

Bodies, pornography and the circumscription of sexuality: A new materialist study of young people's sexual practices

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Sexualities

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Abstract

We explore 'sexualisation' from a new materialist position, as an assemblage of bodies, things, ideas and social institutions. Interview data on 22 young people's sexual activities reflect a range of relations and 'affects' contributing to the sexualisation of young people, including peers, social events, alcohol, media, popular culture and pornography. While a 'sexualisation-assemblage' may produce any and all capacities in bodies, it is typically blocked and restricted into narrow and circumscribed capacities. Limited and unimaginative practices portrayed in sexualised media and pornography narrow definitions of sexuality, and may reproduce and reinforce misogyny, sexual objectification and circumscribed sexualities. We argue for sexualities education for both children and adults that can 're-sexualise' all our bodies.

Keywords

Assemblage, Deleuze and Guattari, new materialism, sexualisation, young people

Introduction

Media with sexual content, including pornography, and their apparent effects on the sexual imagination of the contemporary West have been a rallying point for recent concerns over child sexuality. Academically, responses divide along

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realist/constructionist lines, with the former focusing on child protection, risk and health, and the latter on moral panics founded in normative gendered, classed and racialised discourses. Betwixt these theoretical perspectives, faith and political perspectives have shaped current policy towards perceived premature and precocious 'sexualisation'.¹

In this article we shall assert that the sexuality of the contemporary West is an impoverished and constrained refraction of a body's potential for physical, emotional and/or cognitive intensifications; a potential that far exceeds what is currently understood as 'the sexual'. More specifically, we assert that sexual media and pornography, along with many other aspects of contemporary culture, contributes not to the broadening of sexualities, but to their circumscription, and that the so-called sexualisation of culture draws both children and adults into a narrow and normative sexuality. This restrictive 'sexualisation' is not a threat to moral decency or childhood innocence, but to everybody's capacities to enjoy and explore possibilities of 'becoming-other' to which sexualities can contribute (Deleuze and Guattari, 1984: 294).

We proceed by exploring the material interactions that impact on young people's sexual conduct, through empirical data collected during Author 2's doctoral project (Bale, 2012). We explore the biological, physical, social, cultural and discursive processes that surround the bodies of those who are perceived at most risk of 'sexualisation', looking at the interactions between a range of materialities: bodies and desires, media representations of bodies and sex, social discourses on young bodies, the media that disseminate them, the economics of commercialised sex and sexuality, and all the cultural baggage that produces the contemporary sexual climate. The 'new materialist' perspective (Coole and Frost, 2010) adopted in this article marks a divergence from the majority of social science literature on sexualisation and pornography, which divides epistemologically between realist and constructionist perspectives.

Duschinsky (2013) has mapped the improbable coalition that has emerged around 'sexualisation', comprising religious organisations, parent groups such as 'Mumsnet' that articulate concern at liberalising and sexualising sexual cultures 'harmful' to youth (Bailey, 2011; Papadopolous, 2010), and some feminists who consider the emergence of sexualised cultures as part of a more general shaping of girls and women within a masculinist model of sexuality and neoliberal marketisation of sexuality, girls' and young women's bodies (Gill, 2003: 105; Horvath et al., 2013; MacKinnon, 1989; Merskin, 2003: 108). These divergent groupings share a view of sexualisation as a social problem, the root causes of which need to be addressed by policy initiatives and activism.

Realist perspectives are floridly represented in documents such as Bailey's (2011) *Review of the Commercialisation and Sexualisation of Childhood* and Papadopoulos' (2010) *Sexualisation of Young People Review*. Horvath et al.'s realist review of literature (Horvath et al., 2013: 7) suggests that increased access to pornography is linked to unrealistic attitudes to sex and relationships, more sexually permissive attitudes, beliefs that women are sex objects, less progressive gender role attitudes,

and to children and young people engaging in risky sexual behaviours. Concern over increasing access to pornography by teenagers (Hines, 2011; Paul, 2005) features alongside other social issues concerning young people, including historical child sexual abuse (Mendelson and Letourneau, 2015) and sexting and cybersex (Levine, 2013; Mitchell et al., 2014; Phippen, 2012).

