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Lamenting sexualization: research, rhetoric and the story of young people's 'sexualization' in the UK Home Office review

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This article discusses 'The Sexualisation of Young People' review, authored by Dr Linda Papadopoulos in 2010 for the UK Home Office. The article examines the review as an academic piece of work, considers it in the context of debates about young people, violence and sexualization, and discusses the characteristics and significance of rhetorical accounts that operate as 'laments' about sexualization.

This article has developed from a discussion that began in response to the review 'The Sexualisation of Young People', published in February 2010 by the UK Home Office. The 100-page report authored by Dr Linda Papadopoulos, a dermatologist and celebrity psychologist, made a series of recommendations for countering what it described as overly sexual representations and the normalization of problematic attitudes towards women and girls. It raised many issues of significant interest to the provision of personal, social, health and economic education and sex and relationships education in the United Kingdom, and more broadly to the way young people's sexual cultures are perceived and managed. As a government document it is likely that this report will have public presence and longevity, and that its recommendations will inform future policy on adolescent health services and sex education, as well as establish the parameters for further research into young people's consumption of media.

The review followed something of an explosion of writing in this area, with policy reports in the United States (American Psychological Association 2007) and Australia (Australian Senate 2007), as well as a slew of popular books. Kath Albury and Catharine Lumby (2010, 56) have suggested that sexualization is 'a debate that has been simmering for almost a decade', and certainly the claims that the media are contributing to particular anxieties around sex and appearance for young women and girls are not new. Much of this recent writing on sexualization has been the subject of criticism that has included accusations that it: draws on 'one-sided, selective, overly simplifying, generalizing, and negatively toned' evidence (Vanwesenbeeck 2009, 268), is 'saturated in the languages of concern and regulation' (Smith 2010a, 104), uses the term 'sexualization' as 'a non sequitur causing everything from girls flirting with older men to child sex trafficking' (Egan and Hawkes 2008, 297), excludes important feminist work on media, gender and the body, presents a highly conservative and negative view of sex in which only monogamous, coupled heterosexual sexuality is regarded as normal (Lerum and Dworkin 2009), is devoid of any historical or cross-cultural understanding of the expression and regulation of sexual imagery and sexual practices, and ignores a rich and well-established body of theoretical and empirical work on the relationship between sex and media, culture and technology (Egan and Hawkes 2009; Buckingham et al. 2010).

Surprisingly, perhaps, the Home Office review contained no discussion of these criticisms; nor did it attempt to address them. Indeed, rather than establishing any

critical distance from existing bodies of writing, it is characterized by the same approach, the same substantial flaws of interpretation, and the same highly negative view of sex, media and young people. In this article we discuss the review and place it in the context of debates about young people, violence and sexualization. We also look at its connections to a range of rhetorical accounts of sexualization and to the contemporary representation and regulation of sexual practices, asking how researchers should respond to this kind of work.

Sexualization and violence: no necessity for evidence

The necessity for the review was not spelled out but seems to have had its genesis following a consultation launched by the then Home Secretary, Jacqui Smith, as part of the Home Office (2009) 'Together We Can End Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy', and thus appears to have been driven by a belief that there are demonstrable links between sexualization and violence against women and girls. There is no doubt that sex and sexuality are areas of concern for parents and all those who come into contact with young people in professional capacities, and the problems of violence and coercion some young people will meet in their sexual relationships need to be rigorously addressed. However, the review had remarkably little to say about violence and coercion, and instead focused almost entirely on the role of the media in creating sexualized messages. At no point did the review address the beliefs, motivations and actions of those who abuse women and girls, the ways in which young people may be at risk of being abused or becoming abusers themselves, or the structural factors and material realities that contribute to violence. The review also neglected to examine what kinds of violence women and girls face and whether these are increasing, nor did it offer its own evidence for claims of the increasing sexualization of culture. In fact, the review failed to indicate or explore any ways in which violence and sexualization might be linked except in the very general terms of sexualized media contributing to a climate in which violence against women and girls is accepted. It had nothing to say about any evidence for links between violence and sexualization, but simply took for granted that there is a 'clear link' between them.

