FEMINIST FORUM

Media, Empowerment and the 'Sexualization of Culture' Debates

Rosalind Gill

Abstract Claims about 'empowerment' increasingly animate debates about the 'sexualization of culture'. This article responds to Lamb and Peterson's (2011) attempts to open up and complicate the notion of 'sexual empowerment' as it is used in relation to adolescent girls. Drawing on contemporary research from the UK, New Zealand and elsewhere, the article seeks to promote a dialogue between media and communications research and more psychologically oriented scholarship. The paper makes four arguments. First it points to the need to rethink conceptualizations of the media, and processes of media influence. Secondly it raises critical questions about the notion of 'media literacy' which has increasingly taken on the status of panacea in debates about young people and 'sexualization'. Thirdly it highlights the curious absence of considerations of power in debates about sexual empowerment, and argues for the need to think about sexualization in relation to class, 'race', sexuality and other axes of oppression. Finally, it raises critical questions about the utility of the notion of sexual empowerment, given its individualistic framing, the developmentalism implicit in its use, and the difficulties in identifying it in cultures in which 'empowerment' is used to sell everything from liquid detergents to breast augmentation surgery.

Keywords Sexualization · Empowerment · Young women · Media · Postfeminism

R. Gill (✉)
Centre for Culture, Media and Creative Industries,
King's College London,
Chesham Building, Strand Campus,
London WC2R 2LS, UK
e-mail: rosalind.gill@kcl.ac.uk
URL: http://www.kcl.ac.uk/schools/humanities/depts/cci/

Introduction

In the last decade, the 'sexualization of culture' has become a major topic of concern, that has garnered academic research and policy interventions and been discussed extensively in popular literature and the media (e.g. Buckingham and Bragg 2004; Attwood 2006; Rush and La Nauze 2006; APA 2007; Durham 2008; Levin and Kilbourne 2009). This article makes an intervention into debates about the sexualization of culture, looking specifically at the place of ideas about empowerment within them. The article responds to Sharon Lamb and Zoe Peterson's (2011, this issue) important attempt to open up and complicate the notion of empowerment. Drawing on contemporary research from the UK, New Zealand and elsewhere, this commentary argues for the need to promote greater dialogue between psychologists and scholars of media and communications, and raises questions about power, difference and media influence.

One of the ways in which contemporary discussions about 'sexualization' or 'pornification' (e.g. McNair 2002; Levy 2005; Attwood 2006, 2009; Dines 2010; Durham 2008; Levin and Kilbourne 2009; Tankard Reist 2009; Paasonen et al. 2007; Ringrose 2011; Walter 2010; Hakim 2011) differ from the 'sex wars' of the early 1980s (Dworkin 1981; Rubin 1984; Morgan 1977; Dworkin and MacKinnon 1988; Cornell 2000; Vance 1993; Segal and McIntosh 1993) is in the prominence accorded to 'empowerment'. The notion has emerged as central to the lexicon of feminist debate – used across a spectrum of positions. On one side of the argument are those who mobilize women's 'choice', 'agency' and 'empowerment' to champion aspects of 'sexualized' culture such as pornography, burlesque or the popularity of pole dancing as a recreational activity – these activities can be defended (or even celebrated) because they are 'empowering' (Holland and Attwood 2009; Smith 2007).

On the other, empowerment is regarded merely as a cynical rhetoric, wrapping sexual objectification in a shiny, feisty, postfeminist packaging that obscures the continued underlying sexism (Winship 2000; Levy 2005; Donaghue et al. 2011). A further position is interested in the extent to which sexual 'empowerment' has itself become a normatively demanded feature of young women's sexual subjectivity, such that they are called on routinely to perform confident, knowing hetero-sexiness (Radner 1993, 1999; Gill 2008; Harvey and Gill 2011; Evans et al. 2010).

Into this complicated and contested terrain Lamb and Peterson's (2011) article – and their work as individuals more generally (Lamb and Brown 2006; Lamb 2010; Peterson 2010)– makes an important contribution, opening up questions about what constitutes sexual empowerment, who has the right to decide this, and, significantly, the nature of the relationship (if any) between subjective *feelings of empowerment*, and actually *being empowered* (whatever that means – a point I will return to). This was the nub of Lamb and Peterson's earlier disagreement (Lamb 2010; Peterson 2010) a divergence of opinion which saw Lamb "believing that Peterson could celebrate a teen girl giving a football player a lap dance at a party as a sign of empowerment" (2011, this issue) and Peterson seeing Lamb as giving girls "the hurtful message that although they *feel* empowered, their sense of power is, in fact, a false consciousness marketed to them by a sexualized advertising culture" (2011, this issue). As they note, this polarization is a familiar one within feminism. In their joint article they aim to disrupt these dichotomous positions, explore common ground, but also point to issues that make answering the question 'what is sexual empowerment?' so very difficult. Their focus is upon adolescent girls and the media.

The real strengths of the article include complicating established positions and outlining a richer, more multi-dimensional understanding about the criteria that might be used to identify sexual experiences as empowering. Lamb and Peterson have each tried to work across and beyond dichotomies in their work and in this article they extend this project, exploring ambivalence and taking apart the seeming obviousness of 'sexual empowerment'. More than this, the article speaks to longstanding debates and dilemmas in feminist theory, raising significant questions about agency, choice, desire and the role and status of the feminist re-searcher (Fine 1988; Tolman 2002, 2005; Harris 2005; Fine and McClelland 2006; Lerum and Dworkin 2009). It does so in a way that is a model of open, dialogical and sisterly debate. In a field characterized by entrenched positions and sometimes hostile contestation (Jeffreys 2008; Duits and Van Zoonen 2007); Lamb and Peterson have chosen an alternative way to explore their differences – one that is cooperative, that regards divergences of opinion not as evidence that one author is right and the other wrong, but

as the result of genuine dilemmas in feminist thinking. It seems to me that in addition to the substantive contribution their argument makes, it is also exemplary of a new and far more productive ethics of engagement within feminism, for which they (and the journal) deserve congratulation.

