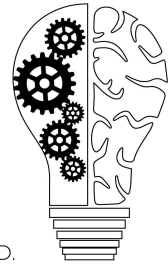


Episode 094: *Cuties* and the Oversexualization of Children in Our Culture

Maddie Ulrich B.S., Randy Stinnett, Psy.D., ABPP, Caroline, Osorio M.D., David Puder, M.D.



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Bios:

Dr. Randy Stinnett is a clinical psychologist and clinical director of behavioral health at the SAC Health System, a federally qualified health center in San Bernardino, California, where he oversees the psychotherapy and psychiatry services. His clinical specialties include psychotherapy for mood, anxiety, posttraumatic stress disorder, substance use recovery, as well as the integration of spirituality and mental health.

Dr. Caroline Osorio is a psychiatrist, excellent and well respected teacher, and a geriatric specialist.

There are no conflicts of interest for this episode.

*Important note: You do not have to watch the movie “Cuties” in order to get something out of this episode. We will be talking about the oversexualization of children in our culture, sexual abuse, and media influences on sexualizing children.

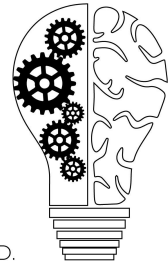
The Film “Cuties”

Overview

The film “Cuties” is a French film that was recently released on Netflix this September. Many are unhappy with Netflix’s decision to put “Cuties” on the streaming service. The movement #cancelNetflix spread quickly through social media, as ex-subscribers urged others to cancel their subscriptions in protest. The film follows the story of an 11 year old girl named Amy as she navigates life as a preteen 11 year old. She recently moved to a new school, and tries to befriend a group of girls in her class who have formed a dance group, calling themselves the “Cuties”. The controversy stems from the girls trying to emulate what they see in the media, wearing skimpy clothing and copying sexually suggestive dance moves in their routines. Throughout the movie, the young girls are sexualized in many different ways, which we will discuss.

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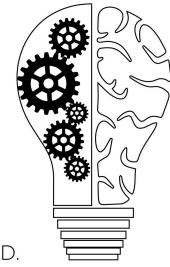
The Most Disturbing Scenes

- **Cleansing with Holy Water**
 - In this scene, a 11 year old girl is wearing nothing but a tank top and underwear while two women throw holy water onto her. During the scene the 11 year old is moving in a sexual fashion with the camera focusing on her buttocks. The scene is gut wrenching and difficult to watch, especially for those who have been victimized. The scene seems as though it's meant to normalize and possibly even romanticize this kind of behavior.
- **All Dance Scenes**
 - There are multiple dance scenes throughout the film which shows young girls dancing provocatively. The camera intentionally moves to show their pelvic regions and their backsides. There were even instances of open leg dances in which the camera lingers on the eleven year old's crotch. This movie was not promoted to be a pornographic film, however the lines are certainly blurred. It begs the question: Does a film require nudity in order to be pornographic? Dr. Osorio spoke to a former cheerleader, now 26, who decided to watch the film and see how sexualized the children actually were because she knew that twerking was part of cheerleading. During the dance scenes she noticed that the camera constantly focused on the genital region of the girls rather than focusing on the dance itself, which is opposite of that which occurs in cheerleading competitions.
- **Dancing for Security Guards**
 - In one particularly disturbing scene, the young girls sneak into a laser tag venue, and are discovered by security guards. The girls begin to dance seductively for the security guards in an attempt to persuade them not to call the police. One of the older men creepily enjoys the dancing girls and allows them to leave. One of the other security guards says "you're not doing this, right?" which implies that the enjoyment of the security guard was inappropriate.

