

Abstract

This article explores the vital roles of matter in the emerging sexual cultures of elementary school children. Based on a case study of a seven-year-old girl, it draws from ethnographic research on the gendered and sexual power relations of students in Northern Finland. Inspired by feminist, new-materialist theories, the analysis indicates how everyday objects may be seen as co-constituting heterosexual femininity by attaching even young girls to teenage cultures and emphasizing femininity and distancing them from childhood and masculinity. This article shows, furthermore, how materiality acts in generating ‘cross-pulls’ that may evoke popularity and admiration, but also cause restrictions to the agency of girls in the ambiguous entanglements of child sexual cultures.

Key words: girls, intra-activity, materiality, new materialism, sexual cultures

Introduction

Minka¹, a six-year-old girl, wanted to let us know the following upon first meeting, as we walked together along a school corridor:

It's so annoying when you need to keep your hand on this print the whole day, because I don't want anyone to see I have a picture of a scooter on my shirt.²

During our year-long fieldwork, it transpired that Minka was exceptionally concerned about her appearance—in this case, about an overly boyish scooter patch on her shirt. As we regularly spent time with Minka and her classmates, we learnt how concerns over boyishness and a pursuit of girliness traversed her daily school life. We noticed how, from the beginning of the first grade, Minka was very popular among her peers, including the boys in her class. This made her an object of their attention:

The lesson is about to begin. Minka is walking in the school corridor towards the classroom door. Luka approaches her from behind, sets his hands around her waist, and gives her a long hug. He leans his cheek on Minka's shoulder and closes his eyes, a blissful look on his face. The moment Luka first touches her waist, Minka's body freezes in place like a statue, and she remains still and expressionless. After a while, Axel comes to them and firmly but silently pulls Luka away, tying Luka's hands behind his back and holding on until the teacher arrives. I've noticed that certain boys often approach Minka in similar, sexually toned ways.

In the above fieldwork note, material objects, the bodies and body parts of young children came together, playing in a way that implied fancying or sexually charged admiration. Many boys in Minka's class had confessed to having a romantic 'crush' on Minka, who herself repeatedly sought attention from popular boys such as Axel and Luka, often conforming to their will, as happened in the moment described.

Our knowledge of Minka was accumulated over a school year spent in her class in the countryside of Northern Finland in the late 2010s, while carrying out a participatory ethnography on the gendered and sexualized power relations of children attending elementary school. During that time, we interviewed first graders aged six to seven and observed their everyday school lives in classrooms,

¹ All names in this article are pseudonyms.

² The excerpts used in this article are part of fieldwork notes, written based on informal conversations with Minka.

playgrounds, and other school spaces. It soon became evident that Minka was caught up deeply in the entanglements of heterosexual girlhood, contributing to the forming of emerging sexual cultures among her peers. Minka spent more time with certain popular boys than the other girls in her class, and the attention she received from those boys was—as shown—often sexually toned including touching, hugging, play-wrestling, and kiss-chasing. Minka’s speech and actions suggested that mingling in those webs of sexually toned relation(ship)s presented her with a complex, sometimes confusing mixture of pain and pleasure. Despite being only six and seven years old, Minka put considerable effort into her appearance and its (re)production of culturally idealized forms of femininity. This meant taking care that her clothes, accessories, and other objects did not create ‘untidy,’ ‘childish,’ ‘boyish,’ or ‘fat-looking’ impressions of her. Research has shown how this constant concern over and striving for a ‘right kind’ of girlhood or boyhood is an integral part of the sexual cultures of children, affecting peer relations and popularity hierarchies from the elementary school years onwards (Kelly-Ware, 2016; Paechter, 2017; Puutio et al., 2021; Renold, 2013).

