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**Governing the souls of young women: Exploring the perspectives of mothers on parenting in the age of sexualisation**

**Abstract**

The sexualisation of young women has emerged as a growing concern within contemporary western cultures. This has provoked adult anxieties that young women are growing up too fast by adopting inappropriate sexual practices and subjectivities. Psychological discourses have dominated which position sexualisation as a corrupting force that infects the 'true self' of young women, so they develop in abnormal ways. This in turn allows psychological practices to govern how to parent against sexualisation within families. To explore this further, six mothers each with daughters aged between eight and twelve years old took part in one to one semi-structured interviews designed to explore how they conceptualised and parented against the early sexualisation of young women. A Foucauldian inspired discourse analysis was employed, which suggested that the mothers talk was situated within a psychological discourse. This enabled sexualisation to be positioned as a corrupting force that disrupted the natural development of young women through deviant bodily practices (e.g. consuming sexualised goods), which prevented them from becoming their 'true self'. Through the disciplinary gaze of psychology, class

inequalities were reproduced where working class families were construed as 'chavs' who were bad parents and a site of contagion for sexualisation.

*Keywords: Sexualisation; Chav, Psychology, Power; Mothers; Foucauldian Discourse*

*Analysis*

## **Introduction**

In recent years the proposed early sexualisation of young women has emerged as an important concern within contemporary western cultures. Sexualisation is situated in the public domain, which has led to a wealth of commissioned reports and the publication of parental guidelines on tackling the problem (see Egan, 2013). Despite this, sexualisation remains a heavily contested concept within the literature (Buckingham et al. 2010; Duschinsky, 2013a). Nonetheless, psychological discourses have dominated, which construct sexualisation as a contagion that infects the 'true self' of young women via the transmission of deviant cultural practices (Egan and Hawkes, 2010). By positioning sexualisation within the psychological domain, the 'interiority' of young women becomes a site of power, which places the 'self' of young women as a source of truth to happiness, fulfilment and improvement (see Rose, 1991, 1995).

Young women historically have been subjected to the disciplinary practices and gaze of developmental psychology, which positions them as 'children' and governs the normal and abnormal through the construction of developmental trends (Burman, 1994). This nexus of power and knowledge brings experts (e.g. psychologists, educators and health professionals) and

institutions (e.g. family, schools and health care facilities) into action to normalise parenting practices to protect the innocence of young women. In light of this, the current paper focuses on the perspectives of mothers of young women by exploring their subjectivities and how they practice being a parent in a socio-political context of sexualisation.

### **Problematizing Sexualisation**

The sexualisation of young women has caused moral panic in the West with both left and right wing political groups coming together to raise concerns on the problematic sexual practices and subjectivities that have emerged (Egan & Hawkes, 2010). However, what is meant by sexualisation is heavily contested in the literature (Buckingham et al. 2010; Duschinsky, 2013a). Nonetheless, there has been a plethora of commissioned reports and texts highlighting the dangers of sexualisation at a psychological, interpersonal and social level. The American Psychological Association task force published a report in 2007 (APA, 2007), which argued:

*Sexualisation occurs when (1.) a person's value comes only from his or her sexual appeal or behaviour, to the exclusion of other characteristics; (2.) a person is held to a standard that equates physical attractiveness (narrowly defined) with being sexy; (3.) a person is sexually objectified – that is, made into things for others' sexual use, rather than seen as a person with the capacity for independent action and decision making; (4.) and/or sexuality is inappropriately imposed upon a person. (APA, 2007, p. 1)*

The above extract from the report categorises sexualisation into four conditions but it is the fourth that has received the most attention in the literature (Egan, 2013). Within this condition, sexualisation becomes conflated with sexuality. The issue of sex and sexuality is not new or unique to young people today. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, life itself became a focal point of power which enabled sex to be brought under control through the juncture of disciplining the body and regulating populations (Foucault, 1978; 2012). This enabled the governance of sexuality at an individual level (anatomy-politics) through the surveillance of conduct and at a societal level (Biopolitics) through reproduction rates. The sexuality of children was pathologized as a medical and moral problem, which legitimized experts (e.g. doctors and teachers) to cast a disciplinary gaze to monitor and control (Foucault, 2012). This was important in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the social purity movement, which construed masturbation as a morally corrupting force for children (Egan & Hawkes, 2007) and in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century with the social hygiene movement where sex was subject to the disciplinary practices of science (Egan & Hawkes, 2009a). This enabled the construction of the 'normal' child who was free from sexuality, which served to govern parental practices under the guise of protecting the innocence of childhood (Egan, 2013; Egan & Hawkes, 2007, 2009, 2010). Parenting therefore became regulated by experts on how to rear children correctly through the development and legitimization of norms through theories, research and the publication of parenting manuals.

