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Doing the Möbius Strip:
The Politics of the *Bailey Review*

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Introduction

In their submissions to the *Bailey Review* consultation, the NSPCC (2011a, 2011b) expressed grave concern that discourses on sexualisation are conflating sexualisation with sexuality, and fact with value. First on their list of policy priorities was greater conceptual clarity regarding which processes within the rubric of 'sexualisation' will cause 'harm' and which ones 'are normal' (2011b: 10, 16): 'We need to differentiate between what may be harmful to children and young people, and what may be sexual, and perhaps even offensive, but does not cause harm. The definition of sexualisation should be based on a proper understanding of children and young people's development' (2011a: 1). In agreement with such concerns, we argue that that a turn to the investigation of 'sexual socialisation' would attend more precisely to the question of harm and suffering, outside of the unhelpful concern for the normal and abnormal subtly smuggled into discourses on 'sexualisation'.

Assumptions made by feminist discourses on sexualisation in the UK have caused them to politically backfire. With the innocence of 'girls' situated as the object of sexualisation, these discourses have conflated *sexism* with *sexuality* in discussing media representations and social practices. This has facilitated the re-deployment of the issue of sexualisation by right-wing discursive actors to police young femininity. We are not opposed to intervention to address the threat posed to women, of any age, from misogyny. Sexualisation discourses, however, have come to be focused on threats to a restrictive notion of decency. In this way, both feminist and right-wing discursive actors have mobilised and affirmed the sexist division between pure and impure, innocent and sexual, forms of female identity. We shall begin with a brief account of the history of discourses on sexualisation in the UK since 1992 (drawing upon the genealogy of the concept that one of us has conducted in other articles), before then moving to an analysis of the 2011 *Bailey Review on the Sexualisation and Commercialisation of Childhood*.

The context of the *Bailey Review*

The term 'sexualisation' first appeared within UK public discourse in 1992-3 in a series of articles in *The Independent*, discussing adolescent sexuality and threats to childhood

innocence. In an article of November 1992, entitled 'The Crisis of Teenage Pregnancies', Dr. Fay Hutchinson of the London Brook Advisory Centre is cited as arguing for the need for more effective sex education, to protect girls from the pregnancies that follow from 'an explicit sexualisation of our young people. We allow them adult clothes and adult things' when in fact 'at 13 and 14 these girls are more at the stage of needing to love puppies and kittens. At this age girls like fluffy toys' (Hall 1992). In the UK press, 'sexualisation' came increasingly to refer to a social and moral corruption of girls by impure sexual representations in the commercial media. Any girl showing signs of adult sexuality was situated as 'mainstreaming' the abnormal predilections of adult sexual predators, thereby making every child more vulnerable to sexual abuse. Hanson (1996) wrote in *The Independent* that the 'sexualisation of children's clothes':

> gives all sorts of strange messages. I hate seeing children done up in what are really caricatures of sexy adults' clothes suggesting an identity that isn't part of childhood - very tight, black and shimmery and glittery. I think mothers have a responsibility to ensure that children have a childhood. The younger the child is, the more complicated. There are people who have confused boundaries about sexuality and I don't think we should put opportunity in their way.

The appearance of innocence is taken to protect girls from sexual threats; sexualised attitudes, tastes and behaviours are seen to degrade girls and remove these protections. This move depends upon two subtle discursive moves: an identification of young women with little children, mobilising the semantic ambiguity of the term 'girls'; and the use of the term 'sexualisation' to refer not only to a progressive but a *developmental* degradation beginning in youth.

This can be seen in the 2010 Home Office report on sexualisation, the *Papadopoulos Review*. Papadopoulos 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 (2010: 6, 27). On the one hand, representations of vulnerability are extended from children to young women. For example, the text acknowledges that cultural objects 'will mean different things to a three-year-old, an eight-year-old and a 14-year-old' (2010: 25), but proposes that 'older children are just as susceptible' to the process of sexualisation as younger ones (2010: 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' (2010: 6). 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 (2010: 7). Rather than critically consider the relations of gender power that organise this differential allocation between men and women of adult sexual status, the *Papadopoulos Review* takes 'femininity' as a pure and vulnerable state, threatened by the intrusion of an unnatural (hetero)sexuality.

