



Girlhood and Sexuality at Intersections of Performance, Relations, and Representations

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Editorial: Girlhood and Sexuality at Intersections of Performance, Relations, and Representations

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From Margaret Mead's (1928) classic study of girlhood in Samoa to the more contemporary *She's Mad Real* by Oneka LaBennett (2011), *Shapeshifters* by Aimee Meredith Cox (2015), and *The Violence of Care* by Sameena Mulla (2014), anthropologists have long taken the world of girls as serious points of inquiry into power and resistance as well as pleasure and imagination. While girlhood varies across time and place, living amid multiple axes of power means that the world is often a complicated place for girls and young women as they navigate their gender identities, roles, and performances.

An analysis of girlhood through a crip studies lens is offered by Anastasia Todd in the commentary "Crippling Visibility: Re-presenting Disabled Girls and Girlhoods." Drawing from observations of the hypervisibility of disabled girls in new media spaces, Todd asks critical questions about the connections between disability, *youngness*, and girlhood in the proliferation of these images. Todd also calls for more theorization of disabled girlhood from a structural perspective that is both critical of "cis-heteronormative discourses of ideal girlhood, normative affects, and able-nationalist logics" and considerate of "what stories... disabled girls, themselves, have to tell." Todd shows that feminist and crip studies together can help to theorize girlhood and facilitate the telling of these girls' stories in more meaningful ways.

Performances of girlhood are also explored in the research article "Performative Disembedding: Amid and Between Potential and Professionalism in Ethiopian Girls' Running" by Hannah Borenstein. Borenstein identifies and explores the conundrum Ethiopian girl runners face as they enter the world stage of running competitions. In order to compete, they are expected to oscillate their performances of youth and adulthood, engaging in what Borenstein calls "a multi-directional performative process of disembedding." According to Borenstein, these young women are sometimes supposed to act as girls with innocence and coachability, while at other times they are expected to act as adults with maturity and professionalism. These performances work, according to Borenstein, to "make themselves legible in a system that is structurally built on profiting off of global inequalities of race, gender, and age."

Together, Todd's commentary and Borenstein's article reflect how particular performances of girlhood are acceptable when they fit expectations of who constitutes a girl and what their

behaviors and bodies should reflect. At the same time, both of these authors ask critical questions about how the inclusion of some girls can lead to other exclusions due to heightened pressures to fit particular desires among consumer economies and audiences.

Sexuality further brings girls and young women into contact with acts of violence, processes of consent, and receiving (or being denied) care. The dynamism of sexuality across time and place is central to the commentary “Girlhood, Sexualities, and Generational Modernity” by Ida Fadzillah Leggett. Reflecting upon earlier research conducted in Northern Thailand, Leggett is keen to consider girls’ place not only in the social orders of gender and sexuality, but also in terms of generational positioning among older women. For Leggett, girls and women are often expected to be the bearers of morality as “good” female subjects in patriarchal structures. This makes the ways in which girls embody, resist, or play with their gender performance and sexualities all the more important to explore in order to understand the consequences of judgement and condemnation as well as newfound expressions of sex, romance, and relationships despite conventional expectations.

Moving readers to a very different site of exploration and imagination, Tate Johaneck provides us with the research article “More Than Just Friends?: Unpacking Queer AFAB Sexuality Within the Sleepover Environment.” Johaneck considers the Western cultural practice of sleepovers as potential spaces of queer exploration. While sleepovers can, at times, reiterate heteronormative practices, there are other possibilities, as Johaneck learned through talking with study participants; it is in the quiet, private, and intimate spaces of sleepovers that young people might play “with normative gendered and sexual aspects such as femininity or heterosexuality and, indirectly, non-normative modes of queerness.” Thus, Johaneck shows us how conventional girlhood practices can also subvert heterosexual norms through the intimate, liminal spaces that can catalyze sexual exploration.

Leggett and Johaneck reveal the omnipresent and insidious nature of normative conventions surrounding gender and sexuality in a variety of cultural contexts. They also illuminate how young people are cognizant of these expectations and work to play with and even reimagine their own gender identities, performances, and sexualities. In seeking new forms of pleasure through such explorations, these young people engage in queering spaces — of generation or childhood sleepovers — to not be delimited by constrictive norms.

Another set of contributions in this issue offer exploration of the body, personhood, and identity and the ways in which others recognize or deny the experience of pain and dis-ease of girls and young women. A commentary by Alexea Howard and an article by Estel Malgosa and Bruna Alvarez both explore assumptions regarding the bodily experiences of girls and young women, with a focus on the internalization and refusal of assumptions from others. Estel Malgosa and Bruna Alvarez explore assumptions of everyday pain embodied by girls and women. In focus groups with 9 and 10 year-olds, Malgosa and Alvarez found that many young people assumed pain

and discomfort were inherent in the feminine experience, particularly around menstruation, sexual intercourse, and childbirth. However, they note that some girls have more positive or neutral perspectives of femininity, seemingly influenced by conversations with adults. Harmful and inaccurate assumptions flourish in silence. Malgosa and Alvarez conclude that talking with children about their bodies and ensuring they have access to accurate information may help them “resist hegemonic representations of femininity.”

Alexea Howard’s commentary illustrates the way in which medical systems and providers treat the “disease” rather than the person when young women seek care for eating disorders. Howard’s participants described receiving medicalized treatment devoid of care for their personhood. When participants tried to voice their experiences, medical providers insisted, “it’s the disease talking.” In response to the epistemic violence experienced in supposed systems of care, girls and young women connect with online communities where they find the care that is lacking in professional systems.

These contributions bring to mind a piece from Billy-Ray Belcourt’s (2020) memoir, *A History of My Brief Body*. In telling the story of dismissal from the medical system as he proactively sought prevention and treatment for possible STIs, Belcourt (Driftpile Cree Nation) draws on Jill Stauffer’s concept of ethical loneliness to name the denial of personhood and experience by those people and systems who have the power to direct, or at the very least influence, one’s life. Belcourt says, “It’s during moments when the self is negotiated with others—in sex, in medicine and public health—that one is prone to being pulled off course and thrown into a crisis of ontological proportions” (84). The relational nature of bodily experiences is central. Our understanding of our bodily experiences is shaped by the responses we receive from others.

In particular, these contributions encourage us to consider what it means to associate the female body with pain, and, further, what it is to be a body in pain or discomfort that is not recognized, or perhaps even denied, by others. Howard’s commentary presents a call to action for providers in medical and public health systems to refuse the medical model that focuses solely on implementation of treatment targeted at a specific issue and instead embrace the social model that supports recognition of the person in the body and cultivation of care for the whole person.

While this issue of *NEOS* is relatively brief, the contributions span a range of concerns as they are presented, experienced, and lived by girls. For readers immersed in girlhood studies, we hope the commentaries and research articles push for more intersections between girlhood, crip studies, and queer studies. For readers who are new to girlhood studies, we hope the range of pieces introduces some key ideas about girlhood, gender performance, and sexuality. An author interview by Chloe Bozak with Parul Malik (2022), featured in the Constellations section, offers insight into the challenge and hopes that emerge when examining such difficult topics with young people. For educators, Chloe Bozak and Hannah Valihora worked with authors Estel Malgosa and Bruna Alvarez to construct a teaching tool that may assist with bringing discussions of pain and

femininity to the classroom. In the words of Parul Malik (this issue), we hope that the few yet fulsome contributions to this issue of *NEOS* show in various ways how “nurturing their agency enables girls to understand themselves and their worlds better. For instance, how their body functions, what laws protect them, how patriarchal roles can be challenged, or what equitable relationships look like.”

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ACYIG Advisory Board Update

Ida Fadzillah Leggett, PhD (University of Illinois)

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The ACYIG Board has been busy! We are updating our Website to include a section highlighting recently published books on childhood and/or youth. If you have a new publication you would like us to include, please email the book details to me at Ida.Leggett@mtsu.edu. This feature joins the ACYIG [Spotlight on Scholarship](#) that showcases new and important research conducted by childhood/youth scholars. Please click on the title and take a look; if you would like to be featured, visit the [author guidelines page](#) to submit your details.

In November our ACYIG Board graduate student representatives Adriano De Francesco and Laura Bullon-Cassis organized a graduate student virtual meetup. Taking the feedback garnered from this meeting, the representatives, now including Christopher Chapman, will organize more virtual student meetups, as well as a speaker series featuring senior scholars discussing key issues pertaining to the ethics, methodologies, and theories of the anthropology of children and youth.