Links between the encounters and sexual cultures of children and young people at school can seem vague or obscure at times, a complex mixture of what is desired and gives pleasure and what feels unwanted or uncomfortable—as was visible in Minka’s case also. These mixtures include, for example, mundane gendered or sexual gestures that pass quickly (see Huuki & Renold, 2016; Robinson & Davies, 2015), as well as cultural heterosexist suppositions (Paechter, 2017; Rysst, 2010) and quotidian material actants (Allen, 2013a, 2013b). Consequently, as they entangle with the mundane practices means that such sexually toned patterns—and the activities they materialize—are not recognized easily. However, upon viewing those practices as they traversed Minka’s everyday life and combining those observations with previous research addressing the formation of childhood and youth sexuality (e.g., Allen, 2015; Hawkes & Dune, 2013; Kromidas, 2015; Renold & Ringrose, 2011), everyday school events—such as those described above—began to gain new dimensions. They appeared to be significant ‘material moments’ (Taylor, 2013) attaching Minka to the emerging sexual cultures of her class. These cultures came into being in the intra-actions of the body, ‘material’ and ‘discursive’ as Louisa Allen (2015) puts it, reinforcing Karen Barad’s (2007) assertions that matter and meaning are constituted mutually.

Taking inspiration from feminist new-materialist theories (Barad, 2007; Bennett, 2010), we pay close attention to Minka’s case, focusing on the mundane material processes operating in the co-constitution of the emerging sexual cultures of elementary school children. This paper connects to recent childhood and youth research that examines how heterosexual girlhood comes into being in

childhood and adolescence, and with what effects (Huuki & Renold, 2016; Marston, 2020; Puutio et al., 2021; Renold & Mellor, 2013), with also connecting to recent special issues of *Sexualities* (see Alldred & Fox, 2015; Allen, 2015; Hawkes & Dune, 2013; Holford et al., 2013). We aim to contribute to scholarship that has examined the roles of materiality in shaping adolescent sexualities (Alldred & Fox, 2015; Allen, 2013a, 2013b, 2015) and in the sexually toned play of kindergarten children (Holford et al., 2013; Huuki & Renold, 2016), exploring the less-studied yet active parts played by mundane materiality in the early years of child sexual relationalities.

Researching girls in the emerging sexual cultures of children

The romantically and sexually toned relationship cultures of children—of which we understand the dimensions of Minka’s interaction and relationships with boys to be part—stem usually from heteronormative conceptions of a gender binary and mutual attraction between boys and girls (Kromidas, 2015; Renold, 2013; Rysst, 2010). Here, those relationalities are conceptualized as sexual cultures that include complex, multidimensional gendered, sexual, and romantically toned material-discursive activities, intertwined in many ways with broader peer relations (Allen, 2015; Renold, 2013). Emerging sexual cultures are contextually contingent: their coordinates and participants vary, while their boundaries are negotiated constantly (Allen, 2013a). An integral part of that negotiation is the pursuit of heterosexual gender identities. They form through various material-discursive practices that include public displays of affection, gendered actions, media products, and sexual or romantic relationship games—for example, kiss-chasing and marriage plays (Gansen, 2017; Huuki & Renold, 2016; Martin, 2011; Robinson & Davies, 2015).

Models of normative heterosexual romance are attached heavily to girlhood from the early years, and implementations of heterosexuality are known to affect the popularity of girls in peer groups. Nonetheless, romantically, or sexually toned relations are difficult for girls to control (Cannoni & Bombi, 2016; Huuki, Kyrölä & Pihkala, 2022). Sexual cultures are often associated for girls with contradictory fears of harassment, social embarrassment, and over-sexualization (Hill & Kearl, 2011)—and with a pressure to remain innocent victims (Renold & Ringrose, 2011). As a result, expressions of heterosexual femininity often set girls in passive, adaptive positions through which they seek approval from boys. Girls become placed, therefore, as targets of heteronormative objectification, when their bodies, actions, and desires are commodified for a heterosexual gaze and masculine evaluation (Hawkes & Dune, 2013; Jackson & Vares, 2015; Rysst, 2010).