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. We would suggest that tacit assumptions made the *Papadopoulos Review* and feminist discourses on sexualisation have *themselves* facilitated this focus. Discursive strategies which aim change society through the regulation of social and sexual behaviour have long been mobilised by feminist actors in ways that have been open to appropriation by other discursive actors. This is not, in itself, problematic – which is why accusations of 'moral panic' regarding discourses on sexualisation lack analytical precision and, as a result, political acuity (Atmore 1999; Bray 2008). What is significant and troubling about the feminist discourses on sexualisation such as the *Papadopoulos Review* is that they have instantiated, re-worked, and naturalised a division between pure and impure forms of femininity. In doing so, an uncritical discursive coalition has been forged with discourses that demand the control and regulation of young female sexuality.

Parents, generally mothers, have been addressed by right-wing narratives on sexualisation which have insisted upon the pressing need to protect and regulate their innocent children in the context of sexual threats from outside the home. In one of the first such instances of this right-wing narrative, *The Daily Mail* mobilised the issue of 'sexualisation' to castigate the irresponsibility of those who would critically discuss representations of childhood innocence and purity. The editorial argued that 'in expressing this opinion publicly' a speaker is 'giving the green light to paedophiles', in the context of 'the 'sexualisation' of children and pre-pubescent girls' in contemporary 'consumer society' (*Daily Mail* 1993). From the late 1990s, the issue of sexualisation came to be increasingly used within right-wing discourses to suggest that the visibility of sexuality – especially marked, 'deviant' sexualities – within the mediated public sphere has served to express and further contribute to the destruction of public morality and decency (e.g. Appleyard 1998; Shakinovsky 2002). For example, Julian Brazier, the Conservative MP for Canterbury, placed 'sexualisation' as both the cause and consequence of a Parliamentary Bill lowering of the age of consent for homosexuals to match that of heterosexuals (Pierce 1998). 'Sexualisation' was

positioned in such discourses as closely tied to the contamination of moral values in society, the breakdown of the nuclear family, and the lack of adult 'responsibility' (Phillips 2002; Poulter 2010).

A significant actor in the shaping of this right-wing problematisation of 'sexualisation' has been David Cameron, now Prime Minister of the UK. Soon after his election to the role of Leader of the Opposition, he positioned the Conservative party against the 'harmful and creepy' sexualisation of young girls (Cameron, cited in Crerar 2006). In the central speech of the 2009 Conservative Party conference, entitled 'Putting Britain back on her feet', Cameron mobilised the threat of sexualisation to childhood as a legitimation strategy for financial measures to incentivise marriage and to radically scale back the welfare state. Only in this way would Britain be 'back on her feet', behaving responsibly – free of 'her' fiscal debt and of 'her' sexual/moral dissolution:

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

The issue of sexualisation was headlined as the core of the Coalition government policy on families and children. The Coalition's *Programme for Government*, issued by the Cabinet Office in May 2010, stated that since 'strong and stable families of all kinds are the bedrock of a strong and stable society', the Government must 'take action to protect children from excessive commercialisation and premature sexualisation' (Cabinet Office 2010: 19). An Early Day Motion was proposed by the Conservative MP David Morris in November 2010, which praised the Mothers' Union for their campaign on the issue of the 'commercialisation of childhood' (see Mothers Union 2010). In response, on the 6th of December 2010, the Coalition government commissioned a new report from the Mothers' Union on the sexualisation and commercialisation of childhood to recommend practical changes in government legislation on the issue. This new inquiry was 'led by Reg Bailey, chief executive of Christian charity the Mothers' Union' (Carlin 2010). The Coalition utilised the

legitimacy given to the issue of sexualisation by the *Papadopoulos Review* to commission a further report with 'tough recommendations' in order to achieve 'a culture of responsibility in our country' (Cameron 2011a).

The *Bailey Review*

'Letting Children Be Children', was issued by Reg Bailey (2011a) on behalf of the Department for Education. The *Bailey Review* takes as its 'starting point' the work of previous reviews on sexualisation. It lauds the *Papadopoulos Review*, but notes that making policy recommendations on the basis of expert knowledge is difficult as this knowledge is 'contested', 'divided' and 'inconclusive'. In particular, he rules out attending to the issue of what 'sexualisation' means. Instead, 'the conclusion of this Review is that parents are the experts in deciding whether something is appropriate for their child' (Bailey 2011a: 7-8, 37). An appeal to parental authority, mediated through the 'measured approach' of Bailey himself (2011a: 45), will bypass the social scientific debate and focus instead on policing norms. This can be seen in Appendix 1 to the *Bailey Review*, which lists four objects of parental concerns which together comprise the 'early sexualisation': content and practices which are 'sexually suggestive', which treat women as 'sexual only', which encourage 'children to think of themselves (or others to think of children) as adult or sexual', and which are 'glamorising or normalising 'deviant' behaviour' (2011a: 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 explicitly normalising.