Historically, sexuality as served a political function by defining and regulating the boundaries between children and adults (Foucault, 1978; 2006). To this

end, within the sexualisation literature this is reproduced with sexuality construed as a taboo in childhood, which should be guarded against (Robinson, 2005). This has allowed adults to draw on the dominant cultural understanding that children should exist in an innocent state, which is free from the contamination of adult sexuality (Montgomery, 2008). Within this context, parents become positioned as protectors who must 'parent' by monitoring their children in line with expert advice. This form of surveillance in families becomes critical as the threat of sexuality aims to weaken the division between children and adults (Robinson & Davies, 2008). The above argument is well versed in the existing literature as the fear of children growing up too fast (Thompson, 2012). Nonetheless, in the sexualisation literature the focus has tended to be on young women and in particular the 'tween', a socially constructed age based category that is representative of a group of pre-adolescent females aged between eight and twelve years of age (Cook & Kaiser, 2004).

While the absence of sexuality in childhood is construed as natural, there is an uneasy tension as this is juxtaposed with an unyielding and ungovernable sexual instinct (Egan & Hawkes, 2007, 2009a, 2010). This is problematic as it creates a paradox where sexuality is seen as both absent and present in young women (Egan, 2013; Egan & Hawkes, 2012). The blame is therefore placed on young women themselves, which draws attention away from the wider issues of sexism and gender politics that are at play (Duschinsky, 2013b; Ringrose, 2012). Nonetheless, the tension between the competing subject positions of victim and perpetrator for young women is resolved

through the construct of the other and otherness (see Dashtipour, 2012; Walkerdine, 1997). This allows some young women to discursively distance themselves from the other, who is the sexualised (Bragg, 2012). This means that the mark of sexualisation is present in some but absent in other young women. Nonetheless, the threat of contagion from the other is always present and impacts on the innocence of young women at a behavioural, cognitive and emotional level (Duschinsky, 2011; Egan & Hawkes, 2010). This positions sexualisation as a psychological concern, where the infected and deviant subject can be normalised by the practices of psychology and hence control their contagious nature (Duits & van Zoonen, 2011).

### **Governing the Soul of the Sexualised**

Sexualisation is often situated in a psychological discourse, which permeates throughout the academic literature, social commentary and reports. By positioning sexualisation within a psychological discourse, the 'self' emerges as an object-effect of power, which legitimizes psychologists as 'experts of the soul' or 'servants of moral orthopaedics' to govern young women (see Foucault, 1977; Rose, 1991, 1995). The sexual instinct can be brought to attention and normalized by the disciplinary gaze of psychologists through the construct of the self (Foucault, 1978). This is played out in the range of commissioned reports that draw on the disciplinary gaze of psychology. In 2010 the celebrity psychologist Linda Papadopoulos published a review to the home office in the UK on sexualisation. The review draws on the concept of the 'true self', which is articulated as a young woman's authentic voice which is corrupted through sexualised cultural practices. In this light, exposure to

sexualisation via the mainstreaming of the sex industry is assumed to corrupt women from their normal and proper form, which focuses attention on their physical appearance rather than their aspirations and accomplishments (Duschinsky, 2013b). This line of inquiry is also evident in the APA's report in 2007 and the Australian institute's report published in 2008 (Rush & La Nauze, 2008), which both highlight the dangers of self-sexualisation. That is, the process whereby young women internalise sexualised behaviour and physical appearance as desirable traits, which encourages them to engage in sexual practices too young.

