bailey Review* aimed to bring together previous UK reports on this topic (Buckingham, Willett, Bragg & Russell, 2009; Papadopolous, 2010 and Byron, 2008 and 2010) which, in turn, had echoed similar reports which have previously been published in Australia (Rush & La Nauze, 2006) and the United States (American Psychological Association, 2007). On the basis of these previous reports, and further engagement with parents, the *Bailey Review* put forward a set of recommendations in relation to the sexualisation and commercialisation of childhood. These recommendations include, for example, ensuring that magazine covers with sexualised images are not easily seen by

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children, bringing in an age rating for music videos, and making it easier for parents to block their children's access to internet material.

There has been a tendency, in debates about sexualisation internationally, towards polarisation (Barker, 2010). Broadly speaking, one side of the debate argues that society has become hyper-sexualised, that children are accessing sexual and pornographic materials from increasingly younger ages, and that this is damaging them: making them grow up 'too fast' and putting them at risk of sexually transmitted infections, teenage pregnancy and sexual violence, amongst other 'harms'. This argument is made in a number of popular books on the topic (e.g. Levin & Kilbourne, 2008; Sarracino & Scott, 2008) as well as in journalistic accounts (e.g. Hanson, 1996; Phillips, 2002) and in political rhetoric (e.g. Cameron, 2009). The other side makes a neoliberal, post-feminist argument for freedom, autonomy and choice in engagement with sexualised materials (Gill & Scharff, 2011; see Duschinsky & Barker, forthcoming 2012, for a more thorough engagement with the structure/agency tension in this debate).

Both sides of this debate depend for their persuasiveness upon a tactical deployment of the term 'sexualisation', without recognising the multiple meanings of this word and the ways in which it is deployed (see Smith & Attwood, 2011, for a discussion of similar slippages in the Papadopoulos review, 2010). This multiplicity is revealed in Appendix 1 of the *Bailey Review*, which lists four objects of parental concerns which together comprise the 'early sexualisation' of children: content and practices which are 'sexually suggestive' (1), which treat women as 'sexual only' (2), which encourage 'children to think of themselves (or others to think of children) as adult or sexual' (3), and which are 'glamorising or normalising 'deviant' behaviour' (4) (2011b: p.4). The second item on this list is a measure of sexism; the first and third together morally problematise teenage sexuality and desire by identifying true sexuality with adulthood; the fourth is quite explicitly conservative and normalising. This conflation of a concern for sexism with a concern about female and deviant sexualities serves to subsume, under a right-wing narrative, the feminist concerns about gender stereotyping which originally brought the issue of 'sexualisation' to the public eye (see Barker & Duschinsky, forthcoming 2012). Moreover, the conflation of these four faces of 'sexualisation' quickens the emotiveness of this narrative and provides it with the veneer of obviousness or 'common sense'.

The first face of 'sexualisation' (sexually 'suggestive' content) tactically re-frames a shift

which has occurred recently in contemporary Western societies: There has been an increased visibility and availability of marked signifiers of female (hetero)sexuality (such as the underwear, high-heeled shoes, revealing clothes on slender bodies, and made-up faces, which Bailey is concerned about). These represent a vocabulary which is deployed by a variety of subjects for forming narratives about the self: through discussions of desire and desirability, we tell ourselves tales of our power or powerlessness, our belonging and loneliness, our sources of stability and fear. Such accounts encode, veil and play a significant role in re-formulating embedded inequalities such as race, class, and gender (Berlant, 2008).