Bailey (2011a: 3) echoes and affirms David Cameron's mobilisation of the imputed truth of childhood as the constitutive outside of the responsible subject, stating that 'for children to be children, parents need to be parents... taking their responsibility for their children upon themselves'. If parents act as they should, then the market will produce positive outcomes without the need for thoroughgoing state intervention: 'there is good reason to believe that the business community, supported by engaged and responsible parents, can show that it is capable of playing its part in putting the brakes on the unthinking drift towards an increasingly commercialised and sexualised world for children'. David Cameron (2011b), in his response to the *Bailey Review* has expressed enthusiasm for the presumption that the market does not require state regulation in order to achieve moral outcomes: 'I note that many of the actions you suggest are for business and regulators to follow rather than for government. I support this emphasis, as it consistent with this government's overall approach

and my long held belief that the leading force for progress should be social responsibility, not state control'.

Despite expressing reservation that the concerns regarding 'sexualised clothing' may be 'unreasonable' (2011a: 45), the *Bailey Review* notes how concerned parents are about inappropriate clothing being sold to 'girls'. He therefore suggests that clothes retailers should 'develop and comply with a voluntary code of good practice for all aspects of retailing to children' (2011a: 16, 42). Bailey (2011a: 11-12) asserts that whilst he wishes to make parenting easier by nudging the market in the right direction, this does not 'absolve any of us as responsible adults from creating the right sort of environment that allows our nation's children to be children'. Whilst parental authority is the justification for Bailey's claims, 'parents can themselves be complicit' in processes of sexualisation and so require government 'support' for their parenting. For example, rather than recognising and feeling confident in the role they should take in combating sexualisation, the text notes that 92% of parents have never complained about sexual content in the media, and that of these 43% of parents believe that they never have encountered sexual content worthy of complaint (2011a: 76-7). Appendix 1 to the *Bailey Review* states that 'pressure to consume is acknowledged as an irritation but is rationalised as acceptable - the sense of real personal harm is very low and irritation is traded off against the perceived benefits' (2011b: 2). The main text of the *Bailey Review*, however, argues that 'although we conclude that these concerns are not at the forefront of most parents' minds, we do not consider that this is a reason for complacency' (2011a: 87), and the text can still deploy the authority of parents as a legitimation strategy for its own moral and policy claims.

Bailey expresses grave concern that 'we are all living in an increasingly sexual and sexualised culture' (2011a: 3, 9). The *Bailey Review* states that 'sexual images form a wallpaper to our lives, all-pervasive but hardly noticed. This background affects adults as well as children and is everywhere in society' (2011a: 41). The particular concern of the text is that there exists a 'pressure on children to grow up takes two different but related forms: the pressure to take part in a sexualised life before they are ready to do so; and the commercial pressure to consume the vast range of goods' (2011a: 4). As a result, parents informed the *Bailey Review* that they 'felt that there is 'no escape' and, for children, no 'clear space' where they can simply be themselves' (2011a: 23).

Bailey discerns two broad responses to this pressure. The first suggests 'that we can try to keep children wholly innocent and unknowing until they are adults. The world is a nasty place and children should be unsullied by it.' The second approach argues that 'we

should accept the world for what it is and simply give children the tools to understand it and navigate their way through it better... to do anything more than raise the ability of children to understand the commercial and sexual world around them, and especially their view of it through the various media, is to create a moral panic' (2011a: 10). The *Bailey Review* therefore makes a partial departure from the narrative presented by the *Papadopoulos Review* in taking a degree of critical distance from the narrative of sexualisation as a destruction of childhood innocence. A critical point that the text makes is that such narratives profit from representations of innocence themselves, 'sensationalis[ing] the issue, fanning a prurient interest in cases where a sexual dimension can be put into a headline' (2011a: 45).

Bailey expresses particular concern regarding the second response to the issue of sexualisation. The problem with the second approach is that, afraid 'that we would infantilise adults if we make the world more benign for children', it instead permits processes which ''adultify' children' (2011a: 10). Furthermore, this second narrative has meant that parents 'lack the confidence to speak out on sexualisation and commercialisation issues for fear of being labelled a prude or out of touch' (2011a: 18). Bailey concludes that 'neither' of the two responses to sexualisation 'can be effective on its own'. Children must not be 'wholly innocent and unknowing', because 'we do not want to cut children off from the commercial world'; children need to learn how to become consumers in a way that is 'manage[d]' by their parents (2011a: 52; cf. Department for Business 2011: 37). However, he cites parental views that 'There's a concern about them knowing too much at their age. You want to protect their innocence'. Whilst a 'wholly innocent' childhood is therefore ruled out by Bailey, he authorises parental concerns that sexualisation is making children appear like adults, thereby making them vulnerable to sexual attack. Another parental perspective cited by the *Bailey Review* states that 'She wants to wear make-up and short skirts because she wants to look like [a celebrity] but it's too much. It's not innocent – well it is, but it might look provoking to the wrong people.'