One critique in favor of the film argues that these scenes are intentionally repulsive to wake people up regarding how the media is influencing young children, and how they are emulating what they are exposed to. The director of the film has come out multiple times to say that her intent was to point out how the media influences young girls. They see women acting provocatively and want to emulate it. "Doucouré explains that she is telling this story through Amy's eyes, challenging the audience by showing the hypersexualization of children has become normalized. *Cuties* explores how girls become women, sometimes sooner than they should, forced into adulthood by the society they live in and the media they consume. "When I was young, I also saw a lot of injustices around me lived by women," says Doucouré. "We're

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**PSYCHIATRY &
PSYCHOTHERAPY**

used to saying that women in other cultures are oppressed, but the question that I had when making the film was: Isn't the objectification of a woman's body that we often see in Western culture another kind of oppression?" ([Haynes, 2020](#))

The issue with this film is it's requirement to violate little girls in order to prove that you shouldn't violate little girls. One of the biggest issues with "Cuties" is that the line is so blurred, promoting or condemning the sexualization of children, that the argument could be made either way. The film does not openly condemn the behavior which means whether or not it should be is up to the viewer's interpretation. It's obvious that people with pedophilic sexual preferences are taking advantage of the film, because the movie "Cuties" is trending on pornographic search engines based on a Reddit post ([Reddit, 2020](#)). The unnerving part is that even those who are convicted pedophiles or sexual abusers can have access to "Cuties" because it is on Netflix. Even hospital staff who are attending to those currently hospitalized for sexual attraction to children cannot stop them from watching "Cuties" because it's technically not pornography.

What Should We Do with Other Social Media Outlets?

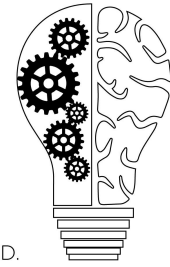
If we are concerned about films such as "Cuties" becoming more mainstream, what should we be doing about platforms such as Instagram or TikTok which allows young girls to promote themselves in a sexualized manner?

When we think about these platforms we don't need to come at it from an either-or standpoint, but more of an understanding that there is a gradient in terms of intensity/overtness of sexualization. There is a history of controversial TV shows that have sexualized young girls, and show a less severe sexualization than "Cuties". Dance Moms has been under fire a handful of times for having their girls wear inappropriate dance costumes ([Chan, 2012](#)). Toddlers and Tiaras repeatedly received backlash for sexualizing girls as young as 3 years old during pageants, until the show was eventually cancelled ([Henson, 2011](#)). But even though these TV shows are another instance of children being sexualized, the main difference is that the camera is not focusing on their butts or genitals in explicative dancing scenes. Though child beauty pageants can also be harmful, there is a scaling of the degradation being shown on the screen. There are those out there who support "Cuties" because of other shows that have been aired on TV which also exploit children, but perhaps this film should cause us to question whether or not those other shows should be removed as well.

The issue in our current culture is that children are being exposed to sexualization even in mainstream music videos like Cardi B's *WAP* which is number one on Billboard's Hot 100 and has over 200 million views to date. An article from Moms.com explains, "Cardi B is a role model

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DAVID PUDER, M.D.
**PSYCHIATRY &
PSYCHOTHERAPY**

to many young girls and her lyrics span across audiences across the globe. The impact of this filthy messaging is significant, making it all the more concerning in this particular instance. To think that young girls would idolize someone who uses her body and their sexuality for material gain is glorifying everything that most parents set out to protect their little girls from. Young boys are tuned in and receiving raunchy messaging suggesting that exploiting women and objectifying them is somehow admirable and acceptable, especially considering that this artist is glorifying this role she has put herself in” ([Nasir, 2020](#)).

We as mental health professionals should advocate for social media outlets to protect young and impressionable minds and those who might sexualize themselves for some sort of popularity. There should be guidelines, not informed by profit but rather by that which will best protect our children and their mental health.

Aggression and Sexuality

One of the articles that discussed the sexualization of girls revealed that within the 100 most viewed video clips from the top 4 porn sites and found that 93% depicted violence against women in the opening scene ([Lamb, 2019](#)). As a culture, we need to ask ourselves if we want these violent acts against women to be repeated in the minds of people who are viewing these sites. The problem with movies such as “Cuties” is that it is sending a message to viewers that sexualizing children or being sexualized as a young girl is normal and a way out of a bad situation if they’re in a broken home. Unfortunately, this mentality sets them up for disastrous results which eventually could lead to a life of sexual abuse or sex trafficking.

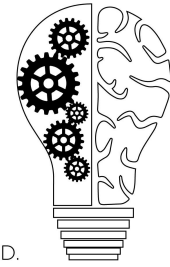
There are even instances of combining eroticism with violence within “Cuties.” During one scene, the main character pushes a girl into a large body of water in order to take her place in a competition which nearly kills her. The problem with this situation is that the young girls are being sexualized throughout the film mixed with a scene of violence leads to a combination of two drives that should not overlap.