In what follows I seek to contribute to the conversation with my own set of interests and concerns, which overlap with Lamb and Peterson's, yet also generate new questions and point to different directions for research and activism. My argument will centre around four broad themes which respond to Lamb and Peterson's paper but also speak to wider debates about girls and 'sexualization', drawing on my own and others' current research, conducted in New Zealand and the UK. First, I will raise a number of questions about the conceptualization of 'the media' in Lamb and Peterson's work: highlighting the tendency to view it as monolithic and homogeneous; the problems with theorizing influence in terms of imitation or mimicry; the lack of attention to girls' active consumption and production of media; and the importance of local, specific contexts in mediating its place in girls' lives.

Secondly, I will raise some questions about the status of 'media literacy' in debates about 'sexualization'. Lamb and Peterson's paper is emblematic of a wider trend in which teaching young people to be critical of the media is posited as a panacea for various social ills (Potter 2010; Silverblatt 2007; Hobbs 2011). Not only does this leave media them-selves untouched, shifting all the responsibility onto young people to think critically and deconstruct, but it also mis-understands the complexity of young people's (indeed all people's) relations to media, with its implication that being critical will automatically displace other kinds of affective responses including shame, hatred or desire.

In the third section of the article I will turn my attention to the debates about 'sexualization' and 'pornification' more generally and ask why they have become so divorced from discussions of sexism, racism, homophobia or other axes of oppression. Despite the language of empowerment, discus-sion of power seems curiously absent. One problem with this is that it allows for a very generalized and almost abstracted notion of 'sexualized' media and consumer cul-ture that does not acknowledge differences in the ways bodies may be 'sexualized' or not. Moreover it invites a moral response rather than a political one. I will further unpack the figure of the 13 year old girl who seems to dominate debates about sexualisation (Rush and La Nauze 2006; APA 2007; Lamb and Peterson 2011), and I will raise some critical questions about her assumed Whiteness, middle-class-ness, able-bodiedness, US Anglo status and heterosexuality. I will argue that this (much recycled) figure produces a very particular set of anxieties, linked to hetero-normative, classed and colonial histories, and silences or occludes other ways of thinking about the issue.

Finally, I will return to Lamb and Peterson's argument and ask whether the notion of sexual empowerment – even in its richer, infinitely more subtle iteration by the authors – is useful. I will highlight in particular the problematic developmental assumptions it embodies, with the implication that adult women are more empowered than their daughters or younger sisters (a contention I question). I will also discuss the difficulties in identifying 'empowerment' in a culture in which the term has been taken up, emptied of its political significance, and used to sell everything from diets to pole dancing classes (Goldman 1992; Douglas 1994; Amy-Chinn 2006; Lamb and Brown 2006). Furthermore, sexual confidence and a sense of sexual power is part of the very 'sexiness' (Radner 1993, 1999; Evans et al. 2010) that is normatively required of young women today. In this sense empowerment itself (or certainly its proxies: confidence and adventurousness) has been 'sexualized' and cannot be said to operate entirely independently of 'sexualization'. I will conclude that Lamb and Peterson may have done too good a job of opening up and unravelling the notion of empowerment. By unpacking it and showing its complexity, its assessment has come to seem extremely problematic. Whilst there may be situations or research projects in which calculating individual sexual empowerment is useful, it seems to me that the bigger and more urgent task is the shared one to create a culture in which young women and men can have sexual experiences that are safe, consensual, pleasurable and free from shame.

Rethinking the Media and Media Influence

The first set of questions I want to raise concern the media. As in most discussions of 'sexualization' (Durham 2008; Levin and Kilbourne 2009; APA 2007; Papadopoulos 2010; Bailey 2011) media are accorded a prominent role in Lamb and Peterson's article. They note that media may have positive and negative capacities, but their overwhelming focus is upon the latter, with media seen as a barrier to sexual empowerment or as a contaminating influence that prevents feminists, scholars or concerned parents from being able to gauge whether any particular (sexual) choice is genuinely empowering or whether it is made 'suspect' by wider media culture. As they put it, is it really empowerment "if a girl is inspired by highly sexualized media representations?" (2011, this issue.)

Media emerge here as homogeneous, monolithic and all-powerful: *The Media*, rather than a diversity of different media, platforms, genres and productions, with – presumably – different kinds of representations of girls and young women, and, moreover, in which girls are increasingly involved as active producers, not merely consumers. Lamb and Peterson's view echoes the conclusions of the APA's Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls (APA 2007) which reported on time spent "with the media" – without making any distinctions between different kinds of media or how they are used e.g. watching a documentary versus reading a magazine versus playing an online game versus updating a Facebook profile.

One problem with such an abstracted, reified view of media is that it downplays the very real differences and contradictions *within* media content. As Myra MacDonald (1995) noted some years ago, the idea that the media offer a single template of femininity to which to aspire has given way to something much more fragmented and complex. A newsreader is not a reality TV show contestant, is not a character in *Sex and the City* (Sex and the City [1998–2004]), is not a gaming heroine or a war correspondent. It seems to me that multiple representations of women can be found in the media; there is no single 'media woman'. Indeed, even in relation to 'sexualized culture' media are at once arguably the pre-eminent site of 'sexualization', but also the major site of its discussion and critique. Often these can coexist in the same space: newspapers or magazines may print outraged or 'concerned' opinion pieces about the sale to children of toys featuring the Playboy bunny or T-shirts bearing the slogan 'Future Porn Star' amidst a range of other content (photographs of topless women, adverts for telephone sex lines, etc.) that might itself attract the label 'sexualized'. A number of commentators in the UK (Brooker 2011; Sabbagh 2011) have pointed to the way in which media concerns about 'sexualization' are frequently an opportunity for them to use those very 'sexualized' images to which they ostensibly object e.g. after the storm in the UK caused by Rihanna's 2010 'raunchy' appearance on *The X Factor* (ITV1, December 12th 2010)*, the British newspaper the *Daily Mail* – known for its campaigning against 'sexualization' – endlessly reproduced the 'shocking' images, with salacious close-ups that had apparently not even been shown on TV (Daily Mail, December 14th 2010). Moreover, concerns about 'sexualized culture' are increasingly paralleled in the media by worries about the threats to civil liberties being wrought by government action to deal with 'sexualization' (see Bray 2008, 2009). Thus the media might be said to be a key site of sexualization, a key site of concerns about sexualization, and, furthermore, a key site of *concerns about concerns* about 'sexualization'. All this is to highlight the fact that the relationship between the media and 'sexualization' is not uncomplicated.

