

Sexuality and Childhood

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Most contemporary discussions of childhood and sexuality open by noting that the terms are particularly contested and fraught when brought together, the focus of intense public concern, ambivalence and unresolved tensions. This may be in part because in Western culture the disputed and always-ambiguous boundaries between childhood and adulthood so often hinge on the question of innocence, which in turn has been defined in terms of sexual ignorance. Crossing this boundary, acquiring (adult) sexual knowledge or experience, even through abuse, has signified not only loss of childhood, but also of the protections due to ‘innocent’ children. Anxieties also circulate around the question of whether children are being appropriately socialized into sexuality and by whom (parents, the school, other experts, the media, young people themselves). Historically ‘proper’ sexuality has been defined normatively, as reproductive heterosexuality within the nuclear family. The contemporary more sexually liberal and pluralistic moment tends to emphasize consent, which gives rise to new ethical complexities in relation to youth. The figures through which childhood has been thought about also often reference sexuality directly or indirectly and as problematic: from the ‘masturbating child’ to the ‘unmarried / teenage mother’ or ‘sexualized’ child. The topic is of interest to Childhood Studies because of its insistence that childhood (and by implication also childhood sexuality) is a social construction rather than a singular or natural entity that can be identified outside history and cultural context; the broad interdisciplinary approach taken by Childhood Studies can map and theorize shifts in the social meanings of childhood and sexuality. Childhood Studies also attempts to center children’s voices – in this case their own accounts of their sexual lives, experiences and pleasures – while

simultaneously troubling this very endeavor. This entry aims to open up definitions and understandings, indicating briefly how the question of childhood and sexuality has been governed, imagined, and lived in diverse ways.

(Child) sexuality is historically and culturally variable

Considering childhood and sexuality as we approach the third decade of the twenty-first century requires acknowledging cultural, political and socio-economic transformations across the world, often captured by the terms ‘neoliberalism’ and ‘globalization’. These changes include increased but uneven marketization, individualization and commercialization, redefinitions of public and private, and new forms of poverty and inequalities in post-industrial landscapes, within and between global North and South. Sexual relations and practices have been marked by these shifts: mediatized, commercialized and recreational (rather than only private, domestic, procreative or relational) forms of intimacy, sexual consumption, pornography and eroticism are being simultaneously normalized and problematized (freed from some forms of regulation but tied into new ones). Sexual imagery and vocabularies once associated with pornography have been mainstreamed; new human-rights-based claims-making and activism have arisen around lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual (LGBT) identities; ‘liberal’ tolerances are being framed and contested as part of modern progressive selfhood and even enter into government policy-making and international relations. Biological determinism – the view that the body is immutable, puberty a set stage with fixed meanings – is less secure than it once was. All these shifts are gradually being theorized in relation to childhoods: the emergence of the ‘pedophile’ sex offender as a somewhat mythologized and widely reviled figure encourages a focus on age more than on gendered, sexual and other power dynamics. Yet while childhood vulnerability (to sexualization and to sexual abuse and exploitation) continues to be a rallying point for moral

entrepreneurs and campaigners, children's sexuality may be 'thinkable' or legible in new ways (as 'queer', 'trans' or 'agentic' and 'rights-bearing' for instance), with consequences for what can be done and said in their name.

Comparative studies across time and space show how widely what is defined as 'normal' and 'abnormal' in relation to children and sexuality can vary. One source of evidence is the journal of Jean Héroard, the physician for Louis XIII of France from Louis's birth in 1601 until his own death in 1626, in which he documented many aspects of the child's life in detail (in doing so demonstrating continuities with 'modern' approaches to recording childhood). Its descriptions of how both Louis himself and his servants talked about and played openly with his genitals suggest that children were not seen as separate beings, from whom it was either possible or desirable to hide sex - although it is unclear how far this could be generalized to other children of different classes at that time. Other historical work has similarly captured changing notions of moral and sexual adulthood, age of marriage, of the sexual treatment of children and so on, although controversy remains over how these can validly be described (for instance, in universalist terms as child abuse, as claimed by the psycho-historian Lloyd DeMause, or more neutrally as cultural practices).

Anthropology is also a discipline that can in principle show difference in sexual cultures, practices and definitions, in ways that challenge individualized and genitalized understandings of sex, (homo or hetero) sexuality, and gendered and sexual binarisms. Many studies have focused on the role of marriage, rites of initiation into adulthood, or incest taboos, often from within a Western framing (relating to ideas of adolescence as turbulent, or to the Oedipal complex) and not necessarily from an interest in children's own perspectives. These accounts raise dilemmas around their methods, ethics, sources and analysis. Margaret

Mead's argument that young Samoan women's sex lives did not suffer from the repressions of US teenagers led to an extended debate over the reliability of both her informants and her interpretations. Gilbert Herdt's study of the Sambia in New Guinea described a culture in which boy-to-man fellatio formed a part of male social development, while questioning whether this could be described as homosexual or even homoerotic. Heather Montgomery's more recent ethnography of child sex workers in Thailand highlights the cultural constructedness of both childhood and sexuality in this context, pointing to the difficulty of making judgements when the children involved described what they did within such different frames from those of Western charities. Vaibhav Saria's study of hijra in India demonstrates that and how children do participate in sexual economies, even in violent and oppressive ways.