By contrast, constructionist positions start from an assertion that the ways that a society thinks about sexualisation are shaped by discourses and cultural narratives. Drawing on post-structuralist, feminist and queer theory, constructionists focus upon how social and moral concerns about young people, sexuality and sexual conduct have emerged. Thus, Attwood (2009: xv–xvi) argues that the proliferation and prominence of sex in today’s world reflects a discourse that commodifies sex(ualities) as an acceptable, democratic and renewable route to bodily pleasures. Egan (2013: 17) identifies four ‘long-standing Anglophone anxieties’ deployed in contemporary discussions of sexualisation: concern over unfettered female heterosexuality; racialised concerns over sexual innocence and its corruption; middle-class anxieties about working-class sexuality; and disgust, anger and repressed desire over the eroticism of the child. These have produced moral panics around children’s access to pornography, safety of children from sexual predators and ‘sexualisation’ of young children reflected in various policy reviews, strategies and sanctions noted earlier. For Duschinsky (2013: 150–151), a discursive distinction between ‘innocent child’ and ‘responsible adult’ has been used by right-wing politicians to promote heterosexual marriage, justify neo-liberal economic policies and scale back the welfare state.

These perspectives have provided the basis for a radical critique of realist discourses on sex and sexualisation, which, it is argued, over-simplify concerns around girls, bodies, sex and sexuality in ways that ‘flatten out social and cultural difference’ (Renold and Ringrose, 2011: 391), and add a further constraint ‘that fetters girls’ (a)sexuality to morality, appearance and age’ (Jackson and Vares, 2015). Gill (2012: 742) notes the ‘profoundly classed, racialized and heteronormative framing of the debates, while Egan (2013: 134) points to how realist discourses on the media’s role in sexualisation depend on a construction of girls as deviant, rather than addressing the sexism, racism, classism and homophobia in popular culture.

We see two limitations to both realist and constructionist positions. While an activist or policy agenda around sexual media could be criticised for adding a further (constraining) discourse upon sexuality and eroticism, the propositions for action or policy that may follow constructionist analyses can require long-term, improbable or even utopian (Ringrose et al., 2013: 320) shifts in culture or dominant ideologies. And while realist critiques of pornography are founded in unexamined models of adulthood and childhood, an exclusive constructionist focus upon such essentialist discourses can leave an individualised and genitalised understanding of sexuality in contemporary culture largely unaddressed.

It is for these reasons that we choose to adopt a ‘new’ materialist perspective that steps beyond this realist/constructionist epistemological dualism (van der Tuin and Dolphijn, 2010). Using primary empirical data, we examine the materialities

that affect young people's sexual behaviour. We focus not upon texts, but upon matter: upon the materialities of sexualisation, and the interactions between bodies, physical things, social formations and institutions, ideas, feelings and desires within a 'sexuality-assemblage' (Fox and Alldred, 2013). The next section establishes this analytical framework.

A materialist perspective

The turn to matter reflected in new materialist ontology has been fuelled by concerns over the prioritised status of the body and human subject in the social sciences, and dissatisfaction with the focus within post-structuralism upon texts and language (Barad, 1996: 181; Braidotti, 2006; Clough, 2008; Grosz, 1995). New materialism's concern is instead with social production, and consequently focuses upon matter's capacities: how it interacts, affects and is affected by other materialities. For materialist scholars such as Barad (2007), Braidotti (2006), DeLanda (2006, 2013), Deleuze and Guattari (1988), Haraway (1991) and Latour (2005), matter is to be studied not in terms of what it is, but in terms of what it does: what associations it makes, and what consequences derive from these interactions. Consequently, materialities – bodies, objects, organs, species and so forth – are treated not as ontologically-prior essences, each occupying its own bit of space and time (Coole and Frost, 2010: 7), but as *relational*, gaining ontological status and integrity only through their relationship to other similarly contingent and ephemeral bodies, things and ideas (Deleuze 1988: 123; Haraway, 1991: 201).

