

Book Review

Zurbriggen, E. L. & Roberts, T.A. (2013). *The Sexualization of Girls and Girlhood: Causes, Consequences and Resistance*. NY: Oxford University Press.

Reviewed by Amanda R. Nixon, BS (Consultant), & Stephen M. Marson, Ph.D., Senior Editor

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Because of my long relationship with Oxford University Press, they sent me The Sexualization of Girls and Girlhood: Causes, Consequences and Resistance for review. Though I have completed course work in women's studies, I feel that I was a bit out of my element. As a result, I asked my respected colleague, Amanda R. Nixon, to assist. Of all the people I know who are deeply involved in women's studies, I find Ms. Nixon to have the most profound insights. I have made several attempts to synthesize our diverse perspectives; I failed. Thus, this first part of the review is written by Ms. Nixon, while the last is written by me.

Amanda R. Nixon, BS (Consultant)

I want to start by saying that I was thrilled to see a scholarly work addressing an issue that I (as a former high-school teacher and aunt of three girls) feel is enormously important and one that in general I think is mostly ignored by society at large. It's too easy to say "sex sells" or "it's what girls want these days," thereby ignoring that at this period of their development, it is difficult enough for young girls to cultivate a healthy self-concept and an abundance of self-esteem with the pressures that already exist, not to mention pre-maturely introducing a "sexual-self" component to the mix. We must question as our daughters, nieces and young sisters are finding their way in this world do we really need to impose a complex sexual development upon them precipitately in their growth process?

And regardless of their anatomical development, social media, and influence of media and peers, what can we do as parents and mentors to ensure a measured and sound progress into maturity where the development of self and confidence precedes heavier questions and considerations of sexuality? These are the topics I hoped to find addressed, and in most cases the main questions and concerns were covered, some more thoroughly than others. Where the collection of essays fell short for me was more in the lack of depth, as well as the failure to focus comprehensively on the varied aspects that can contribute to the sound, healthy development of a young girl, aiding in arming her with the tools she needs in a society where sexuality is pervasive at younger and younger ages.

First, structurally, the introduction was thorough and informative. The authors are quite effective in defining the issue and delineating the schools of thought as to how girls absorb or acquire the messages around them. However, the subsequent chapters, while loosely organized in a methodical and clear manner, wasted pages being repetitive by re-stating the issue of sexualization in an unnecessary manner since the "problem" or issue had been so well introduced and defined in the first chapter. While these were individual essays or positions, they could have been more effectively edited to make the overall message more cogent and less exhausting of the reader's patience by the time he/she reaches the 3rd or 4th chapter. They also did little to deepen the understanding of the

problem, per se. At the end, I was left feeling that the treatment of the subject was a bit too surface and unfocused, regardless of the consequences and notes on fighting sexualization offered. I almost feel that one singular book written by one author instead of a collection of edited essays would have been more beneficial to such a serious and growing issue.

Perhaps one of the most useful aspects of this introductory is the defining of self-objectification and how this plays in to the development, in this case sexual self-awareness and self-esteem, of the young girl throughout her journey into womanhood. This I find to be the most significant issue at hand, as it has far reaching consequences, even beyond the sexual. A deeper exploration of this concept and the factors that play into it would have probably been more valuable, not only for the understanding of how sexualization affects the young girl, but also of how the factors that play into self objectification can be utilized to combat sexualization's effects on her.

What I found to be the biggest issue throughout the book was the lack of factoring in the individual girl's psychology, outlook or self-awareness in whether sexualization will/would have an effect on her and cause self-objectification to occur. For example, the multitude of studies quoted relaying the amount of exposure to media, whether it be via TV or music videos, seem to only draw a correlation between the amount of TV/videos observed and a girl's self-esteem and/or outlook on her own sexuality, how she sees and portrays herself in reference to her sexuality, and how she sees herself as a sexual object for the pleasure of others or not. None of this takes into account her own self-awareness, confidence, education or self agency and ability to think for herself at all. The same can be said of the authors' references to the media by way of advertising affecting how girls dress. Some of the studies quoted seem to suggest the more exposure a girl has to magazines and advertising portraying young women in sexual ways, the more likely she is to see herself as a sexual object

and dress that way (i.e., the more she is exposed the less conservative she will dress or the fewer clothes she will wear.), or the more likely she is to have an increased concern about her attractiveness to the opposite sex, thereby instigating an over concern with weight, makeup, etc., all to be more attractive to men. It is even suggested that this in turn can lead to a lower self-esteem since the images portrayed are no doubt unrealistic. While all of this could have an effect, the major factor left out of this is the ability to think for herself and the self-concept she had developed to that point.

The author negligibly addresses the role of the girl's mental outlook already and even less so of the role parents play in this. Though intrapersonal relationships and their influence on a young girl are addressed, very little time or mention is given to parental influence. How a girl is raised and the messages from her home life and close friends are all but ignored. These would seem to have a mitigating factor as to how these images and messages out in society are interpreted and absorbed. However, the authors fail to explore this to the extent that I feel is warranted in the scheme of influence over a girl, as well as in how they factor into combating sexualization. If a girl is raised with a positive self-image, she will take the images she sees or messages she hears out in society and interpret them appropriately. To suggest otherwise is to say girls are mindless sponges. So whether more intricate studies should have been included and utilized for demonstration or more credence and focus given to the influence of parenting in whether girls end up self-objectifying, this subject should have been canvassed more extensively.