ACYIG had a productive and well-attended Invited Session at the AAA Conference held in Seattle in November. The session, a Roundtable titled “Growing Up in Unsettled Landscapes: New Directions in the Anthropology of Childhood and Youth” explored the strengths, weaknesses, and new directions in the anthropology of childhood/youth, highlighting current ethnographies and monographs that contributed to new ways of thinking about children and youth, and discussing future research ideas and initiatives that could help us contribute to a wider audience of both anthropologists and childhood/youth studies researchers. The ACYIG Board also had a successful in-person Reception and Book Display at the AAA Conference, where many of us met each other in person for the first time and had productive conversations. It was wonderful to meet scholars interested in childhood and youth from all over the world, and to be able to do it safely face-to-face was a welcome bonus. We will organize another Reception and Book Display for the November 2023 AAA Conference in Toronto, so keep your eyes open for the date and time. If you can't make it to the Conference please email me a PDF your book flyer (with any available discounts) and we will make sure to display it at the Reception. Any information or questions about the Reception or Book Display should be directed to Ida.Leggett@mtsu.edu.

Speaking of the AAA 2023 Conference, please send us a description of your childhood/youth-related panels and we will compile a list of all relevant panels to publicize to our community. You can send this information to julie.spray@universityofgalway.ie. And finally, we are looking into organizing an ACYIG Conference, as we have done pre-COVID. If you are interested in leading or joining this effort, please email me at Ida.Leggett@mtsu.edu to start the ball rolling. We would love to have you!

Ida Fadzillah Leggett,
Convener, ACYIG

Fall 2023 Call for Papers

Theme: Communication in the Worlds of Children and Youth: Imagination, Language, Performance, and Creative Expression

When considering the worlds of children, researchers may start with communication as a site of inquiry, examining how children and youth share their experiences and perceptions of places, people, ideas, and more through the use of language, performance, and other creative expressions. Communication is also a methodological concern in terms of how child- and youth-focused researchers generate information about and convey communication from or with children and youth. *NEOS* invites submissions that speak to imagination, expression, and the senses in terms of how children know, experience, and express their perception of the present and envision the future. Submissions may also reflect these themes as they pertain to child-focused methods such as creative approaches that engage with the sensory, multimodal, performative, and participatory. We invite a range of child and youth studies scholars to submit manuscripts for this issue, and this call for proposals may be of particular interest to (a) communication and performance scholars working with young people, (b) linguistic anthropologists working with young people and language, and (c) ethnographers or child/youth-focused researchers who engage in imaginative and experimental methods concerning how children communicate. Authors may want to consider more multimodal and imaginative inclusions within their text, such as drawings or visual displays of data or findings. We invite submissions that focus on primary and original research around the themes of the issue:

Imagination, Communication, and Expression

- Young people's imaginative expressions of the present or future that may include and extend beyond engagements with play or leisure
- Children's engagement with language including language learning, development, socialization, and change
- Exploration of children's and youths' perceptions of their worlds and less-than-expected or unexpected means of expression through verbal, bodily, or silent forms of communicating

Participatory, Multimodal, and Expressive Methods

- Child- and youth-focused projects that apply and push the conventions of ethnography especially concerning multimodal communication
- The opportunities and challenges of visual and sensory methods with young people
- Creative methods that speak to children's and youths' "participation" in research and knowledge production including participatory action research, community-based research, and theater or performance-focused projects
- Co-written or co-produced ethnography (as genre) with young people

We invite short-form original research articles (1,200 words max, excluding references) that address the issue's theme. *NEOS* also welcomes short pieces (1,200 words max, excluding references) on scholarship and applied research that uplifts racial, economic, and social justice and the dismantling of systemic oppression for a dedicated standing column on anti-racism and equity in child and youth studies.

NEOS is an open-access publication of the Anthropology of Children and Youth Interest Group (ACYIG) of the American Anthropological Association (AAA). We publish research on childhood and youth from scholars working across the four fields of anthropology, as well from those interdisciplinary fields in conversation with anthropological theories and methods. Articles published in *NEOS* undergo a double-anonymous peer-review process.

The deadline for submissions is **August 16, 2023** (end of the day). Rolling submissions prior to August 16th are also welcome. While not required, authors are encouraged to submit a brief message about their intent to submit to the Co-Editors by August 2nd, 2023. The *NEOS* Editorial Team may be reached at acyig.editor@gmail.com. Visit our [website](#) for further information on *NEOS*, as well as [submission guidelines and instructions](#). You may access the submission portal for the Fall 2023 issue [here](#).

**Girlhood and Sexuality at Intersections of
Performance, Relations, and Representations**

Commentary: Crippling Visibility: Re-presenting Disabled Girls and Girlhoods

Anastasia Todd, PhD (University of Kentucky)

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In 2017 I was riding a bus down Sunset Boulevard in Los Angeles to the Disability as Spectacle conference when I saw the image of a disabled girl on the back of a bus stop bench: a young, white girl with down syndrome, face painted like an American flag. She was part of the Ad Council's public service campaign, "Love Has No Labels."¹ I was on my way to the conference to present about disabled girl YouTubers, and I came to realize that the image I serendipitously encountered was part and parcel of the new representational politics of disabled girlhood that I was investigating. In the 2010s, the disabled girl curiously emerges across a range of different sites in the United States' mediascape: in HBO documentaries, on TikTok, and, curiously, on the back of bus stop benches. No longer represented solely through discourses of risk, pathologization, and vulnerability – taking drastically different forms than in Jerry Lewis Telethons – the disabled girls that come to hypervisibly materialize in our recent cultural imaginary are pageant queens, social media influencers, and disability rights activists.

Since the turn of the 21st century, the girl has appeared with ubiquity in media culture as a fabulous/scandalous object onto which we gaze and as a resource to work through anxieties wrought by neoliberalism and post-feminism (Gill 2007; Harris 2004; McRobbie 2009; Projansky 2014). The disabled girl, however, has rarely been theorized (Annamma 2018; Hill 2017, 2022; Mutua and Erevelles 2012; Stienstra 2015). Often, she is understood as outside of girlhood: cast as an ontological impossibility because of a contradiction between youngness and disability. This is because scholars' understandings are figured through the medical or individual model of disability, which posits disability as a pathologized condition, an individual deficit, and a self-evident truth inhered in the body. Within this paradigm, disability is understood as something that must be overcome, intervened upon, cured, or eliminated.

The multiplicity of emergent representations of disabled girls and girlhoods require us to consider the disabled girl with theoretical dexterity and urgency. These representations compel us to ask, why disabled girls, why now? Disabled people have recently come to symbolize a "certain kind of embodied value for contemporary nations," and "increasingly perform [...] representational work [...] as a symbol of expansive inclusionist efforts" (Mitchell and Snyder 15; 19). What does the representation of the young, white girl with down syndrome tell us about how disabled girlhood has come to be mobilized to tell a story about a post-Americans with Disabilities Act United States? In my work I argue we must *crip*² these representations, or interrogate and unsettle assumptions about disability, paying close attention to how cis-heteronormative discourses of ideal

girlhood, normative affects, and able-nationalist logics collide to facilitate the recognition and cultural valuation of certain disabled girl subjects more than others.

But, also, what happens when we turn toward disabled girls, paying close attention to how they represent themselves? On social media—TikTok, YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram—disabled girls actively *crip* girlhood, or upend what we think we know about disability and girlhood. They recast the meaning ascribed to disabled girl bodyminds on their own terms. More questions remain. What stories do disabled girls, themselves, have to tell? How do these stories differ from the story that the bus stop bench purported to tell?

Notes

¹ The “Love Has No Labels” campaign, although produced and distributed by the Ad Council, has several “official” and nonprofit partners. Among the official partners are Bank of America, Walmart, State Farm, and Prudential. The Human Rights Campaign, GLAAD, AARP, Story Corps, and the National Women’s Law Center are among the nonprofit partners.

² Crip is a term reclaimed and used by disability activists, cultural workers, and scholars (Clare 1999; Sandahl 2003; McRuer 2006; Kafer 2014). Crip has come to signify many things at once: an “in-your-face” and prideful reclamation of disability, a capacious and flexible term encompassing all sorts of non-normative embodiments, and, according to Eli Clare (1999), a “word to help forge a politics” (70). To crip or crippling, in the simplest of characterizations, is a practice that interrogates or unsettles assumptions about disability and disabled people.

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Anastasia Todd is an assistant professor of Gender and Women's Studies at the University of Kentucky. Her work is at the intersection of feminist disability studies and girlhood studies. *Crippling Girlhood* (University of Michigan Press), her forthcoming book, is the winner of the 2022 Tobin Siebers Prize for Disability Studies in the Humanities. Her work is forthcoming in

Disability Studies Quarterly and has been published in *Girlhood Studies and Transformations: The Journal of Inclusive Scholarship and Pedagogy*.