This relational perspective is most fully operationalised in Deleuze's (1988, 1990) ontology of affects, assemblages, relations and capacities. We can quickly unpack these concepts, beginning with the notion of an *affect*, a Spinozist conception (Deleuze, 1988: 101) that replaces a conventional conception of 'agency', and may be defined simply as *the capacity to affect or be affected*. All matter (for example, a pornographic image or a sexual code of conduct) has an 'agential' capacity to affect, rather than being inert clay moulded by human agency, consciousness and imagination (Barad, 1996: 181; Coole and Frost, 2010: 2). Affects are what links matter to other matter relationally within an action or event (such as a boy viewing a pornographic website).

Events are *assemblages* (Deleuze and Guattari 1988: 88; Latour, 2005: 208) of material components that develop 'rhizomatically',² in 'a kind of chaotic network of habitual and non-habitual connections, always in flux, always reassembling in different ways' (Potts, 2004: 19). DeLanda (2006: 9–10) argues that 'the assemblage' marks a break from organic models of society, which have been applied by sociologists from Spencer to Parsons to Giddens. The latter are based on a 'superficial analogy between society and the human body' (2006: 8), in which component elements (the 'organs') have inherent attributes or properties that are manifested only when constituted with other specific elements within a whole (the 'organism'). So, for example, 'teachers' and 'students' manifest their particular properties when interacting together as elements within a school or college (the whole).

The assemblage represents a different understanding of collectivity, based upon ‘relations of exteriority’ (DeLanda, 2006: 10–11). Here, any component part (such as a human body) may be detached from one assemblage and plugged into another, within which it will have differing interactions and consequently exercise different *capacities*. So a component may become a ‘learning-body’ when it is part of an assemblage in which it interacts with ‘teaching-bodies’ – these capacities in turn establish the assemblage’s identity as a ‘school’ or ‘college’. But detached from this assemblage and plugged in elsewhere, the former ‘learning-body’ may manifest entirely different capacities (for instance as a ‘worker’ or a ‘lover’) as it interacts with other bodies in a ‘workplace-assemblage’ or a ‘sexual relationship-assemblage’, respectively. For this reason, for Deleuze the components of an assemblage are not bodies, things and ideas, but the *relations* between them (Deleuze and Parnet, 2007: 55).

This has a number of consequences for how we understand both the parts (relations) and the wholes (assemblages). First, we cannot predict what a body (or thing or abstract concept) can do until we observe its interactions in a particular assemblage. Second, neither is it possible to predict what an assemblage can do by simply documenting its components, we need to explore relations’ capacities when assembled together and intra-acting (Barad, 1996: 179). This ‘empiricism’ establishes the need for a materialist sociology firmly based upon observation of actual events, and has implications for the methodology required to explore assemblages, affects and micropolitics (Fox and Alldred, 2014), which we address later. Finally, it means that unlike ‘organisms’, assemblages are highly unstable and continually in flux as relations join and leave.

Within this perspective, what a relation (a body, a physical object or an idea) can do within any event is a consequence of how it affects and is affected by the other assembled relations (Deleuze, 1988: 101). Affects are thus the engines of assemblages, altering capacities physically, psychologically, emotionally or socially (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988: 400; Duff, 2010: 625). Together affects and the capacities they produce comprise the event’s ‘affect-economy’ (Clough, 2008), which can be analysed in terms of its micropolitical effects on bodies and other relations. For example, a media image of a slim female body may ‘territorialise’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988: 88–89) or specify another body’s capacities – it may close down possibilities for what it can do and desire, open up new possibilities for action, or occasionally produce a *line of flight* (1988: 9) from a stable state or identity into unexpected and novel capacities, actions and events. Some territorialising affects may aggregate relations (for instance, categorising young women as vulnerable), while other affects are non-aggregative or ‘singular’, affecting a single relation in a unique way. Aggregative affects include systems of thought or discourses, orthodoxies, evaluative categorisations, codifications, cultural norms and so forth (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988: 291; Potts, 2004: 20).

