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Regulating Bodies: Children and Sexual Violence

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Abstract
The interdisciplinary silences on sexual violence and the omission of children and youth from social science research speak volumes of the power of the child as a flexible, cultural signifier. In this article, I argue that dominant frameworks of children and childhood make child sexual assault a discursive impossibility for most young people. The epistemic violence of silencing matters, and it is these erasures that are fundamental to understanding violence and power. I argue it is paramount for feminist researchers to call attention to the undermining qualities of Institutional Review Boards that act as gatekeepers of representation and voice.

Keywords

> I mean, to be honest, when I was that age like, I had a lot of questions, like I know I had a lot of skepticism. I was like, but it was all, all the skepticism I might have had was put away because he was my

teacher and my parents had brought me up to be respectful, to always obey, and, to just be that way towards adults. I mean, that's good but, you know what I mean, that's good but because of that I didn't question it.

Seventeen-year-old Aiden, quoted above, was sexually assaulted in the second grade by his teacher. He told an adult confidant over 9 years later. In this excerpt, Aiden recognized the personal conflict he faced as a young child when his teacher's behavior radically departed from Aiden's expectations. Aiden struggled with the adult–child duality: adults as authority figures deserving of respect and children as obedient and unquestioning. He identified himself as a "skeptical" child but was brought up to be respectful and to "always obey" adults. Aidan's keen assessment underscores the dominant Western constructions of the submissive child and the adult authority that often appear in young people's interpretations of sexual violence (Hlavka, 2010, 2014). Such ideologies can both create and maintain risk environments for children, perhaps especially in spaces "designated" as safe (Lee, 2001) like home and school. Jill Korbin (2003) notes that

> it is perhaps simplistic to say that both childhood and violence are culturally constructed categories, it is nevertheless the case that violence is not a unitary phenomenon nor is childhood experienced similarly everywhere. Without making the basic assumption explicit, it is impossible to understand the variability of experience involving children and violence. (p. 432)

Major theoretical and methodological shifts in research *with* children, rather than *on* children, have occurred over the last few decades (James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998; Mayall, 2000; O'Kane, 2000). New methods to the sociological study of childhood have increased child participation, drawing attention to innovative research methodologies and agentic analytic approaches. Much of this epistemological and methodological engagement has come from countries outside of North America, so that children's experiences of violence *in* North America have largely remained quantified (Artz, 1998) and focused on criminal violence perpetrated by youth in the public sphere (Stanko, 1994). Sociology has always been interested in violence and victimization as a dynamic social behavior. Yet, children and childhood continue to be objectified and essentialized in the sociological literature so that it "often appears uncomfortable with its own object of inquiry" (Shanahan, 2007, p. 408). Feminist work on sexual violence has largely ignored children as well (Whittier, 2016), contributing to its marginalized status in the discipline and erasure from active theoretical commitments. Therefore, I use the term *epistemic violence* in testimony[1] from Kristie Dotson to show the practices of silencing young people's experiences of sexual violence. Dotson (2011) acknowledges the vulnerability of speakers in linguistic exchanges with others (the audience). In short, Dotson (2011) notes "to communicate we all need an audience willing and capable of hearing us" (p. 238). I argue that epistemic violence can attach to children and youth as they are culturally denied this kind of linguistic reciprocation.

This article treats child sexual violence not as an aberration, not as a rhetorical device, and not as ancillary research in the social sciences. Instead, I argue that the study of child sexual victimization is fundamental to understanding violence and power, it is central to social order, it is key to the reproduction of intersectional inequalities, and it can interrupt assumptions and transform power relations. Rather than review the research on children and sexual violence, I argue that it is both possible and critical to open spaces for young people to speak about their experiences of sexual violence, thereby shifting from research *on* children and that speaks *for* children, toward research *with* children. I also join the growing chorus of sociologists and anthropologists who have recently drawn attention to the disciplinary silences on sexual violence (Armstrong, Gleckman-Krut, & Johnson, 2018; Baxi, 2014) and specifically to the omission of children and youth (e.g., Hlavka, 2010, 2014, 2017; Korbin, 2003; A. J. Powell, Hlavka, & Mulla, 2017; Shanahan, 2007; Whittier, 2016). The relative silence from sociological and feminist scholars on child sexual violence is concerning. One in five girls and one in 20 boys will experience sexual assault in the United States before they turn 18 years old (Finkelhor, Shattuck, Turner, & Hamby, 2014). Other estimates note that upward of one in six men have experienced

abusive sexual experiences before age 18 (https://1in6.org/the-1-in-6-statistic/). Children living in communities marked by chronic poverty and violence are at increased risk of experiencing sexual violence (Miller, 2008; Popkin et al., 2015; Richie, 2012), and more than one third of women who report being raped before age 18 also experience rape again as an adult (Black et al., 2011). Only a small number of children who are sexually assaulted tell an adult (Finkelhor et al., 2014), and it is estimated that more than 85% of child sexual abuse is never reported to the authorities (Hanson, Resnick, Saunders, Kilpatrick, & Best, 1999).

In the following sections, I address the sociology of children and childhood, focusing on dominant frameworks in the social sciences and the epistemic violence that occurs when we draw sharp distinctions between adults and children. In the second section, I show that *the child*, as a flexible signifier, is culturally deployed by adults in the name of paternalism, protectionism, and punishment. I offer that dominant frameworks make child sexual assault a fiction, and thus an "impossibility"[2] for most young people. The sexually assaulted child is treated as an ambiguity within social science literatures, including that of feminist research on interpersonal violence. This becomes abundantly clear when a deliberate intersectional approach is taken to address how sexual violence operates within gendered, raced, and classed systems of domination (Armstrong et al., 2018; Crenshaw, 1991; Meiners, 2015; A. J. Powell et al., 2017), and perhaps especially when children's and youth's voices are brought to the fore. To do so, I draw on my own work on child sexual assault and that of others, which specifically addresses children's experiences and understandings, to show how they disrupt common assumptions and create alternative possibilities.