The above texts draw on a dualism, which positions the body of young women as a source of ungovernable sexual instincts, which are unnatural and threaten to corrupt the psychological self, which is the real site of an individual, which is naturally free from sexuality. It is clear here the tension between sexuality as present (within the body) and absent (within the psychological self) is drawn upon and becomes the weak and corruptible body vs. the innocent and pure mind. Here, the weak body of young women through deviant cultural practices, such as consuming sexualised products (e.g. the marketing of padded bras and G-strings to young women) is assumed to corrupt their psychological interior or self (see Goodin et al. 2010). This means the interiority of young women becomes a site of power, which is subjected to the disciplinary practices of psychology to protect and normalise or restore the innocence of young women (Rose, 1991, 1995). This form of power is situated within wider 'disciplinary societies' where

unproductive social elements (in this case young women) are regulated and controlled for by monitoring their conduct (Foucault, 1977).

Within psychology, young women are monitored through developmental norms, which construct the normal and abnormal (see Hook, 2002). This means developmental norms can be used to determine what is normal at certain ages, how it is best measured and how the abnormal child can be normalised or fixed (Burman, 1994). The concept of normality therefore allows psychology to legitimately control what it means to be a child through a narrative of cognitive, social and emotional development, which constructs developmental norms as a means of managing the interiority of young women. This is reproduced in the sexualisation of young women literature as Danielle Egan and Gail Hawkes argue:

*'...premature sexualisation hampers normal cognitive, physical and emotive progress by diverting attention away from age-appropriate milestones'*  
(Egan & Hawkes, 2009b, p. 390).

The psychological consequences of sexualisation for young women include the onset of depressive symptoms (Tolman et al. 2006), disordered eating (Slater & Tiggemann, 2010), heightened attenuation towards body related concerns (Quinn et al. 2006) and an increased risk of appearance anxiety (Tiggemann & Kuring, 2004). Sexualisation of young women has been further problematized as a cause for the socially constructed compassion deficit disorder (CDD), which involves an inability to form and maintain meaningful

relationships, a lack of empathy, fairness and justice (Levin, 2009). It is clear from the literature on the psychologization of sexualisation that the self of young women becomes corrupted, which prevents them from developing 'normally' into adulthood.

Psychology effectively governs the soul or interiority of young women through the family by monitoring the achievement (or lack) of developmental norms and the absence or presence of the abnormal outcomes of sexualisation as discussed above. The role of the family within psychology is best articulated by Michel Foucault when discussing psychiatry in the 19<sup>th</sup> century:

*The watchful family eye became a psychiatric gaze, or, at any rate, a psycho-pathological, a psychological gaze. Supervision of the child became supervision in deciding on the normal and the abnormal: one began to keep an eye on the child's behaviour, character and sexuality, and it is here we see the emergence of precisely all the psychologization of the child within the family itself. (Foucault, 2006, p. 124)*

The family therefore governs itself through the watchful eye of psychology. The surveillance of young women is a task for parents who as adults must protect the 'true self' of young women so they can remain innocent. This has led to a range of texts aimed at families, which function as 'parenting guides' by highlighting what to watch out for in young women, how this impacts on their development and what can be done to protect and fix them, which is

legitimised by the expertise of psychology. These texts include Olfman (2008) 'The Sexualization of Childhood', Durham (2010) 'The Lolita Effect: The Media Sexualization of Young Girls and What We Can Do About It' and Levin and Kilbourne (2008) *So Sexy So Soon: The New Sexualized Childhood and What Parents Can Do to Protect Their Kids*.

What does all this mean then? According to Egan (2013), whilst sexualisation has become a public concern the evidence on its spread and effects is contentious at best. Sexualisation serves the function of regulating class, race and gender (Egan, 2013). Moreover, the innocent and corrupt free young woman is a middle class fantasy that needs to be preserved, so anxieties emerge when this idealised form of femininity is threatened (see Egan, 2013; Egan & Hawkes, 2012). During the social purity movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the fear of sexuality in childhood was situated within the context of urbanisation, where there were anxieties around the working classes and immigrants corrupting the existing social hierarchy (see Egan & Hawkes, 2007). Sexuality is seen as being forced into childhood through the working classes with their low cultural practices, which produces 'otherness' (Walkerdine, 1997). This means the corrupted young women are the working classes, which threaten the innocence of the middle classes.

