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### Toward an Interdisciplinary Dialogue on Youth, Sexualization, and Health

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## Toward an Interdisciplinary Dialogue on Youth, Sexualization, and Health

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*The commentaries in this issue of the Journal of Sex Research by Vanwesenbeeck and Else-Quest and Hyde on “Bad Girls Rule” are connected to two larger conversations concerning (a) the intersections of sexuality, objectification, culture, health, and power; and (b) academics as public scholars. Vanwesenbeeck makes the case for considering both the risks and the rights associated with sexualization. Else-Quest and Hyde argue for the need to use a developmental lens when discussing girlhood and sexuality. This response recognizes the need for a developmental approach; elaborates on previous critiques about over-reliance on epidemiological terms in the American Psychological Association task force report on the sexualization of girls; and rearticulates the value of placing feminist, cross-disciplinary, and cross-national scholarship at the center, rather than the margins, of this dialogue. Were such a dialogue to occur, evidence of cultural and personal variations of childhood and youth should be considered along with evidence of human personality development. Although scholars in psychology have been leaders in public scholarship on sexualization and girlhood, it is an ethical and intellectual obligation for scholars from other disciplines (e.g., public health, women’s studies, sociology, cultural studies, and epidemiology) to also contribute to this conversation.*

We thank the editors of the *Journal of Sex Research*, Cynthia Graham and Dennis Fortenberry, for supporting this important interdisciplinary dialogue. We are grateful for the insights of the blind reviewers, and we thank Ine Vanwesenbeeck, Nicole Else-Quest, and Janet Shibley Hyde for their public responses to our article. We see this moment as connected to two larger, ongoing conversations concerning (a) the intersections of sexuality, objectification, culture, health, and power; and (b) academics as public scholars. Given that our previous positions were made in our article, we focus our response on a few key points made by Vanwesenbeeck and Else-Quest and Hyde.

Vanwesenbeeck, a Dutch sexologist, makes a strong case for considering both the risks and the rights associated with sexualization. We appreciate her connection between the “tone” of the American Psychological Association (APA; 2007) report and the sexual double standards that encourage women to be “heroes of sexual

inhibition rather than of sexual excitation.” Additionally, Vanwesenbeeck’s discussion of sex work is, we think, at the critical edge of this conversation about girls and women’s sexuality. If we (scholars, activists, parents, and teachers, etc.) want to truly challenge the notion that a girl’s or woman’s worth is rooted in her sexuality, we need to recognize the multiple institutions and traditions that reinforce this notion.

Cultural and religious traditions that privilege men always require intense regulation and surveillance of girls’ and women’s sexuality. In these contexts, the moral and social “worth” of girls and women is based on their sexual availability, creating a good virgin–bad whore dichotomy. This tradition is thriving in many aspects of U.S. culture, including the movement for abstinence-only education, virginity pledges, purity balls, and so on. In contrast, the mainstream media version of this notion appears, on the surface, to create the opposite problem, suggesting that the worth of girls and women lies in their sexual appeal and availability. We share Vanwesenbeeck’s concern that the APA (2007) report is problematizing only the latter trend and institution (media) while failing to challenge the other deep and enduring traditions and institutions

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that perpetuate the idea that a women's moral and social worth is directly tied to her sexuality. Vanwesenbeeck astutely locates this in the APA task force's "unequivocal, one-sided dismissal of sex work."

The commentary by Else-Quest and Hyde—both U.S.-based psychologists—offers a distinctly different and valuable angle in terms of both discipline and scope. Else-Quest and Hyde present four critiques of our article; we respond to each here.

First, Else-Quest and Hyde argue for the need to use a developmental lens when discussing girlhood and sexuality. This is an important point, and we agree that our lack of engagement of the developmental literature was a clear omission. Unfortunately, while the APA (2007) task force report does mention developmental theories in its introduction, it too relies on data and theory based on adult women. A cross-disciplinary and cross-national dialogue among developmental psychologists, social historians, anthropologists, feminist media scholars, and others on the meanings, constraints, and opportunities of childhood and youth would be groundbreaking. Were such a dialogue to occur, we would expect that evidence of cultural and personal variations would be considered along with evidence of linear and universal human personality development.