In the final section, I propose that it is through voice and participation that children and youth disrupt and transform dominant social orders. In doing so, I attend to some of the barriers to working with and researching children, including regulatory bodies that identify children as "vulnerable human subjects." Pioneering researchers are creating promising pathways, and I reference some of these innovative approaches used in the task of making sociology fit *for* children (Mayall, 2002) and attend to what Renzetti and Lee (1993) call the "politics of disclosure." The cultural resistances to acknowledging child agency (in particular, that of girl children), child subjectivity, authenticity, and legitimacy form the backdrop to this article. Therefore, I engage with the contested notions of child victim, of "vulnerable subject" and of "voice," for sexual violence has always been crafted around the impossibility of speech (Alcoff, 2018; Alcoff & Gray, 1993).

Dominant Frameworks of Children and Childhood

> If socialization were as smooth and successful as socialization theory presupposes, it would be difficult to account for the degree of violence that has existed historically in relations between adults and children. (Connell, 1987, p. 195)

Childhood is socially constructed and flexible as a cultural signifier, and thus, it is a "fiction of extraordinary power and utility" (Lee, 2001, p. 9). In the modern Euro-Western world, sharp distinctions between adult and child reflect ideas about children's nature and place within the home (Ariès, 1962; Holloway & Valentine, 2000). Prior to the 1980s, sociologists defined childhood in opposition to adulthood. Parsons (1956) described childhood as the internalization of culture and society, allowing for the reproduction of social order and society's key institutions. Socialization was the transition from "*human becoming* to *human being*," whereas adulthood was viewed as stable and finished, ushering power over and responsibilities toward the unstable, unfinished child (Lee, 2001, p. 19). Children were deemed dependent, irrational, unknowing, and incomplete and, therefore, represented as flexible bodies to be shaped into future adults. Dominant adult-centered paradigms continue to endorse the treatment of children as *beings becoming* adults, focusing on children's dependency on social institutions such as the family, school, and the state as sites of social investment and social order (Foucault, 1977).

This so-called universal dominant framework is a fictionalized stereotype, one that confers extraordinary power to those who can harness it and one that pits some childhoods and families against others. For example, James et al. (1998) identified "the innocent child," "the evil child," "the minority group child" (Mayall, 2002; Oakley, 1994), and "the socially constructed child" (James & James, 2001). The innocent child is the also the White child, constructed as passive, unknowing, and asexual (Corsaro, 2015; Kitzinger, 1997; Woodiwiss, 2014) so that childhood innocence also functions as racialized project (R. Bernstein, 2011), one in which children must be acculturated, civilized, socialized, or saved (Platt, 1969; G. Ward, 2012). Dominant images of vulnerable White children are often juxtaposed with images of Black and Brown children who embody the "other." Unlike the innocent child, the evil child and the minority child are morally accountable for their decisions and actions. They are cast as social problems so that most sociological and criminological work has focused on Black and Brown children's state-defined acts of deviance and delinquency, despite young people's own accounts of their survival strategies and resistance (Miller, 2008; Rios, 2011; Schaffner, 2006).

The sentimentalization of childhood (Best, 1990) and dominant discourses act as "regimes of truth" (Foucault, 1977) and confirm adult ownership and rights over children. The framework calms adult and expert anxieties about their worldviews, their responsibilities, and their ability to confidently make decisions in the "best interests" of children (Lee, 2001). In this way too, the framework reaffirms adult power over children, acting as the supplement to ideological, patriarchal, authoritative meaning and reasoning. This "regime of truth" has implications beyond the obvious power adults wield over children given the incidence and prevalence rates of interpersonal forms of violence. It also infers the use of *the child* and of "child protection" for state-sanctioned responses to interpersonal violence without deconstructing state violence itself (see Meiners, 2015), unquestionably of central importance to a discussion of child sexual violence. For example, the "adultification" of Black and Brown children often works to legitimize state violence (Epstein, Blake, & Gonzàlez, 2017). In most instances, regimes of truth render children silent and invisible. For Black and Brown children, it also reduces them to the unknowable and unbelievable (A. J. Powell et al., 2017). It limits the interpretation and understanding of what children do and say, and "just as it mutes children, the dominant framework grants adults the position of legitimate authorities over them, capable of knowing better than them and speaking more fully on their behalf than they are able to" (Lee, 2001, p. 44).

Scholars who have criticized the dominant paradigm view young people as capable experts of their own worlds, acknowledging that children are full, but developing beings. This paradigm shift sees children as socially constructed and childhood as a historically situated social phenomenon (Brannen & O'Brien, 1995; Corsaro, 2015; James, 2009; James & Prout, 1997; Kelly, Mayall, & Hood, 1997; Meyer, 1996; Thomas & O'Kane, 2000). Rather than the "child becoming," such scholars center children as agentic social actors with the ability to shape their relational identities and their social lives. Taking up constructionist and interpretive approaches to the study of children (e.g., James & Prout, 1997; Thorne, 1987) and calling for a "new" sociology of childhood (Corsaro, 2015), this approach positions children as constructors of their own cultures. The shift in framework creates a break from individualistic archetypes, yet seeks to maintain the concept of socialization, not only as adaptation and internalization of cognitive and social skills, but also as appropriation, reinvention, and reproduction of society (Corsaro, 1992, 2015). In principle, a new sociology of children focuses on child as agent, as social group, and as interrelated, relational beings in daily life (Corsaro, 2015; James & Prout, 1997). This paradigm then also accounts for gender, generation, and the organization of children's worlds such as epistemic violence and the adult control of knowledge (Best, 1990; Foucault, 1977; Mayall, 2002; Valentine, 1999). Despite its growing acceptance and applicability, this new sociology of childhood continues to be marginalized in the discipline.