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Commentary: Girlhood, Sexualities, and Generational Modernity

Ida Fadzillah Leggett, PhD (Middle Tennessee State University)

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I am honored to write this column for the *NEOS* issue centered on “Girlhood and Sexuality at Intersections of Performance, Relations, and Representations.” The topic fits my own research that spans fieldwork conducted from 1996-1998 on teenage girls in Thailand to my current focus on Western girls’ imaginaries as shaped by fictions and fantasies of their future. What these research foci have in common is the emphasis on girls’ own words, capturing girls’ agency in their interpretations and performance of identity in situations of everyday violence and powerful institutional forces.

Beginning with my dissertation fieldwork in rural Northern Thailand, my work is informed by “generational modernity,” based on Lisa Rofel’s idea of multiple modernities (1999) and Castro’s concept of “genderation” emphasizing that “generational power differentials between girls and boys must be specifically investigated within hegemonic, patriarchal societies to truly understand the intersection of gender with generation in the girlhoods and boyhoods of childhood” (2019, 265-266). It refers to girls not just as a sex/gender and age category, but also a category that is tagged to a specific historical/political moment in time. Thus, the generational modernity of the current generation of girls — the generation of my daughter — is different from the generation of my mother. This concept emphasizes that history is important, and technology is important, as are the cultural assumptions about gender of the day.

In my research, traditional studies on gender in Thailand had tended to categorize women as “good” (mothers, factory workers, wives) or “bad” (cosmopolitan, sexually active, with boyfriends). But this image reflected adult ideas very different from those held by girls who — unlike previous generations — were being exposed daily to images of the wider world through stories and goods sent to the village from relatives working abroad. Girls perceived new standards and possibilities and now desired lives more previously associated with “bad” women than with “good.” Girls now wanted to be able (socially and economically) to wear the clothes, make-up, hairstyles, and jewelry they see in international media images and to have foreign lovers and husbands and beautiful *luuk-khrung* (half-white) children (Fadzillah 2003, 217). Placing the narratives of girls’ desirable sexuality within the politics both of the day and society help us better understand how issues like violence, care, consent, and success are embedded within a specific cultural moment.

Importantly, sexuality influences both the interpretations about girlhood as well as the actual experience of girls. Female sexuality has been vigilantly monitored in many societies, and the

“pure” female has long been held by many as the sign of morality not just for the individual but also symbolically for the culture as a whole. Some examples include the surveillance of young women’s behavior in wartime in Hegarty’s (2008) *Victory Girls, Khaki-Wackies, and*

Patriotutes: The Regulation of Female Sexuality during World War II; Tolman’s (2011) exploration of how not long after the concept of adolescence came into being, adolescent girls’ sexuality came under heavy surveillance; and Sur’s (2021) example of surveillance of girls’ sexuality in Indian schools. In my Thailand research girls were routinely criticized by the community for exhibiting inappropriate behavior, especially girls seen in “inappropriate” situations with boys. For example, in an announcement at the secondary school morning assembly the principal blared over the loudspeaker, “Yesterday, one of our female students was observed sitting on the back of a motorbike with a boy not from the school. She had her skirt hitched up, and she was holding on to the boy. This is not proper conduct for a girl. All of you here should not engage in this behavior, it is immoral. Do not ride on motorbikes with boys who are not your relatives.” Thus, girlhood sexuality need not be actually “sexual” to be judged and condemned.

Girls who are expressing interest in sex, romance, and relationships, and who are exploring gender identities different from the cultural norm, are seen as treading dangerously towards disgrace and disaster and need to be controlled. Given these societal fears of girlhood sexuality, as well the acts of sexualized violence performed against girls, it is imperative to recognize girls as individuals who are thoughtful and articulate about their own lives, who have their own stories, who are able to tell their own stories, who express their own empowerment, and who participate in their own emancipatory projects. And, it is more important than ever to collect and understand girls’ own words about their own opinions and experiences of sexuality, violence, consent, and identity. How are today’s girls navigating this new world? Through the examples of the articles in this issue, we are provided with a good place to start answering this complex question.

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Commentary: Health Systems, Professionals, and Individuals – Treatment Without Care

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Social determinants of health, biopolitics, harm reduction. For those with a background in the social sciences, these topics are commonplace and are keywords that segue into deep conversations about health and the dynamic ways that health systems, practitioners, and individuals interact with one another. Unfortunately, in practice - particularly in places of medical practice or health care - a deep understanding of these topics is lacking. Reflecting on the theme for this issue, I was reminded of the ways that I have seen, through the experiences of my participants, that the medical system misses the mark in attempting to treat or work with young women and can seem like a place devoid of care.

In my work exploring why young women/people participate and continue to remain involved in websites that promote unhealthy eating behaviors, I found that a consistent reason was that the related online communities offered unbiased and non-judgmental support. Of the participants interviewed, 83% began frequenting these online communities between the ages of 13 and 17 years old. This type of support was the polar opposite of the experiences and interactions they had with clinicians who dismissed their thoughts and experiences as being due to being young or a *young woman*. Their clinicians and health professionals adopted an approach to care that championed a clinical approach to treatment leaving little room for the individual's thoughts, or concerns. What is common in clinical exchanges between medical professionals and the individual is the utterance of a simple and common phrase, "that's the anorexia [or disease] talking" (Tan 2003). With the use of this phrase or by adopting this attitude, laden with medical superiority, clinicians mute the individual's agency in their own decisions about their health, establishing the clinician as having authority (Tan 2003) this attitude undermines the individual's perception of the control they have of their body. Furthermore, this creates an opportunity for the clinician to demonstrate that the individual is of a diminished mental capacity (Elzakkars et al. 2016) which can then be used to pressure the individual into a position of relinquishing their control over their own bodies and say in their care. This approach does not often bode well for long-standing participants of this community, which is why these communities of support were a place of refuge and solace, and one that they fiercely protected.

An example of the opposite end of the spectrum was shared by a participant, Ashley, who dropped 20 pounds in a short amount of time due to her eating habits and was knowingly demonstrating several criteria for an eating disorder diagnosis. Ashley went into her appointment with her general practitioner fully expecting (and somewhat hoping) to be referred to a therapist. Her doctor praised her weight loss, telling her that she, "looked great" and noted that the symptoms and discomforts

she was experiencing were probably due to her quick and extreme weight loss, case closed. Instances such as these highlight the schism that exists in the curriculum or training of medical professionals who are looking solely at the body and overlooking the person who inhabits that body.

I recently became aware that there exists a significant percentage of mental health professionals who feel inadequately prepared to treat and work with autistic patients (Corden et al., 2022; Zerbo et al. 2015; Maddox et al. 2020). Similarly, surveying people with autism yielded a common complaint that they do not feel adequately supported by their therapists (Maddox et. al 2020). Hearing this reminded me of a similar correlation that I had come across in my own research that an abysmally small number of medical doctors take a course in nutrition or feel adequately trained to provide nutritional counseling (Kris-Etherton et al. 2014; Vetter et al. 2008) which undoubtedly lead to 33% of my participants noting that they had negative experiences with clinicians related to their eating behaviors.

Time and again we see these factors play out in different iterations with serious and lasting consequences for young people and women, specifically: anorexics going unheard and unhelped because they are placed with clinicians who focus their attention on the body and not the human being; people with autism feeling unsupported because their clinicians are not trained in knowing how to support them; and maternal mortality rates skyrocketing because clinicians are untrained on social determinants of health thus not understanding or considering, again, the person and only seeing a patient.

This also presents the opportunity for further and research and assessment focused on addressing the gaps in ways that medical professionals, while well-intentioned, are not adequately serving the communities and people they hope to help. When the time comes, clinicians and health professionals need to be reminded that every patient or client who sits across from them is a person first - a living breathing human being with real experiences and real concerns - it is from there that compassion is founded. It is from seeing people from there that care is cultivated. Without this realization, our clinicians and health professionals are only treating symptoms in the now, only operating in emergency mode, and from this place cannot offer meaningful or lasting care.

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Author Biography

Alexea Howard, M.A., is an independent researcher and scholar specializing in medical and psychological anthropology. Her research approach is interdisciplinary and mixed-methods in nature, blending frameworks and methods from medical and psychological anthropology, psychology, and public health. Her current research interests include perceptions and

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Imagined Femininity: Pain Over the Life Cycle

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Introduction

The link between women and pain has a long history in medical, Christian, and popular discourses (Fournier 2002). We see it in representations of motherhood as suffering—whether through childbirth (Imaz 2001) or the sacrifices of the Virgin Mary (Hagene 2008)—depictions of the hysterical woman (Foucault 1978), and portrayals of menopause, menstruation, and premenstrual syndrome (Fournier 2002). These images coexist with other imaginaries of femininity that represent young girls as sexually active, knowledgeable, autonomous (Gill 2008), and entitled to sexual pleasure (Allen 2011), as expressions of “agency” or “girl power” (Gonick et al. 2009).