Various authors have applied new materialist perspectives to sexuality (Beckman, 2011; Fox and Alldred, 2013; Holmes et al., 2010; Renold and Ringrose, 2011, 2013; Ringrose, 2011). Braidotti (2011: 148) described sexuality

as a 'complex, multi-layered force that produces encounters, resonances and relations of all sorts', while Fox and Alldred (2013) explored the flow of affect in a 'sexuality-assemblage', the sexual and other capacities this produced, and the constraints and limits produced by territorialising and aggregating affects, channelling desire into a narrow range of sexual capacities. Accordingly, we will rethink a *sexualisation-assemblage* as a 'web of forces, intensities and encounters' (Braidotti, 2006: 41) that produce territorialising and aggregating manifestations of power on young bodies, but also – importantly – continual challenges, fragmentations, resistances and becomings (Renold and Ringrose, 2013: 250).

Our approach is empirical, focusing on sexualisation events in order to explore the affect economies involved in sexualisation-assemblages, and to identify the *emergent* capacities these affects enable within young bodies. From this, we will assess the conclusions and policy recommendations that we documented earlier, and offer our own perspectives on sexualisation.

Methods

The data we draw on within this article originate from Clare Bale's qualitative doctoral study, which explored the sexualities of young people using multiple semi-structured qualitative interviews. Ethical approval for the study was granted by Sheffield University Research Ethics Committee. Those participating in the study attended a further education college in the English Midlands, in an area of high deprivation with significant rates of teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections. Clare spent a number of weeks in the communal areas of the college getting to know the students and explaining the study's purpose and research approach. Students who expressed an interest received information, with a 48-hour cooling-off period before interviews took place with written and verbal consent.

Finally, 22 young people (11 male and 11 female) aged 16–19 were purposively sampled to provide an equal gender split and breadth of ages. Whilst all participants attended the same college, a maximum variation approach was applied in relation to social and family backgrounds, places of birth and schooling, ethnicity, social interests, physical appearance and 'style', academic ability and subjects studied. After meeting with each young person several times to establish rapport, Clare conducted up to three in-depth interviews with each, supported by an indicative topic guide. Participants were encouraged to tell their own stories and experiences, describe their sexual behaviours and sexuality, and how they engaged with sexual media (including pornography). Field notes were hand written and a reflexive research journal maintained. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, and the data was managed using NVIVO software; all reported names are pseudonyms.

Our analysis departs substantively from a conventional qualitative approach, given that its aim was not to document or explicate the sexual experiences of particular young people, but to understand the affect economies that make sexualisation-assemblages work, in terms of the sexual capacities produced

(Alldred and Fox, 2015; Mulcahy, 2016: 213). Interviews are a valuable resource for this latter task, as they provide data not only upon the human and non-human relations within event-assemblages, but also information concerning what these relations do affectively, and what capacities they produce. We began by trawling the data to identify relations; we then identified sexual capacities from the young people's accounts and the affects (defined as 'a capacity to affect or be affected') that produced these capacities.³ To emphasise the plurality of affective materialities that the data reveals as involved in sexualisation-assemblages, we have reported first the human (for example, peers, parents) and then the non-human relations (such as alcohol, venues) identified during the initial trawl.

Findings

A. Relations in the sexualisation assemblage

Analysis of the interview transcripts revealed the wide range of affective relations in young people's sexualisation-assemblages. For example, from the transcript of two interviews with 'Steve', a 17-year-old male sports science student, we identified relations including friends, parents, girlfriend, gender and sexual norms, and sexuality education. Interviews with 'Sheila', an 18-year old female social science student, revealed relations including friends, her mother, magazines, celebrities, condoms and cars.