The task of the sociology *of* children is to make sociology fit *for* children (Mayall, 2002). Underdeveloped in the research, however, it is particularly important to consider the intersectional lives of children and the

construction of childhood. Space and place are embedded in children's lives as they grow out of social practices in specific socially structured settings, which in turn serve to inform such practices (Connell, 1995; Giddens, 1984). Childhoods is plural, for no monolithic social status can encompass the experiences of all children. Gender, race, class, sexuality, and ability shape definitions, interpretations, and experiences of childhood (James & Prout, 1997), as do institutional expectations (Buckingham, 2000; Mintz, 2004). Therefore, in the following sections, I discuss how institutions and social movements that employ dominant frameworks of childhood politicize rape, thereby creating the *impossibility* of sexual violence for children. I attend to some of the research on child sexual victimization that includes young people's voices. Despite the institutional co-constructions of this work, I argue that it shows some of the *possible* spaces for children to talk about their experiences of sexual violence. In the third section, I extend these possibilities to regulatory research bodies that identify children as "vulnerable human subjects."

The Impossibility of Child Sexual Violence

> Survivor speech has been absolutely prohibited, categorized as mad or untrue, or rendered inconceivable . . . and therefore could not exist within the dominant discourses. (Alcoff & Gray, 1993, pp. 265-266)

Carol Smart (1989) argued that "on the one hand there are examples of almost hysterical concern for children, on the other, the danger to them is utterly ignored or glossed over" (p. 52). The ambiguity of existing somewhere within these discursive spaces creates the *impossibility* of child sexual violence. It is simultaneously unimaginable and inevitable. As I demonstrate in the sections ahead, the concern for children excludes most young people who will never identify with "hysterical" discursive framing because it is intensely feminized, racialized, and classed. Young people are tasked with navigating this discursive cultural absurdity, simultaneously protected, controlled, ignored, or disposed of. The discourses of sexual violence have always been heteronormative, patriarchal, and racialized (Flood, 2012; McGuire, 2010; Whittier, 2009). The dominant social narratives we tell about victims and perpetrators of sexual violence shape our stories of fear, threat, accountability, and justice. Perhaps it is nowhere more prevalent than in the construction of child sexual violence where the tropes of "real rape" (Estrich, 1987; Hlavka & Mulla, in press) emerge. Research on sex crime panics and the legal changes that accompanied them show how the fabled innocent, asexual, dependent White girl child was constructed as perpetually at risk from the stranger pedophile. This child served to galvanize social movements and spur legal changes, increasing professional and state control mechanisms such as psychiatric interventions, sex offender registries, and community notification laws (Jenkins, 1998; Leon, 2011; Meiners, 2015; Whittier, 2009). Nancy Whittier (2009) described child sexual assault as a political battleground wherein struggles convened over definitions, memory, prevention, intervention, expertise, and claims to knowledge. While concern for children and youth lies at the center of these tales, the purported but unfounded inevitability of sexual violence at the hands of a stranger-predator is nonetheless exploited and manipulated for political gain and arguments for increased state control (Meiners, 2015). This figure of the feminized and racialized child in need of protection is popularized and on display in the media, in laws passed in the name of White, girl children (e.g., Megan's Law, Jessica's Law, Jenna's Law), and in the politicization of rape used to denounce abuse and exploitation (Kitzinger, 1997). Pathologizing sexual offenders allows the public to react with moral outrage even when it sexualizes children via the eroticization of innocence (Kincaid, 1998). These discourses and practices draw simple absolutes between what is and what is not sexual violence.

What, then, of the *impossibility* of child sexual violence? When the existence of child sexual assault relies upon docile bodies (Foucault, 1977) trained for silence and submission and when it rests on the unsubstantiated claims of a dominant discourse that renders a child victim solely innocent, ignorant, and passive and a perpetrator as a predatory stranger, sexual assault is an impossibility for most children. When child sexual

assault requires particular conditions to be met such as physical injury and trauma (see the body of psychological research on the effects of child sexual assault), impeccable memory, immediate disclosure of the assault to an adult, and asexuality (Cossins, 2009; Estrich, 1987; A. J. Powell et al., 2017), it is an impossibility. And when Western society is so powerfully structured that young people are marginalized, denigrated, or altogether erased from cultural competency—most often because adults cannot or do not have the will to listen—child sexual violence is indeed an impossibility. Space does not exist within the American cultural imaginary for most children's experiences of violence. This impossibility is discursively and materially structured accordingly with gender, age, race, ability, and sexuality. In both cause and effect, the impossibility of child sexual violence is silencing, distorting, normalizing, and oppressing, so that it reproduces dominant gendered and racialized systems of social order and control.