Another difficulty with the view of media that is found in Lamb and Peterson's argument is their very understanding of how media influence works. It is characterized throughout in terms of 'mimicry' and 'imitation', an understanding that is implicitly situated within the psychological 'media effects' tradition. For example, they ask "[w]hy do girls imitate sexualized media and how conscious is this

imitation?" (2011, this issue). They speculate on the meanings and pleasures of imitation but do not question the idea that this *is* the fundamental psychological process at issue in girls' engagement with the media. When discussed in relation to the media, young women emerge as isolated, atomized, rather passive individuals, rather than engaged social actors embedded in family, friendship, school and many other networks. Interestingly, this stands in stark contrast to how Lamb and Peterson discuss the same (hypothetical) young women making sophisticated, nuanced decisions about sexual activity – and indicates, I think, how strongly this particular 'straw' view of the media has taken hold and shapes debate – almost as though thinking 'media' invokes such a dominant set of meanings that it renders the other things we know about young people redundant. It made me long for a greater dialogue between Psychologists and scholars in Media and Communications, for whom such notions of hypodermic effects or influence or straightforward imitation have long been abandoned (e.g. Barker and Petley 2001; Buckingham 2000). What this alternative body of scholarship depicts, by contrast, is a sense of young people as active, engaged, and critical media users.

In current research I am conducting with Sue Jackson and Tiina Vares (e.g. Vares et al. 2011; Jackson et al. in press) on 10–13 year old girls' uses of media, our findings contest the stereotypical figure of the pre-teen girl 'immersed' in 'tween' popular culture for many hours each day, who is said to passively absorb and imitate media constructions (Oppliger 2008; APA 2007; Papadopoulos 2010). The study is based on interviews, focus groups and video diaries and includes 71 girls, of diverse ethnicities, from two metropolitan centres in New Zealand. We are finding significant diversity in the place of media in girls lives, which is informed by age, individual preferences, peer networks, parental guidance and restrictions, familial relations, access to particular technologies and texts, and girls' hobbies and sporting activities. One striking feature of our findings to date is the *absence* of media use for significant periods of time in the girls' lives. Moreover, media use seems clearly to be related to local contexts and cultures – ie is itself highly mediated - rather than isolated individual decision-making. For example, choice of gaming and social networking sites among our sample was largely socially determined by the schools girls attended and their friendship groups, with the game/social networking site 'Moshi Monsters' (http://www.moshimonsters.com) and Disney's 'Club Penguin' http://www.clubpenguin.com) favoured by clusters of girls in particular schools so that they could talk online – despite these sites being characterized by them as essentially 'too babyish' for their age-group. Girls' responses to media are similarly diverse, with high degrees of reflexiveness and criticism shown, even by the youngest girls (see below).

Far from passively imitating media content many girls in our study display an impressive ability to critique and deconstruct the media – including sexualized content (see Jackson and Vares 2011 for detailed discussion of the girls' response to Miley Cyrus's 'sexualized' appearance on the cover of *Vanity Fair*). They also demonstrate considerable awareness of parental and social concerns about 'sexualized' media.

In some research, this kind of argument can be taken to extremes, such that the media appear to exert no influence at all, or, alternatively, young people's media- savviness is held to be so great that they are capable of deconstructing every problematic message they encounter or even of deciding whether to 'be' a child (Bragg and Buckingham 2009). This seems to mirror its more familiar obverse – the idea of the media as harmful – with a similar zeal to read research responses through an ideological prism: in this case that of 'no harmful influence'. Nevertheless this tradition is an important, empirically rich corrective to a view of the media as homogeneous and all-powerful, and young people as passive dopes condemned to imitate what they see. What it points to is a need to move away from the view of the media as a totalizing, harmful monolith to understand the different ways young people engage with diverse features of the mediascapes in which we all live. This body of work is also valuable for its innovative methodological practices (Attwood 2010; Buckingham and Bragg 2004; Coleman 2008; Ringrose 2011; Renold and Ringrose 2011). This suggests that a dialogue across disciplinary boundaries could be really productive.

Beyond Media Literacy

One argument about which Lamb and Peterson said they concurred from the outset is about the need for 'media literacy'. On this topic they locate themselves within a growing hegemony that cuts across both Psychology and Media Studies (Potter 2010; Silverblatt 2007; Hobbs 2011). The notion of media literacy as a Good Thing is fast taking on the status of common-sense. There is a European Charter for media literacy (www.euromedialiteracy.ed), and UNESCO pledges that "empowerment of young people through information and media literacy is an important prerequisite for fostering equitable access to information and knowledge, and building inclusive knowledge societies" (UNESCO 2006). Who could object to the need for young people (indeed all people) to be given the tools to question and critique media messages, to be equipped with a healthy scepticism, an ability to deconstruct that which is presented as to be taken for granted? Who could be against literacy? What's not to like?

This is not the place to undertake a thoroughgoing critique of the notion of media literacy, but I would like to raise

some critical questions about the status of self-evident value it has achieved, both in Lamb and Peterson's article and more broadly.

Lamb and Peterson argue that media literacy is "vital to optimizing adolescent girls' sexual empowerment" (this issue). Media education is crucial, they note, because "in classrooms, adolescents can get some distance from the images' potential to transform their sexuality by dissecting the intentions and multiple possible meanings of these messages" (this issue). One of the problems with this view, it seems to me, (in common with most articulations of media literacy), is the implicit understanding of subjectivity on which it rests. The project of critique, dissection, comparison and deconstruction seems to rely upon a model of the subject as unified and rational, and to operate largely as a cognitive process. The implicit idea seems to be that if someone is media literate, that is to say if they can discourse critically on the aims and techniques that comprise an image or text, they will somehow be 'innoculated' or protected against its otherwise harmful effects. It relies upon the idea of subjectivity as coherent, rather than split or contradictory, with the assumption that affect follows knowledge in rather a neat and obedient manner. It is this contention that I seek to question.