Trawling the interviews thus produced a very long list of human and non-human relations in the sexualisation-assemblages of young people. Among the human relations were peers, family, teachers, school/college, celebrities. Non-human relations included parties and social events; alcohol; media and pornography; contraceptives; sex education classes and materials; paraphernalia of youth culture including music, vehicles, skateboards and mobile phones; and beliefs, attitudes, mores and codes concerning sexual conduct. The affectivity of these relations, and the capacities they produced are described in the following analysis.

B. The sexualisation affect-economy

We consider first the sexual capacities associated with affective intra-actions with human relations (peer group, sexual partners, parents and educators), and then non-human relations including alcohol, social events, media and pornography.

Human relations

Within sexualisation-assemblages, peers contributed affectively to sexual capacities by providing emotional support, a yardstick for comparing sexual behaviour, and efforts to 'keep up' (or not) with an imagined repertoire of sexual behaviours among a peer group. Perceptions (however unfounded) of how her peers were

behaving sexually were ‘rhizomatic’ affects that first contributed to Maria’s adolescent sexual activity, and in turn affected her friend’s behaviour.

I thought everyone else was doing it... I was like, oh yes it’s this great thing that everybody like, loves doing it... I told my best mate, then she went and did it as well. I didn’t tell her to. I was like, ‘I did this yesterday’ and she was like, ‘Oh, was it good? What was it like?’ And I told her exactly that it’s not that bad, it hurts but. And so she went and did it.

Sam suggested that openness in discussing sexual matters with peers had established new capacities, in terms of broadening sexual repertoires.

...oral is very common place a lot of the time. You hear stories about everyone going to parties, just getting a blow job or licking someone out, or fingering or whatever. No one thinks twice about that, it’s not really a taboo at all. Not just in young people, in anyone.

Some affects between peers had negative consequences for capacities. For respondent Clare, a derogatory comment constrained her capacities for sexual behaviour.

In secondary school there’s one lad said I was ugly and that knocked my confidence. I’ve never been with a lad since then. People talking about all their experience with like [name] and [name] it makes me feel, I don’t know, like they’ve all got boyfriends and stuff. People fancy them and stuff, makes me feel ugly and stuff like that.

Sexual partners were relations that contributed directly to developing sexual capacities, including the young people’s initiations into sexual activities. Joe described how his girlfriend negotiated their first experience of intercourse.

It just happened, it was never planned at all. She told me from the start ‘I don’t want to do it straight away’, and I just thought that’s alright... It was just one day she just said, ‘well I feel like I’m ready now, do you?’ And I just said ‘well yes, if you are’, so then it just happened from there.

For Maria and her boyfriend, their sexual initiation took place as part of a longer-term sexualising experimentation.

All his mates had tried sex and he was the one who hadn’t. He wanted to keep up with them I suppose... We’d been together about eight months when we first started talking about it. I don’t know, we didn’t plan it, we had talked about it, and he was like, when you are ready and when I’m ready we might try it. When it got to about a year that we’d been together, we tried it.

However Suzie managed her sexual encounters with her boyfriend, giving her a capacity to assess his commitment to their relationship.

I made him wait seven months before I did anything with him, before I did, before I got with him anything. Cos like obviously I just think like my mum's always taught me if they like you that much, they'll wait.

Other human relations were less significant within the sexualisation-assemblage. Parents were generally a constraining affect – in the run-up to his first experience of intercourse, Andrew received a 'sex talk' from both his own parents and those of his girlfriend

The first time I was in a relationship, we [Andrew and his parents] actually spoke about it. You get the sex talk off your Mum and Dad and all that... And her Mum and Dad got me into the room and talked to me about it. 'You get my little girl pregnant' and all this.

School sex educators were relations in the sexualisation-assemblage – as a source of information about sex.