Sexualisation can be understood within a psychological discourse, where there is a corruption of the 'true self' which causes young women to become engage sexual practices. This is governed by developmental norms, which can distinguish between the normal and abnormal (Burman, 1994). Working

class mothers are stigmatized within developmental psychology as their children are more likely to be categorised as failing meet norms compared to the children from middle class parents (Walkerdine & Lucey, 1989). This has left many middle class mothers to be constructed as being good parents whereas working class mothers are seen deficient in some way (Phoenix & Woollett, 1991). It is clear that class boundaries are reproduced and regulated within developmental psychology, which further legitimises the position of working class children as sexualised beings. By reducing class to a psychological phenomenon, working class children are therefore positioned as developing in abnormal ways, which leads to a corrupted self where sexuality is present. Nonetheless, the contagion of the working class young women can be governed within families where parents monitor and regulate their children under the disciplinary gaze of psychology. A Foucauldian inspired methodology was employed to explore the ways in which the early sexualisation of tween girls is constructed by mothers and the parenting practices they adopt. This form of analysis was chosen because it works at a macro level and therefore enables an exploration of how the wider social and cultural contexts shape the positions available to children and adults and the power relations between them.

## **Methodology**

In line with the small sample size required in qualitative research (Willig, 2008) six mothers who each had at least one tween daughter aged between 8 and 12 years old participated in a semi structured interview. The mothers were recruited using a snowball sampling technique and consequently they

came from differing backgrounds. Two participants were mature aged students studying at the University of Derby; one of these mothers had three sons and one daughter and the other had one daughter. Two participants were hairdressers; one of these mothers had one daughter and the other had two daughters and one son. One of the final two mothers worked for Derby City Council and had one daughter and the other worked in housing and had a son and a daughter. Due to the sampling technique used some of the participants knew the researcher and they passed on details of other mothers who had at least one tween daughter and would be interested in participating in the study.

This study focused on mothers who as parents govern sexuality within childhood from the gaze of the psy-disciplines (Foucault, 2006). This allows the current research to explore how mothers understand sexualisation, how they parent and their subjectivities. All the interviews were dyadic with just the researcher and the mother present. Before the interview took place all the mothers received a brief that gave background information to the study. The brief also included a number of media articles that had been published between the years 2008 and 2011 which focused on the debate concerning the stocking and selling of adult themed clothes or products. Due to the potentially sensitive nature of the interview the brief enabled the mothers to gain insight into the issues that might be covered in the interview. This, combined with the opportunity for the mothers to ask any questions they had before the interview started allowed the mothers to give informed consent to participate in the interview.

In order to provide flexibility each interview was guided by a small number of open ended questions. These questions started broadly and encouraged the mothers to discuss their reaction and feelings towards the media articles included in the brief. Discussion of the articles served as an ice breaker and allowed the mothers to settle into the interview itself by encouraging them to explore public issues rather than personal experiences (Willig, 2008). During the ice breaker the mothers were reassured that there were no right and wrong answers and reminded that their responses would be anonymised so their identity would not be revealed. The mothers also understood that they were able to withdraw at any point during the interview itself and up to two weeks after the interview without giving justification. These steps were designed to help make the mothers feel comfortable to discuss their opinions and experiences. None of the mothers who participated chose to withdraw their data.

The interview then focused on the mother's personal experiences of parenting their daughter. This section of the interview focused on issues such as the potential pressures their daughter was under and the mother's feelings towards the clothes and activities their daughter engaged in. A Dictaphone was used to record the interviews and each recording was transcribed verbatim, using pseudonyms to maintain the participants' anonymity.

### ***Analytic approach***

The interviews were analysed using a Foucauldian inspired discourse

analysis. This type of qualitative analysis is informed by a macro approach and seeks to explore how discourses shape our understanding of phenomena (Burman & Parker, 1993). Within a Foucauldian framework discourses are conceptualised as organised systems of meaning specific to a particular historical and cultural context which decide what is normal and natural within a given society (Hook, 2001). Through the creation of subject positions discourses also shape people's experiences of the world (Parker, 1992). Subject positions such as "mother" and "daughter" categorise individuals and enable and constrain what can or cannot be said or done by the person (Davies & Harre, 1990).