What we have found in our research throws into question any easy celebration of media literacy. The girls in our study show varying degrees of media literacy, with some of them extremely critical consumers of media, even from the age of 10. They are familiar with the language of critique and, moreover, take pleasure in 'unpacking' media images to show their artifice. In particular the girls enjoyed displaying their awareness that media images are constructed, with many exchanges about techniques such as airbrushing, the use of photoshop or the difference between magazines' standard 'before and after' shots in which '*everything* had changed' not just the area of the body that 'should' have done.

Some girls also discussed their anger about 'anorexic models', magazine girls with 'perfect skin' and, more broadly, the gap they observed between media images of girls and young women and those in the real world. They were contemptuous of the idea that celebrity endorsements would persuade them to buy any particular product. Indeed, in many senses the girls seemed archetypal media literate subjects – knowing, critical appraisers of adverts, magazines and a whole variety of other genres. So far, so media literate, it would seem. And yet despite this – despite an extraordinarily sophisticated vocabulary of critique – media representations still got to them, still had an ability to hurt them, still - as they repeatedly told us – made them 'feel bad' or 'feel sad' and/ or made them long to look a particular way or to own a particular product. In other words, the girls' ability to produce subtle and sometimes angry 'decodings' of media content did

not seem in any way to displace alternative, powerful responses to what they saw, read and heard.

Interestingly, this speaks to a very important question that Lamb and Peterson raise. They ask: "Is a girl who "buys into" mass-media-promoted forms of sexuality less empowered, and does an awareness of media, an ability to critique or observe its influence, make a girl more empowered even as she imitates?" (this issue). Setting aside the – in my view – problematic notion of imitation, this is a crucial question that has, to date, been largely ignored by proponents of media literacy: namely what difference does it make? Our research would indicate that the difference is not the self-evident benefit that is often suggested. The impact of media literacy is complicated and needs to be carefully assessed over time. The girls we spoke with did not seem to feel 'better' or more 'empowered' by dint of their knowledge of media practices and techniques. They might enjoy showing off this knowledge but it did not negate or change other, often painful, feelings. In some cases having the knowledge made them feel even more trapped – with the sense that they understood how it all worked, appreciated the 'fakeness; (as they put it), yet still had to live up to the particular images of beauty they were fed.

A particularly vivid and moving example from our research was to be found in a video diary produced by Lily. In it she explained that she 'never reads magazines', because they make her 'grit her teeth' and feel 'so cross' about 'fakeness and lip gloss'. She identified herself as a very critical consumer of media constructions of femininity, but also someone who was 'too busy' with other activities to have much time to spend with media. However, alongside these sentiments, which would no doubt be welcomed by audience scholars and feminists interested in empowerment alike, Lily also articulated a range of other more painful, complicated and difficult feelings. She spoke poignantly of her severe anxiety that her closest friend was developing anorexia, something she attributed to repeated and relentless exposure to 'film stars' flat tummies and how bad they make us feel'. She also confided in her video diary that she felt like 'a social retard' and was trying to 'turn over a new page'. She said repeatedly that she felt 'terrible' and that she did not, even *could not* 'like herself' – even as she explained how she understood that her feelings of self-hatred were socially produced, and how 'the media influences absolutely *everything*'.

Listening to the words of this passionate and fiercely intelligent 12 year old girl, it was impossible to feel complacent about the benefits of media literacy education. It had given her an acute awareness of the role of media in her and her friends lives but this knowledge had not helped – at least in the short term - to make her feel stronger, happier or more empowered.

If this is one powerful objection to the idea of media literacy as a panacea, then another is to be found in a

critique of the way that media literacy forces the work of deconstructing media back onto individuals. This is part of a wider shift in power and governance towards greater self-governmentality, in which individuals are constituted as 'responsibilized', self-governing subjects, who must "bear the serious burdens of liberty" (Rose 1999, p. 67). In relation to media regulation it can be seen at a policy level (at least in the UK) with a move away from state regulation and an increasing focus on media literate individuals self-regulating in relation to media content (Arthurs 2004). Media literacy thus becomes an *individual obligation*; we are made responsible for our own engagements with media-both what we use and how we engage. To champion media literacy, then, may be implicitly to endorse this shift in power, and to make individuals responsible for the work of thinking critically and deconstructing media content. But it is also, surely, to espouse a kind of defeatism, for it seems to suggest that media cannot be changed; all that can be changed is how we engage with them. Thus young people are asked to come equipped with tools to deconstruct sexism; young women are exhorted to become better at dissecting media's 'sexualized' images, to "get distance", as Lamb and Peterson put it (2011, this issue), from images that would harm or transform their sexuality.

I want to ask: why have we (feminists) become so quietist? When did engaging with sexist media seem to call out for an ever more sophisticated and literate media *user*, rather than a campaign to stamp out sexism? Have we given up on changing the world, to focus only on tweaking our critical orientations to it? It seems to me that as well as being part of a wider shift in the operation of power, this issue is also itself deeply gendered, part of the 'postfeminist problem' in which gender inequality is no longer taken very seriously in Northern/Western developed societies, is not felt to be a 'real' problem or form of oppression (see Gill 2007). Quite rightly we do not respond to racism in the media with calls to educate young Black people to better deconstruct racist images; on the contrary, we work to eradicate racism and we speak of its institutional nature, as a structural feature that is endemic to many organizations, including media (Downing and Husband 2005; Rattansi 2007). Yet on issues pertaining to gender, sexuality and 'sexualization' there is liitle evidence of such a robust response – with the exception of some interesting initiatives such as the USA social media based initiative SPARK (Sexualisation, Protest, Action, Knowledge; http://www.sparksummit.com/). Instead there are calls for 'media literacy education' as if an informed populace of 'critical' young women is the best that can be hoped for. Perhaps ironically this focus can itself seem sexist, not only because it treats gender oppression as trivial, but also because it emphasises the requirement for girls and young women to work on the self, to perfect the ways they engage with media, to become ever more responsible neo-

liberal subjects. Instead of this, might it not be time to get angry again, to try to change the world? These issues suggest, at the very least, that media literacy as a kind of catch-all solution needs to be interrogated.