The thing about safe sex has helped everyone. I mean when you are a wee nipper, you knew nothing about safe sex either. When they started introducing it a lot more. When it first come in it was very vague, they didn't really talk about much, but now it's all they talk about. They drill it into you, safe sex use condoms, use this, use that. I think that's one of the main things. I mean if I had known about it, I would have liked to have known about it when I was younger. (Daniel)

The information gleaned in this way was quite limited, however.

I think it should be more in depth... And I think they should clear it up a bit... All they say is, when a man loves a woman they have sex and they have a baby. When you get a bit older... It's if you don't use a condom... (Tony)

You will get chlamydia or you will have a baby, but it's like, they don't tell you aught [anything] else... I just think sex education needs to be bumped up. It needs to be made different to that. (Andrew)

Non-human relations

Social interactions between young people and their peer group involving alcohol had been the backcloth for sexual experiences or experimentation. Dan described

the setting where he first had intercourse.

We had gone to a few bars and watched the [football] match. We got promoted, so we thought right a party. So we are all hammered and found out there was a party, so we all went there and there is this girl I knew. Yeah, ended up, we went into this bathroom and that's where it happened basically.

Alcohol had also been a factor in Andrew's first sexual experience.

It happened when I was absolutely bladdered. So was she. We'd just left school; we were off our tits and whatnot. I just can't remember any of it. I got kids coming up saying, oh you slept with her, did this with her. Next minute you fell out of a twenty-foot tree house and broke your collar bone.

The interaction between two non-human materialities – parties and alcohol – together led to coercive sexual attentions for various of the female respondents. Amy described a negative experience that had had a lasting effect on her sexual confidence.

I went to a party and like I said I'm not a big drinker at all and I got my drink spiked and that night I ended up sleeping with someone and since then I've not wanted to unless I have been in a relationship where I've trusted somebody, and like I say my experience isn't big within it because like I say I'm low in confidence from that night so . . .

Respondents described a range of media and popular culture outlets that had affected them. These included television programmes, films, music videos, newspapers and magazines, billboard and television advertising, websites and internet search engines. Tony described how sexual content in media was pervasive, though its sexual significance only became clear as he grew up.

It doesn't impact you when you're young. It only impacts you when you're old enough to see it for yourself, you take it all in but obviously at that age you don't really or maybe it was just me but I didn't click it all together. I knew it all related somehow but I wasn't quite sure what it was . . . I just spent about well a couple of years really just wondering what it [sexual content in media] was because all you get is playground stories till you actually get old enough to realise what is actually happening.

Even when very young, James reported how he had been affected by sex scenes on television.

I would have been very young and I wouldn't have been more than five or six at the time and I couldn't sleep at night. I had my own telly in my room and I was just flicking through the channels in my room and . . . I flicked onto, I think it was Men and Motors at the time or something . . . I'm not even sure what it was that was going on

now, but there were two people having sex and I was like, I'm not quite sure what that is, but it doesn't look too bad, and something just clicks in your brain, and that was probably the first time I saw out and out sex.

Shona considered that sexual scenes or content in television programmes had directly and positively affected her sexual capacities, encouraging her to explore her sexuality and to talk about it with her peers.

When I'm with somebody that I love, then I have absolutely no sort of problems in expressing myself sexually . . . And that is probably partially because of the media in a way . . . Because there were a lot of late night sex tip shows, and basically, the resounding message is just to be free, and to ask . . . So I think I've got kind of a healthy sort of sexual image from the media . . . I quite liked erm the way that the women in *Sex and the City* talked about sex quite openly with each other. I think that opened up a new medium for women to have more discussion about, you know, sexual experiences.

For Steven, a film he watched on TV with his girlfriend had had an immediate impact on their sexual behaviour.

We were sat together watching a film and it turned into like they were having sex in a sexual scene and then we just like thought, we'll try that . . . I can't remember what film it was, they were having sex in the shower and I was just laid there and I was only joking and said, 'oh we ought to try that in the shower'. And she just popped up and said, 'yeah ok then' . . . We did it in the shower and it's one of the best places I reckon.