Child sexuality is governed and regulated

Childhood is governed - that is, subject to investigation, measurement and control by social institutions (the state, the law, the school, welfare and charities). One obvious example relevant to sexuality is the changing legal parameters of the age of consent. The regulation of childhood is closely identified with trends and changes in the eighteenth century that affected societies and polities across Europe. The emergence of the modern nation-state and of the concept of the 'population' as a resource to be developed, meant that child well-being was increasingly linked to that of society as a whole and led to a new preparedness to intervene in children's lives. Through this time until the early twentieth century, masturbation in children came to be considered a medical and moral danger, linked to a range of social ills including insanity, criminality and impotence. Evidence from the history of campaigns against masturbation challenges the conventional view that children's sexuality can be said to have been in any simple way 'repressed', denied or 'silenced' through puritanism and censorship.

Rather, childhood sexuality – at least in the form of masturbation - was a constant preoccupation, investigated through a wide range of devices, and considered in (for instance) the design of houses, schools and dormitories. But how it was spoken of and to whom was highly if implicitly regulated, the preserve of authorities (such as physicians and pedagogues). It became less ‘coarse’ or bawdy (in the way that Héroard’s journal may now appear to be), and was certainly constrained in new ways within families, schools, and between servants and employers. The historian Michel Foucault even suggests that a ‘vice’ that was unlikely ever to be entirely eradicated may have served conveniently to allow this investigative and regulatory edifice to flourish.

History can point to some more spectacular ways that sexuality was controlled. The campaign against masturbation in the nineteenth century sometimes involved surgical procedures such as circumcision and clitoridectomy, physical devices to constrain sexual urges or wet dreams, and team sports. However, regulation of child sexuality occurs as much through the establishment of norms of behaviour and development through the monitoring and measuring of biological and statistical sciences. These tend to become both internalized and moralized. From this point of view, the contemporary notion that masturbation is ‘healthy’ indicates new modes of governance and self-understanding as much as it does a more enlightened approach. Modern norms around intimacy have tended to include ideas that sexuality is (should be) private, domestic, untouched by commerce, and adult only, although as noted above actual sexual practices may be far more diverse.

Studies have identified the gendered and classed dimensions of the regulation of child and adolescent sexuality. Records from reformatories and mental asylums, for instance, indicate how state approaches to youth sexuality have been gender stereotyped, punishing

sexually active young girls in ways that do not apply to boys, and often fueled by underlying anxieties about miscegenation of races and classes. The preoccupation with girls and gender-differentiated distribution of concerns has been argued to persist in the debate about sexualization, and indeed in the everyday vocabularies of ‘studs’ and ‘sluts’ describing sexually active men or women.

Much of the debate about child sexuality has focused on child abuse rather than children’s own sexual activities and identities. Disciplines such as clinical and developmental psychology – which in turn inform state-funded welfare professions, such as social work and psychiatry - have played a key role in creating and sustaining the image of child as vulnerable and needing protection from sexual images and ideas. As feminist analysis has noted, the state has perceived the (patriarchal) heterosexual nuclear family unit as central to social and physical reproduction, and has therefore viewed and treated abused children in ways that sustain it. Instead of viewing evidence of father-daughter incest as an abuse of male power, for instance, it has been redefined as primarily a sex crime or mark of family dysfunction. Attention has focused on figures further removed from the family and thus more safely demonized, such as nursery and crèche workers, or pedophiles.

Child sexuality is imagined and represented

There is already a rich Childhood Studies scholarship highlighting the gendered, classed and racialized connotations of the dichotomies of ‘innocent’ and ‘fallen’ children, their global and changing distribution, how they arguably fuel eroticism as well as incite consumption, and paradoxically entwine childhood and sexuality more rather than less closely. Studies of cultural representations – including art, media, literature – provide insights into how and why this happens. They also delineate how these texts might offer their audiences ways of

inhabiting aged, gendered and sexual identities, without implying that these are prescribed or imposed in any simple way.

