

Yes, But What Does It Mean?

Sexualization: A Sociologist's View

By Jill Niebrugge-Brantley

What is “the sexualization of girls”?

The sexualization of girls is part of the much larger process of socialization. When sociologists talk about “socialization,” they mean the process of teaching or learning how to be a member of a group. When we talk about socialization to gender roles—like boys and girls or women and men—we are talking about one of the fundamental ways we are taught to fit in to almost all situations: that is, we learn not simply how to be a human being in a situation but how to be a girl or boy, a man or woman, in that situation or group life experience. The sexualization of girls teaches girls—and through it girls learn—that to be successful group members they must be, among and in addition to other qualities, sexually attractive to boys/men. The sexualization of girls teaches that being an object of male sexual desire is a sine qua non of being a successful girl—other things may also be required, but this is basic.

Why is this a problem?

The heavy emphasis upon sexualization of girls in today's socialization in childhood is a problem for at least three reasons.

First, it socializes girls to being an object and there are problem with socializing anyone to being an object. One could potentially be socialized to being an object of utility, and think of oneself only in terms of what one is to do for others; one could be socialized to being an object of ridicule or a scapegoat and think of oneself only in terms of how one is responsible for bad things happening; one could be socialized to being an object of attention and think of oneself chiefly in terms of how others are seeing one. Being socialized to being an object of any sort denies what many people see as chief qualities of humanness—the ability to act as a moral agent in the world, the ability to know oneself, the ability to be responsible for oneself, the ability to function as an independent subjectivity. Being socialized to be an object removes one's basic independence.

Second, the sexualization of girls forces girls to evaluate themselves in terms of how they physically appear to others and to value only one form of physical appearance—a kind of beauty that is sexually alluring. The sexualization of girls creates a culture of what American writer Sherwood Anderson described as “*grotesques*” by which he meant people who take a particular truth and let it become so overwhelming that they become misshapen by it. Anderson writes, “It was the truths that made the people grotesques. The old man had quite an elaborate theory concerning the matter. It was his notion that the moment one of the people took one of the truths to himself, called it his truth, and tried to live his life by it, he became a grotesque and the truth he embraced became a falsehood.” I like this understanding because it allows for the vibrancy and vitality we associate with sexuality but says when that becomes your only standard for vibrancy and vitality—your only truth—then you become grotesque. We are in danger of producing a grotesque generation if we do not draw back from making sexuality the standard by which girls believe they will be evaluated.

Third, the sexualization of girls, as these two points suggest, has negative effects for the whole society. In a democracy, we really cannot have a block of citizens socialized to be the objects of other people's definitions, the instruments of other people's will. We cannot afford the enormous loss of talent that may occur as these individual girls are caught up in a constant quest to establish sexual attractiveness to the abandonment of other goals.

What do you see as the cause of “the sexualization of girls”? Is this a new phenomenon?

To some degree this is a problem with long historic roots in patriarchy. Girls almost from the beginning of recorded history have been socialized to see themselves as objects—their futures to a great degree have depended on their becoming the objects of male desire or their parents arranging for them to be so. From Biblical pronouncements on, the vision of the life course of the woman has been that she will grow from girlhood into an adolescence in which she is picked by or assigned to some man and will go to be a part of his family, basically, an object within that family, bringing with her in many cases a dowry of other objects to enhance her worth.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman in 1898 in the book that became the bible of First Wave feminism, *Women and Economics* described girls' fate in what she called:

“the enforced attitude of the woman towards marriage. To the young girl, as has been previously stated, marriage is the one road to fortune, to life. She is born highly specialized as a female: she is carefully educated and trained to realize in all ways her sex-limitations and her sex-advantages. What she has to gain even as a child is largely gained by feminine tricks and charms. Her reading, both in history and fiction, treats of the same position for women; and romance and poetry give it absolute predominance. Pictorial art, music, the drama, society, everything, tells her that she is *she* and that all depends on whom she marries. Where young boys plan for what they will achieve and attain, young girls plan for whom they will achieve and attain. . . .”he” is the coming world.

“With such a prospect as this before her; with an organization specially developed to this end; with an education adding every weight of precept and example, of wisdom and virtue, to the natural instincts; with a social environment the whole machinery of which is planned to give the girl a change to be seen, to provide her with “opportunities” and with all the pressure of personal advantage and self-interest added to the sex-instinct,—what one would logically expect is a society full of desperate and eager husband-hunters, regarded with popular approval.