Internet technologies provided a means for some respondents to explore sexual issues. For Neal, an internet chat room had been a useful source of information.

I've gone onto a site called AskMen.com, it is fantastic. Everything I've learned during sex, how to please the woman, how to make her feel comfortable, how to be a gentleman about having sex.

Information that Dan had found online increased his capacities to perform sexually.

I mean the first time I licked a girl's vagina I didn't know what I was doing, I was just, yes, lolly pop this is fantastic she didn't feel a thing. I was like damn I've fucked it [laughs]. That was it she never let me do it again at all my ex, she got to that stage I never want that again so I read [about it] on the internet.

However, for James – who self-identified as gay – images he came across on a social media site shocked and upset him.

I was on Facebook the other day, and it was like, if my brother saw this . . . God knows what he would think, he's only fifteen. What sort of vagina do you like, hairy,

trimmed or shaved? And it asked you and there were three pictures across Facebook, I nearly cried, I didn't know what to do. I was like 'noooooo' [pulls face and waves arms] but it's getting on Facebook now and that's like a social site.

A number of the respondents described how they had engaged with pornography, both online and offline. For Tony, using porn was a means to gain sexual gratification, though he did not feel that the content had negatively affected his sexual capacities.

When I got bored I'd go, right let's have a wank, let's watch porn, that would be it sorted, it just kills boredom, like for you to kill boredom . . . That's how it works, the whole porn thing you'll either look at something or think oh yeah I like this but it's one of those that you'll never ever try. It's like people skydiving you like the look of it but you're never going to try it. It just doesn't work like that.

Jodie had used pornography as a means to broaden her sexual repertoire.

It is like educational isn't it and you see it and it is like oh I'll get a bit of that done the next time I'm with my boyfriend.

For most, using pornography was a solitary activity, or something to engage with in a trusted relationship. Dan described the contradictions between sexual excitement and social embarrassment that came when he had been watching pornography in the company of male friends.

I've noticed it on a couple of instances where I've walked in and there's been a few people sat round with one of like dirty channels on telly or they happen to be doing whatever. I've had a couple of instances where I've walked in at my mates and he's been sat there and he's been watching like . . . and I'm like what you watching and we'll sit and watch it for five minutes whatever before going out . . . But yeah . . . I didn't get as turned on as you do, because I was in a room with lads.

Discussion

Analysis of the qualitative data from this study has not sought – as in an interactionist approach – to reveal insights into experiences of sexualisation for individual respondents, or (as in a post-structuralist analysis) to expose sexuality discourses and their consequences for respondents' identities and sexualities. Instead we have dredged the data, first to reveal the range of human and non-human relations in sexualisation assemblages, and then to explore these in terms of what capacities they produced. The analysis we have undertaken indicates the wide range of affective relations in sexualisation-assemblages, including family, friends and peers; material things such as alcohol, condoms, social events, money, cars and

sex education materials; social formations such as moral standards, norms and street culture; and idiosyncratic elements such as celebrities or skateboards, though many other affects are also involved. Sexual capacities, and hence the 'sexualisation' of these young people, emerged from this complex mix of affective relations within event assemblages.

Realist approaches to sexualisation have tended to view children and young people as passive sponges, absorbing the differing messages that a society mediates (Smith and Attwood, 2014: 11), from the well-meaning efforts of parents, teachers and sex educators through to the insidious influences of consumer culture and pornographers. The materialist approach we have adopted recognises the affectivity of all these elements, but is non-deterministic, focusing not on young people as compliant recipients of social forces, but as 'becomings' within a continuously assembling and dis-assembling flux of relations, in which capacities to do, think and feel emerge and recede according to the mix at any one moment in time and space. Consequently, rather than being singled out as pervasive and corrosive 'influences', media and pornography need to be addressed as parts of a much broader, fluctuating affect economy within the contemporary sexualisation-assemblage.