Foucault himself did not propose an explicit model of conducting an analysis (Graham, 2005). However, Willig (2008) proposed six procedural steps that may be adopted by researchers who are influenced by Foucault's work. Following these guidelines the interview transcripts were collected together and read through repeatedly. This enabled discourses that ran through the data set to be identified. Once these discourses were identified analytic attention turned to the subject positions created for mothers and their daughters by the dominant discourses surrounding sexualisation. Extracts which best represented the wider data set were then selected for close analysis.

## **Analysis**

The analytic process developed three key themes that were prominent in the interviews: 1) What it means to have a normal childhood – sexualisation runs

throughout families; 2) Sexualisation and the weak bodies of young women; 3) Parenting Sexualisation – Pathologizing the working class through the construction of the chav. Each of the themes and the interactions between them are now explored in depth using extracts from the interviews to support them.

***What it means to have a normal childhood – sexualisation runs throughout families***

Throughout the interviews, the participants made reference to the boundary between childhood and adulthood. In line with the existing literature, sexuality was used to demarcate children from adults. Moreover, sexuality was situated in the adult domain through the identification of cultural resources such as “porn” and “Ann Summers”<sup>1</sup>. Exposure to these cultural resources for young women was construed as problematic, which would lead to abnormal development. This allowed the mothers to adopt the subject position of protector whose role was to govern their children’s exposure to cultural resources to ensure they had a normal childhood.

*Extract one*

1. Helen: You want to keep them young as long as you can cause
2. otherwise you’re taking their childhood away from them, you want to
3. keep them young and you want them to grow up naturally, you don’t
4. want them to be subjected to, porn and things like that cause otherwise
5. they start being aware of their sexuality at a young age, so what they

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<sup>1</sup> Ann Summers is a chain of adult orientated stores in the UK that are well know for selling provocative underwear and sex toys.

6. gonna turn into when their older if you're exploiting that then they would
7. think it's ok to do it and what are they going to do with their kids, how
8. are they going to grow up.

In the above extract, sex is positioned as a site of knowledge that should be “adult’s only”. This begins in lines 3 - 4 where the introduction of children to ‘porn’ is conceived as problematic. The exposure of children to materials which are used to regulate adult sexuality makes children “aware of their sexuality” (lines 4-5) and therefore disrupts natural development. This is situated within a psychological discourse, where child development is positioned and understood in relation to normal and abnormal trends (see Burman, 1994; Hook, 2002). Access to sexualised cultural resources are therefore used to distinguish between a normal and abnormal childhood, which consequently leads to problems in adulthood ‘so what are they gonna turn into when they are older’ (lines 5-6). We can see power relations in action here as the role of the parent becomes one of protector, who aims to “keep them (children) young” and allow children to “grow up naturally” (lines 2-3). In line with the disciplinary gaze of psychology, the family becomes a site of power where parents are supervising their children by regulating access and exposure to cultural resources (see Foucault, 2006). This form of power governs parenting through personal desire “You want to keep them young as long as you can” (line 1), which is embedded within the wider techniques, values and languages made available to them by psychological practices (Rose, 1999). The tension between sexuality as absent and present in childhood (see Egan, 2013) is resolved by situating sexualisation as a

parenting issue (lines 6-8). The parents who expose their children to sexuality are corrupting their development, which will lead to the adoption of deviant parenting styles for future generations. This suggests that the presence of sexuality runs within families, which means that sexuality will always be present in young women who have 'bad' parents and absent in those who have 'good' parents.

*Extract two*

1. Helen: I wouldn't take my daughter into Ann summers, because she
2. just wouldn't understand what that's for any way you wouldn't do it my
3. parenting would be terrible, I would agree with most parents that if you
4. allow them to see these things then your forcing that child grow up
5. quicker but, I just wouldn't do it.