The result of this is a condition which might, following Thompson (2005), be described as 'the new sexual visibility': a situation in which an apparent increase in 'scandal' comes to be successfully strategically situated as the result of 'moral decline'. This is achieved through the second, third and fourth faces of sexualisation. The feminist concern for misogyny, when incorporated in discourses on sexualisation, makes the tacit object of the discourses the practices and attitudes of women. The identification of 'adulthood' with 'sexuality' in the third face of sexualisation produces a medical and moral problematisation of young people, who are constructed as sexual beings when their sexuality becomes visible within 'public' spaces but who are not classified as full adults. This move is made persuasive by drawing on the longstanding construction of unmarried women as not fully adult, through the image of the 'girl'. Young women are then subject to a normalising gaze, to protect them from becoming deviant themselves and from the pressing threat of the deviance of others. The girl is threatened that she will become 'scandalously impure' if she does not manage herself appropriately in public space (Butler, 2000, p.5). Yet this is not the result of individual pathology, as for example the Papadopoulos Review (2010) suggests, but rather it is caused by the fact that the girl is haunted by the 'trouble' she will suffer, and be held responsible for, in negotiating what has been constructed as full (masculine) public subjectivity in the sexual, economic and political domains (see Butler, 2000, p.82; Egan & Hawkes, 2010).

The increase in 'scandalous' content in the media is less the product of a spiralling increase in immorality than the increasing availability and visibility of the signs of female (hetero)sexuality, combined with the problematisation of the credibility of young women as neoliberal choice-makers. Through the fourfold construction of 'sexualisation', gendered relations of power cannot only be hidden from view, but they are covertly deployed to

support the logic of an argument, the implications of which are quite disturbing. They buttress a narrative in which young women are situated as children, and their sexuality and desire rendered pathological and morally unacceptable as judged by a conservative standard of decency. The tensions contained within these four meanings of 'sexualisation' continually threaten to bubble up throughout the *Bailey Review*; the way with which they are dealt with points to the political motivations and normative perspectives which underlie the report. In the rest of this paper we will focus one example of this: the tensions inherent in Bailey's different treatment of concerns over the sexualisation, and the gender stereotyping, of products.

The *Bailey Review* on sexualisation and gender stereotyping of products

The *Bailey Review* states that 'sexualised and gender-stereotyped clothing, products and services for children are the biggest areas of concern for parents' (p.15). The parents who responded to Bailey were concerned about sexualisation, particularly in relation to clothes sold to children which were felt to be inappropriate for their age. This included: 'bras (whether padded or not), bikinis, short skirts, high-heeled shoes, garments with suggestive slogans, or the use of fabrics and designs that have connotations of adult sexuality' (p.42), such as lace and animal prints. Parents were also concerned about gender-stereotyped products such as divisions of pink and blue clothing, ultra-feminine clothes for girls and army or sports clothes for boys, make-up and fashion accessories aimed only at girls, and cars, action figures and guns aimed only at boys.

The concern about the sexualisation of clothes results in one of the key recommendations of the review: that retailers should come up with a code of good practice regarding retailing to children which they all adhere to, and which – Bailey suggests – should involve avoiding selling 'scaled down' sexualised adult clothing and clothing with sexual slogans (p.44). One of the main themes at the beginning of the review is that retail needs to be 'explicitly and systematically family friendly, from design and buying through to display and marketing' (p.9).

However, in relation to gender stereotyping, the review concludes that there is 'no strong evidence that gender stereotyping in marketing or products influences children's behaviour' (p.48). Bailey argues 'that the relationship between gender and consumer culture is more complex' (p.49) and that the marketing of pink products for girls could have a positive impact (e.g. getting them interested in science if it was marketed in pink

packaging and related to beauty/pampering). The review states that gender preferences are strongly biologically driven and part of 'normal, healthy development of gender identity' (p.49). There are no recommendations made regarding gender stereotyping of products, rather it is accepted that this will inevitably continue as long as there is consumer demand.

When considering the research in these areas, we would conclude that there is – if anything – much clearer evidence for the negative impact of gender stereotyping than there is for the negative impact of 'sexualisation', if the construct even has the validity to be assessed in this manner.

There is evidence that sexualised goods aimed at children are not prevalent, and that their meanings for young people is highly context dependent (e.g. Bragg, Buckingham, Russell & Willett, 2011). Research suggests that young people often actively seek out such goods, rather than being 'exposed' to them, and negotiate their own sexual understandings through them (Bale, 2011), frequently engaging with them in ways which are critical and resist obvious readings (Duits & van Zoonen, 2011).