Children participate in the construction of these representations through language and other symbolic systems (Hall 1997). Children’s representations of femininities reflect beliefs that must be interpreted in their context (Spyrou 2011) and that produce subjectivities (Althusser 1971; Butler 1990; Gramsci 1975). The production of femininities in childhood has been studied within the framework of sexuality (Blaise 2010), as mediated by heterosexuality (Renold 2006). Schools are a place of regulation and surveillance of girls’ bodies and sexual expression (Sur 2021), which turns them into “docile bodies” (Foucault 1977). However, about the place of pain in children’s conceptualizations of femininity has not been examined. Understanding whether and how children link pain to femininity can help us develop more equitable approaches to femininity and masculinity in education.

In research in primary schools in Barcelona province (Spain), we have shown that hegemonic representations of femininity shape the practices, narratives, and subjectivities of children (Malgosa et al. 2022, Malgosa et al. 2023). We analyze 24 focus groups conducted during the 2021-22 academic year with children in grades 4 and 5 (age 9 and 10) to explore how they think about femininity and pain.

Method

The children divided themselves into small groups to make a collective drawing about “changes to our bodies.” To trigger narratives (Eldén 2013), we joined the groups to create larger focus groups, in which the children explained their drawings to each other. During the focus groups, we

asked about their bodies and their ideas about sexuality. The focus groups were a space for critical reflection and the deconstruction of hegemonic practices. For example, we asked why

some processes of the female body supposedly hurt and whether female bodies can experience sensations other than pain. In such discussions, children and researchers collectively produced knowledge (Clark 2005) about sexuality. Data were transcribed, anonymized, coded and analyzed thematically.¹

“What Women Have” Hurts

A group of 9-year-old girls presented a drawing of a girl with pimples on her face, tears in her eyes and blood coming out of her pants, with the label “I hate my period.” When we asked why the girl hated her period, they said:

Maria: Because she doesn’t like it.

Laura: We have to be in the bathroom all day.

Juana: Because it hurts when it comes out.



Drawing #1, girls, age 9

Although some of the girls had surely started menstruating, no girl revealed to us that she had.

The image of menstruation as painful emerged in all focus groups. Although Dusenbery (2018) has questioned whether menstrual pain is “normal,” its normalization remains frequent and contributes to the under-diagnosis of menstrual disorders such as endometriosis (Guidone 2020). Menstruation is a symbol of femininity (Herdt 1987) that participants associated with pain and

other negative things. When we asked them what came to mind when they thought of menstruation, they told us sadness, blood, pain, shame, fear, being in a bad mood, eating chocolate, pimples, and disgust. When we asked if these things were positive or negative, they answered “negative.” And when we asked girls if they wanted to have their period, most said

no. The arrival of menstruation is related to behavioral expectations that women should follow—such as being in pain and navigating the world while they are sad, in pain, possibly feeling afraid, irritable, or shameful.

In another group of 9-year-old girls, the following exchange occurred:

Lola: It scares me. You’re moving closer to an unknown place.

Lisa: We’re scared because we have no idea what it is.

The lack of information that many 9- and 10-year-old girls have about menstruation generates fear, especially when the information available in hegemonic representations is associated with pain.

Other Pains of Femininity

Pain was not only present when children talked about menstruation, but also when they talked about other moments of the female life cycle, such as sexual intercourse and childbirth. Numerous girls asked if it hurt to have sexual intercourse. For example, 9-year-old Anna asked, “Does it hurt when someone puts his penis inside your vagina?” In a group of 9-year-old boys and girls, the following exchanged occurred:

Laia: That noise that they [women] make, is it real?

Pablo: Yes, because the semen goes inside of her, it hurts, and she says “aah” [imitates a moan]. That hurts mothers.

In the children’s representations, moans were always made by a woman (although they disagreed as to whether the moans expressed pain or pleasure). When we asked why a woman would have sexual intercourse if it hurts, they responded, “to have children.”

Childbirth was also represented as painful, as in this group of 9-year-olds:

Emma: All the movies have mothers [women in labor] who are screaming.

Pedro: Maybe it will be the worst day because it hurts, but the best because you’ll have your baby.

That is, women accept pain—from menstruation to sexual intercourse to childbirth—so that they can have children. An infinite capacity for sacrifice (Stevens and Soler 1974) appears to be part of how these children represent femininity.

Representations of Femininity that Subvert and Resist

Some narratives did not include an association between periods and pain and/or showed a more varied and positive picture of menstruation. A group of 10-year-old girls presented a drawing of a girl with blood coming from her vulva and a spot of blood on the floor [drawing 2],

accompanied by a sanitary napkin and a menstrual cup. Her face showed a placid smile. One participant explained that she knew about the menstrual cup because she often talked to her mother about the female body. We noticed that girls who created more positive and/or varied images of menstruation tended to report talking with their families about menstruation and sexuality and/or having educational books about them.



Drawing #2, girls, age 10 years

Another group of 10-year-old boys and girls were asked what came to mind when they thought about menstruation. Their responses were hormones, pads, tampons, blood, menstrual cup, boys, girls, pregnant women, babies, sex, changes, smell, money, party, celebration, happiness, sadness, and feelings. This group described a wide range of concepts associated with menstruation and hence with femininity, which we attribute to the fact that these participants had attended several of our workshops on sexuality and relationships.

Conclusions

Participants tended to associate the processes of the female body with pain. However, some participants talked about sexuality with their families and/or had attended previous workshops with us, and these participants created alternative representations of femininity, acknowledging negative but also positive aspects of having a female body. This suggests that when children have information about changes in the body and about sexuality, they are more likely to resist hegemonic representations of femininity.

Endnotes

¹ All the names are pseudonyms.

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Estel Malgosa (<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0727-5392>): I have just finished the PhD program in Social and Cultural Anthropology at the Autonomous University of Barcelona (UAB), for which I have obtained a scholarship. Since 2017 I coordinate, together with Bruna Alvarez, the SexAFIN project in which my doctoral thesis is framed. In my thesis, focused on sexuality and childhood, I try to understand how boys and girls from public schools in the province of Barcelona (Spain) construct, live, and narrate sexuality; how the gender with which they identify influences their narratives; and how adults talk (or not) with them about sexuality. I combine my thesis and the coordination of the project with the upbringing of my 3-year-old daughter and a new little person who is on the way.

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More Than Just Friends?: Unpacking Queer AFAB Sexuality Within the Sleepover Environment

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Sleepovers are overnight gatherings for adolescents in which characteristics of friendships for individuals assigned female at birth (AFAB) are made intimate through group engagement with social behaviors and identity. Western media and popular discourse have solidified sleepovers as critical to the development of same-sex friendships and heteronormative femininity, embracing activities such as talking about boys, making friendship bracelets, and doing makeovers to emphasize aspects of sisterhood (Mansfield 2018; Tucker 1984). However, sleepovers also embody a transitional nature that may cross heteronormative boundaries by inviting adolescents to experiment with their intimate friendships, thus creating opportunities for queer same-sex experiences.

Mansfield (2018) explains that the ‘slumber party,’ a term synonymous with a sleepover, resembles a celebration of the event’s communal liminality. Its overnight time frame generates transitional boundaries that encourage solidarity and bonding among friends. Within sleepovers, this fluidity allows for direct experimentation with normative gendered and sexual aspects such as femininity or heterosexuality and, indirectly, non-normative modes of queerness. Intense intimacy within same-sex adolescent female friendships occurs during sexual development, where clear associations between sexual and emotional intimacy are not yet established (Diamond 2002). This lack of differentiation means that actions like cuddling, holding hands, and playing with each other’s hair, all of which are specific to family and romantic relationships (Hazan and Zeifman 1994), can become normalized in friendships that label themselves as platonic (Diamond 2002).

While researchers have explored occult rituals like Ouija boards in Western sleepover contexts or queer-coded behaviors of same-sex friendships, a body of research investigating sleepovers and queerness has not yet been clearly established. This article uses interviews to reflect on adolescent sleepover experiences with queer undergraduate college students assigned female at birth (AFAB) between 18-23. These interviews demonstrate how sleepovers create an environment where engagements within same-sex AFAB adolescent friendships may prompt self-discovery of one’s queer identity. The distinction of one’s sex assignment is intended to include interviewees who do not identify as girls but were still subjected to expectations and social constructions of girlhood. During my research, I was an undergraduate student at Grand Valley State University whose adolescent sleepover experiences made me question how queerness manifests itself inside the sleepover space.

