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## Book Reviews

### **Thomas Crofts, Murray Lee, Alyce McGovern and Sanja Milivojevic (2015) *Sexting and Young People*. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave.**

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There can be little disagreement that communications technologies have had important and differential impacts on social and sexual relations. The ubiquity of smart phones and camera technologies as well as the incorporation of images into identity representations, formations and explorations warrants particular analytical attention. It also warrants criminological attention since the use and abuse of intimate and sexually explicit images can carry a range of implications, including sexual exploitation, harassment, violence and criminal sanctions. Crofts and colleagues' new book examines a range of image-taking and sharing practices by young people, broadly defined as 'sexting'. It is, however, a particularly novel and critical treatment of this issue, exploring media representations and 'crises', legal responses, education and prevention approaches, as well as incorporating the voices and experiences of young people themselves.

Indeed, this book provides an important corrective to the dominance of media and popular 'risk' narratives framing youth sexual image-based practices. 'Sexting' is itself a slippery and yet dominant term, referring to a range of practices through which nude or semi-nude 'pics' are made and/or distributed (whether by mobile/smart phone, social networks or online sites and forums). The authors give due attention to definitional issues as well as the preferred terms of young people themselves: 'nudes', 'nude selfies' and 'dirty pics' among them. Yet, as the authors note in their introduction, the term problematically fails to distinguish between the range of practices, motivations and impacts of sexting.

After dispensing with definitional issues, the book moves onto develop its core arguments, among them that the criminalisation and attempts at regulation of young people's (primarily consensual) sexting practices are misplaced, causing more harm than most young people report from sexting itself. Further, the authors argue that young people can be more usefully supported to navigate the dilemmas of sexual image making and sharing, and to make informed decisions and negotiate sexting practices on their own terms. Thus, rather than attempts to control young people's access and use of 'corrupting' technologies, 'we must ensure that the agency and citizenship of young people is an important part of the debate' (p.205).

Informing these arguments are three key conceptual frames (outlined in Chapter 2): the social and cultural change associated with late or 'liquid' modernity (Bauman 2000; Giddens 1991); social anxieties related to children and youth sexualities and sexual 'risk' (Fishman 1982; Foucault 1990); and gendered analyses concerning pressure, coercion, consent and sexual double standards (Attwood 2009; Gill 2012; Powell 2007). Together, these conceptual frameworks shed light on the social and cultural contexts of sexual image-taking and sharing, both with respect to consensual sexual exchanges and non-consensual or otherwise 'pressured' exchanges. A further novel framework is presented by applying Marcel Mauss' (1969) ethnographic and anthropological work on the nature of *gifting*. As demonstrated by the authors' empirical work with young people themselves, many explain sexting practices as a sexy gift to a boyfriend or girlfriend. It must be remembered, however, that gifting itself is a social practice that is never fully divorced of social pressures and expectations, a point the authors return to in their later analysis.

Much of the analytical discussion in the book concerns the Australian context, being the site of the authors' empirical work, but it also usefully incorporates numerous case studies, media and legislative analyses from the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom and New Zealand (Chapters 3, 4 and 5). Chapter 6 meanwhile provides a concise overview of the largely 'sexual risk' framings of anti-sexting campaigns and education directed at high school-age youth, again focusing foremost on the Australian experience.

Most compelling are the experiences of young people themselves (Chapters 8, 9 and 10). The authors rightfully note that, despite the mass media, political and social commentary regarding sexting, remarkably little empirical work engages with young people's lived experiences. While the survey data presented (Chapter 8) situates sexting practices as extremely common (though the authors acknowledge sampling bias and limitations with respect to extrapolating prevalence across Australian young people more generally), it is the *nature* of practices that is most interesting. In direct contrast to media narratives of young people (and perhaps young women in particular), going 'wild' by engaging in 'risky' sexual image-sharing, this book presents a more nuanced account of young people's sexual images forming part of their sexual interactions in committed, long-term relationships. At the same time, and consistent with decades of feminist research regarding the sexual double standard, slut/stud dichotomy and denial of female sexual agency (see Fine 1988; Tolman 1991), clear gendered patterns emerge in young people's *perceptions* of sexting, and in some sharing *practices*. Males, for example, are reported to be more likely to send on a sexual image than females. Overall, however, the authors find that the non-consensual *sending* on is rare (5 per cent) compared with *showing* an image to a third party (20 per cent). Furthermore, while many participants agreed that it was likely that girls particularly sent sexy pics due to pressure from a partner (42-46 per cent), considerably fewer participants (3-4 per cent males, 13 per cent females) actually reported experiencing such pressures. Again, this research provides a useful corrective to the 'risk' framings so common in media and popular representations about pressure and non-consensual sharing of sexual images among youth. One is left to wonder whether one in ten young women sending a sexual image due to pressure from a partner warrants more attention. With so much of the existing published research on this topic focused on pressure and coercion, is it not difficult for the reader to make their own connections between previous research and the more nuanced arguments presented by the authors in this book. Certainly the authors are true to their data, which suggests that many of the 'harms' of sexting for young people arise from *responses* to it, both legal and socio-cultural, well in excess of the sexual image making and/or sharing itself.

The gendered dynamics of sexting exchanges are further explored through qualitative data with young people in Chapter 9, in which familiar slut/stud dichotomies once again prevail. A striking feature is young people's reflexivity regarding the motivations and influences on sexting practices including media representations of sexualities and sexualised bodies more broadly. Perhaps the sampling of largely university students factored here (and this is an

acknowledged limitation of the research design), though certainly that should not detract from recognising young people's agencies and capacities to engage in critical reflexive thinking about their own sexual practices. Indeed, one of the foremost strengths of this book is the transparency with which the authors engage with young people's experiences in their own words and on their own terms, rather than seeking to re-read them through all too familiar assumptions of passive coercion and risky sex. For those whose interest lies primarily in law and law reform, recommendations are further provided in Chapter 12.

This is an important and timely book aimed not only at criminologists but also of direct interest to those concerned more broadly with the regulation of sexualities and sexual identities, as well as youth cultures and young people's agency. As communications technologies change rapidly, so too can we anticipate that social and sexual practices incorporating them will likewise change – and are already changing – as this book finds its place on the criminologists' shelf and undergraduate reading list. While the specifics of sexting may well change, this book makes a significant contribution both to critically examining the practices of young people at this point in time in contemporary Australia, and to developing analytical tools that will no doubt usefully carry forward in their application to new issues and debates as they emerge.

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