Second, Else-Quest and Hyde argue that our claim that the APA (2007) report focused on the negative aspects of media sexualization of girls is unwarranted; they state that "a more balanced approach" is needed. This critique is striking because the authors of the APA report themselves clearly state that they only searched for negative effects to analyze and did not include positive effects at all in the report. At the same time, we agree that it is indeed more difficult to find literature that challenges this negative perspective. Much of this body of work are not causal studies that isolate "sexualization" as a variable; instead, this nuanced work is more likely to be found in narrative and historical accounts, such as the Philippe Aries's historical analysis of the construction of childhood (Aries, 1962). Additionally, as is clear from paradigm shifts in any field, the way to break away from the same empirical answer is for scientists to ask new questions. This is why, for example, we cited new work in our article in other fields concerned with sexualization and objectification, such as reproductive health and HIV and AIDS—fields that are only now beginning to demonstrate a paradigm shift; we are confident that new scientific studies will arrive as researchers continue to ask new questions, moving away from only seeking harm to also remaining open to observing positive aspects of sexualization.

Third, Else-Quest and Hyde discuss two language matters. The first concerns our critique of the use of medicalized terms, such as *exposure*. Else-Quest and Hyde state that epidemiological terms for media harm are appropriate and widely used in public health

research. We are quite aware of the use of these terms in public health, but we stand by our assessment that there is an over-reliance on such terms in the case of media analysis. This is because epidemiological terms of exposure to harm are not exactly the same in media as they are for disease. With media imagery, there is a large circulation of positive and negative imagery (with disease, there is no such thing as a positive circulation). Youth are not only "exposed" to media but also interact with parents, peers, and others. People of all ages have a variety of reactions to media, and these reactions are not always predictable by age. Youth can and do challenge and produce their own media. Hence, it is difficult to adequately show that exposure to media can be isolated as the key and constant variable; there is always an interaction. Given the difference in being exposed to television and being exposed to, say, the HIV virus, we suggest that psychologists also consider other metaphors or frameworks for understanding the social impact of media. These frameworks can be found in media and communication studies, cultural studies, and in the symbolic interactionist theory traditions in social psychology. The second language concern is regarding a possible conflation in our uses of *sexualization* and *sexuality*. We took pains to distinguish these concepts, as the lack of critical distinctions between such terms and others is central to our own critique of the APA (2007) report. (The report uses a wide variety of evidence spanning sexuality, body shame, objectification, self-objectification, and sexual objectification to support the task force's sexualization thesis.) We agree that such distinctions can and should be even further clarified.

Else-Quest and Hyde's fourth and final critique centers on issues of audience and scope, implying that our use of interdisciplinary and feminist theory is inappropriate for general audiences concerned with the sexualization of girls: "The report was intended for a lay audience, including policy makers, parents, and educators. . . . Feminist theory and nuances are important dimensions to the topic of the sexualization of girls, but they should be addressed in more appropriate outlets." We are intrigued by this critique, and find it particularly ironic for two reasons: (a) We are working within the same spirit of the APA (2007) task force in attempting to summarize and bridge a wide range of academic knowledge for the ultimate purpose of translating academic research into a useful public product, and (b) it is feminist theory itself that is the (largely uncredited) inspiration for the entire APA task force report, and is foundational to many of the referenced studies. If the nuances of feminist theory are not appropriate for public consumption, then the APA report could (and should) never have been published.

In conclusion, it is important to highlight the basic feminist and critical insight that all knowledge is political, even with systematic and "objective" research

methods—a hallmark of mainstream psychology. Knowledge is political both in its origin (Which questions are worthy of being asked?) and its outcome (Who listens, and why?). We are simply pointing out that there are other literatures that could aid in this conversation, both between disciplines and between academics and the lay public. Some in psychology may wish that academics from other disciplines would “stay out of it” when it comes to public scholarship on sexualization and girlhood, but we see it as an ethical and intellectual obligation to jump in, and so should scholars from public health, women’s studies, sociology, cultural studies, epidemiology, and many other disciplines.

Again, we thank the reviewers and those who wrote responses to our article. We hope that this is just the beginning, and we look forward to more dialogue.

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