Over the last decade, the previously mostly uncharted territory of childhood sexuality research has dismantled moral panic over the innocence and fragile sexuality of girls—and has examined the gendered patterns of action that cause female objectification (Hawkes & Dune, 2013). This field of research has mapped the junior sexualization processes of children and youth (Renold, 2013; Paechter, 2017), the romantically or sexually toned activities of children (Gansen, 2017; Robinson & Davies, 2015; Rysst, 2010), and the forming and dimensions of the sexual agency of girls (Kelly-Ware, 2016). Building mainly on post-structural feminist and gender theories, it has offered critique of socio-cultural and socio-structural operations of sexuality and power in the lives of girls. This field of research has also allowed a more nuanced mapping of the complex effects of sexual power inequalities and their impact on the production of normative gender identities, which tend to narrow girls' sexual agency, restricting possibilities for gender expression and subjectivity formation. However, this scholarship foregrounds the subjective and interpersonal exclusively in theories of childhood sexuality without much attention on how both human and non-human actors do crucial performative work in producing manifestations of sexuality in young girls.

To attend to the active roles that both human and non-human actants play in child sexual cultures, we turn to a small, but steadily growing body of scholarship that calls for a radical post-individual, non-anthropocentric theory of sexuality (Aldred & Fox, 2015). The following section explores how material elements operate in the sexual cultures of children. We introduce our main concepts of 'intra-action' (Barad, 2007) and 'thing-power' (Bennett, 2010), then describe the methodology and analysis of our research. Through a series of material moments, our first analytical chapter explores how mundane objects such as clothing, symbols, and accessories have collaborative agency in the constitution of heterosexual femininity. Our second analytical chapter examines what this intra-active materiality may produce for girls such as Minka who are strongly entangled in child sexual cultures. We conclude with thoughts on the significance of paying attention to materiality in how girls can become caught up in flows of forces that produce heteronormative gender and sexuality from an early stage in their lives.

The vital role of materiality in the formation of junior sexualities

In examining the forming of heterosexual girlhood from a new-materialist viewpoint, we have been inspired by Louisa Allen's theorizations of the material dimensions of sexualities in a high school context. Allen regards sexuality as a never-ending enfolding of non-human and human practices, including objects, affects, motility, discourses, nature, smells, sounds, and other elements that are

constantly changing, unfolding, and becoming (Allen, 2015). Following this line of thought, we move away from the notion of a child as an autonomous, independent builder of sexual cultures, as deterministically written by culture and biology. Instead, we consider children as constantly changing parts of vital materiality, as amalgams of bodies, objects, and spaces that are part of multidimensional compositions (Allen, 2013a; Taylor, 2013). Concurring with Barad (2007), we understand these multidisciplinary compositions to be multi-agential intertwinements. This directs our attention to intra-action; that is, to the mutual constitution of entangled agencies (Barad, 2007). Intra-action allows us to show how mundane moments, Minka's heterosexual femininity and the sexual cultures of her class are constantly formed *by* and *with* entanglements of everyday objects, from symbols to school spaces, body parts, temporality, and cultural discourses.

Attending to everyday objects as an intra-active part of the formation of junior sexualities lets us observe their affective force, their 'thing-power' (Bennett, 2010). For Bennett (2010), thing-power means the affective force of material elements when interfering with other forces and bodies. In considering and working with the idea of thing-power, we aim to show how material objects emerge as active operators, 'actants' (Bennett, 2010) that generate effects such as emotions, doings, and impetuses, making them a fundamental part of the emerging sexual cultures of children. In the ordinary flows of everyday school life and peer cultures, the affective force of intra-active thing-power generates powerful, materially dense, specific, time-bound instances of occurrence, or 'material moments,' to borrow a phrase from Carol A. Taylor (2013). One can therefore posit everyday objects in the lives of children as agentic in co-producing the meanings of sexual or other flows of forces. By *agency*, we do not mean individual choice or human capacity solely, but the possibility and accountability entailed in bodily production and material-discursive intra-actions (Barad, 2007).