Child sexual assault cannot exist against the backdrop of the dominant construction of the child who is not allowed sexual subjectivity, agency, or voice to know their experience on their own terms. The result is epistemic violence in that children's experience becomes unattainable and thus trivialized. The experience is erased in the process of its discursive and institutional shaping. Adults are active in this structuring, historically policing sexual behaviors of young people, particularly girls (Fine, 1988; Gilligan, 1982), and making youth sexuality taboo and invisible. The silencing of sexuality, desire, and talk occurs very early in life (Gilgun, 1986; Phillips, 2000; Ryan, 2000; Thompson, 1995; Tolman, 1994), and thus, sexual assault is intimately at odds with an "authentic" childhood. These erasures allow for the eroticization of child innocence (Kincaid, 1998), and together, it is ". . . a fetishistic glorification of the 'innate innocence' of childhood, and, indeed, a rhetoric which implies that sexual abuse stains that innocence" (Kitzinger, 1997, p. 168). Childhood innocence and protection is an ideology used to deny children knowledge and agency about sex and power and thus increases the risk of sexual violence (Levine, 2002). The notion of childhood innocence is material in that it is a source of taboo (Kincaid, 1998) and supports the perpetrator's claim to sexual violence. Perpetrators use language that engages images of the unknowing, ignorant child (Gilgun, 1995) to scaffold and control interpretation. The impossibility of child sexual violence allows space for everyone *but* the child to speak and to be heard. What, then, would the child say of the possibility of sexual violence?

The Possibility of Child Sexual Violence

> There is no homogeneous standpoint among rape victims that is available in an unmediated fashion. Their experiences themselves are steeped in historically and culturally contingent constructions and require that we attend to the signifying practices (including feminist ones) through which they are given meaning. (Mardorossian, 2002, p. 750)

According to Foucault (1980), our social and cultural lives are lived through discourses that reflect and contribute to knowledge and our understanding about social life, events, and social order. Feminist work on survivor discourse emphasizes how social actors do not operate outside of dominant discourses, interpretative processes, and institutional practices (e.g., Alcoff & Gray, 1993; Naples, 2003). Theoretically, language is an important link between individual and collective experience and sheds light on cultural beliefs, discursive practices, and structural resources. The production and reproduction of our understandings about childhood sexual violence is no different, as these dominant discourses represent particularized versions of reality and are maintained through cultural privileging and social order.

Research shows that gendered and heteronormative discourses structure how individuals understand their social worlds, including the experience of sexual violence (Hlavka, 2014, 2017; Nelson & Oliver, 1998; Phillips, 2000). My work on young women's descriptions of sexual assault and harassment demonstrates how heterogendered and heteronormative scripts are appropriated to account for violence. For example, young women described sexually aggressive behaviors by boys and men as customarily linked to the saying *boys will be*

boys: "It just happens," and "they're boys—that's what they do" ([Hlavka, 2014](#), p. 344). Threats and harassment were normalized as romance and heterosexual flirting, putting women in the position of gatekeeping sexual activity to which men felt entitled ([Connell, 1995](#); [Messerschmidt, 2012](#)). In the process of appraising and explaining sexual violence, girls drew upon dominant discursive understandings of gender, sex, and sexuality to interpret and justify actions that legitimated men's dominance ([Hlavka, 2014](#)). Take, for example, 12-year-old Abby, who recounted her experience of sexual violence within a complex social landscape of gendered power and sex. She struggled to account for her own consent and desire and shifted blame on herself rather than the 19-year-old man who sexually assaulted her. Describing feeling like a "Barbie doll," a "maid," or a "toy" that could be thrown away, Abby reflexively identified with gendered, raced, classed, and cultural positions in relation to violence, sex, and power ([Hlavka, 2014](#), p. 349). These findings are similar to research on adult women sexual assault survivors who often blamed themselves for rape, invalidated their own interpretations of assault ([Doherty & Anderson, 1998](#); [French, 2003](#); [Phillips, 2000](#); [Young & Maguire, 2003](#)), and framed rape as heteronormative, claiming "That's just the way guys are" ([French, 2003](#), p. 310). This work illustrates how, indeed,

> girls grow into women with gendered subjectivities in which sexual assault and harassment by males are part of everyday life . . . experiences of sexual abuse in childhood must be seen as part of the broad processes in which male-female power and authority are epitomized. ([Levett, 2003](#), p. 57)

Research shows that very young children interpret the behavior of others toward them, their own behavior toward others, as well as how their own behavior might affect the way others see them ([Bluebond-Langner, 1978](#)). For example, [Petronio, Flores, and Hecht (1997)](#) show how children act with a sense of thoughtfulness and consideration of events, people, and consequences as they try to control when, why, and to whom they are willing to tell about sexual violence. Their research relied on 38 intensive open-ended interviews of boys and girls who were sexually abused, ranging in ages from 7-18 years old. Petronio and colleagues discuss how children used a variety of temporal tactics when deciding when and to whom to disclose sexual violence with specific criteria for assessing appropriate conditions. For example, young people had to feel supported by confidants and others, which they judged over time[3] and they often chose specific times and places to disclose and did so incrementally to test (or, "hint around") whether others would support them. Children's fear of negative reactions is unquestionable, and disclosures are often contingent on the anticipated consequences of revealing their experiences of sexual violence. In my work, for example, many children and youth chose not to disclose their sexual assault for many years because they were fearful of family repercussions, especially of not being supported and believed. One young person in my research, Beth, was nearly 14 years old at the time she disclosed sexual assault that occurred for more than 6 years. She said she chose not to disclose the chronic sexual violence by her 20-year-old male cousin because her grandparents often called her "a whore" for the way she dressed and behaved. Once the abuse was revealed, Beth described a litany of harmful reactions from others:

> [My aunt] was mad at me cause, it felt like she was blaming me because it was my fault cause I let it happen. She was like, how could you let it happen and stuff like that and, I don't know exactly but she made me feel like it was my fault.