On the other hand, a wealth of research on gender stereotyping suggests that this is highly related to children's – and adults – perceptions of themselves and other people, their confidence and ability, and their interest in certain activities over others (Fine, 2010). For example, young people inflate their perceptions of their ability in gender stereotyped subjects (maths for boys, arts for girls) after reading about gender stereotypes or even just ticking a gender box (Chatard, Guimon & Selimbegovic, 2007; Sinclair, Hardin & Lowery, 2006). Exposure to gender stereotypes disadvantaging one's own gender diminishes confidence and interest (Correll, 2004) as well as actual performance on tasks (McGlone & Aronson, 2006). Given the fierce gender segregation of clothing, toys, advertising, stories and television programmes from an early age, children are constantly primed regarding such stereotypes. As they learn gender labels and identities they shift into gender-stereotyped play and begin to police their own, and each others, behaviours (Fagot, 1985; Zosuls, et al., 2009), channelling towards conventionally gendered interests (technology and action for boys, care and beauty for girls, Francis, 2010). Counter-stereotyping toys through stories, however, results in girls playing with more 'boyish toys' and vice versa (Green, Bigler & Catherwood, 2004). Queer possibilities can be opened up in the early years when gendered toy and clothing choices are not heavily policed (Taylor & Richardson, 2005), due to the fluidity of gender at this point (Renold, 2008; Mellor &

Renold, forthcoming 2012).

So it seems clear that gender stereotyping and segregation, present in the toys and pink/blue clothing which Bailey's respondents were concerned about, *do* impact on how young people view and treat themselves and others, and may well influence the careers and lives which they pursue, all of which has marked material, economic and social implications. Beyond this, there can be little question that the narrow definitions of femininity and masculinity expressed in stereotyped clothes and other products make life a misery for the many children - and adults - who do not neatly fit in these boxes, who frequently suffer from bullying and alienation (D'Augelli, Grossman & Starks, 2006; Greytak, Kosciw & Diaz, 2009), and who would presumably be located, by Bailey, outside of 'normal, healthy development of gender identity' (p.49). Bailey's biological essentialism around gendered preferences reveals an inadequate understanding of both history (pink for girls and blue for boys being a very recent phenomenon, Goldacre, 2007) and neuroscience (physiological gender differences, when they do exist, may well reflect neuroplastic responses to stereotypical environments rather than 'innate' 'biological drivers', p.49).

The recommendations made by the *Bailey Review* reflect the ways in which issues of gender stereotyping and objectification of women are folded into the issue of sexualisation, such that the object of concern moves from sexism to the sexuality and desires of young women. On objectification, other commentators, such as the Ministry of Truth (2011), have noted that only 13.4% of parents responding to Bailey were concerned about sexualised covers of lads mags. However, one of Bailey's key recommendations is to remove these titles from the view of children. Yet *over half* of parents surveyed in the consultation for the *Bailey Review* were concerned about the objectification of women and beauty standards perpetuated by such magazines, and also by celebratory magazines and tabloid newspapers (which have a far higher circulation than lads mags). On this issue, Bailey concludes that there is 'no clear evidence of a causal link between such images and harm to young people' (p.80) and he puts forward no guidelines about airbrushing, the use of thin models, or the lack of diversity of body forms – despite parental concerns on exactly these points and previous British Medical Association guidance on these issues (BMA, 2000). What can be further added, in light of our disaggregation of the four faces of sexualisation is that the issue of concern shifts in Bailey's recommendation about lads mags from their misogynistic content to their promotion of 'sexually suggestive' content in

the public sphere, their availability at eye level to children, and their promotion of 'deviant', improper practices and attitudes.

Such a use of the four faces of 'sexualisation' suggests, to us, that the *Bailey Review* is more concerned with bolstering current cultural norms than it is with even what parents and young people think themselves, which Bailey locates as the source of authority for the report (see also Kermode, 2011; Greer, 2011). Contemporary social norms situate sexuality and desire amongst young people as inherently problematic (hence the desire to clamp down on anything that might encourage it), and propose that people should adhere to rigid gender roles (hence the lack of any problem with gender stereotyped products). We believe that we need to think critically about both of these conclusions.