I chose to interview adult participants because reflecting on adolescence (ages 10-17) can provide a more in-depth analysis regarding past sleepover experiences than interviewing adolescents, who often experience fluid relationships with their sexuality as they establish their sexual identities (Tellingator and Woyewodzic 2011). I conducted interviews via Zoom, where participants were recorded so I could transcribe the interviews and analyze them based on a grounded theory approach. Findings showed that larger sleepover groups increased the presence of heteronormativity, while smaller sleepover groups demonstrated increased intimacy based on the likelihood of pre-established bonds and shared interests and provided an environment to practice situating one's relationship to sexuality.

Liminality of Sleepovers

Within the liminal characteristics of the sleepover environment, queerness can be a brief period of exploration or identity navigation rather than a long-term goal. This allows same-sex connections between girls, regardless of sexual preference, to produce queerness without relying on a stable queer identity as an outcome. The increased intimacy of a shared sleeping space offers many short-term opportunities to explore queerness through girlhood, especially since queer adolescent behaviors are societally perceived as temporary and are, therefore, less regulated (Farris 2017; Monaghan 2016). In many instances, sleepovers provide some privacy from parental surveillance, which often happens after parents have gone to bed.

Sleepovers as a homosocial space encourage group (or duo) intimacy which, when working alongside liminality, creates heightened instances of vulnerability that may intersect with the instability of adolescent sexual identities and produce queerness. Increased levels of intimacy were expressed by every participant, describing emotional and physical intimacy, whether through sharing secrets, discussing sexuality through crushes, cuddling with friends, or unpacking 'taboo' topics. One participant articulated that "at sleepovers, girls are going to be changing in front of each other. You might sleep in the same bed, the late-night conversations, that kind of stuff. I was always the kid that was like, 'What if we kissed? That would be so weird and quirky.'" These descriptions reinforce how individual empowerment for queering behavior is cultivated from AFAB adolescent group actions. When intimacy is already being naturalized among adolescents during sleepovers, participants who are interested in pushing the boundaries for intimacy can identify opportunities to challenge these boundaries for the entire group. Doing so generates queerness in the sleepover context, although whether queerness becomes embraced relies on the adolescent friend group. Regardless, the fluidity towards appropriate boundaries for intimacy can at least be recognized even if perceived as non-normative.

Gender and Sexual Negotiation

By allowing AFAB adolescents to withdraw from the public pressures of hegemonic society and enter the liminality of a sleepover, the constructs of sex and gender become destabilized, and

expectations for how these identities operate may be challenged. Bertilsdotter-Rosqvist and Brownlow (2017) explain that within the context of homosocial spaces like sleepovers, “girls’ friendship practices include both the negotiation and resistance of different competing discourses of femininity” (42). Although adolescent girls encounter similar presentations of how femininity should operate, these influences are interpreted by individuals in ways that either embrace or disregard certain aspects of female gender and sexuality. The level of adult presence and privatization of sleepovers regulate the extent to which this discourse can occur. When these factors can reduce the public pressure and surveillance to conform to these expectations completely, the gaps in understanding what constitutes heteronormativity between the entire group of AFAB adolescents become visible, thus creating the possibility for queer behaviors.

Although sleepovers have the potential for queerness, the participants did not always embrace queer forms of identity navigation. Some sleepovers purposely reiterate heteronormative behaviors, fixating on commonalities established between interpretations of femininity rather than working to negotiate differences. In contrast, others played with the boundaries of gendered and sexual norms. Interviewees suggested that this depended on the sleepover’s size and attendees’ relationships before the sleepover. For example, one participant explained that in groups where prior intimacy was not clearly established, she forcefully adapted to a heterosexual role to avoid attention or ostracization. However, in groups of established friendships, exploration of queer identity often became normalized. One way this exploration occurred was explained by how when cuddling with friends, “we made jokes about being gay, we made jokes about those things, but we didn’t really know for certain. With my friends, the straightness wasn’t being forced down your throat.” Being able to incorporate queerness in close circles, whether through performativity or normalization of queer behavior, demonstrates how the increased intimacy present at sleepovers can foster the experimentation of sexual identity in close same-sex friendships.

Heteronormative Pressures

Although sleepovers provide opportunities to defy normative social conventions between AFAB adolescents, heteronormative pressures may manifest themselves through group surveillance of one another’s ability to follow dominant social scripts based on sex. Horn (2006) describes this phenomenon as occurring because “adolescents perceive exclusion as a legitimate way to socially regulate individuals whose personal attributes or identity expressions fall outside what is considered acceptable according to social norms regarding gender and sexuality” (64). While more likely to occur in the pressures of group settings rather than in duos, this monitoring occurs in sleepovers where perceptions of behaviors do not align with learned expectations of normative identity in adolescence. Queer AFAB teens are more attuned to this surveillance than their heterosexual peers based on how these experiences allow them to recognize their own feelings as existing outside of social norms regarding friendship and sexuality. One participant confessed, “I think about times where I was sleeping over with women who have ended up being straight and how they only wanted to talk about boys, which felt very ostracizing. I felt very separate from

them.” Regardless of whether participants registered feelings of ‘otherness’ as queer, recognition of these isolated feelings from heteronormativity led participants to occasionally frame even heteronormative experiences as central to long-term understandings of their queerness.

Heteronormativity’s ability to diminish queerness at sleepovers is based on sociological influences such as friend groups, cultural backgrounds, and alternate identities such as race and class (Oswald et al. 2005). Although just because heteronormative pressures are present does not indicate whether queerness can exist. Queerness can occur regardless of one’s personal attraction or conscious reading of certain behaviors as queer, so an individual does not have to experience queerness to participate in its construction. The fluidity of these engagements can then turn spaces for strengthening platonic attachment into sites of possible experimentation with gender and sexual identity.

Conclusion

Queerness in the sleepover environment may not always be clearly identified, but the intimate, private, and liminal structure of sleepovers creates the potential for queerness beyond everyday engagements with friends. The interviews demonstrate that sleepovers, depending on the individual and group dynamics, are a negotiation between heteronormative behaviors and the instability of what constitutes intimacy in same-sex friendships. Upon challenging typical narratives of sleepovers that assume individual roles for AFAB adolescents as being invested in boy talk and strictly focused on platonic bonding, sleepovers can be seen as a space for possible exploration of queer identity. In such spaces, queer AFAB adolescents can explore the differences between platonic and romantic attraction as they transition into adulthood, and conceptualizations of girlhood as strictly heteronormative can be reimaged.

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Performative Disembedding: Amid and Between Potential and Professionalism in Ethiopian Girls' Running

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Embodied Potential and Professionalism

In June 2018, boys and girls travelled from towns and cities around Ethiopia to Asella – a town in the Arsi Zone of the Oromia region, about 126 kilometers south of the capital Addis Ababa – to vie for a position on the Ethiopian national team, which would compete at the World Athletics Under 20 Championships later that summer in Tampere, Finland. Along with the neighboring town of Bekoji, Asella is known as the origin place for many of Ethiopia's greatest runners. It is a small city situated along a steep main street, where hotels built by local heroes like Olympic champions Kenenisa Bekele and Derartu Tulu serve as infrastructural reminders to young athletes of what they can become.

The Under 20 Championship potentially serves as a life-changing springboard for the newest crop of Ethiopian stars, catapulting the children of farmers into professional athletes. But for many young girls aspiring to run, embarking on the sporting path required, or would soon require, a dynamic process of disembedding from a range of intersecting geographic, social, gendered, and developmental positions.

In her study about young women and social change in urban Madagascar, anthropologist Jennifer Cole reformulates Charles Taylor's notion of "disembedding" to describe the "slow, uneven, and multi-directional ways people can become divorced from old attachments and form new ones" (2010, 50) as they move from rural to urban areas to change their lives. In this essay, I show how Ethiopian girls who aspire to run must engage in a multi-directional performative process of disembedding that goes beyond a geographic scope (that is, beyond the movements between the rural, urban, and international). For girls at early developmental stages, the process of disembedding is also one in which they must perform their girlhood at times, and adulthood in others, in relation to the shifting demands of the international labor market of running.

In the economy of running, girlhood and labor are commodified akin to ways that youth has been commodified worldwide, bolstered by free market ideology, a dehumanizing mode of consumerism, and the rise of a racially skewed punishing state (Giroux 2010). But employing an intersectional lens to the transnational industry in which Ethiopian girls work as runners is crucial in understanding that they confront a stage in which they must perform in multi-directional ways developmentally and temporally as Black girls in the world (Crenshaw 1989). As Ethiopian girls

face a culture of distrust among powerful actors in a very male-dominated running world, with racism and cultural ignorance baked into the fabric of the market, they must perform athletically – in the lexicon of sport, they must win – but also submissively – that is, make themselves legible in a system that is structurally built on profiting off of global inequalities of race, gender, and age. Ethiopian girl runners are then faced with the paradoxical and impossible task of performing youth and maturity; innocence and coachability; embodied potential and professionalism.

