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Identity politics

The sexualisation of society and its impact on children and young people.

Summary

- **Identity politics is a movement reshaping society's standards of education, politics, freedom, morals and family** based on the idea that human identity and worth are primarily instinctual and evolutionary rather than innate or endowed. This has compromised our capacity for free civil discussion, for understanding human fulfilment, the role of government in education as well as the design of sex and biological gender.
- **The current construction of sex and gender has resulted in a sanctioned exposure of children** to sexualised material and experiences, which they lack the maturity to process objectively.
- **Recommendations are necessary to ensure school programs have greater transparency and parental collaboration**, focusing on education (not indoctrination), ensuring true freedom of speech and academia, promoting a holistic view of identity and sexuality and relating how this impacts on relationships, character development and wider society.
- **Christians affirm that identity and full humanity derive from Christ** through whom we may receive a deeper and more secure identity than that imposed by radical political and social agendas. Christians consider it a matter of faith and duty to promote the Christian identity ethic and its benefits to society at large.

From sex to sexualisation

There has been a shift in culture from 'free love' to 'shaping culture by sex'. This sexualisation of society employs the sexual attributes of sexual desirability and behaviour as the "measure of a person's value and worth". [1]

Kamal Weerakoon has provided us with a very good outline of what sexualisation looks like in practical terms: "Sexualisation involves social and cultural forces which influence and shape us, and to the reception and appropriation of those influences in our lives. As a social process, sexualisation involves being inappropriately defined by a sexual identity."

There are strong socio-cultural influences that contribute to the process of sexualisation: advertising, popular music, film media and online social media that define 'the good life' in sexualised terms - not just in having sex, but more broadly in being socially affirmed for being sexually desirable.

Weerakoon suggests that when we see ourselves this way, we are doing two things:

> *First, we evaluate ourselves according to our sexuality. Our sexual desirability and performance become more and more important; everything else about us – our athleticism, artistic creativity, intelligence, craftsmanship, relational sensitivity, kindness, courage – become less and less important. Secondly, we take for granted that we have the right to define what it means for me to 'be sexually satisfied'. No-one outside me has the right to tell me who I am sexually, or how to conduct myself sexually – least of all 'God' or 'the church'. Anyone who tries to stop me from achieving sexual satisfaction – whatever that means for me – is at best old-fashioned, and at worst downright oppressive and evil.* [2]

From free love to Identity Politics

Throughout the second half of the Twentieth Century the psychology of sex became increasingly politicised. Historian Carl Trueman says the "seismic shifts" we have experienced in our culture demonstrate that *the politics of sexual identity rests upon a much wider and deeper transformation of human identity than simply sexual preference. And that so many of us have been caught by surprise by the rapid acceptance of transgenderism … reveals how blind we have been to these tectonic cultural shifts and to the means by which they have been made both normal and normative.* [3]

These fundamental shifts have involved a deep transformation in the way individuals view themselves. The notion of 'Psychological Man', made popular by the sociologist Philip Rieff, captures a core aspect of this identity-shift. Psychological Man locates all his meaning and identity in "his own inner well-being and happiness". This idea was merged with those of Freud and others, moving sex to the heart of individual and social identity, thus creating a new definition of human happiness that is focused around sexual satisfaction.

Trueman explains: *Happiness and personal satisfaction had been the hallmark of Enlightenment thinking and found its most artistic expression in romanticism. What Freud did was take the internalising impulse of romanticism and set it forth in scientific idiom of psychoanalysis, thus giving his philosophy a persuasive form of expression. He also thereby [focused much] of human identity and happiness specifically upon human sexuality* – by identifying sexual repression as a major source of unhappiness.[7] Freud argued that human identity development arose from more than the sexual drive, but the current politics of sexuality follows Freud in blaming unhappiness on the repressive influences of conservative institutions such as the family and the church.

Once the idea that "identity was primarily

sexual" became trendy, it was coupled with popular culture, entertainment and advertising. Trueman writes, "We need to understand that every commercial we ever see is projecting an image of Psychological Man to us: human beings as those who find fulfilment in the purchase of goods that will make us happier and, more often than not, sexier." [7]

Weaponising sexuality

In the 1950s and '60s, these changes in our understanding of human identity were integrated with ideas of 'oppression' in socialist theory, which had also begun to shift their grounding from the economic realm into psychological and sexual spheres. Italian philosopher Augusto Del Noce described this move as a new "warfare against repression" generally. Other leading lights in these new movements were Wilhelm Reich and Herbert Marcuse, upon whose work the sexual revolution and political movements of the 1960s were built.

