CHAPTER 7

Desexualising the Freudian Child in a Culture of ‘Sexualisation:’ Trends and Implications

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Introduction

When I worry about students, it tends to be the girls. They are the ones I lose sleep over. I am not just worried about inches of exposed anatomy: I am concerned for their souls, their being, and their sense of self.... I don't blame them completely—it does happen fast ...sixth graders are mere children, while eighth graders are burgeoning adults; their minds and bodies change more rapidly than they realize. During these chaotic middle years, they evolve from carefree kids to body-obsessed teenagers almost overnight. One day they can't pay attention in class because they're thinking about ponies and their pet guinea pigs, and the next they're incapacitated by daydreams about the opposite sex. (Jessica Lahey, 2014 accessed 11/10/2014).

The new-born infant brings sexuality with it into the world; certain sexual sensations attend to its development while at the breast and during early childhood, and only very few children would seem to escape some kind of sexual activity and sexual experiences before puberty (Sigmund Freud 1907)

American school teacher, Jessica Lahey, published “A Dress-Code Enforcer's Struggle for the Soul of the Middle-School Girl” in the popular North American publication, The Atlantic on Valentine’s Day in 2013. In her call for proper comportment, Lahey equates clothing choice with self-respect, intellectual promise and a good future. In contrast, sexualized cloths are said to lead to sexual behavior, to anorexia and to portend a future of mental illness and, quite possibly, even death. Lahey views her fight over hemlines, as a battle worth fighting because she wants to ensure a future of “strong minds, kind hearts and unlimited potential” (Lahey 2013). Lahey also cautions readers about the consequences of failure,
Some hated themselves and loathed their bodies; they wanted to shrink down and disappear from notice. Others plucked out their eyebrows and stopped eating. Years after she was my student, one made it out of law school before she lost her battle with depression in a motel room in North Carolina.

Lahey knows many girls who could “change the world if they would only give themselves a chance”—a chance that only seems possible if a girl eschews her sexy displays in the classroom.

As I have noted, at length, elsewhere narratives forwarding the cause of respectable comportments (as opposed to sexualized display) rely upon longstanding classist assumptions and, disturbingly, too often dovetail with a subset of claims found in some feminist anti-sexualization rhetoric (Egan 2013). Sexualisation literature, like many of the narratives forwarded by sexual reformers of the past, argues that (girl) child’s sexuality is quiescent until puberty (Egan 2013; Egan and Hawkes 2006). As Foucault notes in his introductory volume on *The History of Sexuality*, in modernity, the child’s sexual has was conceptualized as physiologically present (in that everyone is born with sex organs), but experienced as subjectively and phenomenologically absent until puberty (Foucault 1980). In my research I have shown the trenchant nature of this presumption. As such, any manifestation becomes proof that sexualisation has occurred (Egan 2013; Egan and Hawkes 2006). Once tainted, girls become “body obsessed” almost “overnight,” their sexuality is almost preternaturally compulsive and incapacitating. Once sexualized, innocence is lost and, as a result, so is her status as a child. Reading Freud’s quote from his 1907 essay on *The Sexual Researches of Children* could not be more different. Freud’s conception of psychosexual development states that the child, from birth, is a sexual being. This does not mean that the subjective experience of the child is the same as the adult, but that rather the child is autoerotic, curious and that sexuality extends far beyond a reproductive or heteronormative imperative.

During his life, Freud actively critiqued moralizing discourses regarding masturbation and spoke against the various movements espousing moral rather than scientifically based sexual education (Egan and Hawkes 2006; Gay 1999). In his essay, “Civilized Sexual Morality and Modern Nervousness” he argued that cultural double standards and cultural dictates against masturbation
were particularly deleterious for women (Freud 1908). Examining cultural contradictions through the lens of psychoanalysis did not stop with Freud (Samuels 2001). In the 1940s and 1950s, Anglophone social workers, teachers and activists, inspired by Freud’s early writing on the sexual life of children, crafted alternative sex education curriculums and called for more measured thinking about children, masturbation and sexual knowledge (Egan and Hawkes 2006; Berstein and Gillian 1997; Burston 1994). They feared that imposing anxiety and fear into discussions about sex with children would create negative associations and inspire shame (Egan and Hawkes 2006; Berstein and Gillian 1997; Burston 1994). In the 1980s psychoanalysts challenged the dominant clinical discourse that sexual expression in children (a.k.a precocious sexuality) was always already a marker for sexual molestation. At base, Freud’s conceptualization of infantile and childhood sexuality has long served as an alternative model to the present and absence model outlined above. Starting from the assumption that sexuality is not, per say, pathological opens up a more nuanced set of questions around the sexual expression and exploitation of children. However, unlike their predecessors, psychoanalysts in the Anglophone west have been conspicuously absent from more recent discussions of sexualisation and its harms. Why?