In this extract Helen continues to position herself as a responsible parent who actively restricts her daughter's access to the inappropriate sexual knowledge supplied by "Ann Summers". In lines 1-2 Helen's daughter is positioned as a passive and naïve child who has no sexual knowledge and would therefore be unable to "understand what that's (Ann Summers) for". This places Helen in a position of power and responsibility. As the only source of information about sex Helen is able to control and regulate her daughter's knowledge, which ensures she has a normal childhood and develops naturally. Helen decides what her daughter needs to know and when as a protector. This echoes the relationship between parent and child established in extract 1. Children are

placed in a subordinate position to adults and are considered to be in need of protection.

In lines 2-3 Helen reflects on the consequences of enabling children access to Ann Summers and adult sexuality. Allowing a child to obtain premature sexual knowledge is constructed as irresponsible and a reflection of “terrible” parenting. This is situated within a psychological discourse which draws on developmental norms, where parents who do not adhere to normative practices are constructed as deviant and subsequently positioned as “bad” parents for their overt attempts in forcing children to grow up (line 4) so they develop abnormally.

### ***Sexualisation and the weak bodies of young women***

This theme examines the ways in which parents construct the relationship between sexualisation and the body of young women. The body is a site which is corruptible and where sexualisation is performed, which was drawn upon by the participants who discussed concerns with children’s appearance to others and themselves.

#### *Extract three*

1. Tracey: I’m gonna have to start looking for something more like a bra,
2. erm and that’s when I’ll probably be, I’ll probably will be shocked at
3. what there is, its wanting them to erm, the padded bras, it’s almost
4. raunchy I suppose its wanting your child to want bigger breasts which,
5. that’s not right, you get boobs when you’re a teenager, its like if you

6. rush it, you almost take away that specialness that came when you
7. became, what we call a teenager at about thirteen or fourteen

A biological discourse is evident throughout this extract, which constructs the “padded bra” as an unwelcome external influence which disrupt a girl’s natural development by aesthetically changing her body. This intervention is positioned as deviant as it gives the girl a “teenage” appearance before she has reached puberty and therefore disrupts her natural development. This fast tracking of development is problematic because it opens the girl up to the “raunchy” adult world by adopting sexualised subjectivities before they are physically ready for it. This reproduces the arguments present in the Papadopoulos (2010), APA (2007) and Australian institute (2008) reports, which position the bodies of young women as weak and corruptible through the consumption of sexualised products, which disrupts the development of their true or authentic self. Psychology therefore functions as a disciplinary power by governing the mind (innocence and true self) through bodily practices (clothing and behaviour). In other words, the self or mental life of young women can be protected by regulating their exposure to sexualised products.

In lines 3-4, Tracey suggests that parents who purchase padded bras are “wanting your child to want bigger breasts”. Such parents are positioned as “not right” because they are actively taking away their daughter’s childhood. This intention to sexualise can be understood in relation to the previous theme where sexualisation runs in families. In this light, within the disciplinary gaze

of psychology, bad parents are those that do not regulate the psychic life of their children by regulating exposure to sexualised goods. Within a western culture the transition from child to teenager is considered to be special as it is indicative that the child has reached an age where they are accepted to be biologically ready to cross the boundaries between child and adolescent. Although hypothetical in its construct, Tracey constructs this experience as unstable and easily “taken away” through the influence of sexualisation, rendering the child to be passive to the external forces of sexualisation and vulnerable to the experience of a forced or unnatural development. Therefore, the use of padded bras disrupts the natural physical boundary between adult and child.

*Extract four*

1. Helen: No, no they haven't got any idea, because you're taking their
2. innocence away from them at such a young age because you are
3. letting them wear it at that age, what's the next best thing, what's the
4. next best thing that they want, and then its going to get worse isn't at
5. and they're gonna be exploited to the other male party, especially for
6. young girls anyway, they're going to be seen as sexual objects other
7. than something that is young and innocent that's just starting to go
8. through puberty at school and they've got to go through it naturally.

Here, Helen aligns the early sexualisation with the sexual objectification of girls. As in the previous extract “innocence” is fragile construct which can be easily “taken away” unless the child has adequate protection from adults

(lines 1-2). In line 3 parents are blamed for disrupting child/adult boundaries and “letting children wear” inappropriate clothes at an early age, which draws on a psychological discourse, where exposure to these products subsequently leads to abnormal cognitive, emotional and interpersonal development (see Egan, 2013). Moreover, as the body is weak and corruptible, the interiority of young women or their ‘true self’ becomes disrupted. This neglect of parental responsibilities has serious consequences as it places a girl “who has no idea” in a vulnerable position where they can be “exploited to the other male party”.