Vying for a “Chance”

When and where girlhood ends are highly variable in Ethiopia and choosing to be a runner can both elongate and curtail the lived experience of girlhood. In development and anthropological literature alike, child marriage poses a severe threat to girls in Ethiopia (Abera et al. 2021; Erulkar 2013; Hannig 2017). Many young women have marriages arranged by their parents at an early age; some girls are even abducted and forced into marriage, and others conform to cultural practices and marry early by choice.

The girls I met explained the geographic, cultural, and developmental crossroads they face in early adolescence.¹ Often coming from a cultural context where running is seen as taboo for a woman, athletes told me over the years that if they wanted to avoid early marriage and continue running, they would need to run away, literally and figuratively, to the capital city or another center where they could have basic needs taken care of by a coach or club, and eventually get a “chance” to go abroad.

“Chance” is in quotes here because athletes would use the English version of “chance” to talk about racing abroad rather than the Amharic rough equivalent of *idil*, which connoted an interior and religious state of being lucky (Levine 2014). “Chance” was deeply entrenched in the athletic lexicon, and implied other determining factors, largely out of an athlete’s control. But getting a “chance” had less to do with athletic ability or perseverance than it did to performing as an athlete with potential value outside of competition.

As my research progressed, I began training with a group of young athletes in Addis Ababa in 2017. Here, I learned not only about their dreams and aspirations, and reasons for leaving the countryside, but also about their perceptions – both correct and misinformed – about the process of professionalizing. All young athletes learned by word of mouth that winning a junior national competition was one way to race abroad, as was finding a “manager” – or in the sports world, an international agent. But exactly how to do that, to get a real “chance,” remained a nebulous mystery.

Being fast was a prerequisite. Performing athletically was a necessity but did not necessarily guarantee a life-changing contract; even making a national team was only a step. Performing potential at the youth stage and being able to manage a host of parasitic relationships that

developed with a slew of actors trying to cash in on the value of their embodied labor was a crucial part of the performance of professionalism. I would later explore the elite side of sport in my research, interning with a sports agency and spending a year with a high-level management group, watching girls socially and economically transform their lives. But when I went down to Asella in 2018, I was beginning to learn, alongside my training partners in Addis Ababa, about the additional performance modalities that being a young promising athlete entailed.

“This is Supposed to be a Youth Competition!”

When I arrived at the stadium on the first day of the competition in Asella a major dispute was playing out between coaches and officials. As I approached the circle of conflict, the coach of a major government club, Commercial Bank, yelled to me, “They have no control!”

We were vaguely familiar with each other at this point, and I asked him what the problem was. “This is supposed to be a junior championship! Look at her!” he said, openly pointing at an athlete warming up on in the infield. “You think she’s under twenty years old? She’s at least 25. This is supposed to be a youth competition!” The coach literally pointed fingers at members of the Federation who were present to make his point; their interests were centered around sending athletes who would win medals, not necessarily policing their age.

Internationally, running journalists and fans have criticized Ethiopia for “age cheating” numerous times at junior competitions. Many claim that athletes put down fake ages and compete down to gain a performance edge over their foreign competitors. Discussants on LetsRun, a preeminent running media outlet with active message boards from running fans around the world, regularly express doubt about Ethiopian “junior competitors,” who they perceive to be much older than their ages listed on paper (LetsRun 2018).

While many of these accusations stem from racism or cultural ignorance, they are not totally unfounded. Falsifying documents that list one’s age, as evidenced by this dispute, is as much a problem domestically as it is internationally. Fans and journalists abroad do not understand that most athletes from the countryside do not actually know their birth dates and often do not have a documented age until they are poised to compete abroad. When athletes aspire to run professionally, they are indeed encouraged by coaches and companions to ask for a younger age at the immigration office, because impressive times earlier in childhood demonstrate potential. As a result, coaches, officials, athletes, and agents know these documents may not reflect biological reality, and thus engage in a process of evaluating the “true” youth of young talent.

Girls I have spoken to over the years, both in real time as they seek to demonstrate a sense of potential but also youthful innocence, and in retrospect, have brought about important tensions they feel in performing, and being evaluated, for their youth.

Once, in 2015, I was on a bus into Addis Ababa from Sululta with a young athlete I was living with at the time. Azeb, a teenager, was going to the immigration office to ask for a new passport.¹ She received one a few years earlier after both of her parents died, when she sought domestic work in the Middle East to provide for her and her sister. It was important for her to be of the legal age to get an exit visa, so she begged the immigration officer to do so, and therefore currently had a passport that indicated she was 25 years old – much older than she really was.

Now that Azeb was running, she figured her chances of making money through athletics might be better. She learned that in this instance, to sell her labor, being a *girl* was, in contrast to the domestic labor she previously sought, much better than being a woman. “I will ask them for 16,” she told me on the bus ride into the city.

When we met a few hours later and I inquired about the appointment she shrugged, “They gave me twenty.”

While Azeb was indeed a bit older than many athletes at the junior competition in Asella, her experience trying to alter her age indicated the multiple modalities of performance that girl runners needed to learn. They needed to perform, in the literal and athletic sense, first and foremost as good runners by getting results on the track. They would also need to perform both *youthful* potential through the capacity to grow, age, and improve – and *matured* professionalism through the ability to already succeed as a full-time athlete.

The Performative Paradox of Disembedding

In Finland, at the World Athletics Under 20 Championships, in the morning and evening astonishing performances took place out on the track, but behind the scenes the inner workings of a “meat market,” as one agent put it to me, was on full display. Girls and boys from the United States were largely there for experience and would return home to attend university. Many parents even flew from the U.S. and other European countries to watch their kids perform. But Ethiopian girls and boys, many of whom had parents who were subsisting off the grains and crops they cultivated, were on the cusp of life-changing contracts if they performed well. The social and material stakes of their performances were markedly different.

Above the grandstands, representatives from shoe companies were discussing the value of the performances. It was expected that Ethiopians and Kenyans would take home most of the distance medals. What was up for speculation was their true age, which would dictate, to those signing their contracts, the corresponding value of their labor. Much like the coaches at the competition in Asella, many suspected that some of the athletes did not biologically belong in the “youth category.” One runner, in particular, was discussed on the message boards of the same running website mentioned above, which referred to the IAAF (then, the international governing body of

track and field, now known as World Athletics), as a “joke” for letting a woman from Ethiopia compete. Others, who looked “baby-faced,” were seen to have higher value.

Notably, the ease with which others in the industry spoke about their fates shed light on the inequality upon which this system is built. A conversation about a young, promising, white woman from an English-speaking country would be more collaborative, dynamic, and have a higher dollar sign attached to it; an Ethiopian girl would expect to be grateful for what was offered.

Even still, girls understand these inequalities, and push back on some of these constraints by understanding these parts of the job as constructive and de-linking the moralism about being truthful about their age that is projected on to them. They understand that as they attempt to narrate and develop their own politics of body through athletic performance (Cox 2015), they must recognize and grapple with the limitations of their various audiences in rural, urban, and transnational registers.

Contrary to perceptions of deceptive “age cheating,” I argue that Ethiopian girls who run must perform an often-paradoxical form of disembedding. They must not only perform certain kinds of aged and gendered times and places, but also an expectation of embodied running potential to continue in their pursuits. The performances here, too, have incredibly high stakes. In many cases, since girls have foregone traditional gendered roles to perform as *emerging* athletic stars, they are expected to perform on the track as skilled, off the track as professional, and amid these spaces as simultaneously having time to blossom and already embodied potential, which means occupying a sometimes-liminal space and disembedding at various points in time. A good performance of disembedding could lead to a real “chance,” pushing back against the unequal racist, gendered, and geopolitical footing upon which they entered this global running sphere.

Notes

¹All names are pseudonyms.

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Hannah Borenstein is a Collegiate Assistant Professor in the Social Sciences Collegiate Division and Harper-Schmidt Fellow in the Society of Fellows at the University of Chicago. Her research is broadly concerned with intersections of sports, race, gender, politics, and labor, with a particular focus on long distance running in Ethiopia. Her book project, provisionally entitled *Running to Labor: Ethiopian Women Distance Runners in Networks of Capital*, comes from over two years of fieldwork in Ethiopia, along with multi-sited archival and anthropological research in the U.S., Europe, and Asia.