After reviewing the literature, I have found that a funny thing has happened in the century since *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* was published in 1905—infantile sexuality has faded from prominence within Anglophone western clinical literature. In contrast, psychosexual development is increasingly equated with gender development (as opposed to a model for gender and sexuality as it was earlier); and, paradoxically, although an increasing interest in ‘pre-Oedipal conditions’ dominates much of the literature, the pre-Oedipal phases which formerly stressed a set of autoerotic aims (oral, anal, phallic) have been effectively desexualized and linked with aggression (Celezena 2014; Laplanche 2011; Green 1997). Prior to exploring the desexualisation of childhood within Anglophone psychoanalytic literature, it is important to understand Freud’s contribution to the history of ideas on the child and its sexuality.

**Freud’s Sexual Child**

Although Freud is often credited with ‘inventing childhood sexuality,’ he was not alone in his desire to decipher the phenomenological, biological and cultural implications of sexuality and
eroticism in the life child (Egan and Hawkes 2010). His theories were part of a larger discursive
constellation including pediatric medicine, sexology, pedagogy, child development and social
reform written in the late 1800s and mid 1900s in the Anglophone west (Egan and Hawkes
2010). The impetus driving psychoanalytic discourse was not an attempt to unravel the
“problem,” “danger” or “damage” caused by childhood sexuality—rather it was a desire to
understand its “nature” (1905b, 8). Unlike many of his contemporary counterparts who argued
that sexuality was a physiological presence which, under normal circumstances, was dormant
until puberty, Freud asserted that the manifestation of sexuality in the life of the child was a
normal rather than pathological predicament (Egan and Hawkes 2010; Freud 1905c, 1907). In
fact, he believed that the child engages in fantasies, wishes, and actions that stem from an active
erotic impulse that is self and other directed (at least until latency); and, moreover, that such
fantasies may involve masochistic and sadistic longings (Freud 1905a; 1905b).

Sexuality, according to Freud, is an evolving subjective experience that begins in earliest
infancy and formed at the intersection of the cultural, biological and biographical. He argued that
sexual instincts were situated at the nexus of the mental and the physical—that they were the
psychical representation of a continuously flowing source of stimulus—as opposed to the
response to a singular source of excitation (1905c). Sexuality, he wrote, “consists of many single
component- impulses” and is evidenced long before puberty (1908b, 16). As such, eroticism is
the result of a complex amalgamation of aims, objects, bodily pleasure, scopic registers, sexual
curiosity (what Freud terms sexual researches) as well as the desire for mastery and surrender
(Freud 1905a, 1905c, 1908b, 1928). The search for pleasure is apparent “in infancy, when it
attains its aims of pleasurable gratification not only in connection with genitalia, but also in other
parts of the body (erotogenic zones), and hence is in a position to disregard any other than these
easily accessible objects” (Freud 1908a, 16–17). This can be seen in children tugging earlobes or
rubbing their cheeks. Pleasure is sensual, autoerotic and not simply located in genitalia.