It is important to note that this imposed sexualisation which transforms the “young and innocent” girl into a “sexual object” is constructed as gender specific. This reflects the remnants of a patriarchal society where men exert power over women, and the woman remains to be subordinate, fulfilling the role of “sexual object” under the control of men. It is important to note that this relationship is taken for granted as men are not problematised for positioning women as sexual objects. Instead, parents are blamed for allowing their daughter to wear adult clothes which makes them look older than they are and enforces sexualised subjectivities on them.

*Extract five*

1. Emma: She’s going to be paying so much attention to how’s she’s
2. developing, is she filling that bra, does she look good in them pants,
3. she’ll really focus on it but she shouldn’t be worrying about that, I mean
4. Its very rare for women to grow up and love their bodies naturally

5. cause they notice imperfections, so she's going to hate them cause
6. she's looking for them, she's watching them grow and I don't want her
7. to even think that, she should be thinking about doing well at school.

Emma's subject position of a woman allows her to express her "experienced" opinion as she generalises about the pressures that girls are subjected to as they "grow up" (line 4). At the beginning of line 2, clothing is used to exemplify how sexualisation can draw inappropriate attention to the body. In contrast to the previous extract the concern expressed here does not relate to unwanted attention from men. Instead, it focuses on the possibility that her daughter may develop a preoccupation with her body. Childhood discourses which position children as being in a state of innocence free from worry and concern position body concerns as un-natural. Within these discourses body issues is something that Emma's daughter "shouldn't be worrying about" (line 3). Early body awareness is construed as an intrusive and negative force as it directs a child's attention away from activities that their attention should be naturally orientated towards. This is also reproduced in the psychological literature on sexualisation as it is assumed a focus on the body diverts the attention away from the true self (e.g. Papadopoulos, 2010). This allows sexualisation to become a psychological issue, which is subject to its own disciplinary apparatus.

Emma's construction of a child that should be free from body related concerns stands in contrast to her construction of adults whose attention to the body is considered to be natural as "they notice imperfections" (line 5). This

constructs habitual bodily awareness to be normal when performed by adults as it is a rarity for women to be happy with their appearance (lines 3-4). The body is therefore constructed as an object from which subject positions can be adopted (e.g. women vs. girl). This is not to claim the body can be reduced to a discursive function, as suggested earlier in extract 3, manipulating the physical appearance through bras may change the subject positions children adopt (sexual object vs. child). In this light, the analysis suggests that materiality (i.e. body and bras) may interact with the discourses and subject positions that can be drawn upon (Nightingale & Cromby, 1999).

In lines 1-3 Emma constructs her concern to be centred upon her daughter becoming focused on the physical appearance of her body. Here, sexualisation can be seen to be problematic as it disrupts a child's development by drawing them into the adult world, as they become concerned with adult issues. Since children are constructed to exist free from "adult concerns", including those that are body related, these behaviours are constructed as not normal, have a disruptive impact on their development and are therefore unacceptable activities for children to engage with.

### ***Parenting Sexualisation – Pathologizing the working class through the construction of the chav***

This theme explores the strategies used by parents to protect their children from early sexualisation and the consequences for adults who fail to adopt the role of protector.

*Extract six*

1. Julie: I mean its sort of like, you have in your head the types of mothers
2. that would allow this sort of thing, like the chavey, sort of, you know
3. single with loads of different children by different fathers, they would
4. allow it, I would never allow my children to do this, I want them to have,
5. its really hard because I want to try and instil in them that it isn't about
6. what they look like it's about developing their personality.

In the above extract, psychological discourses are drawn upon to construct parenting practices against the dangers of sexualisation. Julie positions herself as a responsible parent who protects her child and would “never allow” (line 4) them to be exposed to the threat of sexualisation. This positions her as a protector who monitors her daughter’s practices and focuses on her as a psychological being. This is in line with the disciplinary gaze of psychology where ‘good’ parenting is understood in terms of supervising children in relation to normal and abnormal trends (Burman, 1994). Within the context of sexualisation, as argued in the second theme, allowing children to focus on the body is construed as disrupting the development of their true self.