Toby Young (2010), blogging about the report for the Telegraph, noted its failure to offer any proof for its claims and its reliance on supposition and conjecture, and went on to identify inconsistencies in the way information was presented in the report, not least the apparent contradiction between the need for a report of its kind and figures from the British Crime Survey (which includes crimes not reported to the police), which suggested that incidents of domestic violence in the United Kingdom more than halved between 1997 and 2009 (Harman 2009). Alison MacLeod (2010), also blogging about the report, noted the poor quality of much of the evidence used in it; one statistic that was widely reported in the press and suggesting that a high proportion of young women aspire to work as glamour models appeared to emanate from a television survey that had been reported in a newspaper. Lynne Segal, reflecting on both the quality of evidence used in the review and its intellectual rigour, wondered whether this could be, 'the same high proportion that is doing better than boys across the board on almost every index of educational achievement, whether in schools or upon entering the professions in equal numbers to men?', and noted that on reading the review she felt, 'as though the last forty years of feminist and other scholarly contention around the body, sexuality and representation, had simply never happened' (Segal 2010).

Defining sexualisation

The review starts with its notion of sexualization; ‘the imposition of adult sexuality on to children and young people before they are capable of dealing with it, mentally, emotionally, or physically’ (Papadopoulos 2010, 6), although it does not reference any theoretical or empirical work that would establish what it means by adult sexuality, how sexuality develops, how children and young people are being defined, or what would show whether they were ‘capable of dealing’ with it. In fact, the term ‘sexualization’ is used in a variety of ways within the review; as a way of describing ‘a number of trends in the production and consumption of contemporary culture; the common denominator is the use of sexual attributes as a measure of a person’s value and worth’ (Papadopoulos 2010, 24), and in a way that suggests that it is the same as ‘sexual objectification’ (2010, 27), or even simply ‘gender stereotypical ideas and images’ (2010, 37), although another passage refers to ‘sexualisation and objectification’ (2010, 83; emphasis added), as though these were distinct. Elsewhere still, it is not sexualization but ‘premature sexualisation’ (Papadopoulos 2010, 36) or ‘hyper-sexualisation’ (2010, 62) that is identified as the problem. These various uses of the term are ill-defined; sometimes suggesting a concern with the speed of development of sexual identity, at others with a problematic expression of sexuality, and at others still with problems related to gender. But this is to confuse a number of things; adult sexuality with sexual objectification or gender stereotyping; and hypersexualization with hyperfeminization. In some places the term’s usage suggests that ‘sexualization’ is unproblematic for adults but not young people; so long as it is not ‘premature’ or ‘hyper’. This confusion of development, politics, culture, sexuality and gender is typical, and not just of this review, as we shall go on to discuss, and the lack of any conceptual basis for thinking about those differences is indicative of the very weak academic base of the review. This is not simply a question of semantics – ‘sexualization’ as it is used here is both vague and obscure; conflating a whole range of textual forms, behaviours, attitudes, states, interests and practices, and presenting it as a singular object of concern. But it is hardly surprising that the term is confusingly used, given that the review does not engage with the way that sexualization has evolved in academic writing and that it does not see a problem in setting out to ‘understand the impact sexualisation is having’ (Papadopoulos 2010, 25) without attempting to ‘enter into a theoretical debate on the precise definition of sexualisation’ (2010, 17). In fact, sexualization has been a rather different subject of academic debate than the review suggests. At its simplest, the term simply means ‘to make something sexual’. At its broadest, it has been used to explore a number of questions: what do contemporary fascinations with sexual values, practices and identities indicate? How does the view that there has been a shift towards more permissive sexual attitudes sit alongside new forms of regulation? How can we account for the growth and diversification of sexual media, or the breakdown of consensus about defining obscenity, or the prominence of sex scandals, controversies and panics in the media? Another linked but not directly analogous term, ‘pornification’ (Paasonen, Nikunen, and Saarenmaa 2007), has been used to describe the way that pornographic styles and aesthetics have been redeployed in some popular culture