Power, Politics and Sexual Empowerment

In this section I want to turn to questions about power, ideology and politics. It seems to me striking that in Lamb and Peterson's paper – as in so much of the discussion about 'sexualization' (APA 2007; Papadopoulos 2010; Bailey 2011) – there is scant consideration of power. Curiously, empowerment seems to be cast as an individualized phenomenon which, though clearly connected to gender and age, is not related analytically to issues of power, inequality or oppression. The wider context in which sexual empowerment might take place seems conspicuous by its absence. Moreover there is little political framing of the discussion of sexualized culture.

I find myself bewildered by this silence - which, again, surely relates to the formulation of media and media influence – in which empowerment appears such a dislocated, individualized and atomized experience and, conversely, sexualization is not explicitly linked to questions of power. Why, I wonder, is sexualization in this argument not connected to sexism or to racism, to class inequality or homophobia? How could empowerment be thought of *independently* of such categories?

Such questions relate to my own ongoing dilemmas about the utility of the notion of 'sexualization' at all (and indeed the notion of empowerment – as I discuss below). Despite the way they appear to speak to something apparently 'new' and 'real', there are many problems with the notions of 'sexualization' or 'pornification' or 'raunch' (McNair 2002; Levy 2005; Paul 2005). The terms are too general; they are difficult to operationalize and therefore to use analytically. More than this, they tend to homogenize, ignoring differences and obscuring the fact that different people are 'sexualized' in different ways and with different meanings. Sexualization does not operate outside of processes of gendering, racialization and classing, and works within a visual economy that remains profoundly ageist, (dis)ablist and heteronormative (Gill 2009). Furthermore the terms seem to pull us back into a moral domain, rather than one of politics or ethics—they pull towards judgments about 'explicitness' and 'exposure' rather than questions about equality or justice. Might it not be more productive to talk about sexism rather than sexualization? For all their force in animating and inspiring a new generation of feminists (Banyard 2010), I worry too that these terms threaten to reinstate the terms of the 'sex wars' of the 1980s, with their familiar polarizations and discomfiting

alliances between pro-censorship feminists and right wing religious organizations (Cornell 2000).

This is made worse by the profoundly classed, racialized and heteronormative framing of the debates themselves, whose privileged object of anxiety and 'concern' has been the White, western, middle class, girl-child. Lamb and Peterson recirculate this figure whom they term the "typical 13 year old girl" (2011, this issue) whose North-American, Anglo status is not questioned – only later are 'disadvantaged' young people mentioned (e.g. "girls who live in poverty or girls who have immigrant parents" [2011, this issue]). In this way, their marginality, and their exclusion from the category of 'typical' girls seems (unintentionally) to be reinforced- even though I would suggest that being a child of migrants or living in poverty are hardly unusual or atypical experiences in the US. To note this is not to 'nit-pick' or to engage in academic point-scoring. It is a crucial point because – as with the taken for granted framing of media – this figure, this construction of the typical 13 year old girl, is *repeatedly mobilized* – in academic, policy and media reports and comes to constitute or define who is "at risk" (Harris 2004, p.13). She becomes discursively overdetermined to such an extent that her *specificity* is rendered invisible: she is always already (pre)figured, she shapes what becomes thinkable about 'sexualization'. What if we changed her gender or ethnicity? Or if we thought of her as a lesbian or as a girl living with a disability? Immediately this would open entirely new ways of thinking – sexual experiences might not be framed so strongly in terms of risk and danger.

More broadly, it seems to me that we urgently need an intersectional approach to thinking about the complex nexus of relations between sex, media and power. The notion of intersectionality articulates a set of ideas that have informed feminist work for decades, namely the understanding that social positions are relational rather than additive, and the need to "make visible the multiple positioning that constitutes everyday life and the power relations that are central to it" (Phoenix and Pattynama 2006, p. 187). As Avtar Brah and Ann Phoenix (2004, p. 6) put it, the concept of intersectionality signifies:

> The complex, irreducible, varied and variable effects which ensue when multiple axes of differentiation— economic, political, cultural, psychic, subjective and experiential—intersect in historically specific contexts. The concept emphasizes that different dimensions of social life cannot be separated out into discrete and pure strands.

This, then, is a call to think about 'sexualization' and sexual empowerment *with* sexism, racism, ageism, classism, homophobia, (dis)ablism and also to think transnationally (Imre et al. 2009). But it is not simply a matter of *integrating*

sexism with other axes of power and difference, but also facing up to the complex dynamics *and complicities* in play in the current moment – precisely those complicities that repeatedly locate White, middle class, heterosexual North American girls as the privileged subjects of the debate.

What is becoming a pressing question for me is whether it would be efficacious to drop the term 'sexualization' altogether, and to work instead upon specifying more carefully how those aspects of social and cultural life we collect together under this label operate in particular contexts - paying attention to power. This question was brought into sharp relief during the summer of 2011, while I was working (with colleagues) on a study concerned with young people's use of mobile internet technologies. Whilst the funding body was explicitly concerned with 'sexting' and other sexualized forms of messaging, our time with 13 and 15 year old young people in inner city London schools made it increasingly difficult to think about these issues within the usual terms of the debate. Instead we needed to think about and confront the intimate intersections of gender, race, class and sexuality – for how else could we understand the system of 'ratings' for young men in which status could be accrued by collecting revealing photos of their female classmates; or the use of the word 'gay' as an insult to boys who refused to participate in the bluetoothing or other sharing of such images; or the cartoonized Facebook images of Black young men 'daggering' White women – or many of the other practices we encountered? In a contemporary US-based study of college-aged young people's postings to Anonymous Confession Boards, Andrea Press and Francesca Tripodi (2011) encountered similar practices – many of them concerned with the forensic evaluation and comparison of female students' bodies. Far from being 'empowered', the young people in both these studies had no politicized language at all to make sense of their experiences. Whilst the young women expressed hurt, upset or discomfort, what was disturbing was that they did not appear to have access to a feminist vocabulary with which to critique practices that researchers apprehended not so much as an example of 'sexualization' but part of a frightening resurgence of sexism.

Empowerment Fatigue?