Reich in particular viewed sexual repression as an enemy of true human identity, and responsible for "creating the pathologies and the dysfunctions of the world". He even believed governments "should supervise and indeed enforce the sexual liberation of the populace".[7] A free society would therefore: "provide ample room and security for the gratification of natural needs. Thus, it will not only not prohibit a love relationship between two adolescents of the opposite sex but will give it all manner of social support. Such a society will 'conclude that any adult who hinders the development of the child's sexuality should be severely dealt with.'"[7]

Reich was not universally accepted, but his view that young people should be free to gratify natural desires strengthened the argument against restraint from traditional influences such as parents. In Reich's thinking, human beings are fundamentally sexual in nature, and it is the State's responsibility to provide the right conditions in which this sexual identity could flourish. Politically, this had huge implications for marriage and the family in their traditional and monogamous sense, now seen as the "repressive social institution par excellence"[7]. Reich's work escalates sexualisation into a battle with the institutions of family and (Christian) religion, as we hear today in the rhetoric of some in secular society.

The fact that sexuality had become central to identity led to the co-opting of language traditionally belonging to the domain of civil rights. "When sexuality is identity, then sexuality has access to all of the cultural rhetoric which surrounds other identities and, most significantly, to the moral history of such". [7]

The co-opting of civil rights rhetoric by the sexual revolution has led to an emotive problem when it comes to challenging beliefs that sexuality defines identity. "Because the language of freedom/oppression and the background of the civil rights movement has been so comprehensively adopted by the LGBT lobbyists, it is virtually impossible to express any dissent with the movement without being immediately categorised as an irrational bigot motivated by hate." [7]

Regardless of individual rights to hold different views – or to suggest a logical argument against marriage redefinition – the response is an accusation of bigotry and hate. This brands a dissenting person as being against freedom and equality and for the oppression of a suffering minority: "the sexual revolution is part of an overall revision of what it means to be a person; and that revisionism has been brought about not so much by cogent argument as by other means"[7] such as intimidation, emotive name-calling and so on.

In this ideology, every distinction of sexual identity is built upon the foundation of someone's happiness. Any questioning of sexual identity is therefore considered oppressive and to be silenced because it is considered an attack upon a person's identity, happiness and freedom. Once a person's sexual identity becomes a form of political and social power, it becomes a powerful reason to be politically active.

This then became the mission of the new intelligentsia – to revise history, to ignore and obscure the achievements of democratic and Christian societies and to use the wedge of (sexual) victimhood in the cracks and fault-lines of society. The so-called victim is used as a tool of a broader political agenda with little concern for the damage to individuals, families and institutions.

What sexualisation is doing to children and young people

Most children and young people are exposed to sexual images and language through the internet, movies, music and broader popular culture long before they understand what they're dealing with. Exposure to sexual imagery and language is so commonplace that young people assume it's the norm and this informs their understanding of sexual behaviour with others.

Technology has become a major force in the sexualisation of young people. According to the Fifth National Survey of Secondary Students and Sexual Health (2013), carried out among over 2,000 Year 10, 11, and 12 students from Government, Catholic and Independent schools around Australia:

a) Half of all students reported having received a sexually explicit text message;

b) Just over a quarter of all students reported that they had sent a sexually explicit photo of themselves;

c) Most sexually active students reported receiving (84%) and sending (72%) sexually explicit text messages;

d) Half of all sexually active students reported sending a sexually explicit nude or nearly nude photo or video of themselves, while 70% reported receiving such a photo or video. [4]

Shelley Walker and others have provided some useful qualitative analysis on the effects of the sexualisation of technology.[5] She cites how the practice of sexting highlights the impact of sexualisation upon identity:

a) Young women feel pressured to present themselves as objects for sexual consumption, and young men carry expectations to respond to this;

b) Young people may become desensitised to sexual images, particularly as pornography changes what is seen as 'normal';

c) Young women are more likely to be negatively affected by sexting activities as there is a possible link between gendered sexual violence targeting women and the pressure on young women to send images of themselves to their friends.