texts. What Brian McNair (1996, 23) has called the ‘pornographication of the mainstream’ sets this kind of adaptation alongside an expansion of a ‘pornosphere’ within which obscene, although increasingly accessible, texts proliferate. According to McNair (2002, 13), both developments can be seen as part of a broader shift towards a ‘striptease culture’ that is evident more generally, not only in sexually explicit or suggestive media texts, but in cultural trends that focus on lifestyle, reality, interactivity, self-revelation and forms of public intimacy. These uses are rather different to their employment within the review because of their attempt to draw attention to the complexity of these issues; the rise of virtual forms of sex, concerns about both mainstream and ‘extreme’ media texts, the resurgence of anti-sex and anti-porn movements, shifts around the way sex is understood in relation to age, the dramatic diversification and accessibility of sexual representations, the myriad ways in which the significance of sex is changing in the twenty-first century in relation to work and leisure, self-expression and relationships. Admittedly this is a broad range of concerns, but while the term ‘sexualization’ may be limited in its ability to grasp all of them, its use in these kinds of contexts has been an attempt to open up questions and pay attention to some real shifts that are taking place in the use of media and technology, in household organization, work and leisure, in notions of aging, and in the shifting relations of commerce and intimacy. ‘Sexualization’ in the Home Office review accomplishes a quite different task; closing down rather than opening up a discussion and collapsing a whole range of issues together as though they emanated from a single source with clear and measurable ‘effects’.

Media, porn and violence

It is probably already clear that we see the review as of strikingly poor academic quality. With so many mistaken assumptions, gaps, misrepresentations of available research and conceptual weaknesses it is difficult to know where to start in unravelling it. The data and methodology of the studies that are referred to are not discussed openly as one would expect in a review of this kind: all kinds of ‘evidence’ – scientific and anecdotal – are mixed together as though they are of equal value; references are made to ‘consistent and reliable evidence’ (Papadopoulos 2010, 12 and 70) but supported by very few citations; and there is frequent use of very dated work, which is particularly problematic given that the review is attempting to document a ‘new’ phenomenon. Much of its ‘evidence’ predates the supposed emergence of sexualization, was undertaken for varying purposes and within disparate academic disciplines, and cannot be aggregated, as the review appears to suggest, to produce similar and substantiating conclusions. The review also demonstrates an approach that appears to have been untouched by the development of media, communication or cultural studies over the past 50 years. It ignores the considerable body of work in these fields and what they have had to say about Internet use, gaming, mobile communications, pornography, television, film, magazines, music and advertising, and, in particular, young people’s relationship with media. Instead, it draws on rather childish ideas of how the media might work – through ‘messages’, ‘drip drip’ effects and ‘internalization’. This is language that would not be used in even the most basic introductions to the area and represents a view of media use that would have been

considered woefully dated well into the previous century. It draws from a kind of deterministic pop psychology that focuses on effects on the individual and appears to rest on a very basic set of ideas about how identity is formed; ‘children learn what it means to be either male or male from prevailing cultural norms’, they ‘internalise . . . expectations’, their behaviour is ‘controlled by “cognitive scripts”’ and ‘subconscious associations’ (Papadopoulos 2010, 26), and ‘shaped by “socializing” influences’ (2010, 27) To take one example as indicative of the narrowness of the review’s conceptual understanding of media, consumers’ interests in particular forms, and the relationship between consumption and identity formation: its discussion of music videos ignores a vast body of work that has examined the ways in which popular music expresses more than ‘just’ sex – the lyrics and images of music from rock to rap deal with the huge and varied array of emotional feelings that enrich our lives. Some of these expressions may be difficult, even problematic, but it is in the vocalizing of feelings and emotions that music has its charge for young and old alike. To simply reduce thousands of songs and videos to carriers of ‘bad attitudes’, as the report does, reflects an astonishingly naive view of the ways in which music has resonance and importance in people’s everyday lives. Poor use of evidence is apparent throughout; one of its claims – that ‘teenagers who preferred popular songs with degrading sexual references were more likely to engage in intercourse or in pre-coital activities’ (Papadopoulos 2010, 50) – is based on one single source and assumes a level of causality that would be amusing if it was not so ridiculous. And if it needs spelling out, what exactly are ‘pre-coital activities’? Kissing? Cuddling? Heavy petting? Oral sex? And how and why might these activities be sparked by degrading sexual references? What are degrading sexual references? Do teenagers who listen to songs that have no sexual references abstain from intercourse or pre-coital activities? The point is that these claims are not evidence, they are reiterations of concern, designed to create a picture of dismay. Moreover, the analysis of individual music videos included in the review relies not on any use of textual methods or evaluation of audience responses, but entirely on ‘gut reactions’ expressed in emotive language. Evidence is imported from entirely unconnected research traditions in order to make a claim that ‘the depiction of women as sexual objects’ is likely to produce ‘acceptance of rape myths’ in viewers (Papadopoulos 2010, 50).