There is another instance where one of the girls stabs her classmate with a pen which further promotes the cruelty that the girls have towards one another. The fact of the matter is that kids can be cruel to one another, but to push it to such acts as almost committing manslaughter should cause serious pause for audience members.

Unfortunately, it doesn’t end there. Another scene shows the main character taking a picture of her genitals and posting to social media. Afterwards, one of her classmates made a comment about it which led to an aggressive response from her. Possibly worse is the scene in which the

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**PSYCHIATRY &
PSYCHOTHERAPY**

main character begins to remove her clothes for her older cousin so that she could get her phone back from him. These scenes don't just mix sexuality and aggression, but also promote the use of sexuality in order to get what you want or appease anger. The biggest concern with these scenes in particular is that these actions were not meant to be played out by an adult woman, but an 11 year old girl.

Hidden Messages within “Cuties”

Lyrics

- There are multiple instances in the film where the girls are dancing to highly misogynistic lyrics. Some examples include:
 - “...let you know that I am not a whore, I am a little bitch. If you want to play, baby, let me tell you this...”
 - Rough translation from Spanish to English “Give me daddy, like nobody else. Give me. Give me, baby. So I can leave you entranced...get ready for it. You know what I'm talking about. Like no one else can do it. Come on and touch me.”

Other Influences

Riverdale

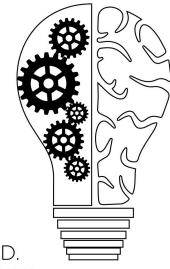
It's apparent that “Cuties” is not the only media outlet that has a skewed view of children. *Riverdale* is another show from the CW that portrays minors in a disconcerting manner. All the actors who are meant to portray teens are young adults at least in their mid 20s which will automatically give actual teens a distorted view of what their bodies should look like at their age. The show consistently oversexualizes the women and portrays these “teens” as having sexual intercourse on a regular basis which does not match the reality of most teenagers today. A large portion of the female protagonists are thin and gorgeous women which places a high expectation on young girls as they compare their own bodies to those they see on shows such as *Riverdale*. An article from *Teen Vogue* explains, “Shows — and especially ones with such devoted young fan bases as *Riverdale*'s — will need to examine what they're presenting as normal, and what explanations they owe their audience as they're telling these stories” ([Russo, 2017](#)).

Technology

Children have more opportunities to hide themselves behind a facade more than ever before. All popular mediums for children give users the ability to filter their appearance in a way that makes them look enhanced. Imagine being a young person growing up in this world where it's not okay to look like yourself. Simply being comfortable in your own skin is not going to get you as much attention as you would receive by filtering out anything “unwanted.” The problem is exacerbated

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**PSYCHIATRY &
PSYCHOTHERAPY**

by the fact that Hollywood idols are constantly photoshopped to enhance their appearance or even receive hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of plastic surgery to maintain their youthful image which sets an unrealistic expectation for bodily/age comparison. Children are tying their self worth to how they are portrayed and received on social media, but the individuals that the media shows they should mimic have an unfair and dishonest advantage. A study looking at 6 to 9 year old girls published in *Body Image* found “**exposure to sexualized media was found to be correlated with internalization of sexualization messages, itself correlated with negative body image.** The findings provide preliminary evidence that sexualized messages appear to be internalized by very young girls which, in turn, has negative implications for how they feel about their bodies” ([Slater, 2016](#)).

Poverty of Meaning and Connection

One of the aspects of mental health is for a patient to move from relationships that are not meaningful to finding deep and secure connections that are meaningful and mutual. Unfortunately, there is not enough of that being portrayed in the media. In order for a pedophile to engage in their sexual fantasies they have to have access to children. In Hollywood, there is an abundance of children and motivated parents hoping to make it big in the city of stars.

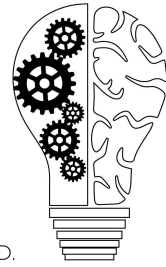
Some will try to defend the film industry by saying that it happens everywhere and doesn't occur more here than it does elsewhere. But, the unique combination of high reward and success if you are liked while dropping off the wayside completely if you are blacklisted creates an atmosphere of doing whatever it takes to please those with high influence in the industry. An example of this would be a tape which revealed Harvey Weinstein trying to coerce a woman into performing a sexual act that she did not want to do. Weinstein was using advanced psychological tools in order to break her down to the point of getting what he wanted ([Renfro, 2017](#)). The takeaway on this is a total disregard for the victim's sexual autonomy and complete focus on the perpetrator's sexual desires with no regard to whether or not they dehumanize the victim.