Australian sociologist Michael Flood has noted the sexualisation of the culture and its effect on young people:

> *It is well documented that sexual media, particularly sexualised representations of girls and women, can encourage girls and young women to see themselves primarily in sexual terms, to equate their worth and appeal with narrow standards of physical attractiveness, and to see themselves as sexual objects… Both correlational and experimental studies find that adolescents' and young adults' exposure to media which sexualises girls and women is associated with greater acceptance of stereotyped and sexist notions about gender and sexual roles, including notions of women as sexual objects.* [6]

Michael Flood has noted that the consumption of porn by boys and young men intensifies attitudes supportive of sexual coercion and increases their likelihood of perpetrating assault. [6]

He also highlights a link between sexual behaviour among young people, including early sexual debut, and the consumption of sexual media content.

Flood adds that significant data shows viewing pornography is related to male sexual aggression towards women. Although this data is strongest in relation to violent pornography, it does still hold for so-called nonviolent forms, especially if pornography is viewed frequently by users. In addition, Flood links pornography with negative outcomes in relationships, including decreased intimacy, infidelity, and sexual "addiction". [6]

The sexualisation of society has led to young people engaging in sexual activity at an earlier age, often before they have the maturity to understand the personal, emotional and social implications of their actions. Few see marriage as the ideal context for discovering or exploring their sexuality.

A number of scholars and doctors have pointed out the lower age of sexual debut in Australia over the past several decades. First sexual intercourse takes place on average around 16 years of age, and young people generally have more partners than previous generations did. The National Survey of Australian Secondary Students and Sexual Health found that:

a) The majority of students (69%) have experienced some form of sexual activity.

b) Almost one quarter of Year 10 students (23%), one third of Year 11 students (34%) and one half of Year 12 students (50%) had experienced sexual intercourse;

c) Almost a quarter of sexually active students (23%) had sex with three or more people in the past year.

d) Approximately one quarter of sexually active students reported an experience of unwanted sex.[4]

Kang, et al state that the average age of first intercourse among Australian youth is 16 years, which "…is earlier than in previous generations. Like young people in other developed countries, young sexually active Australians are more likely to have multiple partners, unprotected sex and high-risk partners, with poorer access to services compared with adults, all of which puts them at an increased risk of acquiring and transmitting sexually transmissible infections (STIs)." [7]

Almost 13% of the Australian population report being frightened or forced into a sexual experience. The mean age of first being coerced into sexual activity for males and females is about 16 years, with 2.8% of men and 10.3% of women reporting sexual coercion before this age. A significant proportion of sexually active secondary school students also report having unwanted or unprotected sex as a result of being intoxicated. Patrick Parkinson from the University of Sydney suggests that, "the increased incidence of premature sexual activity and unwanted sex may well be (caused by) the increased sexualisation of young people due to exposure to pornography before the age of 16". [8]

As these figures highlight, Australian young people are engaging in sexual activity much earlier than previous generations. [9] Early sexual initiation is linked to a number of adverse health and psychological outcomes, such as a greater risk of STIs, unprotected sex, high risk and multiple partners, depression, and alcohol and drug abuse. [10] In turn, young people struggle to enter into marriage, begin families, and parent their children in ways that make for stable family lives and a healthy environment for bringing up children. Society itself also suffers without the socially stabilising foundation of functional marriages and families. [11]

Sexual education in schools and universities

It should be noted that sex education in Australia over recent decades has failed to arrest the decline in age of sexual debut, and, in a number of the markers already mentioned, has not brought greater levels of safety and wellbeing in relation to sexual activity. Instead, sex education curricula in Australian schools and universities creates the impression that sex during teenage years, and particularly under the age of sixteen or seventeen (the legal age of consent in Australia, depending on State), is a normal part of growing up.