Unlike adults, Freud suggested that the sexual constitution of the child is more “variegated,”
“polymorphously perverse,” and autoerotic than its adult counterparts (Freud 1905). Infantile
sexuality emerges from and in relation to “one of the vital somatic functions” (1905, 48). As a
result, it is the pleasurable feeling the child receives from the satiation of its basic needs, such as
hunger, that it later seeks to reproduce on its own. Moreover, a child’s sexual aim and its search
for a sexual object are formed in an analogous fashion; both are created “in connection with the bodily functions necessary for self-preservation” (1912b, 50). In her daily care of the infant, the mother produces a continuous source of excitation and pleasurable feelings in the various erotogenic zones of her child’s body (1905c). While some regions of the body are “predestined” to provide pleasure (such as the oral and anal orifices and later the genitals), any “part of the skin or mucous membrane can function as an erotogenic zone” (1905a, 49). Primary sexual experiences are “naturally passive in character” during the oral phase (because it is the mother who “suckles, feeds, cleans and dresses” the child) (ibid.). However, during infancy “active” characteristics also come to the fore and are manifested during the anal phase (for example, the child’s ability to withhold feces) (Freud 1931, 195).

The prolific and non-genital constitution of the child’s sexual impulse, within Freudian psychoanalysis, displaces the otherwise taken for granted assumption of models of adult sexuality which may foreground the primacy of genitalia and during her life time a reproductive imperative. As I noted at the outset, sexualisation literature in its conceptualization of the child assumes that sexuality is dormant until puberty and that sexual expression in kids must be the outcome of a sexualized culture. Freud, in contrast, paints a picture of childhood where sexuality is active and marked by a host of contradictory features. For example, Freud underscores that the emergence and stimulation of the erotogenic zones in the child has “more to do with producing a pleasurable feeling” than with “the nature of the part of the body concerned” (1905c, 49). The psychosexual life of the child is further complicated by its “component instincts” that come to the fore during the child’s pursuit of sexual pleasure (1905c, 58). Devoid of shame and empathy, children are driven by a quest for mastery and sadistic cruelty (ibid.). Scopophilia, exhibitionism, and cruelty are not only present, according to Freud, but are also universally expressed in children. When reviewing popular antisexualisation texts one sees rather quickly that sexy dress, consumption of sexual material and/or “phallic displays” of bawdy behavior—are conceptualized as proof positive of sexualisation and are believed to be portents of dangerous sexual behavior in the near future (Papadopoulos 2010). Freud’s model, in contrast, examines fantasy, identification, the unconscious and the self. Fantasy and action are not corollary.
Unlike other theorists, Freud believed that pre-Oedipal eroticism was gender neutral – in that it was polymorphously perverse, autoerotic, bisexual and primarily compelled by the pleasure principle (1905c; 1908a). As Freud states in his 1913 essay on “The Predisposition to Obsessional Neurosis” gender difference does not influence “pre-genital object choice” (1913, 82). In the early life of children, sexuality is conceptualized as primarily active; unfortunately Freud equates this term with masculine, but as others have noted, this is more cultural than biological. Masculine subjects were allowed to pursue sexuality, whereas cultural dictates demanded passivity in the feminine (an equation Freud felt was unequal and pathological) (Freud 1908). Nevertheless, what is important to keep in mind is that, for Freud, the child experiences its sexuality long before it comes to see itself as masculine or feminine. In this way, the awareness of one’s gender is secondary. The increasing importance placed on the pre-genital phase in Freudian psychoanalytic discourse is evident in his 1915 revision of Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality, in which he states that a child’s pre-genital sexual organization “constitutes a regime of a sort” in its life and when passed through normally offers “only a hint” of its prior existence (1905c, 64). The sexual impulse during the pre-genital phase becomes almost analogous to its manifestation in puberty. For Freud, the only distinction is that in childhood “the combination of the component instincts and their subordination under the primacy of the genitals has been effected only very incompletely or not at all” (1905c, 65). As he further articulates in 1919, it is in “the years of childhood between the ages of two and four or five that the congenital libidinal factors are first awakened by actual experiences and become attached to certain complexes” (1919, 102).