Innocence is gendered, classed, and racialized, of course ([R. Bernstein, 2011](#)). In Beth's case, she was a young White woman living in a poor community in the rural Midwest, precariously being moved from family member to family member because her mother was dealing with drug and alcohol abuse. The symbolic child has little to do with the knowing child, the agentic, or precarious child as those children are often ousted from the idyllic image altogether. Cultural representations are important because preserving the innocent child means pathologizing, sexualizing, or demonizing those children who cannot or are not allowed to occupy that imagined space. Material outcomes of such representations likewise become apparent. For example, in her work on

forensic nursing and sexual assault, Sameena Mulla (2014) emphasized the permeability of age boundaries between adults and children receiving sexual assault services in an emergency room. At age 13, young sexual assault victims were seen in adult facilities, but 12-year-old victims were sent to a different hospital. When asked about the differences or difficulties examining 12- and 13-year-olds, one forensic nurse claimed that 13-year-olds in Baltimore City were "just as sexually experienced as 30-year-olds" (p. 94). As much as hard lines are drawn in law and forensic practice, age is a permeable boundary. Even as the young 13-year-old victim is sexualized and categorized as an adult, it becomes clear throughout Mulla's work that these boundaries cannot be fully sustained as the young victim's precarity unfolds throughout the forensic investigation. In such configurations, we risk rendering children invisible who stand outside of an imagined innocence and are thus often not counted as victims of child sexual assault (O'Dell, 2003). Dominant notions of childhood innocence is not agentic, sexual, or knowing so that many young sexual assault victims like Beth and those in Mulla's work are excluded or cast as "other people's children" (N. Bernstein, 2014).

Rooted within cultural representations of the deviant and criminalized Black family that include tropes of the absentee Black father and single "welfare queen" mother (Flood, 2012; Gonzalez Van Cleve, 2016; Hill Collins, 2000; Richie, 2012), Black and Brown children are cast as "bad," hypersexual, and often undeserving of protection (Chesney-Lind & Eliason, 2006; Hill Collins, 2004; A. J. Powell et al., 2017; Stephens & Phillips, 2003). Black boys and girls are hypersexualized: Black boys as perpetrators (N. Bernstein, 2014; Meiners, 2015) and Black girls as "jezebels" (Flood, 2012; Hill Collins, 2004; Miller, 2008; Richie, 2012), despite their increased risk of sexual violence (Jones, 2009; Miller, 2008), including at the hands of law enforcement (McGuire, 2010; Ritchie, 2017). Not surprisingly, then, research shows that many young people of color have a deep distrust of law and the criminal justice system (Fagan & Tyler, 2005). Youth of color are more likely than Whites to perceive and expect legal injustice (Weitzer & Touch, 1999; Woolard, Harvell, & Graham, 2008) and to report negative personal experiences with police (Hagan, Shedd, & Payne, 2005). In my work (Hlavka, 2013), children of color, especially boys, described legal and criminal justice actors as intrusive, unhelpful, and harmful state apparatuses. Justice and the law were often contradictory for youth, and poor prior interactions with the state affected whether young people decided to tell someone about their experience of sexual violence. The criminal justice system often positions child crime victims as passive objects, but I argue that youth are instead making clear choices and decisions about state intervention into their lives, and that these legal subjectivities are unique to their social positioning. Coupled with the rise of the carceral state, mass incarceration of communities of color, and historical exclusion from U.S. political and legal systems that have deprived communities of their rights and justice (Alexander, 2010; Gonzalez Van Cleve, 2016), "the symbolic child also shores up the intertwined logics of punishment and protection" (Meiners, 2015, p. 135).

Given these intertwined logics, how can the child be simultaneously innocent but also guilty, victimized but criminalized (A. J. Powell et al., 2017)? It is as essential to deconstruct the use of the innocent, symbolic child as it is to recognize that the very "operationalization of ethnicity and culture in terms of 'minority' groups and children serve(s) to reify the majority culture and naturalizes 'whiteness' as the norm" (O'Dell, 2003, p. 143). We must interrogate the harms done to communities of color, "for the sake of the child" and "in the name of children" that have inevitably led to increased surveillance and carceral control via child protection systems, the criminalization of childhood in schools, juvenile adult court transfers, and increased use of collateral consequences (Rios, 2011; Zimring & Tanenhaus, 2014). It is essential to recognize that much work on youth (including my own) is situated within state systems and so young people's narratives of violence are co-constructed and contextualized as part of that system.

Sexual Violence, Voice, and Regulating Bodies

> Voice is one of the most pertinent ways in which the body-subject projects itself in the world as a subject with an own will and viewpoint. Voice is thus very much the physical carrier of relations among people; my voice links me with and gives me a place amongst personal others. (du Toit, 2009, p. 89)

The shifting cultural narratives and discursive framing of sexual violence outlined above should be a familiar one, mapping onto the women's anti-rape movements beginning in the 1950s (McGuire, 2010) with Black women breaking the institutional silence of White men's sexual assault of Black women and girls. In the 1960s and 1970s, victims and survivors encouraged resistance through speaking out and using voice to disrupt "both trauma and the hubris of perpetrators [that] flourished in reliable climates of silence" (Alcoff, 2018, p. 179). To speak out was to threaten the taboo of silence along with the very power structures that promoted that silence, perpetrators and institutions alike. Speaking about sexual violence, then, could be healing, cathartic, educational, political, moral, vindicating, and validating for women. It could, of course, also be humiliating and threatening to one's own sense of self in relation to a world mired in skepticism. The *possibility* of sexual violence was met with backlash against the breaking of social taboos, and survivors' speech was distorted and manipulated, making at least some sexual violence always impossible. Women were accused of making up stories of familial or intimate partner sexual assault; they were pathologized as bearers of fake memories; they were cast as vindictive liars attempting to gain frame; or they were deemed weak and confused about their own experiences of "normal" heterosexual sex (Alcoff, 2018; Kitzinger, 2004). As Foucault (1980) argued, speaking out can disrupt dominant discourses and transform power. It can also create new conditions of discipline and normalization, such as marginalizing and denying some women's voices.