This assessment has implications both theoretically and practically. It recognises that media and pornography contribute affects that open up new possibilities for young people's emergent sexualities (for instance, as a source of information about sexuality or as an opportunity to explore possible sources of sexual pleasure) – the 'democratisation' thesis (McNair, 2002), or in Deleuzian jargon, a 'de-territorialisation' or even a sexual 'line of flight'. But our assessment also identified in these media and pornographic materials a very narrow conception of sexuality and what it comprises. The stereotypical and unimaginative practices often portrayed in some pornography and sexualised media are problematic because they impose narrow and circumscribed definitions of sex and sexuality, and aggregate bodies into prescriptive formulations of gender and sexuality. They may also consequently reproduce and reinforce misogyny, sexual objectification and neoliberal sexual consumerism, and constrain rather than promote sexual diversity.

This however is not to recapitulate the moral panics around young people and sexualised media that we critiqued earlier in the article. While we are critical both of the narrow portrayals of sexualities to be found in pornography (including misogyny and violence), our analysis does not lay blame for 'sexualisation' solely at the doors of media and pornographers. The data suggest that many elements in the sexualisation-assemblages of the young people interviewed may establish both in them *and in adults* a narrow and normative sexuality that is individualised, genitalised and often familialised (Alldred and Fox, 2015; Attwood, 2006: 80; Bogue, 2011: 34; Deleuze and Guattari, 1984: 99). This is an impoverished and constrained refraction of a body's potential for physical, emotional and/or cognitive intensifications; a potential that far exceeds what is currently understood as 'the sexual'. From sex education that focuses on a body's physiological and emotional capacities, to gendered peer interactions, to social norms concerning femininity/masculinity, sexual pair-bonding and monogamy, to alcohol-fuelled social

occasions that enable physical encounters, sexualisation is pervasive and insidious, *grooming* us all – young and old – into circumscribed sexualities.

In this broader context, our critique of the production and consumption of pornography and other sexual media content is not that it is good for some (consenting adults) and bad for others (children), but that it is one element within a pernicious sexualisation-assemblage of bodies, body parts, money and desires that de-limits what is culturally understood as sexual and contributes to broad sexual grooming. Genitalised pornography is a threat not to moral decency or to childhood innocence, but to all our capacities to enjoy and explore the possibilities of sexualities and becoming-other. Furthermore, this sexualisation is often underpinned not by altruistic efforts to spread sexual pleasure and rights but by a neo-liberal marketisation of sex.

This analysis suggests that concerns with sexualisation need to shift attention away from moral panics about children's access to inappropriate sexual content, to a radical approach to sex and sexualities education for children and adults that aims for the 're-sexualisation of everyone'. This re-sexualisation would encompass 'sex-positive' (Queen and Cornella, 2008) celebrations of diverse desires and relationship structures, but move radically further, to address foundational conceptions of what is and is not 'sexual', exploring with people of all ages the possibility for embodied and material intensifications that extend beyond narrow definitions of and distinctions between sexual and non-sexual. It would aim to operationalise the Deleuzian claim that 'sexuality is everywhere' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1984: 293), by extending explorations of embodied pleasures that are non-genital, even non-physical, and which are dis-aggregated from discourses that link sex with reproduction and the family (for an example, see Austin's (2016) exploration of the sexual 'lines of flight' associated with dancing). It would oppose the narrow sexualities promoted in commercial media and pornography, re-casting these as circumscribed and impoverished versions of the rich, endless permutations and possibilities for embodied and material sexual becoming.

Notes

1. In this article we problematise the concept of sexualisation and its ambiguous use by a range of interest groups, and our quotation marks flag it here as a contested term.
2. Deleuze and Guattari (1988: 7) use the rhizome as a metaphor for the branching, reversing, coalescing and rupturing affectivities within assemblages.
3. This approach has been used successfully to explore affect economies in other studies, for instance of ageing (Fox, 2005) and health and illness (Fox, 2011; Fox and Ward, 2008).

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