Using the concepts of intra-action and thing-power together lets us examine the nuances of how childhood sexual cultures are constantly becoming through entanglements of mundane materialities, human actants, and gendered normativities. The complex but powerful intra-relationships between bodies, discourses, and material elements produce gendered and sexual meanings that co-constitute presumed heterosexual gender identities for children, enabling their relations and reactions to social worldings (Taylor, 2013; Wolfe, 2021). Material elements become charged intra-actively with thing-power, therefore, affecting the positions of children in sexual cultures (Renold & Mellor, 2013). In Minka's school class, mainstream teenage fashion styles and accessories that emphasize feminine body shapes can be viewed as non-human actors that became charged with specific thing-power,

producing different actions and possibilities for girls. We will examine this more closely in our analysis section.

Material ethnographic methodologies

The fieldwork in question was implemented as a part of a research project addressing entanglements of gender, sexuality, and power in the peer relations of elementary school children. It was conducted in a medium-sized primary school of around 400 students from grades one to six, aged 6 to 13, in the latter half of the 2010s. We followed two first-grade classes of approximately fifty children over two to three days per week, in several stretches for one school year. The research had undergone ethical review and the participation of the children was based on informed consent from the children themselves, their legal guardians, and the school authorities³. The data generation included an array of creative and ethnographic activities from participatory observation to interviews, informal discussions, and creative, child-centered activities such as photographing and filmmaking; also walking tours with children and parents. Our data consists of hand-written notes, recorded interviews, children's drawings and writings, and video recordings and photographs of school spaces and the everyday activities of the children involved.

Engaging with the class over a period of one year allowed us to follow the lives of the young children closely, becoming sensitized to diverse flows of power in the classroom, attending in a multisensory manner to the dimensions of emerging child sexual cultures. As we continued to collaborate with the two classes for several months, we were able to seek ways of engaging with the children casually and through one-on-one 'check-ups.' This offered the students chances to address and communicate their feelings and experiences on social situations, our participation, and the emotions evoked by them. Spending time with the children in question also gave us the opportunity to follow on-going cross-pulls of peer relations, which we considered and upon which we made notes during our time in the field. These included fleeting incidents such as hands lingering on a scooter patch, nervous glances at the classroom, sudden kisses, hugs that were not quickly let go, ambivalent chasing games, and coercive expressions of 'fancying.' Each such incident contained a charge that gestured at heterosexual admiration, settling as a target of fancying, or pursuing a 'right' kind of heterosexual gender identity in a way that caught our eye and made us pause. In their capacity to do so, we understand them to be what Taylor (2013) discusses as material moments. In other words, they are

³ This research was carried out in a sparsely populated area of Northern Finland. To protect the anonymity of Minka and other children involved, we refrain from disclosing the precise time, location, and other details of data generation.

specific, materially dense instances bound to time and space that are ‘felt’ and registered bodily as part of ongoing sensorial flows of embodied experience.

When beginning to write this paper, our collaborative analysis combined in a generative manner the material moments observed, the affects those moments evoked, and our shared interest in child sexual cultures and new materialist inquiry. This allowed us to rethink Minka’s case and to begin to explore practices associated with the everyday routines, activities, and performances of children, which included micro flows of their gender and sexuality. Upon a closer examination of everyday occurrences involving Minka, the relationships of the children in question—alongside our theoretical concepts, acknowledging the field of research on child sexual cultures and their material micro-processes—blended with our own experiences of the sexual relationalities of children and the emotions of fascination, confusion, and discomfort these school events evoked. Together, this formed our data, which we approached according to Maggie MacLure (2013: 172) as ‘belonging to both language and body.’ By that statement, we mean to acknowledge the significance of both bodily intensities and material-discursive dimensions such as clothes, accessories, expressions, speech, text, and moving bodies.