This brings me to my final argument about the very notion of empowerment. Perhaps because Lamb and Peterson have done such a very good job of calling it into question, I am left wondering what it helps us with – if anything.

When it is allied to a developmental discourse, the notion of empowerment seems problematic, suggesting as it does a trajectory that moves towards greater empowerment across the lifecourse, even if not – as Lamb and Peterson rightly

note – tied to age in any simple way. It would be surprising if developmental elements were not relevant at all, but clearly the journey to empowerment cannot be a linear process. We know enough about adult sexual health and experience to want to avoid the idealization of this, as though adulthood represented the pinnacle of empowered sexuality (Lamb 2010). Adolescents do not have the monopoly on unsafe, non-consensual, painful or unsatisfying sex! Many of the barriers to empowerment that Lamb and Peterson identify as afflicting girls and young women may surely also affect older women – in this sense, a sexist culture seems at least as relevant to understanding this as any developmental processes. Indeed, I am interested in our general tendency to project concerns about sex onto the young, which often seems to involve a complex displacement of our own unresolved issues around sexuality onto girls. What is going on here psychologically? What does this do performatively? How might it be related to feminism as an unfinished project – not only for young people but for all of us?

Another reason 'empowerment' is so problematic, it seems to me, is because the notion has become commodified – used to sell everything from washing powder to cosmetic surgery. In a context in which fake 'empowerment' is everywhere and in which feminist notions of it have been taken up and sold back to us emptied of their political force (Goldman 1992; Douglas 1994; Heath and Potter 2005; Lamb and Brown 2006; Gill 2008), how can we identify what true empowerment would look like, would feel like? This is made particularly complex in relation to 'sexual empowerment' since it has become one of the tropes of sexualized culture: everywhere we are confronted with images of 'empowered' female sexuality; this is (very often) precisely how sexual objectification is done. As I have argued elsewhere (Gill 2008), sexism today is intricately entwined with discourses of empowerment. Moreover, 'sexual empowerment' – or at least its proxies: 'adventurousness' or 'confidence' – has itself become a compulsory part of normative, heterosexy, young female subjectivity – part of a 'technology of sexiness' (Radner 1993, 1999; Evans et al. 2010) that has replaced virginity or virtue as a dominant currency of feminine desirability (whilst not altogether displacing the earlier valuations and double standards). If 'empowerment' (or at least a certain kind of sexual power and prowess, endlessly coached in young women's magazines) is normatively demanded of young women in their sexual encounters, how can it also be used to independently assess the feminist quality of such experiences? The term 'sexual empowerment' is clearly freighted with multiple contradictory meanings, making its use analytically a fraught and difficult project.

Lamb and Peterson show that these issues are far from the only difficulties facing feminist scholars who want to work with the notion. As they note, there are a whole series of challenges, which range from how much weight to accord to subjective feelings of empowerment versus 'expert' views; the fact that different dimensions of empowerment may conflict, so that what is empowering in one respect may be disempowering in another; to the fact that perceptions of empowerment may change over time, etc. What is clear from their excellent interrogation of the notion is that any sense of sexual empowerment will always be provisional, contingent and contestable. There is no unproblematic way of operationalizing the notion, nor is there any final arbiter on what counts as sexual empowerment.

As Nicola Gavey (2011) notes, there is a sense of fatigue when confronting these debates. 'Sexual empowerment' seems weighed down with competing meanings and arguments, mired in difficulty. Moreover it ties us back into an individualistic framing of the issues around gender, sex and power – as if it is something that is assessed at the individual level rather than discussed as a social good. It puts all the emphasis upon *individuals* rather than on creating the conditions of possibility for all young women to enjoy safe, consensual and pleasurable sex. This, then, is my final misgiving about the notion of sexual empowerment. Having done such a great job of interrogating it, I am not clear why Lamb and Peterson still want to work with this term. Not only does it direct attention away from the wider social, cultural and political context in which sex takes place, but is it even a relevant notion? Is it a term that girls or young women themselves would use? I can't help thinking of the standard 'post-sex' scene in a film - maybe one of them is lighting a cigarette. Does anyone say 'Phwoar- that was empowering!'? I think not! It's a flippant example but makes a serious point: rather than creating an ever more rigorously calibrated and nuanced set of instruments to identify and assess sexual empowerment, would it not be more effective - analytically - to work with the more specific, bounded, disaggregated constituents that make it up e. g. desire, pleasure, ability to negotiate condom use, etc. etc.? In this way, rather than attempting to arbitrate 'empowerment' we could work from the ground up to understand those features that contribute to girls and young women making sexual choices with which they are happy.

Conclusion

In this article I have made a number of critical points about Lamb and Peterson's interesting and important discussion of sexual empowerment, adolescent girls and the media. Although I have raised disagreements and points of difference I hope these will be taken in the spirit of constructive conversation that was so inspiring in their dialogue. I am far from 'sorted' - let alone dogmatic – on the issues under discussion, and have tried to convey that I, too, am struggling

with these questions – in my own research and in dialogue with others. I am grateful for Lamb and Peterson's intervention, for the ethical spirit of their discussion and for the opportunity to engage to try to clarify my own thinking. The argument here is – inevitably – the outcome of my own particular and somewhat unusual intellectual trajectory through European Critical Psychology, Sociology, Gender studies and Media and Cultural studies. In responding to Lamb and Peterson's work I hope I have contributed in a small way to what is very much a *shared* feminist project - to create a world in which all girls and young women (indeed all people) are able to explore their sexuality in conditions that are free from coercion, and enjoy safe, consensual and pleasurable sex.

References

Amy-Chinn, D. (2006). This is just for me(n): Lingerie advertising for the post-feminist woman. *Journal of Consumer Culture, 6*, 155–175. doi:10.1177/1469540506064742.

APA. (2007). *Report of the APA Task Force on the sexualization of girls*. Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association.

Arthurs, J. (2004). *Television and sexuality: Regulation and the politics of taste*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Attwood, F. (2006). Sexed up: Theorizing the sexualization of culture. *Sexualities, 9*, 77–95. doi:10.1177/1363460706053336.

Attwood, F. (2009). *Mainstreaming sex: The sexualization of Western Culture*. London: I. B. Tauris.