There is no doubt that women, more than men, are evaluated on their attractiveness and that the higher the perceived attractiveness, the more worth some segments of society are likely to assign. And the advertising and media sources that show young girls in "adult" situations, poses, clothes and makeup are not helping and are inappropriate. However, this alone does not make a girl self-objectify or focus on what the author calls a

'body project.' And it is probably accurate to say that the more other attributes and talents/skills are highlighted in women (creating a task-involved climate, for example) the less likely they are to self-objectify. However this can not solely be laid at the feet of TV, advertising and other media. This most likely has more to do with interpersonal relationships building the intrapersonal relationship a girl has with herself as a strong or weak filter for the messages to which she is exposed throughout her girlhood.

For example, Deborah Tolman's essay is supposed to address how the sexualization of girls affects young boys, men and adult women. While she has very valid concerns over what she calls the "pornification" of the media, what she seems to concentrate on is how sexual objectification is becoming normalized for young boys. She focuses a good portion of her essay on how video games display women solely as sexual objects or unintelligent, vulnerable beings and that objectifying these women often is equated to power. Additionally she asserts that ideals about femininity and masculinity are concreted in such games with the men being the powerful heroes (often inflicting violence upon the women) and the women being objects of desire in inferior positions, often enjoying being aggressed. This, among other pornified images, she feels constitutes the sexual education of young men. While I do not disagree with her that this is a huge issue, I do feel that, for one, it is nothing new, and two it doesn't actually connect solely as an effect of an emerging sexualization of young girls, except that the alleged pornification is simply happening at an earlier age of female. Hence, I found her argument to be extremely sound insofar as it discusses the formation of attitudes towards women being developed during this sexual "education" of boys.

Especially poignant are her assertions that boys and men are at worst, vicariously educated about sex through porn itself, which because it is made for the most part by and for men based on what is perceived to be arousing for a man, often leads to

unrealistic expectations of women's sexual behavior and appearance, learned scripts for "breaking down" women's resistance, possible dehumanizing of women, equating of violence and sex and overall dissatisfaction with partners. Although I wholeheartedly agree with this train of thought, I do not believe it necessarily relates to the topic at hand. I feel it says more about a problem that has existed for a very long time in relation to attitudes towards women but less about the sexualization of girls. The assertion that these videos and porn use characters that are supposed to be young (as this is what I see only to be a trend) may actually be more applicable in the argument. However, Tolman only explores how this affects women and their obsession with remaining youthful, as this is perceived to be more appealing to men now.

I don't know how much this can significantly be tied to sexualization of girls, since men preferring younger women (as a generality) and women being obsessed with youth are actually ancient phenomena, as old as history itself. She cites the increase in plastic surgeries such as labiaplasty and vaginal rejuvenation as evidence of this. She claims they are solely for the aesthetic pleasure of men. For one, the increase of these probably has more to do with their recent technological improvements and increased availability and affordability than to some new desire to look young simply because young girls are being sexualized in the media. More importantly, these surgeries, especially vaginal rejuvenation, are not solely aesthetic. They are in many cases required for additional support of vaginal walls and organs after childbirth and trauma. When not for medically necessary causes, they are performed also in order to give women a tightening of the walls to increase their own sexual pleasure. Tolman's point that when women are unable to live up to perceived body standards they develop a lower self-image, and that can lead to less enjoyable sex (through inability to become aroused, participate in certain acts of sex or orgasm) are valid. However, this falls more under self-objectification, which has previously been discussed.

Each essay does some version of what Tolman did. While they all elaborate (some more convincingly than others) on the idea there is a growing issue of sexualization of young girls and the various contributors to this sexualization, most fail to submit a comprehensive understanding of how these factors are absorbed by girls and what internal factors, such as self-awareness and self-esteem, and external factors, such as family and environment, can combat its influence.

Stephen M. Marson, Ph.D., Senior Editor

As both a father and a sociologist, after I completed this book, I found myself depressed. As a father, I became distressed because of the world in which my daughter lives. At that point, I began to think like a sociologist. As Ms. Nixon pointed out, the central theme among all the authors is treating “media” as the single most important independent variable, while sexual objectification is the dependent variable.

The authors do not address family influence or socioeconomic status (SES). On page 264, SES is noted, but not as an independent variable. A question: Do families make a difference when their daughters face the real world of sexual objectification? Is there an outcome difference between a female child who is sold into prostitution by her father and a female child whose father reads to her every night before she goes the bed? I realize the reductio ad absurdum dimension of my question. However, the main problem with this book is that it focuses on bivariate causal relationships. For example, the authors present this causal feature:

Media → Objectification

This bivariate relationship is misleading, intellectually dissatisfying and most importantly, has little applied value. The hypothetical model should include Media as an intervening variable, as illustrated:

Family Relationships → Media → Objectification

Frankly, I am troubled. Essentially, *The Sexualization of Girls and Girlhood: Causes, Consequences and Resistance* is a comprehensive synthesis and review of literature on sexual objectification of females. It is incomprehensible that no multivariate analysis (multiple regression, path analysis, etc.) has been employed to control and identify the strengths of key independent variables. Failure to include multivariate analysis will inhibit social advocates to pursue policies and strategies that could combat the sexual objectification of females.

With all its shortcomings, this is a critically important volume to be adopted in every academic library. For universities that have women’s studies programs with a research arm, the book will be extremely valuable as a catalyst for contributing to the knowledge base.