As we continued to investigate, we began to delve into the specific moments at which material elements intra-acted and became entangled, generating specific charges that produced effects related to gender and sexuality. In those moments, we understand mundane objects as acting within other entangled material agencies, co-constituting child sexual cultures in microlevel classroom occurrences that constantly (re)-define the agency of the actors emerging as part of them. For the purposes of this article, we focused ultimately on the moments that illustrate in detail the dimensions through which materiality was linked to girlhood in manners that reinforced the formation of sexual cultures in the early school years. The moments are exemplified by excerpts from our field-work notes. While we observed the case of a single girl, Minka, that case resonates also with our long-term research in which we have explored the gender and sexual cultures of children and young people (Huuki et al., 2022; Huuki & Renold, 2016; Pihkala & Huuki, 2019; Puutio et al., 2021). This emphasizes how even a single case is always entangled with broader experiences, stories, materializations, and previous research on gender, sexuality, and injustices related to those in western child cultures (see also Hill & Kearl, 2011; Renold, 2013; Renold & Ringrose, 2011; Rysst, 2010).

As mentioned earlier, our analysis uses the concepts of intra-action (Barad, 2007) and thing-power (Bennett, 2010) to emphasize the mutual entanglement of material phenomena and the powerful predictable—and unpredictable—forces possessed by intra-acting materiality. To reach and

understand the affective force of ordinary things in the emerging sexual cultures of children, we have divided our analysis into two parts. First, we focus on four material moments, examining how everyday objects such as hairbrushes, shoes, a scooter patch, and a phone case become charged with thing-power through which heterosexual femininity emerged. Considering the events observed together with the idea of thing-power, our particular focus is on how mundane material elements intra-act in ways that are part of the distancing of a child, in this case Minka, from childhood and masculinity, attaching her to adolescence and to idealized heteronormative representations of femininity. Secondly, we examine those specific intra-actions to state how the implementation of heterosexual girlhood and investment in child sexual cultures generated cross-tensions that simultaneously enhanced Minka's joy, popularity, and opportunities to belong, but also controlled and restricted her agency in significant ways.

Mundane matters in co-constituting heterosexual girlhood

A lesson is about to begin. Minka arrives in the classroom in a state of distinct anxiety. She asks me if she could go back to the corridor, since she had forgot to brush her hair. Despite my reassurance that her hair looks perfectly fine, Minka responds anxiously that she can't stay there unless her hair is brushed. I say there might be a brief instant before the lesson begins, so she leaves the hallway for a moment, returning a while later, looking more relaxed. To me her hair looks just the same as before—long, straight, and regular.

The ability to maintain a tidy appearance was strikingly important to Minka, to the extent that she groomed her hair several times during a school day and carried five hairbrushes of different shapes and colors in her backpack. Choosing brushes was a part of Minka's regular habit of keeping up her feminine appearance, and as we saw above, failing to do so could present a source of utter distress for her. Briefly, these brushes might seem somewhat ordinary, irrelevant everyday objects, but when considered part of the intra-active, material-discursive entanglement of everyday school life and childhood sexuality, they begin to gain new valences.

In this material moment of Minka arriving in the classroom and coming to the presence of others, something significant in relation to heterosexual girlhood occurred. Reading this event through a material lens allows us to pay attention to the five brushes that Minka was carrying in her backpack. As Bennett (2010: 5) puts it, the brushes in Minka's backpack started to 'shimmer and spark'. They occupied Minka's attention, making her restless and unable to sit still or focus on school activities.

This shimmer and spark can be understood to stem from how an entanglement of gendered bodily processes, peer relations, school spaces, cultural notions of attractive feminine appearance, and sensations of looking good intra-acted and ‘charged’ the brushes with idealized forms of femininity. Perhaps this intra-active entanglement also entailed the resonances to the crushes and romantic tensions she had experienced with some of the boys. Carrying the brushes in her backpack and regularly grooming her hair—or bringing extra sets of P.E. clothes to school for the same reasons—almost seemed like Minka was carrying an extra weight of femininity and sweeping and fitting that in place. Together with discursive mechanisms, brushes held thing-power and collaborative agency as they affected her emotions and co-constituted heterosexual girlhood.