The review also draws attention to the widespread availability of pornographic materials, but the issue of pornography is raised only to close down any avenues of investigation. Claims of its increasing availability and increasing violence are not supported by evidence that might indicate where these have occurred or what their impact has been. Laying side by side the claims that violence is commonplace in young people’s relationships, that sexual harassment in schools may be ‘on the rise’ (Papadopoulos 2010, 12), and that children are subject to abuse (2010, 13) with the statement that ‘There is consistent and reliable evidence that exposure to pornography is related to male sexual aggression against women’ (2010, 12) implies that pornography, as well as ‘sexually objectifying images of women in the mainstream media’ (2010, 11), may be an identifiable source for violence against women and young people, somehow associated with ‘significant amount of evidence linking stereotypical attitudes to women’s sexuality and sexist beliefs with aggressive sexual behaviour’ (2010, 11). In fact, as is well known,

research that has claimed to have found such links has been extensively criticized, including a previous Home Office review that concluded there was no evidence for such a link (Howitt and Cumberbatch 1990).

Similarly, although there are well-established fields of research on young people and childhood and the development of gender and sexual identity, work from those areas is absent here. Like other 'concerned' accounts of sexualization, the review fails to consider what women's and girls' contemporary engagements with bodily display might mean in a variety of contexts and for the women and girls themselves (Duits and van Zoonen 2006).

The absence of young women's voices in accounts of this kind raises the question of the relationship between the desire to protect and the desire to control.

Constructing young women as powerless not only denies them a position from which to speak, but 'risks reproducing the very powerlessness it sets out to avoid' (Lumby 1998, 52). This production of powerlessness is also reproduced methodologically, as Linda Duits and Liesbet van Zoonen note (in press); although appearing to put young people – especially girls – at the centre of attention and concern, the review confines them 'in the standardized measurements of experimental and survey research'; methods that deny them any opportunity to speak about or reflect on the issues that are under investigation. In addition, as Lynne Segal (2010) has commented of the review, the kind of narrative it employs is, in the end, less about young people's experiences and practices and more about 'older people's (and especially parents') worries about young people's behaviour, encompassing an amorphous array of their activities as consumers and producers'.

Lamenting sexualisation

Alarms about troublesome media forms are rarely innocent of politics and prejudices, nor are they new; they deploy a set of anxieties around sex, technology and young people that have been apparent in responses to every successive media form throughout the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries (McNair 2002). Neither is the expression of concern around young people and sexuality a contemporary development; the 'masturbating child' (Foucault 1976, 105) and 'falsely innocent adolescent female' (Kendrick 1996, 261) have been emblems for the easily corruptible figure of the young person since the nineteenth century. The lack of any discussion of this history of concern, combined with its lack of intellectual coherence and its incompetent assembly of evidence, suggests that rather than seeing the review as a report about sexualization, we should view it as part of the set of rhetorical works that include the American and Australian reports (American Psychological Association 2007; Australian Senate 2007) and the many popular books on the topic that draw a variety of issues into a broad expression of concern about sexualization and pornification; young people (Levin and Kilbourne 2008), heterosexual couples and families (Paul 2005), aspects of American culture from women's porn to torture at Abu Ghraib prison (Sarracino and Scott 2008), technology (Delmonico et al. 2001), addiction (Malz and Malz 2009), popular culture (Oppliger 2008), casual sex (Sessions Stepp 2007), dumbing down and a 'culture of illusion' (Hedges 2009), social liberalism (Shapiro 2005), and the failure of feminism (Walter 2010). As Alan McKee has argued, all kinds of things

are collapsed together in accounts like these: ‘child pornography; children being targeted by any form of marketing; young people becoming sexually active; sexual abuse of children; raunch culture; protecting children from any sexualised material in the media; and body image disorders’ – and all presented in a way that obscures the distinctiveness of any of them, thereby allowing commentators to ‘slip from one to the other as though any of them were saying the same thing, with any of them either being a cause or an effect’ (McKee 2010, 131 – 4).