The gender of the 'sexualised child' is generally not addressed by the *Bailey Review*, despite discussing 'girls' in nearly every example and quotation pertaining to sexuality. Sometimes 'gender stereotyped' content is taken as an aspect of 'sexualisation'. On other occasions, however, they are discursively separated: for example, of 873 parents surveyed '73 felt that there were inappropriate slogans on children's clothing – either of a sexualised nature or slogans that were gender–stereotyped' (2011c: 7; see also 2011a: 26). The tensions in the text associated with this simultaneous presence and absence of gender come to a head in a section entitled 'Gender Stereotyping'. Bailey states that his consultation with parents

has led to the conclusion that 'there is often an overlap between the toys of a highly gendered nature and, especially for girls, a sexualised content' (2011a: 48). However, Bailey goes on to argue that 'we also note that the 'pink for girls' approach can have a positive side', as will be visible from a case study. The case study is a quotation from Bob Paton, Interplay UK, the toy manufacturer, which describes how, in marketing 'bath bombs', 'unfortunately, 'science' still appeals to boys more than girls. Once we changed to predominantly pink packaging and marketed it as a craft activity, we were shocked to see consistent sales'. The 'positive side' of 'pink for girls' for Bailey is that such gendered symbolism is good for sales! He concludes that 'there is greater evidence now of there being innate gender differences so that a desire to play with one kind of toy over another is at least as much about biological drivers as with socialisation and has to do with a normal, healthy development of gender identity' (2011a: 49). Attention to gender and the issue of sexism are embedded in biology, folding them back out of Bailey's narrative on the dangers of sexualisation.

Among the recommendations made by the *Bailey Review* is a ban on 'peer-to-peer marketing', in which those 'under the age of 16' act as 'ambassadors' for particular brands and earn money for encouraging their friends to buy them (2011a: 65-7). The *Bailey Review* also instructs the Advertising Standards Authority to avoid the 'placement of advertisements with sexualised imagery near schools'. Though less than 13% of parents expressed concern about 'sexualised nature of on-street advertising such as billboards and posters in bus shelters' (2011c: 7), for Bailey the issue is one of consent, since 'there is no option to 'switch off' on-street advertisements' (2011a: 26). In response to parental concerns regarding the 'the sexualised and gender stereotyped' content of music videos, Bailey also proposes the introduction of age ratings for music videos, to bring them in line with other film content which is mandated to have such ratings under the Video Recordings Act 1984. One of the central recommendations of the *Bailey Review* is that, 'as a matter of urgency, the internet industry should ensure that customers must make an active choice over what sort of content they want to allow their children to access. To facilitate this, the internet industry must act decisively to develop and introduce effective parental controls' (2011a: 15-16). A means through which parents can block inappropriate content and monitor their child's media consumption should automatically be enabled on mobile phones and computers. The text also recommends a further review in the winter of 2012, in which further market regulation should be recommended if the degree of commercialisation and sexualisation of childhood has not improved (2011a: 88). Like the *Papadopoulos Review*, the *Bailey Review* recommends the creation of a website for parents to air their concerns regarding sexualisation; Cameron

(2011b) has stated that every recommendation will be implemented, and that work on the website will begin immediately. With the creation of a website to facilitate complaints about sexualisation, and the recommendation of a further review, the incitement to media and policy discourses on sexualisation looks set to continue.

Conclusion: Beyond 'sexualisation'

The term 'sexualisation' emerged in its contemporary usage in America in the mid-1970s as a portmanteau of the words 'sexual socialization' (e.g. Spanier 1975). If the notion of 'socialisation' can be acknowledged to mean a dynamic process of subjectivation both actively and passively inflected by the production, reproduction and transformation of wider societal forces, then we would recommend unpacking the concept again. In this we are in agreement with recent work in this journal by Jackson and Westrupp (2010: 374), which recommends 'shifting the focus from girls to cultural production would not only avoid moralizing notions of the 'sexualized girl' but potentially open up new understandings'. The UK feminist grass-roots activist group OBJECT have also proposed that the term 'sexualisation' has misdirected public discussions, framing debates in a way that is not helpful for feminist goals (Long 2011). Moving the terms of the debate from 'sexualisation' to the construction and stabilisation of 'social' behaviour would have the advantage of directing attention explicitly rather than covertly to the role played by both particular forms of cultural consumption and sexual practices and desires in the formation of adult subjectivity, agency and citizenship.