Historically, women and children have rarely been regarded as experts or authorities of their own lives, or even of their own thoughts (S. Campbell, 2003). Together, they face similar discursive frameworks when it comes to speaking out about sexual violence. Informal sanctions include disbelief, disregard, blame, and questions of credibility, behaviors, and motive. Formal sanctions are institutionalized through professional retaliation for speaking out, via doubting medical professionals who refuse to offer women and children medical and forensic services (Corrigan, 2013; Mulla, 2014); through questions of credibility, corroboration, and consent in courts of law that often function as revictimization (Hlavka & Mulla, in press; A. J. Powell et al., 2017); and amid widespread cover-ups of chronic sexual violence in churches, athletic organizations, and universities (Armstrong, Hamilton, & Sweeney, 2006). At the very least, it becomes clear that speaking the possibility of sexual violence is so potentially disrupting to the dominant social order that a multitude of forces galvanize to silence and disrupt survivors' speech. Given the historical significance of women's voice in the transformation of gender relations, in challenging the status quo, and in demanding the right to be heard and regarded as agents of their own lives, why is it that feminist and victimization scholars have rarely included children's voices in their work on sexual violence?

Children experience a vast amount of interpersonal and structural violence (Korbin, 2003), but their own voices and perspectives have been largely absent, especially in the United States. This lack of attention is likely due, at least in part, to "adult conventional wisdom and cherished beliefs about human nature and childhood as a protected life stage" (Korbin, 2003, p. 442). However, if research on youth has taught us anything, it is that children are grossly under-protected. It is thus germane to ask questions about who gets to claim spaces of knowledge? Who has the power to define and deploy so-called ethical positions and structures of protectionism? Western-dominant frameworks inform Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) that define children as "vulnerable human subjects" in need of special and increased protections because they cannot make their own decisions (Qvortrup, 1993; Swauger, 2009). Such frameworks and scientific models have in no small way constrained research with children and youth. These tensions are strong, despite a growing recognition of the importance of including young people in research endeavors and of their abilities to participate in research

([Christensen & Prout, 2002](#); [M. A. Powell, Fitzgerald, & Taylor, 2012](#)). Scholars have criticized IRB overreach and the limitations set on social research despite little evidence that IRBs are effective in protecting participants ([Adler & Adler, 2016](#)). IRB guidelines are focused on a rights-based model rather than on the ethics of care explicitly promoted by feminist researchers ([Gilligan, 1982](#); [Harding, 2004](#); [Mulla & Hlavka, 2011](#)). Concerned mainly with managing risk, the result is disparate ethical body conclusions for similarly proposed studies in different universities ([Stark, 2012](#)) and decreased attention to understudied groups and topics like child sexual victimization. Who are we protecting by rendering the child invisible and the experience of sexual assault as impossible? How are our cultural values and assumptions operating to erase their experience of sexual violence from broader understanding of social inequalities?

We must question children's subjectivity and selfhood within Western epistemology and turn our focus, in a feminist sense, (back) toward local grounding, geographies, and meaning. Research with children in the global South and in South Africa demonstrates the absurdity of positioning children as passive and incomplete subadults. For example, [Patricia Henderson's (2012)](#) work on children as primary caregivers of HIV/AIDS patients in their households dictates the absolute necessity of centering young people. [Lauren Heidbrink's (2014)](#) work on migrant youth and transnational families and [Pamela Reynolds's (2013)](#) research with youth fighters and activists at the heart of the Anti-Apartheid movement center the perspectives, actions, and experiences of young people in conflict, in war, and in social movements. Child sexual violence, too, must be understood not only within the wider symbolic system in which it operates, but also, and essentially, outside of dominant systems that might structure responses like the criminal justice system and child protection and welfare systems. We need the voices of young people to be front and center—to speak of their experiences and to be able to narrate their interpretations of their experiences, not for the sake of others or for institutional purposes.

With cultural configurations of moral and social discourse evolving over time, a relational, constructionist view of child sexual victimization allows for the reconfiguration of sexuality and power as interconnected and repositions children as part of, rather than standing outside of, the social world ([E. Burman, 1995](#); [Corsaro, 2015](#)). Researchers must consider, therefore, how power—both structural and discursive—operates among and within social groups ([Bell, 1991](#), [1993](#); [DeVault, 1996](#); [Foucault, 1977](#), [1978/1986](#)). Because children are members of and affected by societies which in turn have been shaped by dominant discourses, "language is central to children's participation in their culture both as a symbolic system that encodes local, social, and cultural structure and as a tool for establishing (that is, maintaining, creating) social and psychological realities" ([Ochs, 1988](#), p. 210). Language can act as the empirical lens to children's active interpretations of sexual victimization because, as I argue, they do not simply tell about their experience but make meaning of it via the cultural context of their lives. Children participate in the production of society and culture and they creatively appropriate information and language from their worlds. To appropriate their words as something else, to misuse, to misunderstand, or to ignore altogether, is a grave injustice that perpetuates the impossibility of child sexual violence.