Despite their different starting points and political stances, these accounts tell the same story of crisis in very similar ways, and it is possible to identify them by a particular structure and set of narrative roles. The ‘problem’ is identified, as are the ‘victims’, ‘villains’ and ‘expert solutions’. The story is illustrated through the use of recurring figures such as porn addicts, post-feminist lolitas, traumatized children, and concerned but helpless parents, and through the narrative of a downward spiral in which the sexualized girl frequently becomes the primary sign for the ills of modern life. The story belongs to an older series of ‘laments’ about the decline of innocence, courtesy and romance that Cas Wouters (2004) has identified, triggered by shifts in manners since the late nineteenth century.

From this point of view, the lack of academic rigour and coherence of such works is easier to interpret; these are cautionary tales with a particular set of storytelling devices. They are enormously commonsensical and on the surface their arguments seem plausible.

Take this example from the Home Office review: ‘Healthy sexuality is an important component of both physical and mental health. When based on mutual respect between consenting partners, sex fosters intimacy, bonding and shared pleasure’ (Papadopoulos 2010, 6). It is impossible to disagree with the apparent good sense of this. But ‘healthy sexuality’ is intensely normative, ruling out many pleasurable, non-coercive practices including, at the very least, casual sexual encounters. Laments about sexualization also rely heavily on assertion and repetition, on the expression of unfocused concern, the jumbings of distinct issues, emotive appeals and a form of address that presupposes we are already frightened and angry about sexualization and ready to act on these feelings. But their bold claims turn out to be much more tentative on close inspection, as Toby Young identified in the following example from the review:

The sexualisation of women – and, more widely, the pornification of culture – can put pressure on boys to act out a version of masculinity based on the display of power over women . . . Given this, it is perhaps not too much of a leap to posit a link between the messages being sent out to boys and the normalisation of aggressive – or even violent behaviour – towards girls and women . . . (Papadopoulos 2010, 60 – 1)

It is not just that these claims are conjecture dressed as evidence but that they offer very particular ways of thinking about both sexuality and propensities to violence – both are constructed as personality processes that are constantly in danger of being unleashed by the ‘wrong sort’ of messages. Or, in another example from the review: An issue of concern is that the sexualisation of girls is contributing to a market for child abuse images (often referred to as ‘child pornography’ in the media) or sex with children. The fact

that young girls are styling themselves in overtly sexually provocative ways for other young people’s consumption – whether this be on social networking sites or via photographs sent by email or mobile phones – makes them potentially vulnerable. Young people themselves are

now producing and swapping what is in effect ‘child pornography’ – a fact borne out by the growing numbers of adolescents that are being convicted for possession of this material. (Papadopoulos 2010, 13)

The seemingly obvious connections being made here are actually intensely conjectural and come alarmingly close to blaming the victim. The review constantly makes reference to potentials for abuse but fails to offer any evidence for sexualization causing or increasing child sexual abuse. Ironically, taking pictures of themselves does not necessarily make young people vulnerable to abuse but it does appear to make them vulnerable to prosecution by the state! It is not inevitable that research carried out to underpin policy must be as poor as the Papadopoulos review. As Petra Boynton (2010) has argued, the ‘Sexualised Goods Aimed at Children’ report produced by David Buckingham et al. (2010) for the Scottish Parliament provides an excellent model of what work in this area can and should look like. Unlike the Home Office review, this report:

- critically evaluated the existing reports on Sexualisation;
- included a thorough search of additional evidence on sexualisation and related issues;
- tested the idea of what Sexualisation might be using innovative participatory methods;
- investigated what Sexualisation was, how it manifested itself and how it was interpreted and experienced by parents and young people; and did not set out with the assumption Sexualisation was prevalent, nor looked for confirmation of its existence. Instead it questioned the concept and looked to see what issues were problematic and positive for young people and their parents.

Nor is it inevitable that using ‘celebrities’ to front this kind of work is bound to be problematic; Tanya Byron, a psychologist and media personality best known for her television work, has been widely commended for her review, ‘Safer Children in a Digital World’ (Byron 2008), carried out for the Department of Children, Schools and Families in the United Kingdom.