Sex education in Australia tends to sexualise children even more by normalising non-monogamous sexual contact at a younger age. This approach is contrary to significant studies showing that the greater maturity of age at sexual debut, and the more often sex takes place in the context of long-term, monogamous relationships such as marriage, the better the outcome for both individuals and broader society. [11]

Gender theory in schools

Many see this accelerated sexualisation as a normal part of growing up. However, others observe that, under the guise of addressing issues of violence and respect, the education system has become a vehicle for further sexualisation, including embracing gender theory. Current approaches to gender theory in education now include:

a) Teaching that being male or female is a social construct and that gender is fluid, though in truth the great majority of Australian men and women see themselves within the natural biological categories of male or female. Therefore, to teach children to question heterosexuality as natural is illogical. [12]

b) Giving the impression that gender uncertainty and confusion is common and normal. In fact, research shows that, except in a small number of cases, gender is binary and the vast majority of people who experience gender confusion for a while, later embrace their birth sex. As one study notes: only a tiny minority of children who experience cross-gender identification will continue to do so into adolescence or adulthood; [13]

c) Emphasising sexual pleasure (however it is achieved). The positive aspects of sexual relationships within marriage are clear, but one has to question whether school classrooms are the place for discussion of fashionable alternatives. Respect should also be afforded to parental concern regarding children being instructed in public school classrooms on "emotional, physical and biological responses to sexual arousal … the sensory places/areas on the body that stimulate sexual pleasure or cause arousal' and 'pleasurable sexual acts such as masturbation'. Why are our classrooms becoming places for learning pedagogies of sexual pleasure?" [14]

Most parents of school age children will find the influence of this socio-political movement alarming. Their alarm is beyond moralising. It is a genuine concern that the sexualisation of children is causing serious health and social impacts that should not be normalised. Parents are rightly concerned about the ready access to pornography and the sexual activity of teenage children. Parents rightly expect schools to educate, not indoctrinate. It is not the role of schools to teach

about erogenous zones, masturbation, and gender fluidity or to politicise and sexualise the identity of the young.

Considerations for schools and education policy

Identity formation is more than sexuality, and to deny the opportunity to discuss this reality is to deny young people an important part of growing up. Young people may explore their identity, including their sexual orientation, but it should not be assumed by educators that this determines their permanent orientation. Political debate should not intrude into their freedom to grow normally and in accord with parental expectations.

Identity politics carries with it much more than demands for sexual orientation rights. The language of oppression and civil rights carries a deep cynicism about family, religion (typically Christianity) and government.

Schools are for critical thinking and learning, not for the destructive analysis of one's own culture and institutions. Families have historically been the institution responsible for the socialisation of children and the development of their values. Accordingly, governments need to implement evidence-based moderate sex education strategies for schools that respect the primary role of parents to promote responsible behaviour and good decision making, and moderate the deliberate sexualisation of students.

There is an obvious need for education in the responsibilities and risks, not only of the possibilities of sexuality. How technology is shaping this should also be properly understood and managed. Accordingly, the following should be researched, resourced and implemented:

a) Partnering with parents on school curriculum programs related to sexuality by ensuring direct parental input in the drafting of programs, rather than leaving matters solely to academics whose focus has obviously desensitised them;

b) Improve transparency: Require parental permission to teach children such topics (that is, opt-in rather than opt-out with no mandating of such programs). Allow parents to be present during any such lessons; and make curriculum materials freely available to the public with acknowledgement of which programs are used in each school.

c) Teach a holistic view of sexual activity, not merely as a biological action or a means of pleasure. It is a fundamentally moral action as it deeply affects all who engage in sexual experience – even though some may not concede that their reactions are moral. The current language of 'full consent' is in fact a moral position.

Consideration of Christian Identity perspectives

Christianity has a high view of human identity and value, grounded in the person of Christ as the ideal person who selflessly lives and dies for others. While no Christian is able to emulate Christ perfectly, Christ remains the single greatest influence in Christian identity and societal engagement. This is captured in His words, *"Do to others as you would have them do to you"* (Matthew 7:12).

The flourishment of identity and value is an intrinsic part of the mission of the Church. The theological idea of all people being made in the likeness of God (Imago Dei) implies healing from fractured and fragmented identity and restoration into well-rounded and well-adjusted personhood. This is a matter of faith and conscience for Christians rather than a social theory.

The natural, biological family provides a unique basis for identity – not just in the family name and history, but in the very genetics, physical and psychological traits. Biology and genetic familial history trump ideological identity formation and should be respected far more by educational and cultural institutions. Disrespect for the familial bonds between parents, children and other biological family relations is a serious fault-line in contemporary culture.

In closing, Christians find identity politics and sexualisation of children particularly unacceptable because it damages children in their self-understanding and in their capacity to relate to others in a healthy way. Furthermore it runs counter to their faith position about human identity – that it is much broader than sexuality and that it is based in the biblical revelation of being made in the likeness of God as exemplified in Christ.

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