As Jessica Benjamin and Patricia Gherovici have noted, it is only after Oedipalization and the castration complex that eroticism becomes confined and bifurcated by the dictates of civilization and plagued by a kind of haunting absence for what one had to give up (Gherovici 2010; Benjamin 1998). For Freud, Oedipalized gender and sexuality is a melancholic formation; this means, they are plagued by what must be given up (masculinity must refute femininity and visa versa) in order to conform to the often rigid dictates of masculinity or femininity (Freud 1928). Notwithstanding part of the pleasure of early life is the more open terrain of bodies and pleasures that are transformed in later life.
Freud’s pregenital organization is radical in one sense because it foregrounds the universal and polymorphous nature of sexuality in early life and in so doing uncouples the association sexuality with corruption and/or pathology. To this end, the eroticism of childhood is not something to correct (unless it becomes dangerously intertwined with the instinct to cruelty); rather it is a foundational instinct in the child. Nevertheless, Freud’s conception of latency ultimately undercuts the potential of his theory by consigning the child’s sexuality back into a “dormant state” and once resuscitated, one that was more conscripted toward heteronormative confines. Laplanche and others note that Freud’s latency may be more about hormonal quietude that an absence of fantasy or sexual curiosity (Laplance 2011). In other words, a lack of hormones before puberty may mean that kids are less interested in erotic play, but it does not mean that they are not actively negotiating a set of fantasies about self and others in terms of sexuality and the culture at large. Given the centrality sexuality played within Freud’s thinking, the transition away from his explanatory framework within the Anglophone clinical literature over the past 60 years is particularly interesting.

Some 110 years since the publication of Three Essays Sexuality, the psychoanalytic literature in the Anglophone west has witnessed a significant decrease in clinical investigations into or theoretical extensions of Freud’s thinking on infantile sexuality and, some would argue, on discussions of sexuality in general (Green 1997). When reviewing the Psychoanalytic Electronic Publishing (from here forward referred to as the PEP) which houses psychoanalytic journals from around the globe, one can examine the shift in publications on various topics over time. When searching the term “infantile sexuality” one will find that there were 2443 articles on the topic between 1955 and 1994, and of said publications, 1993 were published by analysts practicing in the Anglophile west. Using the same search parameters shows that between the years of 1995 and 2014, there were 903 articles published. However upon closer examination, one finds that 689 of those publications were clinical, and of those, only 498 were published by individuals practicing in the Britain or North America. Searching for the term “childhood sexuality,” illuminates that 387 articles have focused on this as a key term between 1955 and 1994 and that of those articles, 300 were authored by analysts located within the Anglophone west. In the years since, 204 articles have been published by almost half (85) focused on the
humanities and of the remaining, only 42 were written by clinicians in Britain or North America. Infantile eroticism, as a search term, yields the fewest results across the years. Between the years of 1955 to 1994, only 17 articles were written on the topic and since that time there have been only five published pieces. What is notable, is that all five of them are either reviewing clinical debates of the past or about adult conditions.

It is the case that earlier publications tended to focus on drive theory (also known as the classical Freudian perspective), while later ones are more diverse in terms of theoretical perspective. However, with few exceptions, attempts at extending or reviewing theories of the child’s sexuality are increasingly rare the Anglophone psychoanalytic literature. Unlike other concepts which have undergone scrutiny and revision, the child’s sexuality has not undergone theoretical reconsideration for quite some time. As a consequence, an evaluation of the contemporary cultural beliefs or experiences of young people and sexuality is outside of the ways in which analysts are talking about psychoanalytic practice. One reason for this transition maybe the turn toward object relations theory in the Anglophone west. In the next section I spell out what object relations says about child sexuality and how this differs from the classical Freudian account.

The Object Relations Turn, Maternal Bodies and Pre-Oedipal aggression

It would be impossible to create any definitive statement about psychoanalysis in the singular when one speaks of the Anglophone west. Whether one is discussing North America or Britain, it is important to emphasize that psychoanalysis is always practiced in the plural. Although there has been a decline in the practice and acceptance of psychoanalysis within the Anglophone west, one can still find a number Freudian, Kleinian, Bionian, Lacanian, Relational/intersubjectivist, Jungian, and Independent institutes in Canada, Britain and the United States. Given this variance of practice, I decided that publication trends might offer the best marker of popular and/or dominant explanatory schools of thought; reviewing the PEP’s most cited articles allowed me to explore consumption and citation patterns over the past twenty years. I found a striking turn toward what some would call an object relations and/or intersubjective framework (www.pep.org accessed 11/20/2014). Klein, post Kleinian such as Winnicott and Bion as well as intersubjective such as Benjamin and Ogden writers occupy much of the top 30 list. Pre-Oedipal
anxiety, rage, narcissism, autism, attachment, attunement and transference and counter transference are the primary foci in the articles listed (see appendix A for the chart). Only one article examines issues of the erotic and attends to infantile sexuality in some sense, Emmanuel Ghent’s “Masochism, Submission, Surrender—Masochism as a Perversion of Surrender” (Ghent 1990). Otherwise, the topic of sexuality in general and infantile sexuality more specifically are absent. Articles in the most cited and read category, have tended to offer object relational theoretical suppositions on the early psychic life of the infant, anxiety, aggression and the underpinnings of pre-Oedipal conditions.