Despite – or perhaps because of – their difference from these works, their lack of intellectual coherence and disregard for evidence, accounts like the Home Office review are immensely seductive. They are part of a set of broader ‘visceral’ responses to shifts in media and sexual practices that make discussion based on evidence virtually impossible (Albury and Lumby 2010, 57). They make a complex and difficult set of issues appear ‘obvious’ and easy to understand through their positioning of young people and adults as victims or villains, rescuers or persecutors. They make it possible to apportion blame without really having to do anything about the issues facing young people, becoming a substitute for meaningful action or an attempt to be ‘seen to do something’, rather than producing a set of properly considered and manageable proposals. In their incarnation as ‘academic’ reviews they also become useful to governments in order to pursue an agenda while pretending the reverse – that policy is underpinned by independent and objective evidence (Smith 2010b). Indeed, the kinds of rhetorical strategies employed throughout these accounts often use the figure of the helpless sexualized young person to advance other political agendas (McKee 2010, 137), and for this reason, as Alan McKee has argued, it may be ‘more useful to see these claims as the rhetorical strategies they are, and refuse to

try and engage in rational dialogue with them’, although it remains absolutely necessary to assess those strategies and challenge them.

Inappropriate, unsuitable, creepy . . . sexualisation

At the time of the release of the Home Office review, it seemed that comprehensive sex education would, for the first time, become statutory in the United Kingdom. In its original form, the Children, Schools and Families Bill included clauses to make personal, social, health and economic education compulsory and to ensure that such provision did not discriminate between types of sexual relationships. But as the Bill progressed through the parliamentary sessions, and in response to vociferous complaints from opposition MPs and various lobby groups, opt-out clauses were introduced enabling faith schools to continue their classroom rejection of abortion, contraception and ‘alternative’ sexual partnerships.

Arguments were made that the sex education proposals removed parental rights to decide what was best for children, promoted questionable attitudes towards sex, advocated particular practices deemed either dangerous or morally suspect, encouraged experimentation, and sexualized young people. In the end, the provisions relating to sex and relationship education were abandoned so that the Bill could be passed before the general election in May 2010. For the organization Christian Concern for our Nation, the abandonment of even the watered-down proposals was a matter for celebration and ‘demonstrated the power of prayer’ – although, as its Director, Andrea Minichiello Williams, put it: ‘We must continue to speak up on behalf of the right of our children to innocence and purity and we must make sure the candidates we elect to Parliament understand the importance of this issue’ (Christian Concern for our Nation 2010). The subsequent formation of a coalition government – made up of Liberal Democrats who have generally been supportive of sex education, and Conservatives who have generally not – means there is considerable uncertainty about how sex education in the United Kingdom will fare in the future.

We are not in the business of prediction but, as we were editing this special issue, news was breaking of a decision to axe the Teenage Pregnancy Independent Advisory Group – a non-governmental organization that advised the Labour government to make sex education compulsory – and it seems unlikely that the coalition government will seek to expand provision. The new government is led by Prime Minister David Cameron, whose electioneering during 2010 included railing against ‘creepy’ and ‘inappropriate sexualization’, with a description of his own battle with his daughter over the ‘unsuitable’ lyrics of the singer Lily Allen (Daily Mail 2010a, 2010b). Proud of his record as an opponent of sexualization, Cameron claimed to be ahead of other politicians in recognizing the problem, parading his own parental worries in a calculated appeal to ‘all parents’ and a demonstration of the tangible threats posed to the nation’s youth. His government’s approach to young people’s sexual health and education is likely to focus on sexualization as a key issue for parents and professionals without spelling out exactly where the problems might lie.

It is here that we see some of the more problematic elements of the ways in which

laments about sexualization feed into debates around sex education and thence into the provision of adequate sexual health services for young people. There is a view that sex education is an incitement to underage sex and in and of itself an attempt to sexualize the child, hence the frequent recourse to ideas of ‘children being forced to grow up too quickly’ and the calls to ‘give children back their childhoods’. We are conscious that while it appears important to enter into a dialogue with government reports such as the Home Office review, a great deal of time and energy is wasted in the critiquing of poor quality work, and more generally remaining locked in an unproductive debate about what counts as ‘sexualization’. The challenge we face is to critique these rhetorical accounts in a way that takes seriously the genuine concern that many feel about young people’s well-being, yet make clear the probable outcome of confusing concern with evidence. At the same time we must be careful that our energies are not diverted from the more important task of working to develop the serious study of young people’s sexual cultures.

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