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Constellations: Connections Across Childhoods

Teaching Tool for Imagined Femininity: Pain Over the Life Cycle

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Introduction

We have created this teaching tool to support educators using the article “Imagined Femininity: Pain Over the Life Cycle,” featured in this Spring 2023 issue of *NEOS*, by Estel Malgosa and Brunna Alvarez in their classes. The teaching tool includes reflection questions, prompts for discussion, comments from the authors, and follow up assignment ideas to encourage a rich engagement with the article. Educators are welcome to share the authors’ comments with the students or they can use them to inform their contributions to the discussion with the class. This teaching tool is relevant to a wide range of disciplines including but not limited to social work, politics, sociology, anthropology, nursing, social psychology, health psychology, gender studies, and more.

Preparation

Have students read the article in advance and encourage them to consider the following questions as they read:

- How does the article relate to your understanding of femininity and pain?
- How is the link between pain and femininity constructed or enforced in society? Think about the media, the medical system, public discourse, education, schools, and more.
- What has your own experience been with education regarding the female body? Were female experiences framed to you as positive, as negative, or not at all in your early education?

- As a child, what did you associate with femininity? Do you recall pain as part of the construction of femininity in terms of your understanding?

Author Comments: I think that if we lived in a society where menstruation was highly valued, our perception of 'pain' and 'discomfort' would be totally different. We always say that there are things that can be uncomfortable (like having large breasts) but, instead, they are socially valued as positive. Linking femininity and pain makes female bodies resign themselves to feeling pain, thereby normalizing disorders and pathologies, preparing them for the 'sacrifice' of motherhood, or they could also normalize having painful or pleasureless sexual relations. For example, a study by the Spanish Women's Institute (2022) shows how 60% of young women have had sex without sexual appetite.

Discussion

Allow time for an in-class discussion using the following questions as prompts for small or large groups.

- How do children participate in the discourse surrounding femininity and pain, and how might this be catalyzed by a lack of education surrounding the female body?
- The article mentions that there is a high likelihood that a proportion of the participants had begun menstruating despite none of them mentioning it. How does the fact that none of the participants mentioned their own menstrual experience speak to discourses surrounding the female body?
- The article mentions that children are more likely to resist hegemonic representations of femininity when they have access to information about their bodies and their sexuality. How do you think children are educated about sexuality and their bodies today? Who do you think educates them?
- How might the framework of sexual health or sexual education classes be altered to foster change in the discourse and knowledge surrounding femininity and pain?
- How does the discursive link between femininity and pain potentially impact female-bodied people?
- What is your knowledge of feminized chronic pain conditions such as endometriosis, adenomyosis, polycystic ovarian syndrome, pelvic inflammatory disease, dysmenorrhea, and dyspareunia? If your understanding of any of the aforementioned conditions is limited, consider exploring their pathology and symptomology further.

Author Comments: First of all, I would like there to be sexuality education with a gender perspective and focused on children (for example, RSE has not yet been implemented in Spain). This should incorporate pleasure in sexuality as a central element, making visible the vulvas and the clitoris. Also, when working on reproduction, talk about the clitoris, otherwise we talk about male ejaculation (pleasure) and female ovulation (menstruation/pain). I think that menstruation could be treated as a health cycle and explain different experiences. I think that menstrual education and reproductive education could be included in sexuality education.

Follow up

As a follow up to the class discussion, ask the students to write a short essay or post to a discussion forum using one of the following prompts:

- How did your perspective of femininity change based on the article and class discussion?
- How does this article build upon or parallel other ideas, readings, theories, or discussions that we have encountered in this class so far?
- What are the potential implications of what is represented in this article for female-bodied people? Where and how would you like to see change?
- What has been your personal experience with understanding of femininity and links to pain?

As an additional or alternative follow up assignment, have the students anonymously write down one thing they wish they would have known as a child regarding femininity and pain. You can then compile what the students wrote down so they are able to read each other's ideas.

References

Malgosa, Estel and Bruna Alvarez. 2023. "Imagined Femininity: Pain Over the Life Cycle." *NEOS* 15 (1).

Author Biographies

Chloe Bozak recently graduated with her Bachelor of Social Work from Thompson Rivers University located on the unceded and ancestral territory of the Secwepemc peoples. She is

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Hannah Valihora is a fourth year Bachelor of Arts Candidate at Thompson Rivers University, within Secwépemc'ulucw. She is a double major in sociology and psychology and will graduate in June of 2024 with distinctions in both research and co-operative education. Valihora is passionate about exploring how identity interacts with feminized illness diagnoses, and how the implementation of feminist theory and practice may improve such patient outcomes. Valihora is also interested in utilizing feminist theory as a pedagogical praxis to impart a greater ethics of care in education, healthcare, and qualitative research practices. Following the completion of her BA, Valihora will pursue her MA in Sociology, further intending to complete a PhD in her respective field.

Estel Malgosa (<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0727-5392>): I have just finished the PhD program in Social and Cultural Anthropology at the Autonomous University of Barcelona (UAB), for which I have obtained a scholarship. Since 2017 I coordinate, together with Bruna Alvarez, the SexAFIN project in which my doctoral thesis is framed. In my thesis, focused on sexuality and childhood, I try to understand how boys and girls from public schools in the province of Barcelona (Spain) construct, live, and narrate sexuality; how the gender with which they identify influences their narratives; and how adults talk (or not) with them about sexuality. I combine my thesis and the coordination of the project with the upbringing of my 3-year-old daughter and a new little person who is on the way.

Bruna Alvarez (<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9069-4573>): Ph.D. in Anthropology and professor at the Autonomous University of Barcelona (UAB), the University of Barcelona (UB), Queen Mary University of London (QMUL) and tutor for the Degree in Anthropology and Human Evolution at the UOC. I am a member of the AFIN Research Group of the UAB, where I carried out research on maternity, reproduction, and sexualities. I finished my PhD in 2017 on maternity policies in Spain when my children were 8 and 6 years old. After an intense maternity experience (research and parenting) I worked on assisted reproductive technologies and coordinated research on children and sexuality. Currently, I am trying to consolidate my academic career, while my children grow up and my family includes more members.

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Interview with Parul Malik

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Introduction

This interview follows Parul Malik’s article “‘You Cannot Escape’: Children Working with Children for Sexuality Education,” featured in *NEOS* Volume 14, Issue 1, Spring 2022.

Interview

Chloe: The theme of our Spring 2023 NEOS issue is Girlhood and Sexuality at Intersections of Performance, Relations, and Representations. Your Spring 2022 NEOS article discusses nurturing children’s agency regarding their sexuality. Could you elaborate on the importance of and/or the potential impact of nurturing children’s agency in relation to girlhood and sexuality?

Parul: Girls in patriarchal cultures, as our own, often have fewer opportunities to engage with ideas of sexuality. They have limited control over their bodies, choices or even what they learn. Nurturing their agency enables girls to understand themselves and their worlds better. For instance, how their body functions, what laws protect them, how patriarchal roles can be challenged, or what equitable relationships look like.

Chloe: You mention in your article that researching sexuality with children is a sensitive topic in India. Can you explain these sensitivities for our readers and elaborate on how you think the sensitivity of the topic affects children’s sexuality and sense of agency over their bodies?

Parul: It is a paradox. Sexuality, on one hand, in India is bound in conventions of taboo, hesitation and shame; while on the other hand, is everywhere. We do not have a formal curriculum for sexuality in schools - apart from some fleeting discussions about violence and reproductive health — and conversations about it at home are sparse. Parents think schools could take sessions, the school thinks the family should. This leads to an intergenerational cycle of silence. It is, then, challenging to justify why we should have discussions about sexuality; especially in a cultural context where children are considered to be ‘too young’ to engage with anything ‘sexual’. The children in turn find it difficult to understand and communicate about their sexuality. This affects

one's sense of agency over their body, decision making, and interpersonal relationships as they grow up.

Chloe: What challenges or barriers did you face while researching such a sensitive topic with children?

Parul: One did encounter challenges over the course of the research. A few to spell out could be that:

1. Schools and elders (teachers and parents) did not always want their children to have discussions about “sexual” ideas.
2. They wanted me to facilitate sessions built on their worldviews, such as the teachers pushed for teaching children conventional gender norms.
3. They found participatory research on sexuality with children to be tedious and too “detailed”.
4. As a researcher, I was unable to find relevant participatory research on sexuality with children within our cultural context.

Chloe: How do you think your research was influenced or changed by the fact that you utilized participatory research to research with the children?

Parul: Participatory research enabled the children to claim their agency in the research process, establish ownership over content and learning, and engage collaboratively on ideas pertinent to their own lived experiences. I was an elder and outsider to their cultures, and the topic was a sensitive one. The research process and experience needed to be meaningful and relevant to the participants. The research was, therefore, completely influenced by the methodology employed, which emerged from children's active participation.