In a profoundly sexist culture, in which commercial interests are playing an important role in structuring the discursive, material and affective agency of social actors, there is a need for research and social policy that addresses the interconnections between the lives of young people, gendered relations of power, and consumer cultures. Yet more careful narratives are needed, which recognise like Gill (2008: 54-5) that 'a new version of female sexual agency is on offer that breaks in important ways with the sexual objectification and silencing of female desire' but that 'in refiguring female sexual agency in these particular ways, it raises new problems and challenges'. Where research has avoided the dehumanising narrative of 'sexualisation' as degradation in exploring this issue, the result has been a subtle analysis with great critical power (e.g. Renold & Ringrose 2008; Pascoe 2011). Though there are notable exceptions such as Gill, the framework of 'sexualisation' does not predispose

researchers towards such sensitivity; discourses on 'sexualisation' have tended to facilitate tendentious social science, and to support sexist social policy.

An interesting point of comparison for contemporary sexualisation discourses in the UK is the work of Cocca (2004), who indicates that, during the 1990s, feminists in America generally decided not to actively campaign in favour of the intensification of statutory rape legislation, as it was proposed by conservative legislators with the often-explicit goal of controlling the sexuality of young women. However, neither did they campaign against it because it could also protect young women from sexual violence. Where a discursive frame exists, as it does in the case of 'sexualisation', in which oppression and empowerment are positioned as opposites, the image of the 'möbius strip' captures the strange complicities and coalitions associated with discourses on gender, sexuality and protection. A recent study by Malson et al. (2011: 74, 80), published in the journal *Feminism & Psychology*, expressed surprise and delight that the discourses of the female students in their focus group research did not instantiate the 'sexualised' discourses they expected to find but instead 'converged significantly' with the 'critical feminist analyses' of feminist campaigners on sexualisation such as Gill and McRobbie. They found that a 'sexualised' young woman was understood by their participants:

> Not as an image of liberated female desire and gender equality but as 'slutty' and 'look[ing] like a prostitute'. Her sexualisation, however novel in some ways, is nevertheless recuperated back into longstanding, culturally entrenched, derogatory stereotypes.

These researchers find themselves lauding these 'distinctly non-feminist' assumptions, since they correspond to what they see as the 'critical feminist' perspective, 'indicating a critique, along the lines of Gill's'.

The 'obverse' (that is to say, the same) side of the möbius strip can be seen in Hakim's (2010) work on 'erotic capital'. Erotic capital is theorised by Hakim as a particular form of power, disproportionately available to women compared to men due to biological disparities in their level of desire. She valorises the process of 'sexualisation', which she situates as breaking down the conventions which have stopped women from using their sexuality as a source of agency in the same manner as their economic or social capital. Yet just as much as media and policy discourses problematising sexualisation, Hakim's position re-codes gendered relations of power in terms of personal traits. In discourses on

sexualisation, the consumption and sexual choices of young women have tended to be assessed in relation to the discursive figures of the vulnerable child or the 'girl gone skank', since the possibility of meaningful agency is foreclosed for subjects classified as 'girls'. Hakim, by contrast, situates all young women precisely as neo-liberal subjects, operating as the natural entrepreneurs of their own desirability, extracting them from the social conditions of possibility of such entrepreneurs and consumers of 'sexuality'. Whereas, for example, in the *Papadopolous Review* these relations of power are constructed as individual health or psychological and moral pathology, in Hakim the same relations are situated as a spectrum of degrees of sexual agency, ranging from personal sexiness down to undesirability.

Discourses on sexuality tend to 'do the möbius strip' where they depend upon an inadequate account of choice, as either simply present or absent: media and policy discourses on sexualisation tend to essentialise the figure of the innocent girl as the constitutive outside of responsible choice-making subjectivity, whereas Hakim's work takes all but young children to already be such neo-liberal subjects. The *Bailey Review* identifies and straddles this division without addressing the gendered relations of power that would allow it to move outside the möbius strip. Its discourse is continually forced to manage the tensions associated with presenting both arguments at once. Offering a way of escaping the möbius strip, we contend that a concern with sexual subjectivation would permit the analysis and evaluation of the dynamic capacity of gendered relations of power both to enable and to limit particular forms of choice, pleasure and suffering. Attending to 'sexual socialisation' rather than 'sexualisation' would facilitate the consideration of agency as immanent to the organisation of domains of social practice rather than either free from or a mere effect of power.

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