Poverty of meaning and connection is an abundant theme in “*Cuties*.” There is not only socio-economic poverty, but also parental disconnection for the children. The father is physically absent throughout the film. We see the main character taking on the motherly role of caring for her younger siblings without supervision while the mother is trying to make a living for the family. Even though there is a touching embrace between the mother and daughter there is still a severe lack of connection for the young girl with her family or even her peers.

Negative effects of Sexual Objectification

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DAVID PUDER, M.D.

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PSYCHOTHERAPY**

Sexualization

Scientific studies show that it is incredibly traumatic to expose children to overtly sexual material before they're adults. According to the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls, "in the emotional domain, sexualization and objectification undermine confidence in and comfort with one's own body, leading to a host of negative emotional consequences, such as shame, anxiety, and even self-disgust" ([APA, 2007](#)). This self-objectification can even cause girls to lose concentration and perform poorly in school ([APA, 2007](#)).

Sexual Abuse

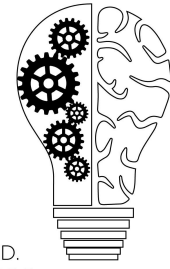
Patients who were abused as children find sex painful because it is combined with the vile events that happened to them as a young child. Children who have been sexually abused are also more likely to become victims of sex trafficking ([De Vries, 2018](#)). Children will dissociate and will be cognitively overwhelmed to the point that they won't be able to enjoy sex later in life. One study found that "of 36 patients with borderline personality disorder, 16 (44.44%) reported a history of definite child sexual abuse (...) Identity disturbances ($P = 0.0354$), recurrent suicidal/self-harm behavior ($P = 0.0177$), and stress-related paranoid/dissociative symptoms ($P = 0.0177$) were significantly associated with the presence of CSA" ([Menon, 2016](#)). Those who have been exposed to sexually explicit material as children or who have been sexually abused tend to harm themselves, become abusers, or act as the object meant to please another. This creates adults who fall victim to the internal belief that says connection is only possible by being abused ([APA, 2007](#)). In addition to these issues affecting the women involved into adulthood, they even affect adult men, as the Task Force states, "exposure to narrow ideals of female sexual attractiveness may make it difficult for some men to find an "acceptable" partner or to fully enjoy intimacy with a female partner" ([APA, 2007](#)).

Main Concerns

- Combining sexualized content with something you wouldn't want it to be combined with. Consistently combining sexual content with children over and over creates that combination within our brains which is how fetishes begin.
- The ambiguous message within "Cuties" can be incredibly confusing for children who may be exposed to it's content, especially for those who are particularly vulnerable.
- How easily accessible videos of aggression mixed with sexuality or sexualized exploited children is unnerving. "Cuties" is on Netflix which is a highly popular media outlet for families. Music videos showing similar content are easily found on youtube. One major concern is how easily our children can be exposed to this sort of content.

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DAVID PUDER, M.D.
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- The message and intent of the director against the sexualization of children could have been made without sexualizing children.
- The issues with movies or shows that sexualize children is that audience members are slowly becoming desensitized to how horrific it is.

Main Takeaways

- Protesting to a certain degree is appropriate for situations such as this one.
- Guarding our kids from exposure to certain content is crucial. Also taking the time to talk to children about questionable content that they may be exposed to already.
- Don't be afraid to talk to your children about sex. We don't want our children to learn about healthy sexuality from media or outside sources that could be harmful.
- Start a conversation with your kids from an early age about the difference between how humans truly look in photographs compared to photoshop and the process of enhancing human features
- NEVER criticize your child's body or your own body in front of your kids.
- Talk about the real age of people in media

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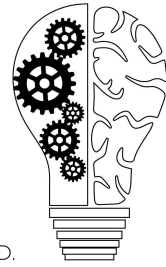
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**PSYCHIATRY &
PSYCHOTHERAPY**

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