The work of psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud is significant to contemporary cultural imaginings of children and sexuality. He is controversial for questioning whether his patients' symptoms were caused by actual sexual abuse (as he first believed) or by unconscious sexual fantasies, a position which has been interpreted as undermining abuse victims' credibility. However, Freud's essays on children's sexual learning and theories, and his case studies (such as 'little Hans'), offer a psychoanalytic sensibility that still has power today, particularly as an alternative to more medicalized or moralistic perspectives on child sexuality. He depicts the child not only as 'bring[ing] sexuality with it into the world' but as 'polymorphously perverse': actively learning but in ways that are non-normative, uncontrollable, easily misdirected, escaping categorizations, creative and taking multiple forms, objects, sensualities, rather than being anatomically driven or predictable. Furthermore, the influence of psychoanalysis is such that modern adults have come to look to this 'inner child' to find the 'truth' about themselves and their own sexuality.

Identifying patterns in the most commonly available cultural narratives in our culture can help identify which stories may become harder to tell. Depicting child sexual abuse as always constituting a violation of innocence and denying the child's capacity to act in abusive situations, for instance, may help situate blame with the perpetrator and preclude identifying the child as in any sense an accomplice in abuse. However, this may also simplify analyses of family dynamics and disallow speaking positions that might be more ambivalent and conflicted. Internationally, charity and Non-Governmental Organization campaigning practices have created new ways for young people to speak about their experiences, including

of sex work and sexual exploitation. Again, however, these can have the effect of further marginalizing or stigmatizing accounts that cannot be recuperated within images of sullied innocence and passive victimhood.

Scholars such as Kathryn Bond Stockton argue that the current cultural difficulty in perceiving the child as sexual means that complex and ambiguous representations of children and sexuality – which she finds in authors such as Henry James or Vladimir Nabokov and some independent film-makers - accrue greater importance for prefiguring or incubating what child sexuality might mean and be and how we might imagine it differently.

Child sexuality is lived

The 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, along with Childhood Studies' interest in children's voice and agency, have all sustained questions of what sex, sexuality, sexual or gender relations and sexual rights mean to and for children, how they themselves make sense of and live these categories. Studies such as Emma Renold's on children's relationship cultures in the primary school have depicted children not as passive recipients but as complex social agents actively creating and recreating culture; and these have helped instigate innovative work, for instance in young-people-led initiatives in sex education. Digital cultures have led to new concerns for children's online safety, but have also offered new democratizing possibilities and channels for their participation, visibility, creativity and activism including around sexuality, communicating with both peer and adult audiences.

If 'innocence' is manufactured and mediated, so too are concepts such as voice, life experience and agency; they are socially shaped, relate to and reflect aspects of the 'adult' world, and rely on cultural, discursive, material and technological resources to be told and

heard. Rights are brought into effect through social practices in particular contexts and times, and do not always carry the same meaning; nor are the consequences of their deployments necessarily the ones initially envisaged. Nonetheless, as noted above, child-centered perspectives can add richness to debates about children and sexuality, by focusing on more mundane, messy, diverse examples than are found in dominant narratives. Accounts of abuse or sex work where those involved are not necessarily very young, entirely innocent, or ignorant of commerce (such as LGBT youth, or those who are both abused and sexually active on their own terms) can reveal fissures - what is unexpected or overlooked – and produce a more nuanced, multi-perspectival picture of motivations and feelings. Joseph Fischel’s work on the currently significant notion of consent acknowledges children and young people as both sexual and as potentially vulnerable, but argues that their vulnerabilities do not derive from age alone but are always mediated by gender, class, ethnicity and sexuality, etc. These power dynamics, when brought into the frame of analysis, in historical and social context and with due attention to young people’s own views, complicate assumptions that we can determine in advance, in any simple way, how, whether and what activities and relationships might be harmful or beneficial for young people.

Conclusion

Although ‘speaking out’ about sexuality and children has been a major trope in sexuality and child research, the issues are crucially about who, how, where, to whom one speaks, not the speaking itself: what is at stake is not repression versus liberation. When we ourselves speak of childhood and sexuality as fraught or silenced, we may be partaking in, rather than breaking with, a long tradition in which children’s sex is constituted as a secret to legitimate exposing it. As this entry suggests, different disciplines and institutions (including the law, welfare, local and national governments, media) document, research, govern, regulate and

imagine the child and sexuality differently; and we can explore what is done in the name of childhood sexuality to policy framings, cultural representations, debates and practices. The current moment is one where we may be beginning to think about child sexuality in new ways, beyond protectionism and assumptions of children's incompetence or asexuality. However promising this may be, it marks the ascent of different political rhetorics and practices of research, documentation and governance - all of which will eventually become historical objects in their turn, ripe for critical interrogation - rather than the uncovering of new and definitive 'truths' about children's sexual agency, identities and capacities.

Sara Bragg, University of Sussex and UCL Institute of Education, London

Cross-references: See also:

Innocence, queer childhoods, sexualities education, sexual agency, sexual abuse, Sigmund Freud, Michel Foucault, UNCRC; consent (sexual); growing sideways

Further readings

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