Feminist scholars are well positioned to take on such a task, to situate children and childhoods within cultural contexts, and to approach the meaning of violence and victimization as socially and interpersonally co-constructed. This work must engage with the socially mediated and historically located impact of language and interpretation because what is possible or what is "true" can never be absolute ([Reavey & Warner, 2003](#), p. 4). The "politics of disclosure" ([Renzetti & Lee, 1993](#)) are essential, as researchers grapple with how to represent children's voices. What pleasures are evoked when children are used to "shock the conscience," to sensationalize violence, to condemn, or deploy state discipline? How are we to write about and act upon violence without sensationalizing, sanitizing, exploiting, or erasing young people's voices? These are essential questions to explore within systems that deploy dominant epistemological and methodological paradigms in scientific, medical, and legal fields that are actively reproducing traditionalist, protectionist, and capitalist and

therapeutic models. The experience and impact of sexual violence and trauma are both framed and erased by dominant Western symbolic order, which problematizes children's selfhood and subjectivity even as erotizes and exploits it. Therefore, our work must be, under no uncertain terms, intersectional and multi-interdisciplinary. Whittier (2016) writes that children are "fundamentally shaped by intersectional inequalities of gender, race, and class, which structure individual-level experiences, prevalence, cultural representations, and state and institutional responses" (p. 104). Scholars must also explore new possibilities for children's subjectivities, agency, vulnerability, and trauma, and problematize the connections between agency and vulnerability. Child sexual abuse is not transparent nor only accessible at a set point in time; rather, it is something that fluctuates in young people's telling and re-telling and in their meaning-making of it. Memory and effect are relational processes of being in the social world. The possibility of child sexual violence lies in the space of the relational and intersubjective being.

Our conceptualizations of agency, victimhood, vulnerability, and harm are critical sources of contestation, lest we forget that children are already and always vulnerable based on age, dependency, and law; they are the least constitutionally protected category of persons and are embedded in gendered and hierarchical family structures (Whittier, 2016). The voices of young people give us the opportunity to reconsider the interconnections of vulnerability and agency and take seriously research showing that identification with victimization and victimhood are sometimes interpreted as disempowering (Armstrong et al., 2006; Mardorossian, 2014; Phillips, 2000). Agency is masculinized; vulnerability is associated with the feminine in Western culture; and victimhood occupies the position of the structural subordinate in relations of domination (Mardorossian, 2014). Interrogating how these ideologies are taken up by children and youth is of critical import. Furthermore, most of the psychological literature on child sexual assault assumes trauma results from sexual violence, but we cannot assume such an ontological truth. Pervasive violence may take on a sense of normalcy, and children's perceptions of risk and their choices in those situations may not be readily transparent to adults, are incorrectly interpreted, or simply unavailable. An essential task for the researcher, therefore, is not to confuse violence and its impact as that which is based solely on disciplinary conventions and cause-and-effect models. This frame can promote psychological discourses of harm that pathologize speech (Gavey, 2005; O'Dell, 2003) while obscuring wider social discourses about sex, gender, race, and class.

It is likewise critical to separate oneself from state structures and legal configurations that too often not only require young people to speak, to tell, and to show trauma in public, but also require the presence or absence of certain trauma for recognition of the experience of sexual violence. The "harm story" (O'Dell, 2003) of child sexual assault incorporates mainstream psychological discourses creating binaries between object/subject and harmed/whole, so that women's and children's harm is depicted as a loss of innocence or lifelong damage to the self. We must be careful in our assumptions so as not to exclude those who do not match such conventions (Hlavka & Mulla, in press). Research on child sexual violence must be attuned to the effects of an unequal, racist, and structurally violent state patriarchy that does very little to protect children, especially Black and Brown and Indigenous children, and may likely do more harm to a child and their family had there been no state intervention (Meiners, 2015). Compulsory speech should be questioned depending on the institutional disciplinary forms of power enacted (Foucault, 1978/1986).

James and Prout (1990) ask, "How can a sociology of childhood practice in a way which is sensitive to the political and ethical problems it inevitably entails" (p. 31)? Research with children requires careful attention to methodological and ethical issues, perhaps especially when researching sensitive issues but not entirely because of it. There is a fast-growing body of work that seeks to promote children's participation in research while emphasizing the ethical imperative of the researcher to promote meaningful and effective involvement throughout the process (Martins, Oliverira, & Tendais, 2018). Not surprisingly, research involving child-centered scholarship and the innovative methods to involve young people in research extends far beyond the scope of

IRBs (Canosa, Graham, & Wilson, 2018; Phelan & Kinsells, 2013; Spyrou, 2011; Swauger, 2009). These imperatives include feminist epistemological positioning and methodological decision making (Harding, 2004); mediated informed consent and assent at all stages of the research process and with various people, including families, caregivers, teachers, and other gatekeepers when applicable (Canosa et al., 2018; Martins et al., 2018; Oulton et al., 2016; M. A. Powell et al., 2012; Stanley & Wise, 1990); issues of privacy, confidentiality, and compensation (Canosa et al., 2018); feminist attention to and rejection of hierarchical relationships in the research process; concerns with reflexivity and participation (Maynard, 1994); and interpretation of the research as a collaborative exercise (M. J. Burman, Batchelor, & Brown, 2001), as well as the effects on researchers involved and participating in sensitive research with children (Brannen, 1988; R. Campbell, 2002; Coffey, 1999).

Grover (2004) focuses on the effort to make data interpretation more authentic, suggesting that participants could reflect on their experiences and ethics policies as well. The connection between all these works is the call for decolonizing methodologies in the field, focusing on critical, antiracist, feminist, and ethnically diverse research (Soto & Swadener, 2005). Research should often be team-oriented so that scholars can hold themselves and each other accountable, given multiple perspectives, multi-disciplinary training, and various approaches, expertise, and analytical viewpoints that lend themselves to richer description, consistencies, and accountability (May & Pattillo-McCoy, 2000), not to mention care and support for each other (R. Campbell, 2002; Gaskell, 2008). There are careful ways to collect and analyze narratives of sexual violence (González-López, 2015). Finally, a small body of work (Kina, 2012; Tisdall, Davis, Hill, & Prout, 2006) attends to the emotional relations involved in participatory research, including the well-being of both child participants (Davis, 1998) and researchers (Gaskell, 2008). Researchers' emotional reflexivity concerning power relations and their own impact on the research context, data generation, and analysis are essential to the integrity of working with children (Blaisdell, 2015; Kina, 2012; Procter, 2013). As an understudied and unfocused area, feminists might also center IRBs for research and critical examination. Getting involved with educating and affecting these decision-making boards should be central to feminist action and change. Researchers can promote examples of studies with similar topics and methods (Adler & Adler, 2016) and inform IRBs about nontraditional designs outside of more traditional paradigms (Harger & Quintela, 2017). Scholars must question the role of regulatory bodies and feminist critiques ought to figure predominately in discussions of ethics, focusing less on universal rights and rules and more on care ethics, interpersonal relations and positionality, and researcher responsibilities (Mulla & Hlavka, 2011).