Like the hairbrushes, other objects such as shoes also possessed thing-power as a part of this dynamism of ideal femininity and mundane materiality, although with different signifiers and effects. In the first grade Minka sometimes brought two pairs of shoes to school. She had thick weather-proof boots to maintain warm and dry in Northern Finnish weather, and trendy low top trainers to enhance her appearance. In this entanglement the boots and sneakers gained different kind of charge in relation to ideal femininity: weather-appropriate shoes carried signifying force of sub-arctic childhood whereas the trainers were charged with popular mainstream teenage appearance. These two contradictory forces created a cross-pull leaving Minka to anxiously hide the boots from other children and with a concern of making the right kinds of decisions of what shoes to wear and how to keep her femininity in place.

Whereas in other moments materiality became laden with feminine or contradictory forces, in some cases the power of everyday things unsettled ideal femininity to the extent of rejection. The scooter patch described in the opening paragraph of this article, was such a material actant. At the time of the fieldwork, in the local context scootering was a boy-coded activity. It can be considered as having been something not highlighting feminine features and therefore not enhancing heterosexual admiration for girls (see e.g., Kelly et al., 2005). Carrying this intra-active masculine force, the scooter patch became so embarrassing that it needed to be rejected which materialized in the way Minka pressed her hand uncomfortably onto the patch the whole school day to cover it.

In addition to masculinity, material objects with connotations to childhood and childishness were also something to be detached from. One day, Minka came to school with a teddy bear phone case as she had broken her regular one. On another instance, she was wearing a Snow White shirt with puffed sleeves on it. In both events materiality co-produced utter anxiousness: Minka hid her phone case in her backpack and rolled her sleeves up to the armpits, telling us about being nervous about boys

seeing that she had such childish accessories and clothes. Intra-acting with age, the phone case and sleeves evoked childishness which did not align to create heterosexual girlhood that Minka was caught up in. The thing-power of these objects unsettled the ideal of a young femininity striving towards adolescence, steering Minka to take distance from them. Alongside the patch, phone case, brushes, and other material actants, central to the intra-active process through which heterosexual girlhood materialized was Minka's backpack, as it worked as a repository affectively protecting and reinforcing the formation of her gender and sexual agency.

The vital roles of materiality in constituting ideal notions of girlhood in the emerging sexual cultures of young children intensifies when we consider these material moments in relation to Minka's status as a popular girl admired by many boys and research on how gendered actions and objects may affect the social positionings of children (Kelly et al., 2005; Pilcher, 2011) and create heteronormative gender ideals (Gansen, 2017; Martin, 2011). Heterosexual girlhood manifests through iterations of intra-acting materiality that form gendered notions of femininity, including how a girl should or should not act or look to be admired and to gain approval from popular boys. Indeed, it was particularly apparent that the mundane material elements gained force in the presence of certain boys, as Minka constantly monitored her appearance, movements, style, and accessories. While the boys were not always physically there, they were affectively present through their connectedness to heterosexuality. Furthermore, as these material elements intra-act with age and cultural ideals of gender, they work together to produce a dynamical force where materiality shapes children's sexual cultures and constitutes conditions for how children can express gender and sexuality and relate to each other.

Tensional thing-power in shaping girls' agencies

It is confusing to follow how overwhelming sexually toned attention and admiration towards Minka seems to produce both pleasure and anxiety in her. I recall the incident of Minka being hugged by Luka in the corridor. I was left wondering at the complexity and intricacies in that fleeting moment; the neutral look on Minka's face on the one hand, and her body becoming strikingly stagnant on the other.

During first grade, Minka appeared to enjoy the boys' admiration and benefit from the attention she had in her peer relations. As previous research shows, maintaining child sexual cultures and receiving romantic or sexual attention increases popularity and chances to define conditions for belonging to a peer group (Renold, 2013; Robinson & Davies, 2015). It was therefore of little surprise that the

attention reinforced a high position in the status hierarchies of Minka's class. What did come as a surprise, however, was just how deeply she was caught up in these entanglements of child sexual cultures. The attachments were so strong and intense, that they visibly had profound effects on Minka's possibilities of using her body, space, and time, as well as being in relation with boys. In the following we turn to focus on how material microactants formed and shaped Minka's 'confederate agency' (Bennett, 2010) via the overlapping axes of movement, space, time, and complex entanglements with heterosexual masculinity⁴.