“Not at all! Marriage is the woman's proper sphere, her divinely ordered place, her natural end. It is what she is born for, what she is trained for, what is exhibited for. It is, moreover, her means of an honorable livelihood and advancement. *But*--she must not even look as if she wanted it! She must not turn her hand over to get it. She must sit passive as the seasons go by, and her “chances” lessen with each year. Think of the strain on a highly sensitive nervous organism to have so much hang on one thing, to see the possibility of attaining it grow less and less yearly, and to be forbidden to take any step toward securing it! This she must bear with dignity and grace to the end. . . .”

From many years teaching this passage, I can tell you that I have never had a class in which even one quarter of the students felt that it was all right for the woman to initiate a date or to be the one who proposed marriage. So the sexualization of girls continues a long tradition of training in passivity.

What has perhaps somewhat changed over time is the form seen as necessary or appropriate for being an object of male desire—or let us say, of male assessments as marriageable. In earlier periods, promises of fertility may have been most important; chastity has a long history as a desirable attribute in a woman. What seems new at this moment is that being sexually attractive seems to require a more overt and even blatant presentation of self and ongoing suggestion that one is not only attractive but sexually available. Thus, it seems that the performance requirements for “doing sexually attractive” have become much more demanding and are being demanded at earlier ages.

Why do you think this change has occurred?

I would explain the change in terms of two processes, both arising out of capitalism in its later configurations. The first was wonderfully described about twenty years ago in Naomi Wolfe's *The Beauty Myth*. By making extraordinary beauty, thinness, sexual attractiveness—

whatever term you wish to use here—by making that the standard, capitalism had hit on a permanent source of income. Basically, no woman can be sure of being attractive enough; women live in a condition of perpetual anomie where physical appearance is concerned: if nothing else, the fact that day by day a woman grows older and becoming older is equated with becoming less attractive compels the woman to be always involved in the struggle to attain or retain beauty. This is a permanent cash cow for a huge industry. And since capitalism depends on expanding markets, one way to expand this market is to change the age of one's target audience—to go to the elderly and to go to the young, and interestingly so far, it appears that the young are the more sought-after audience. Simply stated, there are big bucks to be made here.

A second cause may be in what the late Herbert Marcuse called “repressive desublimation.” “Sublimation,” of course, in Freudian theory, is a socially positive experience in that a person takes an unacceptable emotion and channels it into some socially acceptable and useful energy. A classic example is someone like Walt Whitman rechanneling unacceptable homoerotic feelings into the production of *Leaves of Grass*. In “desublimation,” society allows individuals to make conscious -- and participate in -- formerly forbidden emotions and experiences. But these emotions and experiences are presented in what is in reality a fairly limited and even mechanized form: the erotic is, as Marcuse says, experienced only in a “localized sexuality.” Yet this localized sexuality is presented as so available and defined as so completely fulfilling, that the individual is—here again, I quote Marcuse—“preconditioned for the spontaneous acceptance of what is offered.” This is important because it means there is a steady whittling away of the capacity for critical thought.

All this leads to a point where parents find themselves pressured by children, by advertising, by TV sitcoms, by songs, by movies, etc., to accept a situation—the sexualization of girls—that they may at moments have doubts about.

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A Most Insidious Consequence

“Perhaps the most insidious consequence of self-objectification is that it fragments consciousness. Chronic attention to physical appearance leaves fewer resources available for other mental and physical activities. One study demonstrated this fragmenting quite vividly (Frederickson et al, 1998). While alone in a dressing room, college students were asked to try on and evaluate either a swimsuit or a sweater. While they waited for 10 minutes wearing the garment, they completed a math test. The results revealed that young women in swimsuits performed significantly worse on the math problems than did those wearing sweaters. No differences were found for young men. In other words, thinking about the body and comparing it to sexualized cultural ideals disrupted mental capacity. Recent research has shown that this impairment occurs among African American, Latina, and Asian American young women (Hebi, King & Lin, 2004) and extends beyond mathematics to other cognitive domains including logical reasoning and spatial skills (Gapinski, Brownell, & LaFrance, 2003).

“The implications are stunning and suggest that sexualization may contribute to girls' dropping out of higher level mathematics in high school....Studies show that single-sex math classes lead girls to feel less self-conscious and improve their math performance substantially (Rutti, 1997). This may not be solely because boys would otherwise dominate the classroom (one popular explanation for the success of single-sex math classes for girls) but also because without boys, girls can literally take their minds off their own bodies and think more effectively.” (Amer. Psych. Assoc. Report, “The Sexualization of Girls,” p. 22)