It is my supposition that Anglophone schools have (inadvertently or unconsciously) desexualized the child in an attempt to understand attunement/mis-attunement, anxiety, love and attachment (what Freud has termed the affective current) within the caregiver/baby dyad. With this shift in emphasis, theorists have illuminated what happens when caregiving is good enough in the life of the child as well as how its lack can impact pre-Oedipal conditions such as psychosis (Winnicott 1945; Klein 1954). It is important to note that a similar trend can be seen in much of the recent Anglophone literature on psychosexual development literature—infantile sexuality is more often than not replaced with discussions of gender development (Benjamin 1998). When reviewing the literature one finds that authors have become primarily concerned with how children become gendered and tend to steer away from discussions of polymorphous perversity, the sexual researches and/or erotic fantasy. While I am very interested in this transition, I focus on the object relations turn due to its preeminence in the PEP which, I believe, make it more reflective of what clinicians in practice and training are reading.

In order to contextualize some of this transition it is important to note some key developments in the early part of the 20th century within psychoanalytic practice. One of the ways in which the literature on the child shifted was with the emergence of psychoanalysis and observational research with children (Holder 2006). Through the analysis of children’s play, Melanie Klein painted a picture of the complicated phantasies infants create in order to grapple with the needs, anxieties and desires of dependence (Henchelwood 1994). Kleinian oeuvre revolves around the following three suppositions: that (part)object awareness happens at birth; a theoretical emphasized the primacy of the maternal (in contrast to Freud’s Oedipal father or Lacan’s
symbolic phallus); and, that Oedipalization happens in the first year of life (Henchelwood 1994). Klein asserted that “the infant has an innate unconscious awareness of the existence of the mother,” and “experiences, both in the process of birth and in the adjustment to the post-natal situation, anxiety of a persecutory nature” (Klein 1959, 248). Phantasies for Klein take place at the intersection of the soma and the object—they are, at base, responses to (and defenses against) the corporeal experiences of earliest infancy and the ways needs are met (or not) by the object (Isaacs 1952). There is an innate connection to the object which is guided by somatic impulses, unconscious phantasies and both the “libidinal and aggressive” drives (Klein 1952, 62). However it is infantile fears of annihilation and persecutory anxiety which predominate early life (Klein 1952, 61). To this end, Klein and her followers depart from the classical Freudian definition of instinct as autoerotic discharge based on pleasure and un-pleasure (Grotstein 1980). Unlike Freud who wrote extensively about the ways in which the mouth becomes the site of autoerotic pleasure via the need to feed and even forwarded a connection between a baby’s post breast feeding repose and post orgasmic bliss, Klein emphasized the desire to feed, love and, when denied, devour and destroy the breast (Klein 1952). Instincts, for Klein, are “always object-seeking primarily in the nutritive [as opposed to an erotic] mode” which represents a “holistic urge or need on the part of the whole infant” (Grotstein 1980 378-379). In Freud’s early work libidinal energy was synonymous with the erotic—it was conceptualized as an energetic force that fuels our connection to ideas (e.g., sublimated curiosity), our sexual aims (what we want to do sexually) as well as our fascination with particular objects of desire (who we want to do it with) (Freud 1905c). It was not until his dual drive theory, that Freud used the term life drive which he equated with the concept of an energy that created a tension which brought things together and could be used for sex (e.g., the moment that builds erotically as one moves toward orgasm) or achievement (art, scholarship, gardening, etc), however libido is just one aspect of the life drive (Freud 1905c).