Attwood, F. (2010). Through the looking Glass? Sexual agency and subjectification online. In R. Gill & C. Scharff (Eds.), *New femininities: Postfeminism, neoliberalism and subjectivity* (pp. 203–214). London: Palgrave.

Bailey, R. (2011). *Letting children be children: The report of an independent review of the commercialisation and sexualisation of children*. London: Department of Education.

Banyard, K. (2010). *The equality illusion: The truth about women and men today*. London: Faber & Faber.

Barker, M., & Petley, J. (2001). *Ill effects: The media violence debate*. New York: Routledge.

Bragg, S., & Buckingham, D. (2009). Too much too young? Young people, sexual media and learning. In F. Attwood (Ed.), *Mainstreaming sex: The sexualization of Western Culture* (pp. 129–146). London: IB Tauris.

Brah, A., & Phoenix, A. (2004). Ain't I a Woman? Revisiting intersectionality. *Journal of International Women's Studies, 5* (3), 75–86.

Bray, A. (2008). The question of intolerance: 'Corporate Paedophilia' and child sexual abuse moral panics. *Australian Feminist Studies, 23*, 323–342. doi:10.108081164640802233286.

Bray, A. (2009). Governing the gaze: Child sexual abuse moral panics and the postfeminist blind spot. *Feminist Media Studies, 9*, 173–191. doi:10.1080/14680770902814835.

Brooker, C. (2011, June 12). If the daily mail is so worried about the sexualisation of children, all they have to do is press 'delete'. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from http://www.guardian.co.uk/

Buckingham, D. (2000). *After the death of childhood: Growing up in the age of electronic media*. Cambridge: Polity.

Buckingham, D., & Bragg, S. (2004). *Young people, sex and the media: The facts of life?* Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Coleman, R. (2008). The becoming of bodies: Girls, media effects and body image. *Feminist Media Studies, 8*, 163–180. doi:10.1080/14680770801980547.

Cornell, D. (2000). *Feminism and pornography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Daily Mail. (2010, December 14). X Factor sleaze storm grows: TV watchdog to act after thousands protest 'disgusting' primetime scenes. Retrieved from http://www.dailymail.co.uk/

Dines, G. (2010). *Pornland: How porn has hijacked our sexuality*. Boston: Beacon.

Donaghue, N., Kurz, T., & Whitehead, K. (2011). Spinning the pole: A discursive analysis of the websites of recreational pole-dancing studios. *Feminism & Psychology*.

Douglas, S. (1994). *Where the girls are: Growing up female with the mass media*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Downing, J., & Husband, C. (2005). *Representing race: Racisms, ethnicity and the media*. London: Sage.

Duits, L., & Van Zoonen, L. (2007). Who's afraid of female agency? A rejoinder to gill. *European Journal of Women's Studies, 14*, 161–170. doi:10.1177/1350506807075820.

Durham, M. G. (2008). *The Lolita effect: The media sexualization of young girls and what we can do about it*. London: Gerald Duckworth Press.

Dworkin, A. (1981). *Pornography: Men possessing women*. London: The Women's Press.

Dworkin, A., & MacKinnon, C. (1988). *Pornography and civil rights: A new day for women's equality*. Minneapolis: Organising against pornography.

Evans, A., Riley, S., & Shankar, A. (2010). Technologies of sexiness: Theorizing women's engagement in the sexualisation of culture. *Feminism & Psychology, 20*, 1–18. doi:10.1177/0959353509351854.

Fine, M. (1988). Sexuality, schooling and adolescent females: The missing discourse of desire. *Harvard Educational Review, 58*, 29–53.

Fine, M., & McClelland, S. (2006). Sexuality education and desire: Still missing after all these years. *Harvard Educational Review, 76*, 297–338.

Gavey, N. (2011). Beyond "empowerment"? Sexuality in a sexist world. *Sex Role*s, this issue. doi:10.1007/s11199-011-0069-3

Gill, R. (2007). Critical respect: The difficulties and dilemmas of agency and 'choice' for feminism: A reply to Duits and van Zoonen. *European Journal of Women's Studies, 14*, 65–76. doi:10.1177/1350506807072318.

Gill, R. (2008). Empowerment/sexism: Figuring female sexual agency in contemporary advertising. *Feminism & Psychology, 18*, 35–60. doi:10.1177/0959353507084950.

Gill, R. (2009). Beyond the 'Sexualization of Culture' thesis: An intersectional analysis of 'Sixpacks','Midriffs' and 'Hot Lesbians' in advertising. *Sexualities, 12*, 137–60. doi:10.1177/1363460708100915.

Goldman, R. (1992). *Reading ads socially*. London and New York: Routledge.

Hakim, C. (2011). *Honey money: The power of erotic capital*. London: Allen Lane.

Harris, A. (2004). *Future girl: Young women in the 21st century*. New York & London: Routledge.

Harris, A. (2005). Discourses of desire as governmentality: Young women, sexuality and the significance of safe spaces. *Feminism & Psychology, 15*, 39–43. doi:10.1177/0959-353505049702.

Harvey, L., & Gill, R. (2011). Spicing it up': Sexual entrepreneurship and the sex inspectors. New femininities: Postfeminism, neoliberalism and subjectivity. In R. Gill & C. Scharff (Eds.), *New femininities: Postfeminism, neoliberalism and subjectivity* (pp. 52–67). London & New York: Palgrave.

Heath, J., & Potter, A. (2005). *The rebel sell: How the counterculture became consumer culture*. Chichester and Toronto: Wiley.

Hobbs, R. (2011). *Digital and media literacy: Connecting culture and classroom*. Beverly Hills: Corwin Press.

Holland, S., & Attwood, F. (2009). Keeping fit in 6 inch heels: The mainstreaming of pole dancing. In F. Attwood (Ed.), *Mainstreaming sex: The sexualisation of Western culture* (pp. 165–182). London: IB Tauris.

Imre, A., Mariniak, K., & O'Healy, A. (2009). Transcultural mediations and transnational politics of difference. *Feminist Media Studies, 9*, 385–390. doi:10.1080/14680770903232961.