Material manifestations of emphasized feminine corporeality and bodily motion brought Minka acceptance and admiration and co-constituted her position in her class. However, materiality and movement simultaneously worked in restricting her capacity to implement corporeality. Just as Iris Marion Young (2005) notes, attachments to heterosexual girlhood restrict girls'—in this case Minka's—possibilities to versatile body expression as she had to wrap her hands around her body to cover the childishness and boyishness her clothes and accessories produced. The thing-power of, for example, a scooter-patch, as entangled with other forces bent her body into awkward positions and kept her in those sometimes for many hours. And, as Bennett (2010) clarifies, materiality can never be completely 'abandoned' as it continues its activities, even when considered an unwanted commodity. This was also true in Minka's case. In iterative mundane moments everyday objects played out in ways that restricted her physically, emotionally, and psychologically, manifesting in groomed hair, wrapped body positions or blank facial expressions. Instead of inhabiting her body like many other children to use them more holistically to, for example, do stretches, climb, romp and get dirty Minka became entangled with materiality in ways steered towards ideal femininity. When concerned over a winter-coat-clad body 'failing' to look thin or when squeezing her body into tight, trendy clothes, mundane materiality became intra-actively harnessed to the production of heterosexual girlhood; of looking slim, curvy, and trendy to gain heterosexual acceptance. Striving towards adolescence and ideal femininity and detaching from childishness and boyishness required Minka to constantly monitor that she had a girly and tidy appearance.

Materiality was a core actant in limiting Minka in relation to not only body and movement but also her spatial being. Despite her young age, she had become put on a pedestal in many ways among her peers. Although this material-discursive space undoubtedly evoked feelings of joy, happiness, meaningfulness, and belonging, when materiality is read alongside spatiality it's affective agency can

⁴ These dimensions partly merge in everyday situations, but we have analytically separated them for analysis, to highlight how implementing heterosexual girlhood affects the agencies of girls on different levels in daily activities.

be also seen to decrease Minka's usage of space. As she walked for a whole recess period with her back against a school wall to look thinner in a thick winter coat, its' thing-power reduced her bodily capacities and the area for her to be in the school yard. Becoming attached to emphasized feminine corporeality emerged out of entanglements with materiality that strongly limited Minka's use of space, leading to the full potentials of her body to be left unused.

In addition to creating restricted corporeality and cramped spaces, objects worked in occupying Minka's time. When materiality is harnessed to convey heterosexuality, it starts to push even a young child to avoid anything that might risk, fail, or foul ideal femininity. To accomplish this, Minka's time got away from typical children's activities such as playing, climbing, jumping, and joking around. Instead, the affective force of materiality producing heterosexuality manifested itself in the notable amount of time Minka used to take care of her looks and in the worry of having what she considered as 'flaws' in her appearance. As her coat once got dirty in the playground, the stain in her femininity that the dirt produced made her spend the rest of the breaktime hiding behind a teacher so the other students would not see her like that. Moreover, taking care of the amount of materiality also affected Minka's agency in making her movements slower and occupying her time in everyday situations. This was evident, for example, during P.E. lessons in the time used to choose from different sets of sports clothes even after her classmates were already playing in the gym hall. Attaching to materiality in these ways lifted Minka to an ever-higher pedestal in her class status hierarchy but it also took her time and energy and shifted her away from other children and from toys, playtime, children's clothing, and other things related to childhood.

