

Interrogating the Intersections of Girls and Sex

Hanna Retallack

BOOK REVIEW: Orenstein, Peggy. *Girls & sex: Navigating the complicated new landscape*, 2016. New York: Harper Collins.

In *Girls and Sex: Navigating the Complicated New Landscape* (2016), New York Times journalist and bestselling author Peggy Orenstein outlines an America in which young women, primed to be perfect princesses (as explored in her 2011 *Cinderella Ate My Daughter*), are traversing a new cultural backdrop. It is one that renders them tech savvy and privy to a sex-saturated visual economy, whilst simultaneously denying them the right to sexual safety, equality and pleasure. Drawing on popular writing on teenage sexuality, as well as academic research of adolescent sexuality scholars and feminist psychologists, Orenstein's stated objective is to move beyond moral panic-inducing narratives in order to explore girls' relationship with sex. One-to-one interviews were conducted with over seventy young women between the ages of fifteen and twenty. These interviews serve as the text's hook as Orenstein draws frank insights from these girls on topics including oral sex, labiaplasty, masturbation, orgasms (or lack of), sexual assault and abstinence. These numerous in-depth interviews are often fascinating and the author's call to parents to rethink the 'sex-talk' with their children is necessary. However, the book's strangely post-feminist take on the wider experiences of girls and young women, its failure to interrogate the intersections of identity that differentiate the constructions of and possibilities for girls' sexuality, as well as the author's investment in popularized discourses around sexualisation, mean that Orenstein misses crucial complications within the very landscape she works to navigate.

Orenstein's book is popular rather than academic. Reading it alongside scholarly studies by researchers such as Deborah Tolman, R. Danielle Egan; Sharon Lamb, Louisa Allen, Emma Renold, Jessica Ringrose, Sara McClelland and Michelle Fine

make it clear that *Girls and Sex* is hugely influenced by aspects of academic research. By academic standards, the book is problematic in its methodology, particularly in terms of the lack of specificities around the questions asked and how the answers were analyzed and, as I will further explore, the book's major problem is Orenstein's use of easy protectionist narratives of white middle class girls' sexuality. However, combine the book's direct appeal to concerned parents and the affectively weighty title and it is easy to see why *Girls and Sex* garners so much attention.

Orenstein's thesis is that adolescents face obstacles to 'full healthy sexual expression' (233). Throughout the course of seven chapters, these obstacles are identified as pornography, the lack of quality sex-education, self-objectification, patriarchal purity myths, binge-drinking, 'hook-up' culture and an epidemic of sexual assault in universities and high schools. Orenstein's sample of interviewees, sourced from the 'daughters of friends of friends' as well as recruited through email blasts to universities, are either at college or high school and, as Orenstein admits, are mostly white, upper middle class and heterosexual.

Orenstein states that girls were '*hungry to talk*' (4). They speak candidly about their negative sexual experiences: Erin, a senior at high school discusses her disgust in her own body, 'I don't like my vagina' (63); Anna reflects on unreciprocated oral sex and orgasms 'it's just expected that the guy will get off' (58); Holly talks about the alcohol-fuelled casual sex in the fraternity culture of U.S campuses 'being sober makes it seem like you want to be in a relationship' (119) and Maddie explains her initial decision not to report being raped because 'it's not like he took me to a dark alley' (192). Orenstein's interviewees also report how and where they find pleasure: Brooke recollects her mother giving her sex-positive books to encourage her to know her body; Caitlin remembers her mother buying her a vibrator at fifteen (79) and a number of girls describe their first orgasm as 'transformative' and 'life changing' (129). However, much of what the girls disclose is heart-wrenching and shocking. Many of Orenstein's conclusions, whilst not necessarily original, are hugely welcome because of the popular attention her work generates. Particularly her call for girls to be taught about their bodies (the notion of a psychological clitoridectomy is a helpful way to outline the silence around the clitoris), masturbate, feel entitled to sexual

pleasure and question popular constructions of virginity. The potential radicality of these calls are, however, tempered by a much more conservative and protectionist discourse conveyed in Orenstein's key question: *how can we protect our girls from risk?*

As the question suggests, Orenstein appeals to parents who are worrying about their daughters and sex. And it *is* parents that this book is aimed at. From the outset, Orenstein includes this assumed parent-reader as an ally in her own concerns for her growing daughter and, throughout the text, positions herself firmly as a mother trying to overcome her own discomfort about the future sex life of 'our girls'. We are also left to assume that, rather like the majority of the girls she interviews, these are majority white middle-class parents who, like Orenstein, 'cringe' at the idea of talking to their kids about sex and who need encouragement from a familiar, but much more informed, parent (in a surprising aside, Orenstein says that the idea of her child becoming sexually active is 'mortifying' p.208). After inciting fear, by describing the pervasiveness of binge drinking, casual hook-ups, sexting and assault, Orenstein then quells her readers' anxieties with thought-provoking but rather vague observations. Lines such as 'whether you're discussing dress codes, social media or the influence of pop culture, there is rarely a clear cut truth' (24) open the door to a developed analysis but never quite make it through. The text concludes with a direct appeal to these parents who want their daughters to have experiences that are 'safe, mutual and respectful' (236), arriving at a relevant but rather understated conclusion, that if we want girls to achieve the same equality in their intimate lives that they have in the rest of their lives, parents must talk to their girls differently about sex.