In its treatment of sexualisation and gender there are resonances between the *Bailey Review* and current policy and practice regarding Sex and Relationship Education (SRE) in schools. As Ringrose (forthcoming, 2012) points out, SRE fails to engage with the 'realities' of sexual relationships among young people, focusing instead, like Bailey, on protectionist agendas whereby adults attempt to protect children from risky sexual behaviour (Alldred & David, 2009), and children are positioned as innocent and expected to be ignorant of sexual matters despite the pervasiveness of sexuality in children's lives and play (Epstein, O'Flynn & Telford, 2003; Renold, 2005; 2008).

The UK Department for Education SRE guidance document (2000), which is generally used, states that 'the key task for schools is, through appropriate information and effective advice on contraception and on delaying sexual activity, to reduce the incidence of unwanted pregnancies' (p.16), and, as in the *Bailey Review*, sex is constructed as an adult practice in statements such as 'It [SRE] enables young people to mature, to build up their confidence and self-esteem and understand the reasons for delaying sexual activity' (p.4). On the ground, the majority of SRE lessons, when they do occur, focus on risk (particularly pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections), and half focus on contraception (Ringrose, forthcoming 2012). SRE is highly heteronormative (Epstein, O'Flynn & Telford, 2003; Formby, 2011), and completely separated from gender issues, with no consideration of gender dynamics within relationships (Kehily, 2002). Gender is only considered in school systems in relation to numbers of male and female students, and performance on tests, in order to tick a gender equality box. Wider gender dynamics are not considered, nor are they related to issues of sexuality or relationships within SRE.

Gender and sexualisation are similarly separated in the *Bailey Review*, following their initial presentation as linked concerns by parents. As with many current SRE practices, the emphasis is on protecting young people from certain sexual behaviours, rather than on improving communication about sex (Allen, 2010). This is despite evidence for the benefits of communication (between parents and their children, between partners, and between teachers and students), and the relation between poor communication and many of the risks which Bailey, and others, are concerned with (e.g. sexual health problems, sexual violence, relationship dissatisfaction, see Hyde, DeLamater & Byers, 2009).

Conclusions

We believe that the example of the treatment of sex and gender reveals serious problems which run through the *Bailey Review*. The construct of 'sexualisation' is polyvalent; the Bailey Review itself suggests four meanings: 'sexually suggestive' content or practices (1), those which treat women as 'sexual only' (2), those which encourage children or adults to see children as sexual beings (3), and those which mainstream 'deviant' behaviour (4). Gender stereotypes, encompassed by the second of these meanings, slides in and out of focus in the course of the Review. As a result, gendered relations of power can not only be hidden from view, but can also be deployed by the text to support its arguments.

In the final paper of the ESRC-funded seminar on 'girls, sexuality and sexualisation' (Renold & Ringrose, 2011), Coy and Garner (2011) proposed that the rise of public and political concern regarding 'sexualisation' represents a real opportunity for feminist activism and research. Drawing upon her work with women who have experienced abuse at the hands of men, and on voices of experienced professionals in this field, they proposed that feminists should make strategic use of the issue of sexualisation, which could provide a platform for combating the entrenched sexism of contemporary society which facilitates violence against women. A whole 'shopping-list' of feminist objectives could be achieved through use of the language of 'sexualisation', rather than its critique. This is surely a valid position, and is reflected in the work of a variety of other esteemed scholars and also in the 2010 Home Office *Papadopoulos Review on the Sexualisation of Young People* (see Smith & Attwood, 2011, for a critical analysis of this review which echoes many of the points made here). The strength of this position lies in the fact that it is an open question as to which faces of 'sexualisation' can be jettisoned or reworked without losing the interest of the public eye. Yet looking back, Papadopoulos (2011) herself has remarked

that 'since my review came out, the wrong things have been focused on', which run 'against the feminist' goals of the text. We would suggest that tacit assumptions made within such feminist discourses on sexualisation have themselves facilitated this focus. This feminist strategy has backfired, and will continue to backfire, so long as the issue of sexism is subsumed and denatured by the manner of its assemblage with the three other faces of 'sexualisation'.

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