Chloe: In your article, you discuss the discourse of protecting childhood sexual innocence and of viewing sex as a symbolic marker of where childhood ends and adulthood begins. You further discuss how this discourse denies children the opportunity to learn about their bodies. Can you talk more about where you think this discourse comes from and further elaborate on how it denies children opportunity?

Parul: Louise Allen's work in New Zealand had earlier underlined this fact and this has been pertinent in a different part of the world as ours. This discourse is built and cemented through institutions, such as the family, state, and education. All deny children the opportunity to engage with sexuality. For instance, the state's policy on education is either silent or inadequate to bring in sexuality education into the school curricula. Or when schools do conduct sessions at their own

discretion, they choose ideas like menstrual health and hygiene, which are reductive and do not go beyond biology.

Chloe: What future research might you like to undertake or see elsewhere that concerns children, sexuality, and perhaps girlhood?

Parul: Girls' or children's interaction with social media vis-a-vis sexuality in the Indian context is still under-researched. This would include, for instance, prevalent practices of sexting and body shaming within digital peer cultures, amongst a range of others.

Chloe: We would be pleased to hear more about what you are presently doing, either with the research you wrote about in your previous article or any new projects.

Parul: I currently teach grades 11 and 12 school students in Delhi, India. This position opens opportunities to explore ideas of sexuality in curricular and co-curricular ways. For instance, my students recently made a very creative presentation to their peers and teachers during the class assembly on 'Masculinities'. This included, poetic and musical performances, well-researched speeches, a report about a short research project (where they had mapped the school space and surveyed junior boys about their experiences of growing up male), and so on.

Author Biographies

Parul Malik has received her Ph.D. from Delhi University's Department of Education. Her research was about Critical Sexuality Education with children in and out of school contexts, using peer education and participatory methods. Currently, she teaches English to high school students at a private school in New Delhi, and continues to engage with ideas of gender and sexuality in co/curricular spaces. She is also interested in sexuality and critical literacies, and children's everyday experiences of sexuality on social media platforms.

Chloe Bozak recently graduated with her Bachelor of Social Work from Thompson Rivers University located on the unceded and ancestral territory of the Secwepemc peoples. She is interested in many areas of social work, but she is especially interested in law and policy. Specifically, she is interested in how people who are affected by specific laws and policies can inform said laws and policies as the experts of their own experience. Chloe is hoping to further her education in the area of social justice and to end up in a space where she is able to utilize both her social work education and her passion for law and policy.

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About NEOS

NEOS is the flagship publication of the Anthropology of Children and Youth Interest Group (ACYIG), American Anthropological Association. The bi-annual publication consists of peer-reviewed original short-form research articles as well as editor-reviewed commentaries and feature pieces. *NEOS* relies on the work of many volunteers, including the full editorial board, peer reviewers, the ACYIG communications team, and a multitude of advisory board members for both *NEOS* and ACYIG. If you are interested in getting involved, please contact acyig.editor@gmail.com.

About ACYIG

Launched in 2007 as an Interest Group within the American Anthropological Association, the Anthropology of Children and Youth Interest Group (ACYIG) now boasts more than 1200 members in over ten countries. Members include academics and practitioners who publish on and work with children all over the world. The need for an anthropological interest group concerned with children and childhood continues to center on the fact that, despite growing interest in the area of cross-cultural research on childhood, children's experiences, and children's rights, there are very few established places to discuss and publicize such work, especially outside the realm of education and health disciplines. To read more about ACYIG, visit our website at <http://acyig.americananthro.org>

NEOS Editorial Board

Co-Editor - Rebecca L. Sanford, PhD, RCSW

Rebecca is an Associate Teaching Professor in the School of Social Work and Human Service at Thompson Rivers University, situated on the unceded territory of Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc within Secwépemc'ulucw. Rebecca has over 18 years of experience as a clinical social worker, researcher, administrator, and educator, with specialization in the areas of child and youth mental health, working with children and their families in community-based settings, program development and evaluation, clinical supervision and workforce development, suicide prevention, and intervention, and trauma and traumatic bereavement. Rebecca's research interests include the impact of exposure to suicide, the suicide bereavement trajectory, disenfranchised grief, and ambiguous loss, and the development and dissemination of interventions for people who are bereaved or otherwise impacted by suicide.

Co-Editor - Jennifer Shaw, PhD

Jenny is an Assistant Teaching Professor in the Faculty of Arts at Thompson Rivers University, within Secwépemc'ulucw. She has a PhD in Anthropology from Simon Fraser University and an MA in Anthropology from the University of Victoria. Jenny's research explores the intergenerational implications of immigration and labor policies in Canada, focusing on Filipinx

youths' experiences of long-term family separation and reunification. Her research also concerns migrant domestic labor and gendered forms of work across borders. As a multimodal ethnographer, she employs photography, drawing, song, and poetry in her research as avenues for youth-centered expressions. Her work has been published in peer-reviewed journals including *Children & Society*, *Anthropology of Work Review*, and *Global Studies of Childhood*.

Developmental Editor - Anne-Marie Bedard

My name is Anne Marie Bedard and I'm very happy to be a new developmental editor with the NEOS team. I recently graduated with a Master of Arts in Psychology from Pepperdine University. I'm currently completing an internship in clinical therapy, with the goal of obtaining my license to practice as a professional clinician. I'm also working as an adjunct instructor of Psychology at the community college level. I am a lifelong resident of the state of Michigan, where I'm a very active member of my church's music program, singing and playing the piano. I can also be found interacting with several wonderful cats when it pleases them to allow me to do so.

Digital Scholarship Intern - Chloe Bozak

Chloe recently graduated with her Bachelor of Social Work from Thompson Rivers University located on the unceded and ancestral territory of the Secwepemc peoples. She is interested in many areas of social work, but she is especially interested in law and policy. Specifically, she is interested in how people who are affected by specific laws and policies can inform said laws and policies as the experts of their own experience. Chloe is hoping to further her education in the area of social justice and to end up in a space where she is able to utilize both her social work education and her passion for law and policy.

Assistant Editor and Developmental Editor - Chelsea Cutright, PhD

Chelsea Cutright (she/her) is currently a Visiting Assistant Professor of International Studies and Anthropology at Centre College. She has a PhD in cultural anthropology from the University of Kentucky. Her teaching and research interests include gender, sports for development, youth studies, and contemporary Africa.

Assistant Editor and Peer-Review Coordinator - Alexea Howard, MA

Alexea Howard, MA is a recent graduate from California State University, Long Beach whose focus is in Medical Anthropology. She graduated at the top of her class with awards such as Distinguished Graduate Student, Academic Excellence, and Best Thesis. Alexea earned her BA (Honors) in Anthropology with a focus in Medical and Psychological Anthropology from the University of California, Los Angeles, and received post-baccalaureate training in Psychology and Addiction Studies. Her research explores the way that concepts of health and illness are impacted by a sense of community and a gained sense of agency. Her most recent work focuses on reasons for continued use among those who participate and frequent pro-anorexia websites

and how the use of these sites has impacted the community's conceptions of health and illness as it relates to anorexia.

Assistant Editor and Developmental Editor - Manya Kagan, PhD

Manya Oriel Kagan is a sociologist of education studying migration and education, specifically in urban contexts. Her research mainly relates to refugee children's rights employing ethnography, participatory visual methods and mapping techniques but also interested in alternative education and development projects in different contexts. She finished her Ph.D. in the Department of Education at Tamar Golan Center at BEN GURION University in the Negev, on the integration experiences of refugee children in Kampala, Uganda. She will soon take up her position as a postdoctoral researcher at Perry World House at the University of Pennsylvania. She has co-authored a number of articles in journals including *Race, Ethnicity and Education* and *Critique of Anthropology* and has co-edited (2019) a book entitled *International Development in Africa: Between Practice and Theory* [in Hebrew], published by Pardes Publishing House.

Developmental Editor - Chang Liu, PhD

Chang Liu is a clinical assistant professor from the Division of Educational Leadership and Innovation in the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College at Arizona State University. Her research focuses on how young children learn to become culturally and socially appropriate members of their society and how preschools play their role in this process. As a scholar from the global South, she also interrogates how and why globally circulating ECEC policies and practices originating in the global North and West are taken up, rejected, and localized in other countries and communities. Her work has appeared in leading journals such as *Comparative Education Review*, *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, and *Ethos*. She is also one of the co-founders of *Nonsignificance*, an independent, non-profit podcast focusing on gender, family, childhood, childrearing, and education issues in general.