The book is founded upon a surprisingly post-feminist thesis ; that girls and women have 'made it' everywhere but in their sexual lives. Orenstein positions girls' sexuality within a schizoid landscape as she observes girls' expectations of egalitarianism in the workplace, and draws on 'successful girls' (Ringrose, 2007) narratives that position girls as 'winning' because they are succeeding in education and 'outnumber boys at college' (3). This premise, that girls have made so many gains outside of the bedroom whilst so few within it clearly suggests that girls' intimate experiences are separate from wider societal inequities. Theorists including

Debold (1996) and Tolman (1999, 2002) have long linked the suppression of female sexuality to the wider patriarchal oppression of women and Fine and McClelland (2006) place teenage girls' sexual wellbeing 'within structural contexts that enable economic, educational, social and psychological health'. By ignoring these connections, Orenstein fails to recognise the ways in which sexuality is entwined with other aspects of life or address the ways in which an experience of sexual pleasure or autonomy (or its lack) is, as Lamb argues, 'bound up' (300) with wider structures of power.

Orenstein's lack of interrogation into the relations between sex and wider dominant structures is echoed in her decision not to disclose the intersections of her interviewee's identities. Whilst there is mention that the sampling net was cast broadly (4), race, class and bodily ability are removed from all analysis entirely. Queer identities are confined to one short chapter and girls of color, girls with disabilities, girls from poverty or those who sit at the intersections of a few or all of these identities are othered out of Orenstein's analysis so that white, able-bodied heterosexual girls are the assumed norm. Tolman and colleagues' research into teenage girls' sexuality has widely critiqued social assumptions that 'poor girls, girls of color, urban girls' (Tolman, 2002: 26) are assumed to be hyper or over-sexual, whilst Black and Latina girls in particular must counteract stereotypes that present them as 'vixens or ho's' (Sharpley-Whiting, 2007 in Lamb: 300), their sexuality constructed in opposition to the fragility of a white, heterosexual, middle class femininity that requires protection. As Lamb (2009) argues, this construction of White girls as vulnerable to victimization and Black girls as sexually agentic and invulnerable, mean that pleasure, desire and constitutions of 'healthy sexuality' work very differently depending on these intersections of identity. In Orenstein's text, however, the ways that sexuality is constructed across varied identities goes un-interrogated. Whiteness is assumed and therefore Orenstein's protectionist angle is played out across what appears to be a mass of prematurely sexualized and vulnerable white bodies.

In the West, debates over girls' sexualisation have fueled moral outcries in which adult-focused agendas have not taken girls' perspectives into account (Ringrose, 2013; Harvey, Gill, Livingstone, Egan, 2013). Whilst Orenstein's text *is* centered around the voices of girls and makes claims to move beyond media panics, the discourse remains one of ubiquitous 'hypersexualisation' (13). A fissure is made between 'learning to be sexually desirable' (as represented in selfie culture) and 'exploring your own desire' (43) that falls into easy subject / object positions (or what Orenstein terms subject / product) that present only two ways of being sexual. Girls who may enjoy feeling desired are placed in a diminished 'object' position (Lamb: 299) whilst the subject position that girls are encouraged to take up is murkier, defined only through references to 'fullness' and 'health' (233). It is unfortunate that, in a book so rich with girls' voices, it is such a familiarly adult view of vulnerability and risk that dominates.

In the final pages, Orenstein aims a string of rhetorical questions directly at the reader: 'would you like your teenager to explore and understand her own body thoroughly before plunging ahead with partnered sex?', 'would you hope she can find caring, reciprocal, egalitarian relationships where she can express her needs and limits?' (236). *Of course!* one can almost hear the parents cry. Orenstein's calls for girls to have better sex, to know and feel good about their bodies, to demand McClelland's call for 'intimate justice' (2010) are undeniably right and important. It is however one of her final questions, 'Would you like her to have fewer partners?' (the presumed answer being yes) that one is reminded of the limitations of this book and begins to wish that another question might be asked. What if these parents were encouraged to engage their daughters in critical thinking about the very discourses that Orenstein draws on? The discourses of whiteness, heteronormativity, slut/whore binaries, achievement, and risk that don't just represent girls' sexuality but produce it. Perhaps then the conversation might be forced to move on from the adult fascination with protecting the sexualized girl-object and we might see how girls themselves navigate their *own* way through the ever-changing landscape of sex. Just last week, in the high school where I teach, a male teacher told a group of girls that their clothes encouraged their bodies to be 'prematurely sexualized' and a

female student responded 'isn't it patronizing to suggest that we aren't sexual beings in our own right?'. It is clear that girls are already recognizing the over-emphasis on adults' interpretations of their innocence or corruption and it is the questions of the girls themselves that requires a further and truly intersectional interrogation.

References:

Egan, R. D. (2013). *Becoming sexual: A critical appraisal of the sexualization of girls*. John Wiley & Sons.

Lamb, S. (2010). Feminist ideals for a healthy female adolescent sexuality: A critique. *Sex Roles*, 62(5-6), 294-306.

McClelland, S. I. (2010). Intimate justice: A critical analysis of sexual satisfaction. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 4(9), 663-680.

Ringrose, J. (2007). Successful girls? Complicating post-feminist, neoliberal discourses of educational achievement and gender equality. *Gender and education*, 19(4), 471-489.

Ringrose, J., Harvey, L., Gill, R., & Livingstone, S. (2013). Teen girls, sexual double standards and 'sexting': Gendered value in digital image exchange. *Feminist Theory*, 14(3), 305-323.

Tolman, D. L (2009). *Dilemmas of desire: Teenage girls talk about sexuality*. Harvard University Press.