Jackson, S., & Vares, T. (2011). Media "sluts": "Tween" girls' negotiations of postfeminist sexual subjectivities in popular culture. In R. Gill & C. Scharff (Eds.), *New femininities: Postfeminism, neoliberalism and subjectivity* (pp. 134–146). London: Palgrave.

Jackson, S., Vares, T., & Gill, R. (in press). "The Whole Playboy Mansion Image": Girls fashioning and fashioned selves within a postfeminist culture. *Feminism & Psychology.*

Jeffreys, S. (2008). *The industrial vagina*. London: Routledge.

Lamb, S. (2010). Porn as a pathway to empowerment? A response to Peterson's commentary. *Sex Roles, 62*, 314–317. doi:10.1007/s11199-010-9756-8.

Lamb, S., & Brown, L. M. (2006). *Packaging girlhood: Rescuing our daughters from marketers' schemes*. New York: Saint Martins Press.

Lamb, S., & Peterson, Z. (2011). Adolescent girls' sexual empowerment: Two feminists explore the concept. *Sex Roles.* this issue. doi:10.1007/s11199-011-9995-3

Lerum, K., & Dworkin, S. L. (2009). "Bad Girls Rule": An interdisciplinary feminist commentary on the report of the APA Task Force on the sexualization of girls. *Journal of Sex Research, 46*, 250–263. doi:10.1080/00224490903079542.

Levin, D. E., & Kilbourne, J. (2009). *So sexy so soon: The new sexualized childhood and what parents can do to help protect their kids*. New York: Ballantine Books.

Levy, A. (2005). *Female chauvinist pigs: Women and the rise of raunch culture*. New York: Free Press.

Macdonald, M. (1995). *Representing women: Myths of femininity in the popular media*. London & New York: E. Arnold.

McNair, B. (2002). *Striptease culture: Sex, media and the democratisation of desire*. London: Routledge.

Morgan, R. (1977). *Going too far: The personal chronicle of a feminist*. New York: Random House.

Oppliger, P. (2008). *Girls gone skank: The sexualization of girls in American culture*. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company Inc.

Paasonen, S., Nikunen, K., & Saarenmaa, L. (Eds.). (2007). *Pornification: Sex and sexuality in media culture*. Oxford and New York: Berg.

Papadopoulos, L. (2010). *Sexualisation of young people review*. London: Home Office.

Paul, P. (2005). *Pornified: How pornography is transforming our lives, our relationships and our families*. New York: Times Books.

Peterson, Z. (2010). What is sexual empowerment? A multidimensional and process-oriented approach to adolescent girls' sexual empowerment. *Sex Roles, 62*, 307–313. doi:10.1007/s11199-009-9725-2.

Phoenix, A., & Pattynama, P. (2006). Intersectionality. *European Journal of Women's Studies, 13*, 187–192. doi:10.1177/13505068065751.

Potter, J. (2010). *Media literacy* (5th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Press, A., & Tripodi, F. (2011). *Feminism anonymous: Feminist and postfeminist responses to the new media environment. Transforming Audiences 3*. London: University of Westminster.

Radner, H. (1993). Pretty is as pretty does: Free enterprise and the marriage plot. In A. P. Collins, J. Collins, & H. Radner (Eds.), *Film theory goes to the movies* (pp. 56–76). New York: Routledge.

Radner, H. (1999). Queering the girl. In H. Radner & M. Luckett (Eds.), *Swinging single: Representing sexuality in the 1960s* (pp. 1–35). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Rattansi, A. (2007). *Racism: A very short introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Renold, E., & Ringrose, R. (2011). Schizoid Subjectivities? Retheorizing teen girls' sexual cultures in an era of "sexualization'. *Journal of Sociology, 1–21*. doi:10.1177/1440783311420792.

Ringrose, J. (2011). Are you sexy, flirty or a slut? Exploring 'sexualization' and how teen girls perform/negotiate digital sexual identity on social networking sites. In R. Gill & C. Scharff (Eds.), *New femininities: Postfeminism, neoliberalism and subjectivity* (pp. 99–116). London: Palgrave.

Rose, N. (1999). *The powers of freedom*. London: Routledge.

Rubin, G. (1984). Thinking sex. In C. Vance (Ed.), *Pleasure and danger: Exploring female sexuality* (pp. 23–37). London: Routledge and Keegan Paul.

Rush, E., & La Nauze, A. (2006). *Corporate paedophilia: Sexualisation of children in Australia*. Canberra: The Australia Institute.

Sabbagh, D. (2011, June 6). 'Sexualised children' - is it always the media's fault? *The Guardian.* Retrieved from http://www.guardian.co.uk/

Segal, L., & McIntosh, M. (1993). *Sex exposed: Sexuality and the pornography debate*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Sex and the City [Television series] (1998–2004) New York: HBO

Silverblatt, A. (2007). *Media literacy: Keys to interpreting media messages* (3rd ed.). Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers Inc.

Smith, C. (2007). *One for the girls: The pleasures and practices of reading women's porn*. Bristol: Intellect Books.

Tankard Reist, M. (Ed.). (2009). *Getting real: Challenging the sexualisation of girls*. Melbourne: Spinifex.

Tolman, D. (2002). *Dilemmas of desire: Teenage girls talk about sexuality*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Tolman, D. (2005). Found(ing) discourses of desire: Unfettering female adolescent sexuality. *Feminism & Psychology, 5*, 5–9. doi:10.1177/0959353505049696.

UNESCO. (2006). Regulation, awareness, empowerment: Young people and harmful media content in the digital age. Retrieved from http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001469/146955e.pdf

Vance, C. S. (1993). *Pleasure and danger: Exploring female sexuality*. London: Pandora Press.

Vares, T., Jackson, S., & Gill, R. (2011). Preteen girls read 'tween' popular culture: Diversity, complexity and contradiction. *International Journal of Media & Cultural Politics, 7*, 139–154. doi:10.1386/macp.7.2.139_1.

Walter, N. (2010). *Living dolls: The return of sexism*. London: Virago Press.

Winship, J. (2000). Women and outdoors: Advertising, controversy and disputing feminism in the 1990s. *International Journal of Cultural Studies, 31*, 27–55. doi:10.1177/136787790000300103.