This position of protector is sharply contrasted a “chavey” parent (line 2) who does not take the role of protector. The term *chav* is a social construction which is representative of a societal underclass, positioning all members within this category as immoral and undesirable citizens (Tyler, 2008). The *chav* has been used historically to pathologize the working class by drawing on the emotive state of disgust (Tyler, 2008). In lines 2-3 *chav* mothers are

presented as “single with loads of different children by different fathers”. Use of traditional family discourses here position the chav parent as a bad parent who fails to maintain a normative family unit. Furthermore, this type of mother is positioned as sexually active with a number of different partners. Within this discourse, the acceptance of sexualisation transgresses from the normative boundaries of appropriate sexual knowledge and constructs the chav parent as a deviant, since allowing “this sort of thing” is synonymous with allowing a child to acquire sexual knowledge. This is consistent with the paradox that whilst sexualisation is present within the families of some (in this case working class parents construed as chavs) it is also absent with others. That is to say, working class families represent the other, which is construed as the faceless chav who fails to protect their children from consuming sexualised goods. Within a psychological discourse, failure to regulate children’s consumption of sexualised goods is construed as bad parenting, which impacts on their interior mental life and leads to abnormal development (see Hook, 2002; Rose, 1991, 1995). In this light, social class inequalities are hereby reproduced under the guise as psychological phenomenon, which positions working class families as responsible for the contagion of sexualisation through bad parenting practices.

## **Discussion**

This analysis has explored how wider discourses present in a western society shape mothers’ understandings of sexualisation in the context of their daughters’ lives. It also explored the subject positions adopted by mothers as they worked to limit their daughter’s exposure to sexualised behaviours and

practices. This is an important area of consideration since sexualisation has been situated within a psychological discourse, where it has a detrimental impact on the cognitive, emotional and interpersonal development of young women (see Egan, 2013). This allows psychology to provide a disciplinary gaze, which construct and distinguishes between normal and abnormal developmental trends in young women (Burman, 1994). These norms are monitored within families by parents, which subsequently creates good and bad parenting approaches.

Throughout the interviews mothers suggested that sexuality should be for adults only. This is consistent with the suggestion that sexuality and sexual knowledge is an intrinsic dimension in western definitions of child and adult and boundaries that separate these two categories (Bragg et al. 2011). A normal childhood was constructed as one that involved parents as protectors who regulated their exposure to corrupted cultural practices. The body of young women was construed as weak to themselves and others, so it became a site where their interiority (innocence and true self) becomes corrupted (e.g. Papadopoulos 2010) through consuming goods, such as G strings and bras. Bad parents were those that were constructed as chavs who were positioned as the 'other' (Walkerdine, 1998). The social construction of the chav has been used to position the working class as pathological and as a site of disgust (Tyler, 2008).

The chav parents were positioned as those that failed to supervise their children. The disciplinary power of psychology functions by positioning these

parents as bad by adopting problematic practices because the body is weak, so their children will consume sexualised goods without supervision and develop in abnormal ways (Foucault, 2006; Rose, 1991, 1995). For the mothers interviewed sexualisation was always present in the families where there were bad parents, which was the source of contagion. This is supported in the literature where developmental psychology has historically been used to regulate social class boundaries by positioning working class parents as deficient (see Phoenix & Woollett, 1991). Here, class boundaries are reproduced discursively by mothers who reduce sexualisation to a psychology phenomenon, which distances themselves from the subject position of bad parents. Overall, the disciplinary power of psychology has been discursively drawn upon by mothers to legitimize social class injustices and position working class families as the underlying cause of sexualisation.

Whilst it is timely to have considered the debate surrounding the sexualisation of children, this study is limited to adult only interpretations. Since this area is predominantly centred upon how young girls may be affected by imposed sexualisation, future research should aim to consider this debate in the context of the child. Of particular interest would be to explore whether young women draw on “adult-centric” understanding of sexualisation and the extent to which social class inequalities are reproduced in their talk.

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