Klein’s ‘nutritive’ object seeking model resonates with what Freud describes as the “affectionate current,” a concept he developed in, “On the Universal Tendency toward the Debasement of Women” (Freud 1912). Freud argues that the sensual and affection currents are unfused in the lives of men who must debase women in order to have sex. Accordingly, the sensual current is related to, but not synonymous with, libido and is more akin to adult sexual lure or attraction,
whereas the affectionate current happens in earliest life and helps forge the primary attachment between baby and caregiver (1912). It is not that affection is anti-libido or untethered from the erotic, rather it is, for Freud, comprised of a much smaller portion of the component instincts which make up the erotic. As I noted earlier, for Freud ‘sexual instinct’ is not a singular or monolithic imperative, rather it is a series component instincts that fuse together in idiosyncratic ways in the lives of individuals (Freud 1905). Klein takes this a step further. She equates the affectionate current with attachment (Grotstein 1980). Klein is more interested in attachment, anxiety and rage in earliest life (Klein 1952). As a result, she evacuates most of the libidinal energy from the mother/child dyad (Klein 1959, 1952). Klein’s epistemological pivot toward de-eroticizing the child transforms the ways in which the child and her or his relationship to the caregiver is conceptualized within theory and thus as an explanatory frame within the clinic.

D.W. Winnicott was also deeply interested in the anxiety or ruthlessness of earliest life (Winnicott 1945; 1950). He theorized that prior to object awareness, infants move through a phase of pre-concern and experience a kind of rage and destructive impulse toward deprivation (Winnicott 1945, 1950). Within such states, part objects behave as if by magic, to this end it exists when desired, it approaches when approached, it hurts when hurt. Lastly, it vanishes when not wanted. This last is most terrifying and is the only true annihilation. To not want, as a result of satisfaction, is to annihilate the object (Winnicott 1945, 153).

This is not about the desire to destroy, rather it is a reaction to frustration. The phantasy of retaliation occurs as both a defense against the material loss of the object in the external world or as a reaction to the loss of control of the body and/or the internalized object within the psyche (Winnicott 1945, 156). In a move away from Freud’s thinking on the binding nature of libidinal cathexes, Winnicott believed it was frustration and aggression that spurred movement away from the self and toward the object. It was the need to fulfill some sort of privation (hungry, wetness, etc) that makes the baby move toward the other for amelioration. The oral phase is so intertwined with aggressive components that Winnicott claims that in “health it is oral love that carries the basis of the great part of actual aggressiveness—that is, aggression intended by the individual and felt as such by the people around (Winnicott 1950, 205 emphasis added). Simply stated, aggression is central to primitive forms of love and a cornerstone for maturation (Winnicott 1950). As in Klein it is love not eroticism that is foregrounded.
Wilfred Bion, like Klein and Winnicott, was also interested in the earliest phase of infant life and was invested in better understanding of mentalization, the building of mind and the cultivation of feelingful thinking or, its destruction, in the mother/child dyad as well as the analytic setting (Bion 1962). Drawing on a digestion model, Bion theorizes that it is the mother’s capacity for containment and reverie that helps transform a baby’s ‘uncooked’ sensory elements into cooked digestible morsels capable of mentalization (Bion 1962). Bion argues that, “the mother’s capacity for reverie is the receptor organ for the infant’s harvest of self-sensation gained by its consciousness” (Bion qtd in Brown 2012, 1203). With maturation the baby introjects the mother’s capacity for symbolization which fosters the capacity to handle and mentalize new experiences—at base it is the intersubjective space developed between caretaker and child that helps build mind and think. While Bion’s work, much like Winnicott’s, emphasizes the vitally important place of unconscious communication and care between the caretaker and child, the libidinal erotic aspect of that dynamic, on the part of both parties, has been evacuated.

As I noted earlier, consumption and citation trends illuminate that the work of Klein, Bion and Winnicott have been highly influential over the past twenty years. This is for good reason, each of these theorists shed light on the formation of psychosis, unconscious communication between caretakers and infants as well as a much neglected aspects of early psychoanalytic literature—aggression in the pre-Oedipal life of the infant and its place in symptomology. Given this, one might argue that the desexualisation of the infant is simply an effect of a shift in clinical emphasis and a broadening of the horizon of the ‘analyzable.’ Or, one could ground this transformation in the historical context of a post-World War II Anglophone west and the desire for analysts to understand the roots of such atrocities.