Cutting across the repetitive everyday practices of heterosexual girlhood were their complex entanglements with heterosexual masculinity. As the previous section indicates, materiality charged with masculinity produced a threat to heterosexual girlhood. However, as masculine forces in Minka's life operated in alignment with regimes of sexual power, matters could also act as enhancing her position as a heterosexually admired girl. The attention of popular boys had a twofold effect on Minka's position in her peer group. When boys' bodies were wrapped around Minka, or when they gestured liking her by throwing snowballs at her, the snowballs on the one hand became laden with flows of heterosexual masculinity and fancying that amplified heterosexual girlhood and boosted Minka's social position. Becoming in this way Minka might be seen as a manifestation of ideal femininity orchestrating the sexual cultures among her peers. On the other hand, however, Minka became simultaneously covered and weighed down by the same material forces—covered, in that she became the object for repeated hugs, kisses, snow attacks, romantic gestures and the heterosexual

male gaze. Through these recurring sexually toned events Minka, more than many other children, can be considered as being a part of intra-acting flows producing heterosexual femininity. For all the power and attention she received for this, however, one may regard her agency to be reduced with a restricted capacity to summon the possibilities of time, space, and bodily movement.

Concluding things: constraining femininity in place

This case study has sought to increase knowledge of the powerful ways in which heterosexual girlhood emerges through intra-active forces of materiality in the minutiae of everyday life. These material forces act in co-producing child sexual cultures re-enforcing those relationalities as heteronormative material-discursive practices. Viewing Minka's position as intra-actively co-constituted through an array of material moments occurring, recurring, and repeating across spaces and time began to shed light on the weight of the situation, on the affective effects of heterosexual girlhood on Minka's self-expression. In the light of this study and of previous new-materialist research on childhood sexuality (see e.g., Allen, 2015; Holford et. al., 2013; Puutio et al., 2021), we propose that mundane material elements intra-act as vital forces that co-form heterosexual girlhood through iterations of material moments. More than mute matter, in such moments intra-acting everyday objects can carry ideal femininity, but they can also become charged with masculinity and childhood in ways that create a threat to it. Recurring and accumulating over time, these material moments become part of settled patterns of relating to others, firmly catching some girls into the ambiguous entanglements of heterosexual girlhood. We also suggest that the power of things affects the positions and self-expressions of girls attached to child sexual cultures. Mundane materiality has the capacity to produce cross effects: on the one hand enhancing joy, popularity, admiration, and culturally valued girlhood, and on the other, causing girls heavy emotions and restricting possibilities to act and belong. As this tensional, intra-active thing-power iterates and cumulates, it starts to gradually determine the im/possibilities of how girls can use space, move around, use their time, and act in relation to dominant forms of masculinities.

What we observed over one school year in Minka's class is a reminder of how surreptitiously some girls get caught up in the flows of forces that produce heteronormative ideals of gender and sexuality. Despite the tensions, physical and psychological restrictions, and emotional weight it causes, a conformance to implementations of normative gender and sexuality often happens gradually, given that investing in and maintaining child sexual cultures is connected strongly to social acceptance, pleasure, and excitement—and to a sense of belonging. As in Minka's case, material microprocesses

attach some young girls deeply in implementing child sexual cultures from an early age. However, children often navigate those relational networks and cultural oversupplies of sexuality alone, given that the phenomenon is rarely recognized or addressed by adults at home, in schools, or during leisure time.

Processes related to the implementation of childhood sexuality may remain vague, because tensions and vulnerabilities connected to romance and sexuality blend strongly with childhood innocence, friendship, and mundane play in child peer groups. This is problematic, given that strong heteronormative, restrictive forces in child sexual cultures create conditions for the normalization of low self-esteem, gender-based violence, and sexual harassment over time. The new-materialist perspectives utilized in this article help to draw attention to the roles of the material microprocesses in constituting gender and sexuality in ways that have previously been largely overlooked in childhood sexuality research. With this understanding we can become familiar with and attuned to the gendered and sexual expressions of children as something brought into being through human-nonhuman entanglements. Based on that knowledge, we should then develop systematic relationship and sexual education that covers early childhood and primary education, including consideration of the ways in which materiality plays a focal part in effecting child sexual cultures.

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