Conclusion

> One way that social scientists in general can be sensitive to [ethical] issues is by giving a voice to the vulnerable, rather than by creating images of those studies which are infused with the political and social agendas of the power elite. (Grover, 2004, p. 83)

Sexual violence is about supremacy and the sexualization of power so that multiple sites of inequalities can co-occur. In their 2018 annual review, Armstrong, Gleckman-Krut, and Johnson interrogate the sociological silence on sexual violence, arguing that "scholarship on sexual violence reveals it to be both a cause and a consequence of inequality, not only on the basis of gender, but also along lines of race/ethnicity, class, sexuality, age, ability status, citizenship status, and nationality" (p. 100). Indeed, sexual violence maintains, creates, and binds together systems of power and domination; its impossibility and invisibility make it key to the reproduction of inequality and domination (Armstrong et al., 2018).

Feminists have argued that intrafamilial child sexual violence does not garner the same attention as the stranger-predator because of the politically dangerous nature of challenging the ideology of the patriarchal family and hegemonic masculinity in which children are viewed as property of their parents (Doan, 2005; Herman, 1981; Rush, 1974; Russell, 1986; E. Ward, 1985). This is perhaps exactly the point. Examining

sexual violence from the child's perspective not only attends to the powerful positioning of voice and standpoint but also furthers an understanding of what sexuality and sexual violence "mean to a particular individual at a particular moment in time, as well as dominant ideologies, social norms and practices that are taken-for-granted assumptions typical of the dominant culture" (Meyer, 1996, p. 105). Narratives shape the way we see ourselves and others and show how the collectively shared discursive and rhetorical resources of a culture maintain power relations. We know little about how speech and meaning might act as mediating forces between violence and its impact and how being heard might provide sources of resilience and resistance. Not only can we better understand childhood through the experiences of children, but we can understand our sociocultural conditions—that of violence, power, privilege, and of the reproduction and resistance of social order. The voices of young people are imperative to appreciate the interdependency of how discourse evokes interpretation, for it is through access and control of meaning that experiences in themselves are privileged (Davies, 1996; Foucault, 1978/1986). Interpretation and voice can also legitimate, reproduce, challenge, and resist power and dominance in society.

I began this article with a quote from Aiden, a young man who was sexually assaulted by his teacher in the second grade. At 17 years, he described years of contemplation about the abuse, including a host of physical and emotional responses that, over time, he attributed to his assault. If given the opportunity and conditions, young people expose the intimate, vulnerable, and critical spaces of possibility that must be assessed to privilege voice, honor experience, and challenge dominate narratives that frame young people as unknowing and incapable of agency. Aiden makes this clear when he is asked why he decided to disclose his sexual assault after so many years:

> I'm willing to do anything, as far as anything goes, like talking about it to who I need to, taking it to where I need to. I'm not afraid to do anything, like the counselor lady asked me if I'd be afraid to testify? No. Would I be afraid to tell any form of press? No. And would I be afraid to talk to anyone about it? No, because like, my honest, gut like, reason for this, is to protect other kids, because I don't want it to happen to anyone else. . . . I mean I know it does happen in our world, I'm talking like broad sense. To be honest, I think he will do it again. And I think he may have, already, I don't know that but, I think. It would also, speaking in real broad terms, it's an issue that has to be addressed and the kids, I just don't want to see kids go through that.

Notes
1. Kristie Dotson defines epistemic violence in testimony as "a refusal, intentional or unintentional, of an audience to communicatively reciprocate a linguistic exchange owing to pernicious ignorance. Pernicious ignorance should be understood to refer to any reliable ignorance that, in a given context, harms another person (or set of persons)" (p. 238). Drawing from Patricia Hill Collins's work, Dotson calls attention to the failure of identifying and recognizing a speaker as a knower.
2. In *A Philosophical Investigation of Rape* (2009), Louise du Toit makes sense of rape by locating it within a globally dominant patriarchal symbolic order of western understanding. du Toit traces what she means by the "impossibility" of rape as the experience of the rape victim which is not known, not represented,

and not appreciated by dominant epistemological paradigms within medical, legal, and criminal justice practices. The dominant western symbolic order thus erases rape. The "possibility" of rape, then, focuses on women's subjectivity "which may serve as an antidote to the rapist symbolic" (p. 5). I utilize du Toit's framing in my work to explore dominant westernized discourses of child sexual assault in similar ways, although my work focuses on young people and du Toit focuses specifically on men raping women. Both focus on, albeit in different ways, an alternative symbolic world shaped "through new ways of speaking and behaving" ([du Toit, 2009](#), p. 8).

3. Children assessed whether a confidant was "credible" or trustworthy because they feared abandonment or angry reactions. Supportiveness was a key characteristic in a confidant. Children looked for signals that confirmed others were willing to help and/or comfort them. They balanced the "need to tell with the difficulty of telling by choosing confidants who they perceive are able and willing to relay the information to those who could stop the abuse" ([Petronio et al., 1996](#), p. 107).

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