Both of these are certainly the case, but when one begins to examine the psychoanalytic clinical literature from another European country such as France, which has a similar historical context and has witnessed a corollary shift in clinical interest, these explanations begin to fall short (see Laplanche 2011; Green 1995 ; MacDougall 1995, 1992). French analyst Andre Green raised this very issue in his provocatively titled article “Has Sexuality Anything to Do with Psychoanalysis” in which he argues for a re-emphasis of the sexual within psychoanalytic theorizing (Green
While Green takes issue with the limits of Freud’s ideas on femininity and female sexuality, it is his contention that there is still much to be discovered about the place of sexuality in earliest object relations (Green 1995). MacDougall pushes psychoanalytic theorizing on sexuality with her conceptualization of neo-sexuality, infantile eroticism and the reconceptualization of ‘perversion’ in the life of children and adults (MacDougall 1995).

Jean Laplanche’s most recent writing, offers a deeply important analysis of attachment and the erotic in the life of the child and its relation to objects (Laplanche 2011). For Laplace, the infant and child come into contact with the culture’s vision of gender and sexuality through the ways in which it has been incorporated and unconsciously transmitted by the parents (Laplanche 2011). It is the exchange of affect and these message that form the basis of identification and shapes the baby’s vision of gender and sexuality. Drawing on the work of Lacan, Laplance argues that the baby’s reception of those messages are inevitably subject to mistranslations, because of the enigmatic quality of the parents (a child can no more understand the motivations of its parents than the parents can fully know their child). Sexuality and gender emerge, for Laplanche, at the intersection of child, parent and culture. This is due to complex exchange that unfolds with the baby’s reception of impressions and inevitable mistranslations of parental fantasy (which he terms leaning on). To this end, the sexual life of children is less about hormonal changes, and far more about psychic formation. Laplanche problematizes the concept of component instincts with a discussion of how the erotic’s connection to fantasy and unconscious communication (Laplanche 2011). This is a significant departure from the ways in which the mother/child dyad has been theorized by Klein and post-Kleinian thinkers.

The Anglophone epistemological shift toward conceptualizing the early psychic and somatic life of the child as an attempt at managing the struggles of dependency in a sea of anxiety, is significantly different from Freud’s conception of the machinations of the autoerotic and polymorphously perverse child. By keeping this epistemological turn in mind, a different set of questions begin to emerge about the impact of the Anglophone cultural imaginary on the psychoanalytic clinical imagination and/or cultural pressures on its practice. As I have chronicled in my research with Gail Hawkes, the Anglophone west has a long history of adult anxiety regarding the sexuality and the child (Egan and Hawkes 2010). Within the history of ideas the
child’s sexuality has often been a proxy or displacement for other cultural insecurities within many discourses (Egan and Hawkes 2010). Is this simply a case of Anglophone sexual hypocrisy or sexual repression seeping into the Anglophone Object Relations School? I would argue this reading would be too simplistic and not particularly compelling.

Is it possible that there may be an unconscious defense, due to the Anglophone cultural imaginary, against conceptualizing the erotic aspects of unconscious communication, care and the intersubjective space between mother and baby? Is this particularly gendered? In other words, is there something about the social construction of the maternal body and the child’s body (both deemed in dominant discourse as inherently asexual) that makes such a conceptualization too hard to imagine? Could it be that within Anglophone culture the relationships between caregivers and children are devoid of libidinal exchange? If so, this might tell us something more about the cultural specificity of psychosexual development. Could it be that the extreme anxieties surrounding children and sexuality have made analysts shy away from this topic in an attempt to remain viable within a mental health landscape that is less than welcoming of psychoanalytic perspectives? Is it that we still have not fully taken heed of the important insights of Salvador Ferenczi’s essay, *The Confusion of Tongues*, which would allow for eroticism that is both adult and child centered (Ferenczi 1951)? Ferenczi warns that it is the adult centered nature of conceptualizing the child’s body and sexuality that often leads to deeply problematic projections (Ferenczi 1951).

Ferenczi does not conceptualize this as an intersubjective or object related model, however he offers a provocative thesis that could be examined in this regard. How can his work influence thinking on the exchanges between mother and child that involve anxiety, frustration, dread, aggression and eroticism? For example, within a cultural context where the maternal body is often desexualized—how might a woman’s sensual response to breastfeeding cause a level of anxiety and guilt in her and her baby? How might Anglophone anxieties regarding the child and its sexuality shape the communication, touch and engagement of a parent with a child who is curious about their body? Jean Laplanche argues that ideologies of gender and sexuality are translated via messages, overt and unconscious, through parents and family (which he conceptualizes as the social with a small s) (Laplanche 2011). If this is the case, how might this
shape the ways in which a caregiver is able to contain or refuse to contain any sexual expression of her or his child? Does taking the libidinal into account speak to some of the ways in which unconscious communication is either cultivated or refused within part object relations? Taking this seriously might help us think through how guilt, attunement and mis-attunement might be interlaced with the erotic current in early bonding. And, equally important, it might help Anglophone analysts develop better ways of understanding the phenomenology of that for infants, adults and in the space between them. These are open questions that I hope will cultivate more questions and research in the future. I will end this chapter by returning to the example I brought up in the introduction to think through some of the potential implications of the current conceptual blind spot surrounding the child and its sexuality within Anglophone clinical literature.

**Conclusion**

As I have chronicled extensively elsewhere, a cornerstone of many popular treatises and policy reports on sexualisation within the Anglophone west focuses on the potential contagion of phallically oriented desires and behaviors in tween aged girls (Egan 2013; Egan and Hawkes 2010). Exhibitionism, public drunkenness, premature intercourse, the rise of oral and anal sex, and the desire for a future in the sex industry are just a few that have been mentioned in the particularly hyperbolic publications and documentaries on the topic (Dines 2011; Bailey 2011; Papadapoulis 2010). Revisiting the cautionary narrative offered by Jessica Lahey on why the dress of tweenage girls needs to be managed we see a similar set of assumptions, “I hate having to worry that being able to see a girl's underwear will so addle the boys' brains that they will be unable to concentrate in science class” (Lahey access 11/14/14). Instead of worrying about underwear, she wants to worry about helping girls change the world. The affective nature of her plea makes the critique of her ideas far more challenging. Who, after all, could be against the achievement of girls? It is important to point out, however, key assumptions at work in her article: girls are passive in their orientation toward sexualisation, but once sexualized girls become hyper-compulsive, and finally, that they are at fault for addling the brains of their male counterparts. As I have chronicled, at length, elsewhere and as many of the chapters in this book reveal—this discourse does not accurately reflect the complicated ways in which girls and boys negotiate the sexual cultures within which they find themselves. However, given the hegemony
of this perspective and its place within many government policy papers, its potential for shaping policy and mental health criteria is cause for great concern.

Clinicians, unlike many others, have access to the complicated ways in which culture and family dynamics intersect in the lives of young people and their families. Revisiting psychoanalytic ideas regarding the sexual life of the child seems particularly pressing in the midst of our current cultural climate. Taking the idea of childhood sexuality seriously might allow psychoanalytically clinicians to offer a new approach to seeing how a child’s sexuality might be impacted by a set of adult projections in deeply complex ways (that might include sexualisation, containment, care, desexualisation or pathologisation to name only a few). They might be able to offer another window into the ways in which young people who are suffering and come into session maybe negotiating, among other things, culture, family and sexuality and how these change and transform over time. Analysts could offer a nuanced picture of how young people identify, dis-identify or partially identify with culture, family, peers and how that shapes perceptions of self. Ultimately, it is my hope that clinicians will begin to refocus on the place of sexuality within the life of the child in order to offer a reasoned counter narrative to the current popular discourse on sexualisation.

References
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i Sexologists such as Havelock Ellis, Mangus Hirschfeld and Albert Moll were also deeply interested in the topic and most used adult memories of childhood as the primary data upon which they drew their conclusions—albeit in different ways and for a variety of motives (Egan and Hawkes 2006).

iii Although it cannot tell you from which country this consumption is taking place.